



The Steppes

In the year 1259 on the Russian Steppes, under a clear, crisp sky on these massive flat plains, two men are arguing. They are Mongols. They are War Lords. Both are dressed as Mongols have dressed for a very long time. Both stand facing one another holding the reins of their horses that stand behind each of them. Behind the War Lords and their horses stand a large horde of men, vicious fighters all.

A general murmur comes from such a large group as would be expected: horses snorted, men on horseback moved about and talked quietly among themselves. But the two Lords were focused solely upon each other. One of them, Mengu, wears a red hat. He is in a heated dispute with Hulegu, who is wearing no hat at all but has the bearing of a very powerful leader.

The men seem to find no agreement between them. Hulegu is calm, and doing his best not to smile. Finally, Mengu walks to his horse, frustrated. He mounts his horse, glances back at his brother and rides off in anger at full speed. As he rides away, Hulegu watches as his younger brother grows smaller with the distance. After a few minutes, Hulegu shakes his head and walks back toward his men, leading his magnificent horse behind him.

As he reaches his second in command, he notices the look on the man's face. It stops him dead in his tracks. He turns to look after his brother in the distance, to see what had captured his subordinate's attention. He notices high above them how the very air above Mengu is swirling far up into the sky in a terrifying display of extraordinary insanity.

Finally, it begins to take form.

The air transforms and then solidifies until an entire cliff-side appears in the middle of the massive, flat plain. Where only moments before there had been nothing, there was now a series of white, square buildings littered all along the side of a cliff where no mountainside had ever existed. The man who had been riding through those Steppes was no longer there, having apparently been wholly absorbed by the materialization of a village along a steep rock face. To add even more

to the surreal event, it was all a stark white defined only by shadows here and there.

Hulegu stood there staring, in shock. It took a few minutes, but he started to realize that there was absolute silence surrounding him. He closed his eyes, blocking out the terrifying image before him and realized that if he hadn't known how many men and horses were behind him, he would have no idea that they were even there.

The silence of his men was a vast chasm pulling him backward. He opened his eyes but to all his hope, the solid white monstrosity was still before him. He turned, almost expecting not to see his men. But there they all were, silent and mostly with mouths hanging open in awe.

He turned back around and the cliff side was still there. Then as suddenly as it had appeared, the village buildings started to dissolve. The cliff began to shatter and it crashed to the plains with immense sounds with a slight delay from the distance. It then began to melt and finally the remnants of all that had appeared began to blow about as dust swirling in the winds until it had all completely dissolved out of existence.

Once again the Steppes were as empty as they had been for all of history. And the rider who had been there before, was no more.



The Conqueror Worm

Fade's Story

For many thousands upon thousands of years, Fade had worked up to this point. Looking across the world from the perspective of having seen all of human history and so very far before that, Fade ascended to the surface and could feel the two young entities rooting around in the dirt. Pulling quickly back so as to not damage them, Fade's consciousness sadly felt theirs.

Yet, it was still much too much and pulling back came too late. Fade could feel Reality change, knew their environment had been warped and that this encounter had changed the two young individuals, forever. But Fade could also feel that one day, this could be tried again and at that time, it would be more successful. There was something special about these two.

Not wishing to damage them further, Fade receded back down to a quick and troubled Slumber. It would be a Slumber that couldn't wait for too long, otherwise, these individuals would be lifeless merely due to gerontological causes; for these were creatures, these Humans, and were not very long lived creatures at all.



"Jimmy, come here, look, LOOK at this," James said. He was poking at something in the dirt. Jimmy was nearer to the house, poking at his own buried curiosity. They had gotten the spades from the garage and were digging holes in the side yard. Today's effort was to find buried treasure, either gold or dinosaurs.

They hit a lot of glacial fill, a mixture of dirt and sizable rock from 100,000 years or so of glaciers proceeding and receding, grinding huge boulders into smaller ones the size of a person's hand or head. It was like this along through the Pacific Northwest. This yard in Tacoma, Washington, was no different. But this part of the yard was as if it had previously been dug up and refilled.

"What!?" Jimmy responded, too wrapped up in his own marvelous

devices.

"Look!" James said, looking up and realizing that Jimmy had found his own fascinating thing to poke and prod. He looked up at the brilliant blue sky. It felt wonderful. James put his head up, closing his eyes. He breathed in the aroma of a summer day beyond all summer days. Suddenly, a bright white light fell out of the sky, or more correctly, it grew on him exponentially and slammed him to the ground. He lay there, motionless for a moment.

Hearing a twig snap, he opened his eyes. Everything was bleached out from the sun bearing upon his closed eyelids. As his vision began to return, he could see that Jimmy had broken the twig he was using to poke at something in the ground.

