Goodbye, New Mexico was like a body, threadbare and skeletal and bisected by Route 66: its north contained the upper half, the lungs, liver, and the brain—everything vital that keeps a body going, otherwise known as the town hall, the lone open grocery store, and a couple of struggling businesses amid a seat of shuttered shops on Main Street. Winding south, there would be dozens of abandoned suburban homes, reminders of a bustling city’s past so far in the rearview mirror of history that it was almost impossible to imagine as being a reality.

 Luckily, one of these hundred or so remaining residents operated an old motel for us to stay in. If I needed to continue the skeleton analogy, the single-story, L-shaped business called the Desert Star Motel was somewhere south of the beltline, but nowhere near the crotch area—a tiny patch of gravel road with no houses or structures along it. Not completely roadside, but close enough to still see the famous route. The structure embraced the vintage aesthetic of a bygone era, a time when gasoline costs stayed in the double-digits, a full three-course meal could be had for less than four bucks, and gin-soaked jazz vied for dominance on the culture with the upstart rock ‘n roll. The Desert Star Motel completed this blast from the past with a neon display sign along the road topped by a Route 66 icon. But if the aesthetics of time had stopped, its ravages had not. Like the rest of the pastel colors and curved arches in the architecture, it needed a fresh coat of paint, but refused to give up its chipping, rusting history.

 “Finally!” I started stretching my limbs after escaping from the passenger seat. It felt great to touch good old terracotta again, but any elation I felt from this freedom was short-lived. One thing about a jackrabbit is that our senses are attuned to everything going on around us, and the moment I got out of the van, my ears perked up into the sky like an antenna, twitching with the dry wind swirling all about us. “C’mon, gang, we better check in before the storm comes!”

 A Mexican wolf dressed in torn jeans and a t-shirt advertising his family’s gas station, a mountain lioness wearing an unzipped hoodie, and a conservatively dressed squirrel in bespeckled glasses, stepped out of the used van. They didn’t answer until I cleared my throat. Respectively, Dean and Laurie feigned the enjoyment in their voices, while Samantha giggled as she started pulling out everyone’s luggage from the back. Plus, our equipment.

 “C’mon, where’s the enthusiasm?” I asked again while looking out on the dark horizon behind us, towards the Arizonan border. “We’re finally here! You should be excited like me!”

 “So says the guy who didn’t volunteer to drive,” Laurie grumbled as she too surveyed the dark clouds coming our way.

 “Not all of us can survive on four hours of sleep and three energy drinks, Bram,” Dean yawned with an outstretched arm, the tall canine muttering something in Spanish before saying in English, “I’ll be excited when we actually go into town.”

 “That’s the spirit!” I punched the air and raised my right paw. “I’ll go check us in.”

 Laurie stepped past Samantha to grab my suitcases, then handed them to me with a wry smirk. “Don’t think you’re getting out of helping us, dude! Anddon’t forget to get us some extra cards, or keys, or whatever this place uses.”

 “Fair enough,” I said after gripping my luggage, adding, “And I will!” as I bounded up towards the front entrance.

 “And try not to flirt with the owner, *conejo*!” Dean shouted, to which I flipped the bird with my back turned to him. Would he ever get over the hookup incident in Thunderbird?

 The dust clouds seemed several miles away, looming like an act of God as I trekked across the cracked parking lot to the building half-frozen in time. The archway connected to the front entrance was decked head to toe in various political stickers, etched carvings of names/dates, and solid wads of dried, used gum from decades past, but beyond the tinted windows, the Desert Star’s lobby stood out as surprisingly clean, especially given the state of Goodbye itself. Besides rolling my eyes at a few tacky Halloween decorations or marveling at the stained-glass lamp on the ceiling, as well as wrinkling my nose at the ugly pea soup carpeting, I almost felt tempted to take a siesta on the upholstered sofa in the corner. It felt taken right from the living room of a 1970s suburban home. Part of me almost expected to find Kurtwood Smith lounging atop it, waiting to call someone a ‘dumbass’ in that nasally, rasping voice of his, and I wanted to sleep on it as well.

 I ignored the temptation though. The gang and I had work to do. Carrying my luggage a few feet towards the front desk, I rang the bell once and waited for a couple minutes. No acknowledgment, I hit it twice. Still not a soul in sight, and I was about to just give up when a figure suddenly jumped up from behind the counter, proclaiming with a greeted paw, “Norma Bloch, pleasure to meet you! Welcome to the Desert Star Motel!”

 Almost jumping right into and through the plaster ceiling like a cartoon character, I tried to regain composure and faked a comfortable laugh, shaking her offered paw. She wore a plaid t-shirt despite the New Mexico heat, swished her paw as if I’d been the first mammal she’d seen in ages, yet smiled like a friendly saleswoman.

 “Bram Heathcliff,” I exhaled once my heart started working again. “I booked a couple of rooms for me and my friends. We’re the Paranormal Hunters Society.” When the vixen’s eyebrows raised, and she went to computer tucked in the countertop’s corner, my own salesmanship bubbled to the surface. “I reckon you’d never heard of us?”

 “Sweetie, if I had a dollar for every two-cent psychic and paranormal investigator pretending they’re the real Ghostbusters that’s been staying here, I’d probably have enough pennies to retire to the Keys,” she sighed, then giggled strangely enough like Debra Jo Rupp. Déjà vu. “Don’t even get me started on the out-of-state folks either…”

 “I don’t know if I should be insulted or not,” I gave a charming smile as I thumbed to the front door behind me. “For the record, my crew and I aren’t just some ‘two-cent psychics’, but we are paranormal investigators though, just like the real Ghostbusters. Except we’re not from New York, we’re all from Nueva Fe.”

 She continued typing and clicking, her wedding ring glinting from the overhead lights, eyeing me with a grin. “I reckon you’re here to document some of the odds and evens of Goodbye then? And on Halloween, no less?”

 “What better time than Halloween?” I asked, to which Mrs. Bloch giggled again as I heard shuffling behind me. Dean, Samantha, and Laurie were on their way inside, carrying some suitcases and equipment. “By the way, can you get us some extra key cards for the rooms? Just so we don’t get locked in or out, you know.”

