

JAMIE GREFE

TARANTULEECHEN

101

The
Cinematic Series

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ALSO BY JAMIE GREFE

The Mondo Vixen Massacre

Cannibal Fatales

Mutagon II

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We glide through the barren fields of Hatchet County.

Fangs snap to:

A gigantic eyeball smothered in goop, fur heaving, a splattering belch—claws lash:

A black vortex. Full screen.

And our title is pitch-shifted over brown noise, “TARANTULEECHEN.”

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It’s late—the hum of night crickets.

A two-story farmhouse.

Shlurp-clmp-shlurp-clmp: a beastly form, wiggling too many limbs, drags across the lawn toward a shed and enters the dark.

Behind us, slippers shuffle and a throat clears, mumbling grumpy, gravelled spite. A shadow, a man.

Frank Donner throws open the front door, his chin gleaming stubble in the moonlight. He’s all silver hair and bifocals, a lumpy old bastard. Donner scans, squints, leans on the porch beam, hands in his pockets. It’s nothing, only:

Smoke drifts horror-jitters over the yard.

The shed glows green.

He folds his arms, spits. Suddenly—

The shed is a series of fizzles, pops, cracks like bone grinding metal.

Donner grits his teeth.

The roaring shed morphs to a growl.

He unsticks himself from the porch beam. “Can smell you in there,” he says, “and I want you to go back to where you came from.” He coughs. “Counting to three—you, you understand? *Leave. This. Family. Alone.*” He doesn’t count to three, instead pushes his dentures further into place and clacks.

The thing in the shed ejaculates a splat.

“Wrong night,” he says. “End this legacy.”

The thing farts.

“Crabdammit!—”

The front door bangs open, slippers on stairs, index finger on book spines. Donner’s weathered hand yanks out a leathery hardback, ancient, faintly glowing green. Those dentures clack, suck dust. He bites his lip, searches inside. He’s muttering. Nervous hands fumble page to page and suddenly stop. “This ends,” he says, tapping the text, “right here.”

Over his shoulder, a bay window frames the yard. Curtains flutter and we focus past them on the monstrous form, how it has emerged from the shed, backlit, ominous, and ready, but it just looms for now, a heaping chunk like smokey knives made of bile.

Lightning snaps the shed.

Those appendages warble, shimmy slow; the beast disappears in a snarl.

The front door kicks back open for round two. Donner stands armed with the book and ready to read. He tips it open, rakes chin stubble—thunderclaps—and grins. He’s found the right page. “Got yourself into a heap,” he says, shuffling to the shed. “Not your fault, still—a fucking heap and this is it.”

He looks up to the sky. He stares ahead at the eerily quiet shed.

Each step is a Morricone harmonica wail of reverbed tension.

Cold creeps over Donner when he stands at the shed door. It’s time, he thinks, time to put a stop to this. He clears his throat, looks down at the opened book and then, his mouth shooting right into our very soul, as if in some kind of witch-trance, growls out, “Beast of the Wretch, and Misery-Monger of the Ceaseless NightFrost GloomHole, I summon your return to the Caverns of UrOoze, to the Vomitous Hail and Sleet Stench of the Vile Clench Rod. May Fire Suckers eat your Soulless Corpssssssss—.” Cough.

He breathes, stands unsteady, phlegms up snot. Otherwise, it’s quiet. Over, he thinks. It’s finally over. Let’s study this turd.

He yells, “*kiiiiyaahhhheeeee*,” Bruce Leeing open the shed door, but that beast, those appendages, those razored claws, all of its hulking girth stands close, too close, dripping, waiting, just grinning evil down on poor Donner.

Donner turns the page, there is more: another stanza—unread.

Unfinished. Too late.

Gulp.

It strikes—hard.

Night flashes red.

A blurt rips into his gut. Claws tear a new earhole. Stumbling back, he fumbles to turn the page.

Splat! Blood smears the page. A snarl and something rotten chomps his chin.

He pants through a sliced lung, airless, wheezing cuts—too deadly, too slippery—hot sauce whizzes from a neck wound: his mouth, a watering hole of blood.

His dentures, chattering empty, fall strewn beside broken bifocals.

Donner swings a fist, using the book as a weapon, but his body is launched. He flies, spine-smacks against the porch steps, book hugged tight as his only weapon. So this is tradition, he thinks. Well, I'm not having it.

The beast is quick, a nasty paw snatching up his fallen dentures. It gums them, sucking, tasting, fitting them into its jowls and roars a stench to deafen.

The lawn blackens.

Donner's eyes widen. He's helpless on the ground. Gangly flesh wiggles like snakes unfolding, sensing air for the kill-lick. He soils his pajamas. This thing is not human, he thinks, not animal, can't be, but, damnit, so real. All this time. Turn the page, Donner, turn the—

Blood seeps down his side, but we are already drawn to the encroaching beast that now stands so close to the punchline of this hideous joke.

“Holy sonofa—” He hoists the book—splat—Donner's gashed side rivers to an ocean. “You unholy bastard-fucker-evil-mutated-whore-of-a-pig-g-g-g-oh-uh-ooga—.” A hairy limb grips, yanks, rips his legs off—both of them—and tosses them like chopsticks across the yard.

Everything slows down when you don't have legs.

And Donner's hallucinating mind sputters, “ma, dinner's purdy, pa, toast, please open—Con-ma-ma-pop-goose shallow din-din, angel-o log of ... Johnny, Patty, pork-three-tried to warn you ...” and he's fading, ghosting to the other side, leaking gallons of red pop.

Lightning snaps the shed.

Flash: Donner's eyes flip open, bugged. The motherfucking, crabdamning book! Focus. A shape. What Donner blinks into, before his mutilated face is scraped and devoured, resembles a cross between a giant yeti, a lizard, a grizzly werecat, a swordfish, a possum, yet grosser, stunning—*incomprehensamundo*.

If only, he thinks.

It digs in.

Tight on flailing limbs.

Tight on someone standing upright at the treeline, watching, waiting, trembling. We can't tell.

Back to Donner:

Chunks of skin and bone bits hit the lawn in operatic rain. Goop spatters the front door, a lawn gnome, the driveway, the shed. It's a real shit storm.

The thing tosses the old book to the edge of the yard, the glow petering, dimming, and finishes skinning Donner until the last yank of tendon and muscle are nothing but gut-salsa and grizzle.

It's over. For now.

The yard is an eerie synth pulse.