Jimmy lived next door, but across the street from James. The boys played together regularly, ever since James' family had moved in the year before. They had become fast friends— after their initial meeting. And was it a good one. Just after their sixth grade class had let out for the day and with all the adults nowhere to be seen in the school yard, Jimmy had walked up to the new kid, James, initially just a little curious.

They had just stood there for a moment, eying one another. Then, nearly simultaneously, they both hauled back and took a slug at each other. Both had landed blows incompletely and inaccurately. But they were both hardy warriors and had tried again, and again, and again, neither giving an inch.

In actuality, neither was much hurt in the fracas. Once they both realized they were pretty evenly matched, they gave up just as quickly as they had started. Jimmy gave James a hand to help him up from the dirt and from then on, they were quite literally, fast friends.

They had many adventures in the previous year. Searching through the local "haunted house" on Ventnor Street, finding their way into their soon to be Junior High building, stealing apples from crazy old Widow Roosevelt's apple tree which was more about getting caught or not getting caught, than it was about the apples.

Today's foray however, was one of archeology. They were in James' yard, digging it up for ancient relics. Not the grassy part, just the dirt part. James' step-mother loved the lush green front yard lawn and

badly wanted a nice back and side yard, too.

James liked his step-mother but still missed his mom. They had been just about ready to move into this house when suddenly, his mom had disappeared, she just abandoned them. James and his Dad did eventually get a postcard from Seattle saying that she was sorry, that she loved them, but that she just couldn't stay with them any longer and that she was leaving the country. Then she asked them to try and not to think too badly of her, and she promised that once she gathered herself back together, she would come back.

It was a couple of months after that, when James found out his dad was remarrying, saying that he had received divorce papers from James' mother through a lawyer, and that she was in Saigon. Though James couldn't understand that, it was still how things were. So, Jimmy never got to meet James' mom, but they both liked his step-mom a lot, and that helped some. She was nice, but a little odd. Jimmy thought she was, "hot". Every time Jimmy said anything about it, James would punch him in the arm. Jimmy would just laugh.

But, James and his Dad did what they could to make his step-mom happy. And so, someone was hired to put in a new lawn. The trouble was that the back and side yards had such big rocks, "exceptional glacial fill" as James' father had called it, that the guy they hired to use his tilling machine to dig it up finally surrendered. In fact, he seemed kind of angry when he had packed up to leave. James figured that it had something to do with his machine just stopping altogether right in the middle of the tilling. And then it wouldn't start again.

So for the past year the grassless parts of the yard had remained the grassless parts of the yard.

And so, to the boys, the yard seemed like ancient burial grounds, or the fields of Egyptian kings. Today's foray was a beckoning of ancient treasures. It came upon them suddenly, right after watching a documentary in school on how archeologists dig up dinosaur bones. Just the night before, they had watched a Johnny Depp pirate movie, as one of the coolest pirates ever, who always moved like he was drunk. It was pretty funny and very entertaining. So today, they were Pirate Archeologists.

"Okay, what do you have going?" James said, waiting to see what

Jimmy had unearthed.

"I don't know," he said standing up, mostly ignoring him, "it's like a worm, but not. I've never seen a worm that was so— thick, and well, white." They both peered down into the hole. It was about two feet deep and just at the bottom, the boys could see the "worm" wiggling. It was in the shadows of the hole, so not the easiest thing to see and therefore—

"Classify," Jimmy said. "That's what we have to do now, classify it." Squatting, James looked up, remembering the show they had watched. "Water," James said, "we need water. It will soften the earth and we can, well, unearthen it." Jimmy looked reticent.

"I don't know. That will just make it muddy." Jimmy said. The boys stared at one another, waiting for one of them to show the knowledge and foresight to make a decision. "I don't know, maybe— "

Jimmy squatted too and reached deep and prodded the worm with his finger. At the moment he touched it, something made him jerk his hand back, like he had received an electric shock. Something about it had really spooked him. He looked up at James.

"Well, otherwise," James said, "we might tear it in half, trying to get it out. Nothin' worse'en two worms that were just one. Even if they turn into two whole worms then, we've wrecked our— ."

"Artifact. True, true." Jimmy said. "Here, let me see your stick." He picked up his stick, an eight inch long piece of thin branch. He poked at the worm. Nothing. He manipulated it as James watched. He moved it first one way, then back the other several times and then he stopped. They just starred at it for a minute. Suddenly, it moved of its own accord. Both boys jumped. James actually fell back on his butt.

"Damn!" they both said in harmony.

"Screw this." Jimmy got up and walked over to the house. He got the hose off its holder that was attached to the house and turned on the water. Then he walked it back to James and filled the hole with water, drenching the soil.