“We don’t use cards, but of course you can have some extras, hun,” she replied, and knelt under the counter. When she came back, she had produced four separate silvery keys, each one possessing a rubbery Route 66 keychain. “You’re in Rooms 16 and 17, down at the end of the hall. Try not to lose these, please.”

 “Sure thing!” I snatched them up and pocketed the keys into my jeans. My rabbit tail wiggled. “So, tell me, are the rooms the same as they were sixty years ago?”

 “Sure are, but we got modern amenities like better plumbing, TVs, air conditioning, etcetera,” she said as if reciting it by heart. Before I could ask her if she would be open to having us interview her, the middle-aged vixen’s eyes widened to something behind us. “Oh my!”

 I turned around along with the rest of my crew right as a strong gust of sand assaulted the windows of the motel’s front entrance. Suddenly, the room felt darker as that dust storm finally struck Goodbye, New Mexico.

 “Think it was stupid of us to get up so early now?” I asked Dean, who answered me with a simple scoff.

 “How long did it say it would last?” Samantha spoke up, her tail bristling behind her. “I don’t want us to go out and get any sand inside the equipment.”

 “Few minutes to an hour, give or take,” the vixen answered. “When they hit, they hit hard!”

 “Great,” Samantha drawled.

 “Thanks for letting us stay, ma’am,” Laurie chimed in as we started to walk down the adjacent corridor to our rooms. “Have a good night!”

 “You too, kids!” Mrs. Bloch waved before disappearing again around the corner.

 “So, girls get Seventeen and guys get Sixteen,” I spoke casually. A wry curl of my lips and a speck of boldness led to me suggesting, “Unless y’all wanna share a room with me and Dean. We can all cuddle ‘neath the sleeping bags, tell ghost stories, share secrets—”

 “I’d like to inform HR that the boss is sexually harassing staff members,” Dean interrupted in a deadpan snark, to which Laurie and I snickered as Samantha fought back a blushing giggle. “And by the way, the keys?”

 I set down my suitcases and pulled out the two pairs of room keys. “A key for you, a key for you, and I guess a key for you too.”

 “Thanks,” Laurie chimed.

 Samantha smiled, “Thank you, Bram,”

 “Thanks, *conejo*.” Dean droned.

 I clapped my paws together. “You’re welcome! Now let’s get settled in, perhaps even nap if we need to!”

 Laurie and Samantha walked several feet down to the neighboring room, leaving me and Dean standing in front of ours. My tail wiggled behind me as I inhaled the scents of an air freshener, mixed with a whiff of aged water seal and whatever chemicals cleaned the patterned hallway carpeting. My coworker wordlessly volunteered to unlock our room, but from the anticipated wag in his canine tail, I could tell he shared the same excitement we all did.

 “My homeroom from high school was bigger than this,” Dean quipped when he stepped inside. He inhaled deeply, wrinkling his nose, and added, “Definitely smells like my homeroom though.”

 “This is definitely a mid-century motel,” I agreed in tone before closing the door behind us. “Sure as hell can’t find too many of these around.”

 “Thank fuck for that,” Dean jested.

 Similarly, the girls voiced the same amazement at Room 17’s size and layout, which I knew had to match Room 16 where me and Dean were lodged in. Despite the room being no bigger than an average prison cell at the county jail, I still felt a tingle of anemoia standing in the narrow space between me and Dean’s twin beds. True to the owner’s word, a modern air conditioning unit convulsed gusts of cool air into the room, and I half-sighed at not seeing an analog television on the wooden dresser. However, everything else still screamed ‘vintage Americana’ to the heavens, from the creaking frames beneath a pile of cotton blankets to the framed replica of Nighthawks beside the tiny bathroom.

 “Tell me you do not snore,” Dean asked as he placed our suitcases in the corner closet. “I hardly enjoy spending time with you at the office as is.”

 “First off, fuck you too,” I rolled my eyes as glanced one more time at my phone. I uttered a soft-spoken, “Fuck.” Then, I said, “Second of all, no I don’t. I’m a light sleeper, in fact. Anyway, I just checked the weather again, and it says that damn dust storm outside’s supposed to keep going ‘til after midnight.”

 “I thought you said it’d go on until five,” the Mexican wolf jerked his muzzle in my direction.

 “Well, the weather app suddenly decided it’ll go on ‘til midnight,” I retorted. “It also says we’re gonna get some rain, so at least we were smart to bring umbrellas.”

 “Shit,” he groaned, leaning against the closest bed. “Do you think we can still go out and get some footage?”

 “Samantha won’t like it,” I mentioned.

 “Neither will our viewers if we give them nothing,” Dean pointed out. “I also didn’t endure a four-hour drive just to sit in a motel room with you of all fucking people.”

 “Same here, asshole,” I huffed, and sent texts to Laurie and Samantha. “We’ll talk to Sam about it then. Hopefully, we didn’t forget a GoPro…”

 “This is Samantha we’re talking about,” he stated. “Of course, she brought one. She’s too smart to not consider making sure we brought one.”

 A loud knock vibrated from behind the TV. “We can hear you through the walls.” Laurie’s voice carried through the wallpaper. “And Samantha wanted me to tell Dean ‘thank you’.”

 “For what?” He asked, only to get no reply.

The canine and I shared looks, shrugged, then went back to unpacking our things.

 Samantha had trouble talking to others, though not as badly with us as she did with other strangers. It sort of worked in her favor though as a camerawoman and behind-the-scenes gal. Our tech-savvy team member didn’t just care for the P.H.S. equipment but adored it like children. I often joked about one day possibly catching the shy squirrel cradling the EMF detector, or perhaps one of our expensive cameras, like an actual newborn cub. Then again, she took her pivotal job as the Society’s technician almost more seriously than I did as the Society’s lead investigator. In fact, her thorough editing skills and post-production know-how made me often wonder why she didn’t become a serious filmmaker sometimes.