A hand at the treeline snatches the book from the bloody grass.

Through the front window we watch the creature sink, squeeze cow-sized hindquarters into Donner's recliner.

Its malformed, mutated head tilts toward us, suddenly shoots a grin of dentures sparkling like smiling snowflakes on a toothpaste billboard.

Pull back quick-reverse like we're still alive, like we could've stopped this murderous mess from happening, but your wishes care not for the tale we're about to unleash. It's too late for hope, reason, sanity, or happy endings. Pull back into dark woods. Pull back quick and

Swipe to:

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Day. A country road and an equally beautiful sky. The skittering of tiny skunk feet waddle across the dotted yellow line of this lonely, country road.

All of a sudden, a growling motor, blurred tires kersplat the skunk—it's a van.

A buzzard flutters overhead, caws, and we zoom in on the van's back bumper, still moving at light speed. A sticker reads, "All the world is a stage, so stick to the sidelines, fuckwad." Ahead, a road sign reads, "Hatchet County: Ten Miles." Through the windshield we freeze on the teenage bombshells inside:

Four cheerleader-punks headbang, fist pump to noise metal.

The van zooms. It's a road trip slam-jam. No adult supervision required. The four girls in the van are—

Eva: auburn pigtailed cheerleader and singer/guitarist of this, our travelling sideshow, THE SKULL GIRLS. She's sitting shotgun, sucking smoke, fanning herself and staring stone-faced at the road, mondo and grand. She bleeds nightmare punk-a-thons, power chords, and The Skull Girls' next, unreleased but soon to blast the world, album of noise mayhem, and pushes her black hornrims into place.

The driver (and drummer extraordinaire), Sally, cranks up the tape player, flipping aside orange hair, blowing kisses in the wind, *kawaii* to boot. The drum-bass rumble and cookie monster vocals clearly indicate the Finnish grind antics of Dumflagenlagen (their favorite).

In the backseat, mid-tickle fest, giggling gossip: Mazz, the bassist, and Dawn, supreme synth terrorizer.

The freckles on Mazz's face are birthmarks to her feigned innocence, but she's no spackled angel. She grins, spits a hangnail, licks her lips for good measure.

Dawn blows grape bubble gum. Pop! She has vintage leather on over her cheerleader uniform and who would guess those knuckle bruises are from your daughter's sass—too much fresh meat at last week's drill—how she deals with jocktards after night study in the locker room. It's hideous.

“Turn this shit up, Sally,” Mazz says, throwing out a “those naughty Fins know how to grind,” followed by a “woot-woot!”

Dawn flicks Mazz's ear, says, “how much longer to hicksville, Eva? Can't fathom why you'd want to—”

“Keep your thongs on,” Eva says, combatting the flick with the wave of her pink nails. “Just passed a sign. You would've seen it had you not been greasing Mazz. Oink. Oink.”

Dawn: “I didn't think you—I smell trouble bubbles.”

“Pip, pop, we gonna stop,” Mazz says, takes a deep breath, coughs. “Smells like ass in here. Need meat”

Eva shakes her head, says, “twirl on this,” and uncurls her middle finger. Sally replies for her, “I thought someone said, ‘crank the tunes?’” She raises her index finger in a teacherly manner:

“Girls, no fighting, no frenching, and absolutely no interrupting my musical revelry. We have a policy on these things, remember?”

“Never interrupt,” Eva says, “a woman and her Muzak. You will be attacked with yet another ridiculously boring lecture on all things melodi-ass.”

Silence. The drummer clicks four and the next track-assault begins—*Jellyfish Butcher Blues*. The Skull Girls erupt in unison, miming the slick lead intro of unadulterated feedback.

Cruise on. Faster.

“Tune in, space case,” Mazz says. “Low on gas, no?”

And they are. The needle is buried in the red so far past empty it drips south. “Damnit,” Sally says. “Lights out right during this bang your skull thrash-o-rama.”

“Shut thine hole,” Eva says. “Here we are.”

Cue: classic deserted gas station/party store. We see the rusted seventy six sign, the “Deer Jerky Sold Here” cardboard placard. Pull in, kick gravel, pump gas, stretch, and suck open sky.

“Welcome to the jungle of nothingness,” Mazz says, sawing the air.

Dawn: “I gotta flood the valley.”

Eva: “Place gives me the jitters.”

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The old man behind the counter flips down his newspaper, eagle-eyes the girls, shoots his toothpick from one edge of his mouth to the other like a pro.

We are surrounded by stuffed moose, stuffed bear, stuffed deer, stuffed squirrel, a sunglasses rack, and rusty aisles of bait and tackle as if killing and fishing are the only activities folks around here do. Of course, stale beers are in the cooler, ice outside, and the outdated girlie mags are behind the counter, but you have to ask and even then. Don’t. Trust me.

“Where’s your pisser?” Eva says. “Got three cheerleaders who need to use your facilities or they’re going to burst and we’re not mopping, unless you’re paying to watch.” She bats her eyelashes. “Ding-ding-ding.” He isn’t listening.

“Anything for a buck,” Dawn says, already thumbing the cooler for the right drink, fingering a skull shape in the glass door’s condensation.

Mazz is trying on a pair of aviators, posing sexy officer for early Halloween and fake shooting Sally with pistol fingers. Dawn slips a can of cola under her skirt, curtsies, blushes and heads for the candy bar aisle. “I want to be satisfied,” she says, tee-hee-heeing all the way, for the geezer is enraptured by the paper. Eva raps on the counter.

“Ladies room is thataway.” The old man nods to the back, looks past Eva, drops eyes back to the newspaper like this is an everyday occurrence, these vixen troublemakers from out of town and how to ignore them.

Eva stands there, pressing into the counter, twirling her hair. “I’ve got forty two in gas on pump zilch.”

A television set behind the old man flickers static, snaps clear—crime scene wrap-up. A female news reporter is mouthing something to the camera, gesturing dramatic, distraught. The volume’s too low, but it’s the Donner house. Behind the reporter, sirens and badges carry boxes of what must be evidence, point, nod, haggle, laugh and appear involved. Screen blips bad tracking. Black. Oh my. The television shudders, steadies. Eva snatches the paper from the old man’s hands. The headline: “Hatchet County Massacre Leaves Residents Riled.”

“What’s this about—other than the obvious?”