"Great, now we just have a mud hole." James said. They sat in the sun, watching their new mini pond. "Hey, move the hose away." Jimmy moved the hose off and they watched as the water level dropped. Even they could tell it was going down far too fast to be just seeping into the

hard packed dirt.

"What the— " Jimmy said. In another minute, the hole was empty again and the worm was no longer exposed. Then the mud moved again and they saw it, wrinkled and shriveled flesh avoiding any and all light. Since they couldn't see the other end, there was no way telling just how long this thing was.

"I've never seen a worm with skin like that." James was getting irritated. "Man, it's coming out of there. One way or another." Just as he was about to reach in to the bottom of the hole and pull the worm out, the sun had breached the bottom of the hole as the day hit high noon. Finally they could get a clear and bright look at it, but as the sun hit the flesh of the thing, it suddenly pulled into itself in the mud and nearly disappeared. It was as if the sun had hurt it. Its movement was quick; too quick.

"Like its feeling pain— from the sunlight," James said as he looked up at the sky.

"What— the— Hell— ?" Jimmy said. "So, it's a vampire. We've found a vampire," he said, rather cheerfully.

"Uh, right—" James said, giving his friend an incredulous smirk. "—a vampire worm."

Just then, James' mother called from the front door.

"Boys, its lunch time, come on in and wash your hands."

"Aw, crap," James said, "it's always somethun'." And then he walked away.

Jimmy looked down and kicked a nearby rock, releasing some of his anxiety and annoyance at being pulled away. The rock skittered and fell squarely into the hole, settling down to a wet, quiet sunbath. He shrugged his shoulders and started to look away, but out of the corner of his eye, he caught the rock moving. He did a double take. This was too big a rock for any worm to be able to move, but there was no further movement. So he tossed the stick and walked off. Maybe they'd check it out later. He was hungry now.

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James was standing once again, at the edge of the hole this time, alone. It was dark out now. The neighborhood was silent. A crescent moon

was smiling down upon him, a sardonic smile from the face of outer space. It gave him the creeps. He felt, watched. Peering down into the hole, he could see that there was still something down there at the bottom. He reached into the hole, down into the darkness, into its lair and could feel the cold, white worm.

Frustrated in having waited this long to figure out what the hell it was, he threw caution to the wind and grabbed it. The thing seemed to be buried pretty well in the dirt, so he pulled up on it in a circular motion. It didn't seem to want to go in certain directions very much.

Off in the distance, James heard a dog howling. A breeze crawled gently over him, but it seemed too warm for this time of night. Still, it warmed him, because the worm he had his hand on was too cold, and a bit too solid. He had to see it. He figured if nothing else, it might make a good show and tell at school. Maybe he'd get extra credit for it. Or maybe, they'd discovered a new kind of creature!

He pulled harder on it. Not wanting to rip it in half, he loosened up and got a better hold on it. Then, quite without James' expecting it, it curled away, just as it had done earlier that day. A cold chill followed a line of sweat down his spine. Without any warning, a wave of fear washed over him as the worm grabbed his hand, locking on to him. He tried to pull back but he couldn't and it was pulling him down, down into the hole, toward it. James pulled back, pulled as hard as he could. Bracing himself, he yanked back on it.

'Screw trying to keep it in one piece,' he thought. At this point he really didn't care how many pieces he tore it into. Then his face slammed into the dirt on the edge of the hole.

He was going down and he knew it. James filled his lungs with air. He thought about screaming for his dad, for Jimmy, for anyone. The ground next to the hole began to give way, breaking apart from something that was trying to come up from beneath. It grabbed his wrist, moving up his forearm. The dirt rising above him as it fell away off of whatever it was that was rising above him. He began to see a naked white skinned form in the half light of the moon.

James was too scared now even to scream. He tried, but nothing would come out. As in a dream, when you try to scream but nothing comes out, or when you shoot a gun at a dream monster, but the bullet only

drops out of the barrel onto the ground, lying there, impotent and ineffectual. He'd seen that last one in a movie and thought it was a great scene, pretty scary. But when you are terrified and you shoot something, even if the bullet is ineffectual, you at least expect it to hit what you shot at!

Two putrid yellow-green eyes appeared, rising still through all the mud and dirt as the mound broke into pieces and became a being. It pulled him in to it, his face brought inches from an inhuman white face, its eyes changing now to red and bulging.

"James—" It rasped at him. "It's mommy!" Then she bit into his face. Unbelievable pain filled his skull while she continued to rip away his face in bites and pieces. She started chewing it, smiling a lipless grin. "Ummmm—yummmmy." She bit into his face crunching again as he continued screaming. Her teeth chomped repeatedly on him, the sound knocking around the inside of his skull; and then—

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Tap. Tap, tap.