 Meanwhile, Laurie joined the Paranormal Hunters Society as my co-lead investigator after we remained friends following her own supernatural experience. Being an occasional friend-with-benefits in the past helped me already know she too shared my curiosity about things unknown. Mainly, the mountain lioness liked doing stuff outside her day job.

 As for Dean, as much as we often fought like bitter in-laws, he did play a pivotal role in the Paranormal Hunters Society. Not only as our resident skeptic (I loved calling him Mr. Skeptic, much to his chagrin), but as a diligent researcher for the team. He helped us gather historic, folkloric, paranatural, and cultural information on locations needed. Honest to God, the canine knew more about Goodbye than I did. Shame we didn’t see eye-to-eye as much.

 Still, so long as we did our jobs, our ragtag team of misfits worked extraordinarily.

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 “Four...three...two, and...Bram, it’s on!”

My posture stiffened then relaxed into an excited pose in the motel room’s entrance foyer. “Welcome, spooks and specters, to the Paranormal Hunters Society’s Annual Halloween Extravaganza!” I greeted the future viewers while ignoring Laurie’s muffled giggles and Dean rolling his eyes off-camera. “You asked us, and we promised, and so tonight, me and the entire P.H.S. crew are standing right out here, right inside the Desert Flower Motel, nestled in the heart of the infamous ghost town that’s fascinated and scared paranormal researchers for decade: Goodbye, New Mexico!

I paused, partly for dramatic effect but also to catch my breath. “Anyone obsessed with Route 66 or paranormal locations in America already knows about this place, but what the Hell, let’s go over the basics, shall we?” I glimpsed over to Mr. Skeptic standing by the room’s closed bathroom, right next to the Nighthawks replica. “Dean, do you want the honor?”

He nodded offscreen. The Mexican wolf cleared his throat, sighed, then smiled to Samantha when she directed the camera to him.

“The story begins all the way back in 1927, when Daniel T. Culpepper established Goodbye over a year after the U.S. government launched Route 66,” he explained. “It’s believed the town’s name originated from an inside joke that, as its first mayor, Culpepper and his citizens would say farewell to their own poverty. As the American Midwest and California were now connected by a single major highway system, the prime location that was Goodbye caused its local economy to boom, and like any boom, the town follows, with census estimates topping off at over at least three-thousand residents by 1955. All thanks to the surging Baby Boomers who flocked and flew through Goodbye. Like every other town and city across the route, it started to grow and grow…until a new highway system replaced the old one. Suddenly, no impatient American from Las Estrellas or Lakertown wanted to go down here, since the new Interstate Highway System made travel faster and more convenient. However, what separates Goodbye from the other ghost towns are the stories that former residents have told over the years...”

Dean inhaled and exhaled, visibly doing his best to remain neutral without revealing Mr. Skeptic. “Well, going as far back as its founding, Goodbye has been the center of supernatural phenomena. There’s the standard ghost sightings, at least one confirmed poltergeist case that’s been reported in their defunct newspaper, as well as a couple of notable disappearances. But then there’s witnesses who claim to have seen Hellhounds, UFOs, demons, angels, some more people who claim they’ve traveled to the future and to the past. One recounted surviving an attack by the legendary Sasquatch, another with an evil jackalope, and one infamous incident happened where every resident of Goodbye woke up three days after falling asleep.”

He didn’t discuss said incident further. Conspiracy theorists often referred to it as ‘Goodbye’s Lost Weekend’, or ‘the Missing Saturday and Forgotten Sunday’, when residents fell asleep on Friday, July 18th, 1969, and woke up the next Monday with virtually no recollection of what happened. Nobody knew how, why, what, or who caused the time lapse to occur, but by the time residents tuned in their radios and television sets Monday morning, everyone was taken aback that the Apollo moon landings already happened.

In all honesty, the Lost Weekend itself could be its own solo story. Plenty of paranormal and conspiracy theory researchers had been trying to solve the mystery for decades, but that wasn’t why we were in Goodbye.

At least, not for tonight’s investigation.

“For this Halloween Night, we’re going to be focused on the topic of wild hunts,” Dean informed the audience, “For those who don’t know, the ‘Wild Hunt’ is a folkloric motif focused on a procession of ghosts and spirits roaming across the night sky. This dates all the way back to Norse mythology, when it was said that Odin himself would lead an army of soldiers and Vikings across the battlefield during Ragnarök. Nowadays, the Wild Hunt is referred to as a chaotic dust storm of howling ghosts parading outside. Other cultures and peoples have their own unique and similar versions, from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia and the Polynesian cultures, and the Americas are no exception.

“According to urban legend, Daniel Culpepper himself witnessed this same supernatural event on the first Halloween of the town’s founding. Some witnesses have talked about hearing ghostly wailing in the wind almost every All Hallow’s Eve, though some of these testimonies are contradictory, and nobody has been able to gather evidence of such a thing occurring at all. Is it all fact or all fiction? Let’s find out!”

“And cut!” Samantha lowered her camera. “You did great there, Dean!”

“*Gracias*,” the canine managed to hide his blush well. I shook my head, as this was becoming staler than a soap opera. When would he tell her the truth, I wondered. “I’m a little worried I rambled on and on a little there.”

“You did fine, Dean!” Laurie patted his shoulder before turning to the room’s drawn windows, and I collectively sighed with her that the storm had not let up. “I just wish this damn wind would do a better job with timing. We can’t stay here another night.”

“I could call in sick at my dad’s place,” I suggested, ears perked.

“My boss at my day job isn’t as understanding as your papa though,” Dean mentioned with crossed arms. “I’ve already called in to work three times last month.”

“And I don’t want my parents to get angry at me for staying out of town …longer,” she looked away when all three of our eyes fell on her, and the squirrel continued, “Than usual, I mean. You know how it goes.”

One of my ears folded downward. I didn’t pry too much into Samantha’s relationship with her mother and father, but I did know it severely affected her self-esteem. Even after going to college and getting an excellent day job at her uncle’s electronics store. How she managed to convince them to let her join us on these paranormal investigations, let alone join the Paranormal Hunters Society as a member, I would never know. The last thing I wanted was to create a reason for them to consider otherwise.