The old man leans in, says, “you girls aren’t from around here, are you?” He drools, smacks his lips. “Not safe in these parts for young things like you. Not after what happened to Frank Donner last night.” Eva is intrigued, peering over his shoulder. The television camera zooms across chunks of what could be, just might be, human remains on someone’s lawn. “Murder,” he says, voice soft and then a slow, “gruesome, unholy murder.”

“Tell me more, raconteur.” She grabs a jerky stick from a plastic bin on the counter, throats it and smacks her lips back, louder, not even giving him a glance. “You’ve done piqued my oh-so innocent attention.”

“Gutted him, they did. Mental is what the paper says. If you ask me, it’s that old beast, but this box, hunk of shit,” thumbing back to the television, “just lies about some escaped mental patient: Bill Shmeels, name is. I used to—” He stops, a bearded thread of a man, head low, dragging a shabby coat dings the door, beelines a limp for the men’s room. We linger on the man, his skunk trail, as the door slams, locks. Our old man blinks, snorts, hisses, “if you girls are looking for a quiet place to rest your sweet little (or not so little),” looking chestward, “bosoms for the night, my sons and I—”

Eva pushes the paper into the old man's chest and slaps him in the head with the jerky. "Save it, pussycat..." She pulls back the meat, licks the jerky, smiles. "I mean, thanks, old timer, for the idea of the motherfucking year you indirectly planted in my sweet little," looking down, impressed, "or not so little, bosom." She smiles, drums fingers on the counter. "Just what we were looking for," staring off, "a rock 'n roll production," beat, "Skull style."

He straightens up, itches his brow, says, "is your girlfriend gonna pay for that soda or am I going to have to bend her over my knee?"

Mazz does a "who me?" finger to chest and underhands the skirted cola to Eva.

Eva glances back to Dawn who is staring slack jawed at the television, pointing, finger trembling, smiling wicked and we know where this is heading—nowhere good, and way, way too fast.

"Eva," Dawn says, "we have to cut our record there. Have to, have to, absocluckly have to."

Eva: "Album of the year, no doubt about it." She pulls the old man by the collar and points to the television. "Tell me how to get to that house, grandpa. Now."

///

It's quiet inside, still daytime. We look down from the second story of the Donner farmhouse. We might be the beast who killed Donner—or worse.

Wrinkled fingers gently push open a curtain. Framed through the window, a news reporter, the same we just saw on the television, microphone-slaps her cameraman across the head, winds back for round thirty-seven. He just takes it.

Let the curtain fall, dim the room. Those wrinkled fingers open to grizzled hands reaching up, easing off a brown cowboy hat. Stroke a grey-black ponytail. There is a gold star on our jacket, rusted brown. We are the law around these parts.

Sheriff Bud Hills shakes the last smoke out of an empty pack. He sighs like either he wants to quit, but never does, or knows the sad truth—the closest place to buy smokes is Smitty's Bait and Tackle—a drive.

He turns his head, tilts to the thud of boots on stairs, tips his brim into place.

The sudden voice of a young deputy, out of breath, says, "you've got to see this, sheriff—won't believe it."

Sheriff: “Be down in a minute, Ron. What you found ain’t going to crawl away on its own, is it?” Pulling back, we realize why Hills has chosen this particular room for his own personal inspection. It’s an office of unusual obsession.

“No sir,” Ron says, confused, “I reckon not,” and he’s gone, boots on stairs to silence.

Yellowed newspaper clippings and magazine articles clutter the walls along with notebooks and hardbacks stacked on file folders, maps and colored pins, laced yarn to connect the dots—a fuckload too many thumbtacks for Hills.

“All this shit, Donner,” Hills says, “and your balls still got nailed.” Hills eyes one article in particular: “Mysterious Fish-Beast Slays Entire Town in Northern Michigan Mystery.” He holds it in his hand, crumples it. Another: “Ancient Chinese Man-Chicken On The Prowl?!” He groans. “Where is your curiosity now, Donner?” letting the article float to the ground, pulling in and letting smoke swirl out his mouth in a moment of slow-motion skepticism. “All over the damn lawn is where.”

Outside, the reporter yells, “you were supposed to shoot my face, not the house where—if you haven’t noticed—*there is nothing to shoot.*” She’s using her heel as a rod of pain. Hills looks to the horizon, chuckles. He takes a final drag off his smoke and bites his lip.

“Aw, what the hay,” he says. “What do I have to lose?”

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Deep within the woods of Hatchet County: Paul and Lisa are on a blanket. A stream burbles placid perfection. A wine bottle, a baguette, and a gigantic cheese wedge hold down a checkered picnic blanket. A jam box warbles out a surf aphrodisiac.

Our lovers are crotch-deep in a make-out session.

Paul pops the final button off Lisa’s blouse—boing! His hands knead skin.

They kiss. Tongues swish, lips smack. Through the trees, creeping apart thick brush, are trembling hands and those hands are hairier than usual, slick, furry—we’ve seen them at night all slimed in blood.

Lisa un-suctions Paul from her lips, says, “did you hear that, babe?” His fingers stroke her hair. “I think there’s someone in the woods.”

Paul's eyes uncross. "Probably just the bogeyman," he slurps, "looking for a nut to bang," sucking in her saliva like jell-o. "Now, where were we? Oh yeah, bottom of the ninth." They giggle straight into the next kiss.

Those inhuman hands snap away branches, are too near, too engrossed in the stalk.

Lisa's moans escalate to a rhythmic yip. Paul grunts. She slobbers him mad, yanks him back by the hair. "Bury your head in these owls, soldier boy," she says, guiding his head into tit mountain like an overgrown toddler on a milk-hunt. He snorts, slurps—her pig baby, Paul.

Paul's face sucks chest, wiggling hips in anticipation, groping.

He bites playfully on her nipple. She moans, "oooooooohhhhgaaaahhhhhoooooooo," grinds him deeper, raking fingers across his back. He bites harder and our surf warble melts eerie smothered in hot synth.

Chop! Rip!

We hear a ragged slice, gurgle, drip, drip and know it's not the stream, not water or love juice, not this time.

Paul's hand gropes throat-ward and stops. We see why. Lisa's head has been ripped off and is held dripping in the death-grip of the ugliest beast imaginable.

Paul, oblivious, resumes moving his fingers up her body, past tit mountain. His curiosity spiders to where her head should be. With a slow-motion rise and plop, his hand dips into her bloody neck stump.

And feels around the hole.