James sat bolt upright in bed. A cool sweat covered his entire body. He tried to fully wake up. His eyes were bulging, his breathing came fast and hard. He felt the sweat running down his back, his chest, his face. He shook his head in a panic, and then felt his face. It was fine, it was all there. He breathed easier.

Tap. Tap, tap.

"James. James?" Jimmy was standing outside of James' bedroom window. It was late. The moon was full this summer night. Clouds passed by in the warm evening air. They moved along, allowing moonbeams to fall upon the earth in an eerie and perfectly creepy fashion. Jimmy loved it. James moved the curtain aside and raised up the double paned window.

"Hey." Jimmy said. "Ready?"

"Yeah, sure, uh yeah—"

"You okay?" Jimmy asked, a little concerned. James, fully dressed, easily climbed out the window.

"Sure, you?" James looked at Jimmy, daring him to say anything.

"Yup. Parents asleep?" Jimmy asked, leaning on the window sill.

"Yup." They had taken to sounding alike; such was the power of friendship. "I'm not so sure about this, Jimmy," James said, stalling, still trying to gather his wits. Jimmy gave him a look that shut down any more argument.

"Let's go," Jimmy said, ignoring how James looked. He could tell that he must have had another bad dream. Jimmy figured if one of his parents were suddenly gone forever, he'd probably have bad dreams about it for a few years, too.

They walked the short distance around the back corner, to the side of the house. The neighborhood was quiet. The wind in the trees was about the extent of the sounds. A house a little way down the street had what sounded like a horror movie on a little too loud. Being at this end of the house, no one inside could hear what they were doing. The rest of the bedrooms were at the other end of the house.

On the other side of the wall closest to them in the house was the large living room, with the fireplace, the garage entrance and laundry room doors. But no windows. So, they had about all the buffer they needed to complete their covert midnight explorations and excavations.

"Well," said James, "how much trouble could we get into? We haven't even left the yard, have we." He smiled.

"Exactly. Next door is just that empty lot, so there shouldn't be anyone who we could disturb." Jimmy said.

The empty lot next door was mostly bushes, a few trees, some bramble. Nothing as interesting as a hole at midnight with a bizarre angular worm the size of an index finger hiding out at the bottom of it.

"Got the flashlight?" Jimmy asked James.

"Yup."

"Gonzo. Well?" He looked curiously at James. "Gonna turn it on?"

"Oh! Yeah, right." Snap. Light.

"Shine it over here. Where's the moon?"

"Clouds keep passing over it," James said. "Hey look, the water didn't drain. Damn Jimmy! You left the water on!" James had visions of his parents' water bill costing as much as the national debt, whatever that might be.

"Aw, nuts." Jimmy walked over and turned off the water. He pulled the hose over and wrapped it around its holder. "Sorry. Maybe no one will

notice?”

“Right,” James said, “’cuz my dad doesn’t miss a thing.” Jimmy walked over to the hole. James looked up as the moon appeared from behind a cloud. When he looked back, Jimmy had completely disappeared. There was maybe a second that he wasn’t looking right at Jimmy, and no one can move that fast. He was just gone!

James looked left and right, then spun all around. As he turned back, he realized that the wet ground next to the hole was moving and then suddenly, Jimmy sprung up from beneath the ground!

‘What?’ James thought, ‘it’s become a pool or something.’ And sure enough, as Jimmy was sputtering and trying to breathe, looking like some kind of mud monster, he realized the ground had indeed turned into some kind of quick sand. James was stunned. All he could do was stand there. The passing clouds continued to cast moving shadows on Jimmy and the ground that were eerie beyond words. It was like the entire ground was moving. It had a disorienting effect on him. All this had happened during the passing of only several seconds.

“Damn! Get me out, help me!” Jimmy said screaming at him in a whisper, still sputtering and spitting, wiping his face and trying to bounce up and out. At each attempt to bounce out, he was slipping back in, going down further than last time. Until, he must have kicked something down below, because all of a sudden the water just drained away, like earlier in the day.

Jimmy was standing there immobile, half immersed in mud and looking stunned. James walked over and put out his hand. Jimmy just stared at him. Finally, he took James’ hand and together they worked Jimmy out of the mud. Once he was back up on ground level with James, they both stared at the lowered area of ground. Not quite a hole now, but certainly not level with the ground. They looked at the deep indentation in the ground. Now that the water had completely settled into the ground, they could see that it was oblong in shape.

“What in the hell was that all about?” asked Jimmy. They looked at each other. Then back down at the semi rectangular hole.

“You’re filthy!” James said, “Here, let me hose you off, get rid of some of that mud. God, it stinks, what is that, it smells like you fell into something— that died.”

“Septic tank?”

“Not shit, man, death. Besides, we’re on the sewer line like you and everyone else on this block. But you really stink. Man!”