“So...what do we do now?” Dean asked. Everyone’s eyes looked from to the other.

I cleared my throat and said, “Me and Laurie can go out, gather some footage, and maybe explore some spots? We can get up extra-early in the morning tomorrow to get the rest of the footage. How’s that sound, guys? Gals?”

As much as I hated the idea, someone had to propose something. Dean, Samantha, and Laurie traded uncertain looks before agreeing.

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 “Why did my family have to go to New Mexico?” I bemoaned. “Why couldn’t we have moved to a part of 66 that isn’t sand, wind and fuckin’ dust clouds!?”

 “Better question, why did I let you convince me to come?” Laurie asked me, laughing over the tornado sounds in our ears. “Hey, Sammy, you still there, girl?”

 “Loud and clear,” Samantha’s voice sounded more jovial and calmer on the other end of the earpieces. “Bram, please don’t nod your head. It’s making the feed blurry enough as it is. And Laurie, make sure you don’t talk too loudly into the mics. You’re sending the levels on red. I can hear you fine.”

 “Roger that, Command,” I tapped the piece with a finger. “We’re still on the sidewalk fast approaching the Route itself. Don’t wander too far, Laurie.”

 “The fuck would I wanna do that?” she snarked. “You’re the one who wanted to do this! I’m just along for the ride!”

 I laughed and rolled my eyes, “Point taken!”

 She and I still wore our initial clothing, plus a pair of hoodies covering our heads and some dark sand goggles that Samantha of all mammals thought to bring on our trip. My white jacket and her neon green clashed against the dim Halloween twilight obscured by a dense layer of desert blanketing everything in sight. A GoPro peeked out of our hoods as it filmed raw footage through the lukewarm wind and seemingly endless pastoral landscape, relaying the feed back for Samantha to record. Beneath our jackets were a bottle of water, radios strapped to our belts, our phones, our flashlights, and an EMF field detector—that’s Electromotive Force detector, kind of like a metal detector for the supernatural—in my pocket.

 Everything we needed for what hopefully wouldn’t be a long search ahead.

Goodbye, New Mexico was like a body, threadbare and skeletal and bisected by Route 66; through the wind’s haze, I could spot the recognizable neon sign of a local bar along the Route called El Dorado Lounge and caught a glimpse of what looked to be a few cars parked along the dead street.

Me and Laurie immediately rushed across the cracked Route 66 and to the entrance, where I held the door open for her. “Thanks,” she muttered.

“It’s good to treat a lady right,” I grinned behind sand and dust that caked my lips.

“Woman, yes, but a lady I am not,” she said, cackling as she rushed inside.

An outdated chime welcomed our arrival. Dim neon lighting lit our entrance, while the heavy pungency of stale, spilled beer and burnt out cigarettes choked the air quality. It drifted down a small corridor filled to the brim with photos and business cards, some of them warped, water-damaged, or just plain worn out from age. For being named the El Dorado Lounge, there was nothing golden, let alone classy about it. It was a dive in every description of the word, but it was the sort of sketchy dive bar most teenage bands dreamed of playing in for their first gig in front of a live audience. The El Dorado even had a tiny stage on the far left of the empty chairs and empty tables, and I could just picture said teenage band hunkering down behind it and playing their guts out to a hostile crowd too drunk to care or appreciate the effort.

That night, several hunched backs turned our way, to glower at me and Laurie peeling down our hoodies. I kept my eyes focused on undoing my zipper; I didn’t need to look up to see a few scowls from the patrons.

Yep, we were tourists. Sue us.

We sidled up to the bar, where the man tending it was a graying grizzly bear wearing worn out and patched overalls. He nodded and offered a friendly grin, and I noticed a few missing fangs from the inside of his head. “You ain’t local here, are ya?” he asked us.

“What gave us away?” I chided.

“Think ya picked the wrong night to come tonight.”

“Not really,” I chuckled. “It’s Halloween. You know: *Goblins and witches, and broomsticks and ghosts. Covens of warlocks with all of their hosts.*”

“Where’d you get that from?” Laurie asked.

“*Halloween*,” I replied grinning. “You know, the original classic.”

“Nerd.”

“Why do they got them doohickey’s on their heads, Jim?” Laurie and me turned down the lane to see that the speaker was a middle-aged wolf in a heavy dusting jacket. His eyes went from us back to Jim the bartender and back again, the whiskers on his graying snout bristling and twitching furtively. “Are those cameras?”

“They are,” Laurie spoke up. “We’re paranormal investigators looking into the mysteries of Goodbye, and with your permission, can we ask you about life in town, what things you’ve encountered and the like?”

The same middle-aged wolf scoffed, “If I had a buck for everyone who asked me that shit, I’d be richer’n old King Cole. But sure, whatever. What about you, Jim?”

“Can we record you too while we’re at it?” I asked the quizzical bear. When one of his clawed fingers tapped on the glass shot that he’d been cleaning, then to the tip jar sitting beside his register, a sigh escaped the back of my throat as I fished for my wallet. “Yeah, yeah. I get the hint.”

A twenty-dollar bill and forty minutes later, Jim Barnston and Kent Stiglitz told us about their encounters with the supernatural (on the condition that we a) blur out their faces during editing and b) we give the former our business cards), while the remaining bargoers sometimes chimed in to add context. For Jim Barnston, the grizzly bear had been operating the El Dorado Lounge long after the infamous Lost Weekend, but he’d given alcohol to those who witnessed it themselves. He described the sheer confusion and repressed trauma of those courageous enough, or at the very least drunk enough, to tell him how it felt to lose two whole days of your own life in a single nap.

We didn’t just brave a dust storm for the Lost Weekend though. We came for the ghost stories, which Jim and Kent happily provided, as if they’d told them a hundred times and would gladly do so again. However, of all the stories that stood out, it had to be Kent’s.