He unfastens his lips from her nipple, confused, mouth ovaling into a scream. The beast in front of him flexes, crushes her doll-skull like a rotten plum and throws it crumpled to the stream. Paul flinches, squeezes her bazoom. It squirts blood-milk over his shoulder.

Arms plunge into Paul's body, hoist him up by the insides, and send him spine-first through a broken tree. He sinks gutted on the jagged wood. Blood shoots everywhere, splattering Lisa's headless corpse. Paul shrieks, babbles, shrieks.

The beast towers. We get our first daytime view of this behemoth in all its glory. It's furry, dripping goop and gore. Yes, our own abominable yeti of Hatchet County:

THE TARANTULEECHEN and it's fangs sparkle hungry horror.

Paul's mouth spouts blood as if from a sprinkler, his body flailing to free himself like he knows if he can just wiggle around he'll somehow get out of this. He heaves, screams, and sinks deeper.

The creature wrenches him from the stump and hulks him apart, limb by limb, scrunching his body to soppy bits.

A black furry tongue snakes from its mouth and slurps blood from the scattered chunks of Paul's skin. It looks around, nubs everywhere, smells the cheese wedge, bawks, and scoops it up. It grunts, shoves the brick in its mouth, belches up a hunk.

Satisfied for now, the Tarantuleecheen roars a high cackle that echoes through the trees and darts away.

We are left with Paul's hand hanging limp and a single trail of blood making its way from knuckle to nail and:

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Outside the Donner house, Sheriff Hills' ears perk. He grips the porch beam, strains to hear a distant moan, odd like a premonition or a bawling calf trying to find its way home. He fingers dirt out his ear, distracted by the news van ripping away, leaving him, Ron, and a few officers stumped by so much crime dust, yellow tape and man-gore to contemplate.

It's quiet. The way it should be, he thinks.

Splat!

By Donner's shed, Ron is doubled over, painting breakfast-slop on the lawn. "Just what I need," Hills says, "and tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow I retire."

Hills strides on over. "Brace yourself, sheriff," Ron says. "Stinks worse than an Amarillo hoedown in there." Ron takes a deep breath, yanks open the shed door and yes, Hills feels grits and eggs making their way up to mingle.

Light nails the inside of the shed and we focus over Hills' cowboy hat to a giant oval shell on the ground. "Looks like a mega-monster egg," Hills says, wiping his mustache, snorting away little chunks of vomit-grit from his mustache.

Hills, Ron, and three officers step closer, braced, ready for action. There's a small fridge in the corner, a card table, a woodstove, tools, antlers, pin-ups.

“Feels like a tomb in here,” Hills says. “Or a stomach.”

Ron bends close to the egg, pinching his nose, “Biology experiment gone wrong?” he asks. “Genetically modified food, would be my guess. I’ve been warning people about this junk.”

“Like the eyeball of a possum,” one of the men says. “Minus the pupil.

Another, scratching his head, “Grey?”

“Tan ... Or,” Hills says, “the spawn-pellet of a beast the likes of which, gentlemen, we are yet to see.” He squats close, pokes its jellied texture. “Soft, too. Imagine that.”

One of the men, dry heaving, opens the fridge. “Boss, a couple cold ones in here.” He burps, swallows. “Mind if we—to wash out the, you know.”

“On your own time,” Hills says. “We’ve got horse meat to fry and that’s a problem. Whatever laid this’ll be back to claim it.” Hills runs his hand across the top of the egg, scrapes goo, shakes it off. “I don’t know if we should be caught with our fingers in the pudding when she arrives to claim whatever cream is in this fritter.”

Ron: “Is this what killed Donner?”

Hills: “This? No, sir. This is an egg, deputy, and eggs don’t butcher folks.”

Thunderclaps. Wind gusts in. “I didn’t think it was going to rain today,” one of the men says, thumbing a girlie mag, staring out the shed door.

They all freeze, gaze outward.

“Strange weather, this one,” Hills says. “Gonna get real nasty before night is through.”

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The Skull van flattens another skunk.

Sally cranks Finnish metal, part two.

Eva lights something hand rolled, cracks the window. “And then what, Eva?” Dawn says. “Michael vs. Dinoferrret at Camp Dread?”

Eva: “And then Donner’s body—parts of it—*aDonnering* the lawn. Croutons in a splatter salad.”

“Good spin,” Sally says.

“This dump have a pool?” Mazz says. “I’ll be up for a post jam skinny dip. Round up local meat, show them how it’s done, Skull style.”

“First things first, porkchop,” Eva says. The van gores another critter. “After the jam there’s one place I wanted to, just for a—”

“Back to the Hot Twig juke joint?” Dawn says.

“It was Eva’s idea,” Sally says, “The Hog Tit. Things get hot then ...” She strokes Eva’s hair.

“Watch out!” Eva yells, but it’s too late.

Thud! Crack!

The van nails something bigger than road kill, kersplating flesh against the grill.

“Hold ooooooooooooo,” Sally says, slamming the brakes.

We lurch, screech, skid sideways and sputter to a stop on the shoulder. Mazz and Dawn are all limbs akimbo, righting themselves into position, pushing their skirts down.

Dawn: “I’m going to be sick.”

Eva: “The fuck was that?”

Sally: “Everybody out. This van better not be fucked or we’re fucked times double ten.”

The Skull Girls are out. Sally cracks her neck, stretches. Mazz braces herself against the van. Dawn phlegms out the last remains of lunch.

Eva, in the center of the road, says, “did any of you see what we hit?”

Sally slams the back hatch. “Not a turkey.” She fires up a smoke.

But, obscured from their sights, yet clear now as we pan up and behind the girls: an overturned news van, sideways and smoldering in the field off the road.

Eva shields her eyes, scans, and there, in a ditch about thirty feet up, a woman’s arm, that arm raised stiff as if pointing to the moon to light the way.

The arm drops.

“Well, I’d say you nabbed yourself a gold medal,” Eva says. “Human flesh. Ten points for vehicular manslaughter.”

“Far fucking out,” Dawn says. “We hit a woman. Fuuuuuck this.”

The girls are standing over the ditch, looking down, and Mazz is already sidestepping the ditch’s incline, closer, squatting over the body. Sally fires out, “did I ... did I kill her? She was already dead, right? Fucking leaped-frogged right at us. I didn’t even have a chance to swerve. Fucking leap-frogged right at us.”