“You’re telling me?” They both stopped short and looked at the hole. Jimmy continued to stare as James got the hose and started washing him off until he was someone resembling a normal person drenched in waste of some sort. Now he just mostly smelled bad but it was obvious he’d had some kind of, accident.

“How do I explain this to my mom,” Jimmy said. James just shrugged. Snap, crack!

Both boys froze. Putting on brave faces, they decided to just ignore the sounds. Nothing can hurt you if you don’t believe it’s there, or refuse to acknowledge it, right? Show no fear.

“James,” Jimmy said, “there was no hole like that before, so how could I have fallen into what isn’t—wasn’t, there?”

“Well,” James said, “there must have been something in there. Dirt doesn’t just vanish from the universe, does it? Now it’s just gone. Something that was down there isn’t down there anymore?” They both stared at the ground for a few moments.

“But, there was only a worm down there.” Jimmy looked up at James.

“Maybe it was bigger at the other end than we thought.” James looked at Jimmy, his eyes wider than before.

Crack! It sounded like someone stepping on dry twigs in the vacant lot, maybe behind some of the small trees.

“James?” Jimmy said slowly, quietly, “How’s about we go back to my bedroom?”

“But, I’m filthy! I’ll get your—”

SNAP! Something in the shadows moved closer. Both their heads quickly turned to the sound.

Jimmy pulled his eyes away to see James’ face, to gauge how scared he should be. But his eyes met emptiness. James was already half way around the back corner of the house. Not being able to help himself, he turned to look again at the shadow in the vacant lot and realized that whatever it was, it was now a lot closer.

Just as he was gearing up to run like Hell after James, the moon burst out from a cloud and illuminated the yard and then, he saw it. It was

the size of a small horse, all white, there were gray filthy rags hanging from it here and there, it was lumbering on all fours in an angular way, jerkily moving forward, but then sideways, then forward, then sideways the opposite direction, giving it a most horrifying visage of stop action animation. Like the worst Japanese horror Anime from Hell.

Jimmy was half way around the back of the house before he even realized he had started running. He got to James' bedroom window, and didn't even stop. He bounded up, flying straight like Superman, or more accurately like Superboy. Hitting the floor inside he tucked, rolled and slammed right into the footboard of James' bed.

Jimmy sat there, stunned. He looked around the room; patches of moonlight reflecting from the home across the alley, gave the room a patchy, spooky look. The first thing he really noticed was, no James. Then something grabbed his pants pocket and yanked as if to pull him beneath the bed; childhood thoughts of the Boogey Man beneath the bed fought for purchase on his consciousness, forcing Jimmy's heart up into his throat so badly, that he couldn't even scream.

He sprung forward and rolled sideways from his seated position, spinning around and found himself looking eye to eye with, James, peering out from beneath his bed's footboard. They just stared at one another for a moment, both breathing hard; but Jimmy, breathing very, very hard.

"God dammit! What the Hell, James!" Jimmy yelled at him in the quietest whisper scream he could contain.

"Shhh—you'll wake people up."

"Like we haven't already? And good! We're gonna need people awake!"

"Good point. What happened?"

"I saw it!" Jimmy's eyes showed pain, and fear. He stood up.

"You saw it?" Just then there was a bump, right outside the window. The boys' hearts stopped. They looked at the window. Still open, the curtains fluttered slightly in the miniscule breeze. James looked up at Jimmy, then slid out from under the bed and stood side by side with his friend. Both boys, feeling emboldened with the powerful force of mutual male bonding and support, took a step toward the window.

“Be careful,” James warned.

“We should close the window,” Jimmy whispered.

“Yup.” Gingerly, they stepped toward the window, the curtains lightly moving in the slightly cool night air that was entering the window. As they arrived at the window, they carefully peered out, and down, straining to see what might lurk below, ready to leap backward if need be.

Nothing. They looked at one another. Then each gently placed a hand on either side of the window, and started to carefully, and very quietly, slide the window down. But, it stuck. James took a deep breath. Both steadied and readied to pull harder. The window moved but jerkily, making a sound though fairly quiet, that seemed like a gunshot to the boys.

That was when the bedroom door flew open and James’ father Paul, stepped into the room in his robe and slippers, scaring the boys half to death as they both leaped away from the window.

They both screamed.

“What the Hell is all the noise, James?!” Not wanting to wake his wife down the hall, James’ father was also speaking in a loud whisper. “It’s after midnight. Jimmy. What are you doing here? Why aren’t you at home? What the—? You’re a mess! What’s going on here, boys?”

“Dad! Dad there’s— there’s— ” James was pointing at the window.

“Jimmy. Home. Do your parents even know you’re here? James. You. In bed, now!” The boys moved happily away from the window. James stood closer to his bed and Jimmy moved past the bed and James’ dad, itching for an escape out the bedroom door. Paul moved to the window, looking out, still wondering what they were doing. He turned and looked at them both.