“Live in this cursed- town all your life an’ ya start to notice things. But this one takes the cake,” the wolf mentioned, then finished taking another swig of his bottle. “Every Halloween, strange things do happen ‘round here. If it’s not hearing things at night, it’s seeing things.”

“What kinds of things?” I asked.

“Things in the dark. Things in your room, in the mirror...sometimes things moments after ya wake up. The thing I saw was eleven or so years back, when the other hardware store on Maple didn’t close down yet. I used to be the manager there, and I’d wound the store down for the night—I used to to do a lot of things for that store, back before Pete Davidson decided to pack up for California, the rotten bastard.”

He grumbled something, then drank the rest of his bottle. Jim happily provided another.

“Anyway,” Kent continued, “I’d started walking down the street for home. It’s Halloween, but you wouldn’t find any trick-or-treaters around here if ya tried, so most of us are either asleep or at the bars. So here it is, the street’s all empty, and I’m walking down Route 66, when halfway down, I start to hear something, awfully like someone’s walking behind me. At first, I thought it was my imagination, but then I hear breathing, and no matter how many times I look behind me, it doesn’t stop. Whoever’s breathing down my neck, it just gets louder. Too loud for it to be my mind playing any tired tricks on me, so I run until finally I get to my trailer and lock that son-of-a-gun shut. I think I’m safe until I look out the window…and see *it*.”

“What did you see?” Laurie asked, eyes wide as she leaned in her seat. I couldn’t blame her, as I was very captivated myself, listening to his tale.

Kent glared down at his bottle, then to each of us in the bar. He blinked rapidly, and I’d seen that look a few times. Mostly in old documentaries, when someone is remembering something they really don’t want to be remembering—they always get that look, like they’re being taken back to that moment and its the worst thing that could be done to them in remembering that moment.

“I don’t know,” Kent uttered in a shaken breath. “It looked like a mammal my age, but it…it wasn’t. It...well, that’s the best way I can call it, but it stood on my porch, looking right into the window, dressed in a bloodied leather jacket. Oh god, his eyes…they were just as red as the blood spatter on him…just as fuckin’ red. He then told me…said to me, ‘This town is cursed and so are you’. G-God…it didn’t sound like any speech I’d ever heard in my life, and I don’t want to hear it again. Just heavy, guttural, and sopping. And the wailing sounds I heard after shutting the blinds, I couldn’t even think to call the sheriff. I just ran into my closet and shut myself up. I didn’t dare peek out until I saw dawn’s ass crack.”

The wolf guzzled down the bottle in a single swig as Jim explained further, “And that’s why Kent’s made it a yearly tradition to get drunk as fuck in my fine establishment. If I were you two though, I’d get back to Desert Star before this storm gets worse.”

“What he just said,” Samantha muttered into me and Laurie’s earpieces, having listened and recorded our interviews. “I think we’ve got more than enough as it is.”

“Roger that, Command. Over and out!” I jokingly replied to the concerned squirrel. With a folded ear and a sympathetic smile given to Kent, I informed the drunken wolf, “I’m sorry to cut this all short, but our friends at the motel want us back.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us,” Laurie shook paws with Jim across the counter and I did too. “And I’m sorry you went through that, Mr. Stiglitz.”

Kent hiccupped, “Don’t be. I’m slowly, heh…erasing those m…mummeries!”

“Memories, ya mean,” Jim corrected.

“Pfff…whatever!” He waved it aside.

“I think that’s enough for you tonight, Ken.” Jim rolled his eyes as he handed another patron a gin and tonic. Me and my puma companion finished zipping up our hoodies again, waving to the bartender as we started to walk out the front entrance. “You two take care now, ya hear! And send me a link on MuzzleScroll!”

Over howling, arid wind, I loudly replied, “We shall, thanks again!”

 “Happy Halloween, everyone!” Laurie chuckled with a waving paw. Behind us, a few patrons cheered or raised their glasses, only for anymore voices to be lost like an echo.

 The dust storm turned everything from puke-orange yellow into dark honey brown. Whatever sunlight scraped across the twilight sky started to disappear, and we pulled our flashlights out to scour the rest of the dying town. Everything had grown darker, to the point I could barely spot the unnatural neon glow of some building signs. They flickered in and out of view, disappearing and reappearing like the yellow glow of my flashlight. Even Samantha’s electronic voice warped incomprehensibly in my earpiece.

 I only heard Dean say, “—et back h—arely see—tronger than usu—get back now!”

 “Did you hear that, Laurie?” I hollered, squeezing my gloved fingers around my puma partner’s paw. “For once, I agree with Dean. We better get going back to the motel!”

 Whether Laurie didn’t say anything, or the dust storm drowned her reply, the only sign of confirmation came from her squeezing my paw. With a firm nod, I guided us southward across the empty Route 66, doing our best to stand steady. Thankfully, the wind wasn’t strong enough to carry either of us away like a hurricane, but one particularly strong gust did cause my paw to slip from Laurie’s grasp. Quickly though, I reached back to snatch it.

 “Almost lost ya there, Laurie!” I laughed. “We gotta keep going!”

 Twenty or thirty seconds too late, it occurred to me. I’d been too focused on stepping over Route 66’s uneven pavement, resisting the gale forces and however much sand caked my lower jaw to notice only one beam of light. When I did, it made me stop.

 “Uh…Laurie?” I asked loudly, hunching against the incoming wind. For a split second, I heard her say something. “Wha-What happened to your flashlight? Did it die…out?”

 As I turned around, my fingers clenched around empty air. The beautiful mountain lioness I called my friend and co-investigator was nowhere to be found. Not even the beam of her flashlight could be seen as I whirled around, feet fidgeting and heart racing. By instinct, or rather to cope, I shakily recited a line from one of my favorite horror films, *The Haunting*.

“Whose hand was I holding?”

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 Being alone in near-complete darkness and stranger lands wasn’t an unfamiliar thing for me. In fact, one could argue it’d been a regular experience since my preteen years. Dark shadows, nonvisible figures, winds akin to hushed chanting, they didn’t scare me compared to what I’d seen in my dreams. Obvious figments of my waking imagination were bullshit compared to what the mind made up when I was asleep.