Mazz stands, still fully blocking everyone else’s view of the body. “I think,” she says, grandiose and commanding. “I mean, I don’t think our van could have done *this*,” and Mazz

steps aside revealing how the woman in the ditch is missing both legs, the skin of her face, and both eyeballs. Close-up of that poor mouth ripped frozen in a lopsided scream.

Cue: collective scream.

Let it ring.

Pause.

Scream again.

“Whatever did this, did it before you thumped her,” Eva says, leaning over the body. “Do skunk attack? elk? squirrel? ... rabbits?” She reaches down, thumbs the eyeless rim, shakes off goop.

“It wasn’t an elk that got her,” but the voice is not a girl’s voice, too low, too male, and is coming from the other side of the road.

They freeze.

“Did you say something?” Sally asks.

“Not me,” Eva says. “Did one of us grow balls and learn how to throw our voice?”

“Either that,” Sally says, “or there is someone behind us—the killer, could be.”

And Mazz is in mid-scramble, crossing the road and there he is, gutted, but still wheezing—the cameraman from the Donner house. Behind him, the news van explodes. The girls notice the van for the first time, duck, and it’s Eva who shoves Mazz aside, hops down next to the man. “What happened here, sleaze-guts? Did you kill that woman? Explain or we’ll make you talk, string you up by your shanks and doomify your ass all the way to the cathouse.”

“No ... no. We were,” he says, leaking blood, pressing guts up torn skin, “on our way back ... That thing, beast-foot-big-feet, plowed our van. Van gone. It was—awful.” He hacks blood. “Stacey, I loved her ... way of ... reportage.”

“You mean the dead girl with no face, no legs, half a tooth?” Eva says. “Stacey’s seen better days.”

“Not human. Spider-fish-beaver,” he says. “Mon—Monst—”

“Spit it out,” Dawn says. “Mother?”

“Mongoose?” Sally says. “Mozzarella?”

“Monsieur?” Mazz says, “that’s Finnish for ‘monster’ I think.”

He spews blood-sludge. “Monster,” he says. “It’s a monster,” panting death-breaths as if this is it, his final proclamation. But it’s not. “Leave while you can, before it gets you.” The van

explodes yet again, this time harder, its own grand finale, and the sky grains over in saturated clouds of black smoke and fire.

Tension builds. Commotion in the not so distant forest. Someone or something is watching, waiting at the treeline. Focus on the heartbeat.

“Black fur, chicken skin spider,” the man groans, “beast of the apocalypse,” and when he sighs, we suddenly cut to violin stabs and slasher-vision (that heartbeat, so close) through the trees, watching the girls and the soon to be dead cameraman. Yes, we are reading lips, studying skin, mentally photographing this footage for later—for the real fun. The cameraman gasps air. “Killed Frank Donner ... I know it killed Frank fucking Donner.”

“I don’t want the police breathing up my asshole,” Sally blurts. “I was the one driving—can’t afford this, can’t afford this.” He’s gulping dead air. “I’m going to be the one who gets zapped.” And he is airless, croaks—eyes roll. “This is royally, majorly, most undoubtedly, fucked.”

“Beautiful last words,” Dawn says, applauding. “He must have felt comforted in his final moments, all your soliloquizing and compassion. Take a bow.”

“Meaning,” Eva says, “we respect the dead, but we have to get out of here and that means now before all our asses end up in the slammer, so stop your bitching.”

Our stranger is behind the smoldering news van, crouched low, studying the mini-skirts of the cheerleaders, ogling, panting, trembling with anticipation. The breath is thicker, labored, and just maybe, excited at the prospect of making nasty with these cheerleader punks—or worse, much worse than we can imagine. Zoom across their funereal faces. Cut to:

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A tattered centerfold, vintage legs all shiny in the near dark. It’s one of the officers thumbing the rag, chuckling with that huge egg in the background. He shuts the magazine, shoves a thumb around his nose and digs. Ron and Hills are talking quiet in the corner and the two other officers comb the shed for clues, but mostly just move old stuff into new places.

The egg pulses, jiggles a bit. No one notices.

A cell phone jingles.

Ron undoes his cell phone from his belt.

“Yeah, this is Ron ... what, *what?*” he says, and his face speaks no good news. Hills takes a step closer, tenses. The men stop. “Are you sure it’s him?” he says, and the tears welling, suddenly pour down his pain-scrunched face. “No!” he screams, collapsing to his knees. “No! God, no!” He drops the phone. Hills picks it up and Ron screams straight up into the sky, “Paul!” but it comes out more as a shrieking wail than the name of his slain son.

“Hills here,” and our vision is through eye-slits behind the men, moving along the fogged window, peering in. A voice on the other end, the one at the scene of carnage: “It’s Paul, Hills. Parts of the boy. Fucking hell. Johnson’s nephew found chunks, pieces of him and that Diller girl off seventy-five—fucking butchered, Hills, just nasty as all shit.”

The killer eyeballing the scene dips out of sight as one of the men turns quick to the window.

Hills replies, “Still at Donner’s. We’re on our way. What a fucking nightmare.”

Ron faints, face first like a narcoleptic groom on father’s day.

Inside, we are the officers scraping Ron’s weeping body into our own arms, hugging his limp frame, dragging him in slow-motion out of the shed and over to a squad car. “My boy,” he says, over the symphonic chords of consolation, “my son, my son what have you ...”

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Two cop cars race past our green van. The girls duck low, coast on. Round a bend, we sight a lone mailbox: Donner’s.

“Pull in,” Eva says. “And slam this van’s ass to the porch.”

The Donner driveway spiders upward through dense trees and gravel.

We’re in.

Eva pulls open the van’s hatch revealing cases of gear all spray painted, colorful with band stickers and more aphoristic wisdom than a roomful of English teachers. Sally stands on the porch rubbing the beam where Donner leaned before dying, feels it to be still warm. Maybe just the clouds. She sniffs, smells raspberries. Sally shrugs like she could be helping, but would prefer not to and lights a joint instead.

“Murder house, open sesame,” Sally says, exhaling, “and yet, place feels more like ‘Little House on the Pervy.’ What a drag.”