“James. What’s going on? Why— ” It was just then that the thing outside the window decided to make its presence known. The boys watched Paul as he seemed to fold in half floating there in the air for what seemed like forever but was only a second; his belt didn’t move an inch up or down, it just receding from them as he was sucked out the window in an instant. In that movement they could hear two sounds; one was a whooshing sound, the movement of air; the other a sound of squirting fluids hitting the floor.

The boys gave a little yelp, too scared even to scream, and then they went silent, completely stunned into shock. They looked at each other then, both ran as one to the window. Forgetting silence, they slammed the window down shut as hard as they could; then threw their bodies up against the wall, flattened on either side of the window, terrified. James reached over and yanked the curtains closed in a final act of securing their safety even if only visually.

They looked at one another, then down at the wood floor. In the dim light there was a black puddle of liquid on the floor where James' father had been standing. Jimmy put his shoe in it, and then lifted his foot to see it better in the moonlight from a crack in the curtains. The somewhat muddy white end of his shoe was now red. Both boys warily moved away from the window, toward the other side of the room. They stood by the open doorway, carefully watching the window as they huddled backward through it, pulling the door shut behind them.

They could just see something moving outside the window, its shadow cast faintly upon the drapes. They snapped the door shut and stood there on either side of the door, breathing, breathing.

“Oh—m-my— ” James stammered.

“God— ” Jimmy finished the sentence for James.

“My dad. My dad—what, what do we do now?”

They stood there, listening to the midnight sounds of the sleeping household. There was only his step-mother left, at the other end of the house; seemingly, half a mile away down the hall.

“We have to tell my step-mom.” James nodded down the hallway. “We have to go down, there.” He pointed down the hall to the other end of the house. The boys never, ever went down to that end of the house.

“What is that thing?” Jimmy asked him, realizing his mouth was so dry he could barely talk.

“I don't know, you're the one who saw it!”

“What?” Jimmy said, feeling he was being accused of something.

“Outside, you saw it. You said. It has to be the same thing. What was it!?”

“It was buried. I felt it, in the hole it was in. I thought it was a worm.”

“So did I. Come on.” James pulled Jimmy down the hall to his only

surviving parent's room.

Picking up speed, they ran quickly to the end of the hall arriving at the target bedroom. The door was open, probably from James' dad going to see what all the noise was about. James glared at Jimmy in the semi dark, moonlight streaming in lightly through the drapes in his parents' room. All the bedrooms had the same drapes. James' step-mom liked things being orderly in that way. She was less the decorator than the economical budgetary administrator of the whole household.

"M-mom?" James said. "Mom?"

"You call her 'Mom'?" Jimmy asked. "I never heard you call her mom before."

"What do you want me to call her, 'Step-Mom'? That would just sound stupid. Okay, I guess I always avoid calling her Mom when you're around. It still feels, weird. Look, at least she's not a step-monster." Jimmy agreed a little too lasciviously, but James couldn't quite make out what that look was in the faint light.

"What?" James' step-mom said, trying to sit up, a bit groggy. She was a heavy sleeper. "James? Is that you? Who's with you?" Jimmy took a step into the room. "Jimmy? What time is it? Where's Paul? Where's your dad, James?"

"Mom. Dad. Dad, he— we were, its—" James' step-mom was waking up faster now, getting the feeling something wasn't right. She blinked, reading the terror in the boys' attitude. It was dark, but in her sleep adjusted eyes, there was enough light to see; well, just enough. Right next to her bed, was the window. The boys glanced over at it, concerned. They kept looking there because they really were not sure what they had just seen. It had simply made no sense, such an odd shape. It had centered on James' window, then either disappeared or had moved so fast, that it was simply gone.

"Okay, what's going on, where's Paul?" She was starting to get annoyed, more so at being scared, than at anything concrete. She got up and following the boy's attention on the window, she thought she'd take a look herself. Brushing aside the curtains, she raised the window and went to look outside, before the boys could realize what she was even doing. But once they did—

"NO!" They both screamed, their commanding tone startling her. She

stopped and started to pull her head back in, but hesitated and took a look around first. Nothing was there. She smiled. Kids, right? But, then there was something there after all, and her smile faded.

The boys started to run for her, to pull her back, but before they got even a single step forward, James' step-mom fell back into the room with a "thwump", onto the floor. She had moved too quickly and too lightly, picking up speed until she hit the ground. They could feel it pretty solidly through the floorboards. At the same time, they also felt a splatter of fluids all over the front of them. They turned their heads for a moment, trying not to taste the new flavor on their tongues. They wiped their faces with the sleeves of their shirts and looked back toward the window.