 I was not asleep though. I was in the middle of a dying New Mexican town during a severe dust storm, trying to find my way along the road. No bars, no signal, no voice in my earpiece; my feet stumbled along ancient pavement as I tried blocking the sand from getting into my nose and mouth. The entire time, I tried peering through the goggles for any sign of refuge.

 When I did, it appeared down the road adjacent to the empty highway: an old bus stop shelter! Without much thought, I kicked against the ground and went for my sanctuary—

 HONK! HONK! HONK!

 A vehicle suddenly sped in front of me. Either a truck or a van, I couldn’t tell. The headlights stabbed through the sandy darkness like a spotlight almost too late. Just as fast as it appeared, it sped off down the street. Just another foot and I would’ve been hit. The thought of why a random truck would be speeding near Route 66 during a storm didn’t hit me yet.

 “Holy shit, holy shit!” I hyperventilated. “Just get inside, get inside…”

 This time, I eyed both ways before crossing the street. No phantom cars yet. I sprinted to the structure, almost slamming into a glass pane, then drifted around its corner into the entrance. Within seconds of gathering my breath, I collapsed onto the interior bench with an audible creak. I didn’t even care if it felt as comfortable as it looked, at least it was positioned to shield me from Mother nature’s arid wrath.

 My thumb peeled the goggles onto my forehead. Setting the flashlight next to me on the bench seat, the light reflected from the glass of the bus stop, detailing each grain of sand sticking to or scraping against the barrier. They produced faint tapping noises.

 “Laurie?” I called into the radio. “Laurie?!”

 Nothing. My fist connected to the bench, causing pain to jolt up my elbow and me to wince. Ignoring whatever I felt then, I remembered the camera sitting atop my head, under the hoodie. An unclear red glow reflected from my palm when I hovered it above my forehead.

 “Samantha, do you copy?” I called into my earpiece, then toyed around with the station knob on the radio. “Dean, Samantha, I’m not sure if you’re still looking through my camera, but I’m lost in a bus station somewhere off 66, and Laurie and I were separated. I dunno where she is. I repeat, Sammy or Dean, do you copy?”

 More garbled, electronic voices.

 “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,” I muttered.

 I rifled for my phone in my pocket, pulling it out. The bright screen blinded me, but I didn’t care, instead sending a text message to the Paranormal Hunters Society’s staff chat. For several minutes, my watering eyes watched the circular icon indicating an enroute message continue to spiral and spiral, never to turn into the green checkmark. The same one I never appreciated until that very moment.

 “Of all the times to have zero bars…fuck!” I snarled, then tried to call Laurie’s number, followed by Dean’s and Samantha’s. When the only sounds coming from my phone on the other end were beeps, I went so far as to call my mom and dad. Nothing. “Well, fuck me with a cheese grater…Happy Halloween to me.”

 Until the dust cloud settled or the GPS app on my smartphone decided to start working again, all I could do was wait.

For the next hour or so, I tried my best to remain calm and figure out what to do. As I sat there in the bus shelter, all alone and sitting as I clutched my phone and flashlight like anchors, my mind wandered. I imagined myself in another plane of existence. I envisioned myself as the last survivor of an apocalyptic sandstorm which covered the entire world, engulfing everything until only desert lingered. By whatever stroke of luck, I happened to be a survivor, with the glass-and-metal box I found being the last sign of civilization.

Returning to reality didn’t make things feel easier. Thanks to whatever interference caused by the dust storm, I had neither a signal nor a means to know if Laurie was alright. A part of me chided myself for assuming the worst, but it didn’t mean I wasn’t worried. We knew each other the longest, even before she helped me build P.H.S. from the ground up.

Back in high school and my limited days of college, we confided everything with each other. We helped each other, whether it be relationship problems, wanting to blow off sexual steam due to a stressful week, or simply because we’d both been through the paranormal ringer.

From what Laurie told me over the years, she used to have the exact same dream as a little puma cub, growing up in her family home. It all happened once a week, almost always in the middle of a school week. Each time she fell asleep, she’d wake up in front of her basement door, walk down the steps for a disproportionate amount of time until it led her to a large hole made of old brick and mortar. She would hear voices coming from it.

From there, the nightmare would change differently, like the endings of a choose-your-own-adventure novel. If Laurie chose to stand still against the mouth of the pit, she would wake up without any trouble. If she chose to instead climb down inside, she would find herself entering a labyrinth of red brick and unnatural lighting. Wherever the young puma girl went, a variety of things would happen; sometimes, things from the real world would bleed into her dreams such as a toy or a new television her father bought. Sometimes, a lone figure would stalk her no matter how fast she sprinted down the caverns, which seemed to never have any dead ends or interconnecting corridors. Sometimes, the nightmare ended when she did find a dead end, but other times, it continued for what felt like eternity for Laurie.

One nightmare that stuck with her for ages was before we started having sex, about a month before high school graduation. It began with her walking down the endless steps and stepping down into the pit. As always, curiosity won out, and Laurie jumped into the pit.

Except she didn’t go down any of the four tunnels. Not the one to her left, her right, behind or in front of her. For once, she didn’t make a choice after stepping from the staircase.

Laurie described an uneasy feeling hit her gut the minute she stood still. Unlike the other times before, when she stood on the ledge waiting for the nightmare to conclude, it lingered. Not only that, but it went to places darker and more heinous than expected. Instead of her coming across monsters within the labyrinth, the labyrinth’s own monsters came across her.

Before she could get into what happened next, Laurie broke down in front of me. I never asked for the details afterward, but I did know she immediately moved out of that house the instant she turned eighteen and made me promise to never bring the topic up with her folks anytime I went to visit. As far as I know, the nightmares ended on the first night Laurie slept in her apartment.

As for me? I grew up with severe sleep paralysis. A chemical imbalance and repressed childhood emotions caused me to lose muscle control before, during, and after REM sleep, as well as hallucinate terrifying imagery during these periods. I encountered top-hatted silhouettes and demonic shadow people invading my personal space. Each night turned into a psychological battle where I needed to remind myself none of it was real.