And we know this signals something grand like:

Eva drops her guitar case, “Come here, Sally.” She grabs Sally by the arm, pulls her close, away from other Skull ears. “See all this yellow tape?” They look—nothing, only grass, a shed, the wind. “Murder, my dear. Taste how these clouds are dipping closer to little pink punk notes in your little pink punk ears?” Eva leans in, whispers over the oncoming crickets, “this is it, the big pow-wow-wow, aka, our LP that’s going to catapult your punk stardom to the next level final champion. Tonight, we’re on.” Sally rolls her eyes, looks down, but comes back to meet our gaze with a bite of her lower lip, a brush of her hair, and we drip red streaks, swirls, a drum roll, and explode right into The Skull Girls in full motherfucking, earth-shattering force:

Drum sticks click, “*One, two, three, four—*” cymbals sizzle, rip guitar fuzz, sludge bass strokes rumbling chug, and organ-synth cacophony boom open our eardrums. You are not ready for this. A blurt of doom-scrapes. The girls beat, lick, pound the instruments like aliens drilling the sun into soup. Donner’s living room is their noise dungeon.

It’s a psychedelic delay-fest oozing before us and those tangled wires are strung to a four-track recorder, cassette circling, tick, tick, ticking the tape onward through these discordant stains of splendor. Peak levels hover orange, spike red, and the house itself is jumping from this acid ceremony of The Skull Girls.

“*Come on, come on baby, just shake your wolf-witch assssssss booomb-ba-zooooom-ba-boom!*” Eva yells, triggers a straight pound and snakey bassline smothered in slop—desert sludge de-tuned. She tremeloes her guitar to peaks and waves of fury, “*Night comes teen moon shining, this knife is a plastered grin, girl! Shove it where the sun d-d-d-dies! Roll the dice!*” Boom! The synth switches to a dirty growl and they’re monster-stomping over messy howls, landing a slithering groove in three-three—a pulse. “*Vamp stomp with me! Stomp skull-sucker. Rumble Curve, Rumble Vaaaaaampire.*” We shudder electric in the living room, pull back, and just have to be impressed with this shamanistic display of passion.

The recliner where our Tarantuleechen sat the night before is covered in unused pedals, cables, and strings. Under the recliner, but shoved far enough back where we just can’t see, is a pair of bloody dentures: broken, desolate, stained blood red as if this, our night of gore, is just beginning.

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Gunning it solo, Hills races around the cop car, the one jam-packed with the other officers and Mr. just-fell-off-the-deep-end-and-rightfully-so, Ron. He radios, “I’m going to pull off at Smitty’s, be there in five. Park it where Krueger has that gate near the hunting camp. Over and out.” He takes a hard right, floors it.

Back in the other car, the driver says, “Keep it cool, deputy.” Ron slobbers out a babble for a reply. Officer Two: “Everything is going to be all right,” but he’s not sure these words are any comfort to Ron, who just punched out the passenger side window and whose skin has turned pasty from the payload of trauma that just got dumped his way.

They round a bend, another quick one, are coming up on a hard turn through dense woods, when Ron, howling, screaming lightning, sticks his head out the window and howls like a hoarse wolf. “Pull him back in here, Jim,” the driver says. “He’s not a dog.”

Jim, sitting next to Ron, goes to yank him back, buckle him in. His arms reach out and the car takes the curve. Jim’s meaty arms grab onto Ron’s jacket collar, but the car slams, blams—crashes into a gigantic log fallen (or placed) across the road.

We are inside the car: rocket up, off the ground and tumble, the cruiser nailing a tangle of trees. We hard-thud-scrape and a thick branch skewers the open window and right into Ron’s shoulder. Everything splatters. Jim’s whole upper body is goopy and the upper half of his head is fountaining slush. Both the driver and the other officers are huffing blood, wheezing glass in the front seat. The cruiser grinds to a drip. That’s when Tarantuleecheen lands on the hood of the car, rocking glass and metal everywhere. “Fuck me,” Ron groans. “You did it.” And then a furry appendage blasts into the driver’s chest and blood gushes everywhere.

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There are no cars outside the Bait and Tackle, no pickups, no nothing. The place is dead.

Hills shuffles up to the door, a chill in the air and an unearthly howl deep in the woods. He thinks the worse—diseased lung, mom and dad (all these years), those slaughtered kids in the woods, some beast fucker or looney tune Jasoning about—turns to radio the cruiser to make sure they got there, but stops, spins on his heel and heads back toward the store. In and out, he thinks. One more pack. Tomorrow is retirement. Time to fish, hunt, drive, sit, drink, and, ding-dinging open the door: blam—a dead body, a killer, snap into it.

A world record, Hills mutters, patting his jacket for his piece, for a jackknife, for anything to ward off the evil welling up around him. There's no time.

Someone is hunched over Smitty's—the clerk's—fallen body, head so smashed open it looks like cranberry sauce cleanup on aisle four. The person spins around, facing Hills, who is already gripping that revolver and flinging his old body for cover behind a rack of overpriced fishing gear. It's the stick-figure skunkman we saw earlier ambling to the men's room, most likely. "Schmeels," Hills yells, but it's too late.

A hammer comes hurtling through the air right at Hills' face.

Schmeels, quick like an old crow on the hunt, screams, "ga-ha-ha-ha-ha," and cocks a pump-action shotgun, shattering the front window, sending shards down Hills' jacket.

"Couldn't wait one more day, Schmeels?" Hills says, covering his face.

"Lucky to meet you here, Hills," Schmeels yells, standing drenched in blood, donning a pair of aviators, the same pair as the girls before— "No way I'm going back. Not here. Not nowhere."

Hills crouches, raises his sidearm and blasts off a blind round, nailing liquor bottles and girlie mags, and he creeps to the right, hugging to the rack. He's digging under his coat, unlatching something. Boom. More glass rains.

"Going to run you down," Schmeels says, pumping, firing round upon round. "Fire and fucking iron."

Things go quiet.

Schmeels stands, face scarred, dirt-smearred, blows smoke from the shotgun barrel. "Dinner's served." He laughs, mouth wide, too wide, that laugh. He shoves more rounds into the gun when the blade comes out of nowhere like a star of death.

Hills' bowie knife, boot-hidden and never used, hurtles end over end at the lunatic's face.

Schmeels looks up, stares at the oncoming blade.

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Before Ron knows it, before he can even catch his breath and yank the tree branch from his shoulder, he is wrenched by a hairy tentacle and flung up in the air, ripped right up through the cruiser's top frame and out into the wild.

His body flops, slams the asphalt. Tarantuleecheen jumps over him, huddles and snorts. Ron flexes his numbing fingers, stares up at what must be twenty nubs. “You killed my son,” he says, but the Tarantuleecheen is already stomping over him to devour Jim and the other goopy officers.

Rib bones and legs are sucked, chomped, and dropped. The car is torn open and gore sprays the road.