Jimmy, then James realized that it was only half of her body that had fallen back into the room. Even weirder, it was her top half, having flipped over and landed with her head near the window. They could see her arms moving in the final throws of becoming aware of her demise. They could hear gurgling sounds. The dark fluids began to grow on the floor, surging out in pulsations from the bottom of her torso, creeping slowly toward them.

A gross crunching sound came from outside the window, making their skin crawl. Fear pushed them back out into the hallway, seeming to follow them. Stepping backward out of the room James slowly and quietly closed the door until it clicked solidly shut.

They stood there in the darkness, breathing, trying to breathe, their eyes big. Jimmy looked around. Light from the street light coming through the living room window slightly lightened the other end of the hall. Looking at one another, they could just make out each other's faces in the dim light.

"D-Dad's—dead," whispered James. Jimmy nodded. "We—we're—gonna die, too." James said quietly, trying to keep his panic from rising further. Jimmy just nodded again.

James couldn't believe they were going to die. Already? He hadn't lived long enough yet. First he lost his mother. Now his father. And now another mother. Even if he did prefer his real mother he hadn't wanted her dead. Mom was dead. Dad was dead. They're all dead! Dead! He was rapidly losing his grip on his panic.

Jimmy was having similar thoughts. Both of their eyes were wide open with adrenalin and fear. Their breathing was getting too fast, too loud. The fear in one's eyes was escalating the other's. Jimmy could see that James was about to do something. He wasn't quite sure what that might be, but he could feel his energy keeping pace with James', rising within himself, too. They were both about to scream and they simply could not allow that to happen. Not if they were going to survive. Fighting back within himself, Jimmy realized he was not going to let it happen to James, too! Maybe everyone else in his life was going to disappear, but he refused to let it happen to James. Or, himself!

"No, we're not." James said. "We're not gonna die. At least, if I'm gonna die, I'm NOT goin'—alone!" Jimmy abruptly looked at James, a startled look on his face. James, curiously looking back at him, suddenly understood his friend's apprehension.

"No! You idiot. I didn't mean you!" Jimmy relaxed a little with relief. "Look, we have to stay calm, we have to be quiet. Okay? Can you do that? I'm scared too, but—we will die if we don't stay calm. Somehow." James took a couple of deep breaths, and nodded his head.

"Come on." Jimmy led James quietly through the hall and across the living room to the garage door. They stood at the door, staring at it. It was a pretty typical garage door, joining the living part of the house so that it was pretty solid and would be a formidable barrier for someone to get through. That also meant that it was a sound barrier too, so if something were on the other side of it, they'd likely not know it until it was too late. But, what choice did they have?

"Oh!" James said.

"What?"

"The phone. We need to call for help." James looked around.

"There's no time. We need them here, like now! Sooner," Jimmy whispered.

"I know, but we need, backup. And they might get here in time."

"My dad says they always take a while to get here because we're kind of far off the main track and there's not enough cops anymore because of budget cuts." Jimmy grimaced. "The economy," he said, trying to sound grown up. "Well, its better than nothing." James picked up the living room phone and punched in 911. The operator answered as

Jimmy listened. He could hear the operator speaking. Then:
“Please stay on the line, James. Officers are on their way. They should be there in ten to fifteen minutes. Just stay on the line, okay? Do not hang up. Is there someplace you can hide and take the phone?” It was a hard wired phone because James’ dad thought they should have one phone that worked even with the power out. The 911 Operator was very calm, reassuring. James almost didn’t want to put down the phone, but what he did next might be the only thing that could save them.

“Sure, I understand. I just have to go check something. I’ll just set down the phone and—“ James set the phone down, careful not to hang up.

“Hello? No, no, do not set the phone down. Hello? James. James?” Jimmy could hear the woman, her voice fading as they quietly walked to the garage door. James reached up and fingered the knob of the heavy duty dead bolt. He hesitated.

“Turn it?” Jimmy said. James just looked at it, trying to get the nerve up. He put his hand down and looked at Jimmy.

“Jimmy, what if, dad’s okay? Maybe, he’s just like, unconscious. Or, something.” James waited for a reaction but Jimmy only frowned.

“Yeah, maybe. I’m sure that’s probably it. He’d come help, if he hadn’t been knocked out,” Jimmy said. “That kind of thing would have to knock someone out. Right? But, what about the—“ Jimmy froze. He could feel himself turning white, so he looked down, studying his feet in the dark, mostly the one with the blood on the tip. Jimmy looked back up at James’ face, but now James was also looking down at the blood on his shoe; then he looked back up at Jimmy.

“Hey, I’m— I’m sorry, I—“ Jimmy said, feeling horrible.