To make a long story short, I discovered two temporary solutions to the episodes: alcohol and sex, both of which caused me to not have any dreams at all. So, from high school going into university, to relied on them both to keep me sane when the medication didn’t work. Alcoholism combined with being a hypersexual, pansexual jackrabbit caused me to spiral out of control. Within a few semesters, I went on a self-destructive path that led to me ending a relationship with the man I loved, as well as having a mental breakdown.

To make a longer story even shorter, my parents got me help. They supported me as I no longer used sexual hookups and had me go to AA meetings to stay sober.

And now, I was stuck in a bus shelter in the middle of a rundown town on the edge of New Mexico, with no idea where my co-lead investigator happened to be, or any way to get back to the motel.

 Something tapped loudly against the glass pane, stirring me from my thoughts.

 “Huh?” I straightened up.

Suddenly, it happened again. Only, it was too hard for it to be sand.

 “Who’s there?” I gripped my flashlight in the direction it came from. “Hello?”

 Paranormal investigations required a balance between plausibility and skepticism. As much as I teased Dean for being Mr. Skeptic, I didn’t throw away rational thought when figuring out if something happened to be supernatural. If I did, I’d be thinking every perfectly arranged stack of books had some sort of supernatural paw behind it, instead of someone living who could do just that. That said...maybe it was just some large grains of sand that got caught up in the wind?

 Another loud tap struck the glass pane. It belonged to a stray piece of candy, somehow caught by the weather.

 “Hello?”

 I screamed, turning around to find another mammal standing in the entrance of the bus shelter. Shining the light at him, I discovered he was an otter in some kind of jacket.

 “Woah, hey!” he said, startled. He held both paws up defensively. “Sorry I scared you there.”

 “Who are you?” My dry voice strained with my grip on the flashlight. I began listing off questions, “How did you get through this storm? Are you a resident? How did you—”

 “Easy there, easy,” he chuckled while wiping some sand from his brows and shaking his headfur. “I was just passing through here when I found this place. Thought I’d take a break from all this shit, ya know?”

 I warily looked the otter over. His jacket did little to hide a strong pair of muscles beneath a plaid shirt, and his square jaw and soft smile somehow made my worries disappear. My stiff posture started to relax.

 “Yeah, I guess I do,” I shrugged as casually as I could. “I’m not local, no. I’m here to catalog some of the spooky stuff going down tonight, but me and my partner, Laurie got separated in the storm. Hopefully, it’ll end soon, and I can go find her…”

 “I’m pretty sure she’s fine. The storm isn’t really that bad, at least compared to the ones I’ve been in.” The otter stepped closer, away from the entrance and sat down next to me on the bench. “So, is she a girlfriend of yours?”

 “Nah, not really.” I shook my snout. “What about you? You got a girlfriend out there trying to find you in the desert blizzard?”

 He chuckled, “Desert blizzard. I like that.”

 It was then I felt a warm paw reach up behind me, caressing my back. An electric spark tickled the base of my wiggling cotton-like tail, as my eyes locked with the otter’s emeralds. He grinned at me, and I grinned back. A nagging feeling clawed somewhere at the back of my mind, but I ignored it in favor of a local Adonis suddenly beginning to flirt with me. The more lecherous part of my brain suggested returning the favor.

 Hey, I happened to have a thing for men with square jaws.

 “No, I don’t,” he answered my previous question. “I’m not into girls.”

 His fingers lowered to the base of my tail, pulling me closer.

 “Hmm,” I bashfully snickered like a virgin. “Do you…do you always flirt with the first stranger ya meet in a bus shelter?”

 “They always know how to make adorable noises,” the otter’s tail tapped against the bench’s metal frame. “Now, here I find you: a handsome bunny rabbit, all alone out here, just looking for a good time. Who knows how long we can be out here, really?”

 The thought of correcting him of my species didn’t cross my mind. Instead, lust almost won out as I reached my arm to wrap it around his flank…only to freeze.

 I felt something warm, and wet. Liquid too thick to be water, and way too sticky or slick to be sweat. What’s more was that I also started to hear voices too, outside of the shelter. They were ranged in pitch but rising high like my heartbeat and each hair on my arm.

 The otter’s face hardly changed. He didn’t blink at the voices. Not when I slowly grabbed the flashlight between us, then looked down at the blood coating my fingers, and back at the man. He didn’t just wear a regular jacket. It was leather, and all along the back, I found sharp tears that belonged to a crash victim’s body.

 For a split second, we looked at each other yet again. For a split second, I witnessed his dark eyes turn a much darker shade of crimson, flickering between life and death as he smiled down at me. His open mouth held more pointed teeth than any other should actually have.

He whispered in a gravely, sopping voice, “You are cursed, and so is this town.”

 My flashlight struck the ground, and I fucking ran back out into the dust storm. Any screams I tried to emit were immediately shut by the airborne dirt I immediately spat back out.

 Whatever I just tried flirting with didn’t come after me, but I still ran. Be it a trick of my adrenaline-spiked mind or actual, factual specters, I could suddenly see glimpses of shadows between the layered grains of desert sand, standing and staring at me like mannequins. Sometimes, they seemed as real as a mirage, but other times, they shifted. They stumbled effortlessly against the wind, walking towards me.

 One eventually knocked me over my side. I screamed in fright and confusion until I felt a solid paw grasp my wrist, pulling me back to my feet. A glance down at my paw had me realize the blood was long gone.

 “Holy—Bram, it’s you!” Laurie’s relieved smile infected mine. “C’mon, let’s get the hell back to dodge!”

 “Fuck, yes!” I agreed at the top of my lungs. “Where did ya go?!”

 “This way!” Laurie held my wrist in a vice grip, and I followed her. “I dunno where you went either, but I’d been wandering around, trying to find ya when I started hearing these voices. Then I see ya speeding out of a bus stop at top speed, and here we are!”

 “Wait, you hear them too?!” I gripped the front of my hoodie when it almost flew back.