The trees wind back and forth like black spiders, oblivious, writhing. Ron tries to hold up his arm, is smothered in the officers’ gore.

He staggers to a standing position and a tentacle shoots out, rips off his left arm. He howls, right arm twitching for his sidearm. It’s there. So close. Just inches away. Can almost. Feel it.

Tarantuleecheen crunches into an arm like an ice cube. Ron’s arm. Ron stands in the center of the road, opens fire—blam, blam, blam, but he’s no leftie and can’t stop shivering. He’s not even holding a gun, but a branch or a finger.

It leaps at him, punting him further down the road. He rolls, blood spilling out everywhere and then a flash hits him: Hills. Smitty’s. Help. Go. Go. Go. Fucking Go.

Tarantuleecheen eyes a bloody copy of a girlie mag one of the officers lifted from the Donner shed. It’s just a shredded bush fluttering in the spider wind, but it sparks something in the beast. Rip it open as if this consciousness somehow feels, but doesn’t quite get it. B-boing. Snarl. Look here, Ron thinks, grabbing another of the fluttering porns, look here and feast your foul fucking eyes on these bazoongas. He chucks the magazine at the feet of the distracted beast.

Tarantuleecheen roars at all that glossy flesh, turns, but Ron, that last bit of meat and blood that smells so much like how Paul tastes, is gone, vanished, just a whiff of blood-shit hanging in the air. Tarantuleecheen towers and stomps down the road, nubs following a trail of red into the woods. We hear the thing sniff and snarl, snarl and sniff. And it’s gone.

What none of them see, but what we stay focused on, is how we’re tight on black boots as they step out of the car and walk in slow, steady steps toward the destroyed cruiser. One of the officers, not quite dead, not quite anything, but a head and a spine, is huffing last words, says, “Bill? Bill is that you? Call a fucking,” hack, gurgle, “ambulance. We got ambushed by a giant snake.”

The boots stride to the downed man and his mutilated head looks up past the boots to the figure in uniform that just stares down at him. “Don’t just,” gurgle, “stand there—hurry.”

That’s when one of those boots raises up and stomps down on the officer’s face.

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The bowie knife arcs across the party store toward Schmeels, but he dodges as it twirls, grabs the knife midair, plucks it proper and squeezes. “Mine now,” he says, hefting the blade in his hand. “Barbeque time on the Riviera, baby.” He grins, cuddles the knife to his chest, petting it with one bloody finger.

Suddenly, the store is eerily quiet, save our trickling horror score (beep, beep, beep). We float from the cranberry ooze to the aisle where Hills was and is no longer.

All is still.

Crunch.

Schmeels steps forward and tip toes to the aisle by the door, certain to find Hills’ body leaking blood or already dead. Nothing.

It’s then he sees the headlights blare, light him up from outside. Dead on, those lights. Brights flick brighter. It’s Hills and he’s floored the cruiser, ramming right through the shop’s wall and straight into Schmeels, whose body sails ragdoll to the nacho cheese dispenser in a flurry of goop and metal.

Hills has already rushed out of the vehicle and windmills Schmeels in the chops, but the bowie knife is still clutched in Schmeels’ hands and it’s heading right for Hills’ skull.

The knife flows ear-ward. Hills drops his head and the knife hits stale air. He elbows Schmeels shoulder and the bowie knife skitters to the floor.

Schmeels knees Hills in the crotch, headbutts him in the nose. “You motherflapping man of the law,” Schmeels shouts, throwing Hills to the floor and dashing through the rubble to the car. He’s going to get in, it would appear, but no, he’s on all fours, scouring through spilled jars of artichoke hearts, a mushy can of baked beans and barbecue sauce, looking for his shotgun to finish the deal. “Come to daddy, come to daddy, come on, you fucker,” he says, wiping nacho cheese from his eyes.

Hills rises ghost-like behind him, smoothing his mustache, straightening his cowboy hat. “You looking for this?” he says, holding the shotgun on Schmeels and he pulls the trigger.

It clicks.

“Can’t do nothing without a bullet. You should know that,” Schmeels says, face-skin all yellow cheese stuff and blood. He grabs one of those baked beans cans, lobs it at Hills who ducks out of the way. He looks left, lunges at a gigantic stuffed bear, leaps into it and they topple. Hills just has to stop and stare and wonder why, but Schmeels has ripped an arm off the bear and stands, wielding the arm like a mighty sword. “Chop, chop,” Schmeels says.

“Or, slice, slice,” Hills corrects, sending the concealed bowie knife sailing into Schmeels’ chest.

To the hilt.

Schmeels topples over the fallen bear parts and Hills leaps on top of him, grinding the knife even deeper into his skunky chest, pinning him to the ground. The harder Hills grinds, the more blood oozes out Schmeels’ eyeballs until both eyes popcorn out his head and land in the bear’s stuffed mouth and roll up to the whites. And then, a gunshot blares into the store, exploding the taillights of the cop car. Not again, Hills thinks. Just when a man needs a break. I just want a smoke.

More bullets hale in. Hills rolls off the dead lunatic, wipes blood-chunks off his face. Another bullet, higher. This shooter is aiming to kill.

“I’m an officer of the law,” Hills yells, “put down your weapon and put your hands where I can see them,” but a shot blazes through the car’s back window, shattering it, and Hills, standing cautious, peeking to get a look at his assailant, feels the hot pull of a bullet rocket across the skin of his neck. And then he sees the shooter, staring at him, a hunk of blood-meat jutting from a shirt-stuffed hole in his shoulder and he’s never been so happy to be shot at in his entire life.

It’s officer Ron.

Joy turns south mighty quick, for through the jagged wall hole of Smitty’s Bait and Tackle, and past the white and red trembling figure of that one-armed six shooter, stands the most ungodly thing Hills has laid eyes on. Then it takes a rumbling step closer.

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“Are we going to hammer out another one—fresh meat?” Sally says, making her rounds across the skins. “I’m ready to melt this hole, cut sweet juice and hit the fucking road.”

“Amen to that,” Eva says. “This place conjures the spook daddies. Feels familiar. Can’t place it.”

And at that very moment, unbeknownst to the girls, from the top shelf of the refrigerator, next to a clumpy carton of milk, an egg, the same breed as the gigantic one in the shed, begins to smoke and swell, pulse and jiggle—it’s coming alive.