“No. It’s okay.” James turned to the door again; he put his hand back on the knob of the dead bolt. Then he looked back at Jimmy. “Look. The garage door is metal. There’s no easy way in, even through those double paned windows that are up high. It’s either hard to get into, or if anything did, we would had to have heard it. Okay? It would make a lot of noise. So, there’s nothing in there. Nothing is on the other side of this door. Okay?”

“Okay—“ Jimmy said, starting to believe him. James pulled the knob.

“If believing that makes you feel better.” Jimmy gave James a dirty look but pulling on the deadbolt’s knob.

Finally, it gave a solid kachunk sound. Then he put his hand on the doorknob, took a breath and turned it, steadily, completely, until he heard it click. With that the door released just a hair, breaking its seal and oddly enough, he could feel the air pressure equalizing. He pulled the door open, trying to be quiet. Once they could see into the garage, he realized that they could see better than he thought they would. It was a good thing that tonight, there was a full moon, but the street lights were also pouring in.

Slowly, James pulled the door open enough for them to step inside. Just as they were about to take a step forward, they heard a loud crash behind them, from up the hallway; like someone had ripped the window from the wall in his parents’ bedroom. The boys bolted through the door and pulled it shut as fast as they could. But at the last second though, Jimmy blocked the door with his body to keep it from slamming too hard and too loud. Then they slowly closed it the final inch until they heard the reassuring, click.

They listened up against the solid door. There were no further sounds. Jimmy thought he heard a kind of dragging sound from beyond, kind of like something heavy was being dragged along the floor, but he didn’t say anything.

“Come on,” James said, “over here.” He walked over to a work bench and started going through some chemicals his dad kept around. He found a jar of DMSO and set it aside. He found a container of toluene, and another of strychnine. Then he found a couple of jars, empty Mason jars. He added the liquids and the strychnine powder while Jimmy watched, fascinated.

James stirred the concoction with a putty knife that was sitting on the work bench, carefully dissolving the powder and mixing it well. Then he carefully poured some half inch steel ball bearings into the other jar. To that he very carefully poured the liquid mixture. He put the top on and screwed the ring down tightly. Then he pushed it back a few inches and stepped back. He exhaled, realizing he hadn’t really been breathing, and looked at Jimmy.

“What did you just do? What is that?” They both looked at the jar. The

moonlight was beaming in through the high windows, shining on the work bench, refracting through the jar of white, opaque liquid.

“I don’t know. I’m just glad it didn’t blow up,” James said obviously greatly relieved.

“It’s a bomb!?” Jimmy backed up a few steps.

“No, no. I mean, well, I don’t know, really. I mean, I wasn’t trying to make a bomb, you just never know when you mix things, what will happen, exactly. These are pretty scary chemicals. I just took the stuff my dad said never to touch, and mixed them together.”

“Okay, well that was stupid. And, the ball bearings?”

“So we can throw the jar and it will easily break on whatever we throw it at.”

“I know what strychnine is, used to kill rats, right?” Jimmy said.

James nodded. “But what’s that other stuff?”

“DMSO. I don’t know, it’s a solvent, but some people use it on their skin to help heal faster. Jamie at school said deranged people use it to heal. Anyway, it’s supposed to work for damaged tendons, things like that. My dad used it on my foot once. I had bruised my Achilles tendon. He said it would help it heal faster. It was nasty stuff; as soon as he touched the wet rag with the DMSO on it to my foot, I started to have a disgusting, strong taste in my mouth of, oysters. Dad said it absorbs through the skin faster than just about anything.”

“And that other stuff?” Jimmy asked.

“Toluene. All I know is that it’s toxic. Really, toxic. I figured, the DMSO might help the toluene pass through the skin of whatever we throw it at and the strychnine. Well it can’t hurt. Right?” James beamed and said under his breathe, “I’m going to kill that damn thing!”

“Right.” Jimmy looked at James with admiration. “Well then, now what?”

“I have no idea.” The room suddenly shook with a loud boom. Something had hit the garage door they had just passed through and had hit it with full force. It— was coming in.

“Here, hold this.” James gave Jimmy a butane torch bottle. He picked up a torch lighter, basically a piece of steel scratching a piece of flint, to make a spark in order to safely like a welding torch. Jimmy turned

the knob on the butane bottle and James sparked it to life. The hiss seemed immensely loud but the blue flame was in some way, reassuring.

“Get ready, if it comes through the door. I’ll throw the bottle, then you toss the torch.”

“Then what? We’ll burn up with it!” Jimmy looked around in a panic. James followed in kind, looking for a way out of their situation. Suddenly he knew what to do. He ran over to the side door and unlocked it. It was also a fairly heavy door. He opened it, closed it just enough that it didn’t latch, and relocked it so that when they ran out it would close and lock after them, slowing down any pursuers.

“Ready?” James asked, preparing himself for what was to come.

“No.” Jimmy said looking worried.