 “I do!” She shouted back, “Wait, wait, I see the motel! Keep goin’, Bram!”

 “I see it!” I cackled in utter relief. “I see it, Laurie!”

 The archway and the motel’s sign shone through the shrouded darkness. I could make out the ‘no vacancy’ sign against the wind and dust, but the closer we got to the unlocked entrance, the more I noticed the voices become louder. They transformed into humming chants and wailing cries. In the corner of a teary eye and through the misty goggles, I swore I spotted more of the shadows, but I dared not to look back.

Laurie yanked the front door open, and I plunged inside with her. It crashed shut, but the voices hardly ceased outside. If anything, they screeched louder and louder, ringing in our ear drums and drowning out my thoughts. All me or Laurie could do was tumble down the corridor and slam our fists on Room 16, before I remembered possessing a key.

Nothing provided sanctuary though. No sooner did me and Laurie slam the door shut, than we discovered Dean and Samantha huddled on the floor. The laptop computer lay abandoned on the bed, showing my feed’s perspective. Both squirrel and Mexican wolf covered their ears, as did Laurie the minute she dropped her hoodie.

 “Make it stop!” I barked, grabbing my ears and folding them down once I shed my jacket and tossed the camera to the floor. “By fuckin’ God, make it stop! Make it stop!”

 The walls vibrated and the noise refused to cease, no matter how much we begged. Stomach nauseous and throat feeling queasy, I hunched against one of the empty beds, with Laurie kneeling beside Samantha and me trying to bury my head into a pillow. The ringing in my ears impacted like nails on a chalk board, rising and ascending higher and higher until finally…

…I passed out.

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 “Bram! Bram, wake up!”

 Hearing Dean’s voice, I jumped up from the floor feeling like a ton of bricks conked me in the back of my head. No hangover compared to kneeling on the floor, feeling hot needles pierce my cranium from every side imaginable.

 “Ow, ow, ow!” I winced while rubbing the dried crust from my eyes. “Ugh, wha…?”

 “How are you feeling, *conejo*?” Dean asked me, genuine concern etched on his tan muzzle. “Whatever happened last night, it knocked us all out…for *two* days.”

 My eyes bulged out and I jerked up to my feet, only to groan when I spotted the quavering grin on Laurie’s lips. “Bitches, that’s not funny!” I chided when she and Dean started laughing. “What the fuck happened last night, where’s Samantha?”

 “Already packing up her things in the next room,” Laurie’s smile faltered after gathering herself. “In all seriousness, we’ve been asleep for twelve hours. Last night was…”

 “Twelve?” I cocked my head, groaning as I rubbed it with my palm. “Got any aspirin in your bathroom bag, Dean? Laurie? I sure as fuck didn’t bring any…ugh.”

 “I’ll go check,” Laurie went for the bedroom door. “Be right back.”

 The events of the previous night flooded back to me in gradual torrents. As I went to relieve myself in the bathroom and wash back some color into my cheek fur, I heard Dean’s voice talk to me through the wooden door. He explained how, not long before Laurie woke me up minutes ago, Samantha and Dean had risen from unconsciousness. While Dean tried and failed to find Mrs. Bloch in the motel lobby, Samantha surveyed all the gathered footage.

 “What did she see?”” I perked my ears up high. “Dean, tell me we got actual, factual footage of a ghost tornado—”

 “Nothing,” he interrupted.

I blinked hard once, twice, and thrice. “What did you just say?”

“Nothing,” he repeated matter-of-factly. “We got fuckin’ nothing, besides the interviews.”

 “Huh?” I gripped the porcelain sink as I glared at my bloodshot eyes in the mirror. Then, I turned to look at the door. “I’m sorry, but how the unliving *fuck* did we get nothing?”

 “Files were corrupted somehow, Bram. The audio got fucked somehow and Samantha’s trying to recover it, but for now, it’s all jack shit.” He snarled angrily, not at me, but our luck. “I try not to believe in supernatural shit too often, but last night…that wild hunt, it felt too real to be anything. And now we’ve got no shred of evidence that it happened!”

 My optimism began to fade until a thought came to mind. “What about Mrs. Bloch?”

 “We can’t find her,” he repeated. “She’s not at the desk and won’t answer my calls.”

 “Shit,” my voice cracked.

 Minutes later, I emerged from the bathroom and packed my suitcase. Laurie returned with two tablets, which I happily thanked her for, and she handed some to Dean as well. We both thanked her immensely. Samantha came out of the other motel room too, handing me some of the electrical equipment. Together, we grabbed our luggage. For the moment, all any of us wanted to do was get out. The second Samantha got the remaining B-roll footage she needed of other neighborhoods in Goodbye, we would speed off onto the closest exit connecting us to the I-40 Highway.

 The Desert Star parking lot and what we could see of Goodbye hardly changed since the night before. Granted, almost an inch of sand covered everything in sight, but otherwise, nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Goodbye stayed the mysterious, rundown center of supernatural phenomena.

 Dean volunteered to drive the P.H.S. van. I buckled up in the front passenger seat while Samantha quietly held her video recorder in the back seat and Laurie sat beside her. While pulling out of the parking lot, I could’ve sworn a middle-aged fox appeared from the door. Rather than speaking up, pointing out her presence and asking Dean to turn around so we could confirm she heard the voices from last night too, I looked away. I stared straight ahead as the Mexican wolf at the wheel steered us onto Route 66, towards a row of buildings Samantha wanted to shoot from her window.

 “Last night, when I got lost during the dust storm,” I spoke up, “I think I flirted with a demon.”

 Everyone sat in deathly silence. Then, Laurie laughed. “Only you, Bram.”

 Dean tried and failed to suppress his disbelieving chuckles. “Yeah, only you…”

 Samantha herself couldn’t repress a few giggles. “Only you, heh.”

 Rolling my eyes, I relaxed back into my car seat. My ears rested against the headboard, and sighing deeply, I watched swirls of dust dance in front of the slow-moving van and made a decision. “We are so coming back to this town again, you guys.”