We hover outside the refrigerator, watching the whole white hunk of plastic rattle the linoleum until the door un-suctions open and ribbons of steam pour out. Thunderclaps. A white flash. It’s an egg. The egg has grown, crushing moldy fruit and vegetables, smooshing dips and creams, and it is growing even now, reaching, it would seem, the size of a human head—or larger.

Eva tunes her axe, head cranes at the sound of something from the kitchen. We must have rocked so hard, the whole house is jamming, she thinks. And that’s how the Skull Girls roll. And that is how the Skull Girls roll them up and smoke the competition. And he’s the one, she says to herself, singing the words to her own fantasy tune. “You girls ready,” she shouts, “for another bout of mayhem?”

“Discord,” Dawn says.

“Melted eardrums,” Sally says.

“Needles and slime,” Mazz says.

“Then let’s do this better, harder. To the end,” Eva says. “No more playing. This time it’s for real.”

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Tarantuleecheen gurgles outside Smitty’s Bait and Tackle.

Ron lugs his bleeding body inside the joint, careful not to trip over old man Smitty’s corpse and sees, knife-pinned to the floor, what appears to be, the dead remains of Bill Schmeels. “Let’s go, Ron,” Hills says. “Move it! You’re being trailed by a wildebeest sloth.” He slides inside the car, firing the ignition, trying to get his cop klunker to turn over, but ramming through wall done messed it up.

Outside, Tarantuleecheen wobbles closer and closer. An arm-tentacle sputters from its groin and laps the cranberry blood on the floor, sniffing around, sucking it up.

Ron turns back and fires a shot at the tongued limb, blasts it open in a spray of furry goop. Beast-juice explodes in a mist. Tarantuleecheen howls, but that limb is already morphing back to life. “Get in,” Hills says, “no time for target practice,” still turning the ignition to a lifeless buzz, click, click, click.

Ron steps over a fallen rack of bait—wet bait. Something has affixed itself to his gorey shoulder. It’s a leech. “What the hell,” he says, trying to rip the leech off. Then he notices—Smitty’s behind the counter live bait has spilled everywhere.

The place is infected. Worms ooze, sliming the floor, leeches quiver and squirm, and slugs are making their way toward his limping body. He fires another shot out the front door, aiming recklessly, giving a Hills-Rambo howl to boot. Tarantuleecheen’s closer, now, though: fart, belch, growl. “Come on, come on,” Hills says, and the car turns over, revs to life.

Ron, in mid-slide across the hood like he’s some kind of action star, throws his one arm up and fires a mad shot and hits Tarantuleecheen in its misshapen head, splattering brains in a starfish of noodles. The beast ravages into the store, is closing in, but flailing like it can’t see a thing. Six tentacles all reach out and wrap around Ron’s body as he’s sliding off the hood, ready to sink into the passenger seat. He tumbles, screams.

“Ron! Get your one-armed ass in here,” Hills says, throwing wide the car door. He reaches over, pops the glove box and there sits a skull-handled hunting knife. Close up on Hills’ face, teeth grit tight, and he grabs the knife tosses it to Ron. He just barely catches it with his one good arm, having dropped the now clicking, empty gun and swirling under the pressure of all those slimy tentacles. “We’re going to bury this Disney reject.”

Ron palms the blade and hacks at the tentacles in short strokes—all he can manage. He’s filled with strength, but Tarantuleecheen is right behind the car now, reeling him in. Two other tentacles are sucking at the floor, lapping the spilled blood. This is it, Ron thinks, the final kaboom.

Ron saws. It doesn’t even notice, seems to be laughing, but when Ron bites in and gives it the old “chomp and chew,” it does—and howls in horror. That blast of noise sends any bottle that had not been shot at or, as of yet, destroyed, exploding. Liquor and cola, beer and energy drinks fizz like dust bombs. Every window in the cooler shatters, nailing the gathering masses of half-dead bait that are all but slithering up Ron’s pant leg. It smells like the toilets have flooded, too.

The grip loosens. Ron hacks clean through and finally slides into the car. “Drop this son of a bitch, sheriff.”

Hills slams the cruiser in reverse, floors it. The car shoots back, nailing Tarantuleecheen as its body drops, kerchunks, and just flops there on the ground in a pile, but—it rises, rejuvenated, dripping and angrier than ever, smothered in bait.

The battered cruiser spins out of the bait and tackle, does a three-sixty and the brights light up the carnage inside, all those wiggling worms. The thing is going insane, sending those arms whipping around the store, completely goring Schmeels’ corpse and it is farting, belching, staring straight at Hills and Ron.

“What is it, boss?” Ron says, wiping fur off his stubbled mouth.

“The devil’s bitch.”

“You mean—”

“I think I just pissed myself.”

“Shouldn’t we—?”

“No. It’s that mega-egg I’m worried about.”

Tarantuleecheen bends down, picks something up from where Schmeels’ body has become a bed for the worms: Hills’ skull-handled knife.

“That thing,” Ron says, “picked up your knife.”

“No man fucks with another man’s knife and lives to tell about it, but that, my friend, is no man.” Hills steps on the gas and kicks dirt down the road, hightailing it out of there.

And at this exact moment the rain belts down like a river. The sun dips behind the trees like it just wants to hide until this day is over, but the best, the very best, is yet to come.

Cut to:

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The Skull Girls blast psycho jam session number two, the remix.

Inside the house, the girls thrash power chords and bass synth cascading into freeform noise. Feedback rips. Bass chords strum faster, harder, deeper. Eva screams, shrieks, babbles as if caught in a trance. The trusty four-track recorder clicks, capturing this b-side marathon of chaos.

But the refrigerator hangs open, steaming quiet. No one smells the torn carton of milk or the ripped jug of dressing. The white rot of cottage cheese and sour cream bubble on the floor, hang from the fridge like the ancient snot of a snow beast. We are not drawn to that, though.

We are drawn to the back door, the one in the kitchen. It has creaked open, hangs there with the wind whistling in.

Follow small footprints in the spilt cream clots of the kitchen like a small deer who pranced its way deeper into the forest. The tracks lead outside.

Back in the living room, the girls are locked into each other's atonal flow. The world around them is nonexistent, a moment of transcendence is upon them. Mazz nods to Dawn and Sally to Eva. They smile and the circle around them is a tight halo of sound: pure bliss we can only imagine. Our own skulls snap hollow threads at this unity. Let them ooze into veins, deep down the sound-canal, straight to the loins of everafter.

Muffled now—darker now.

From outside, we are a smaller form, observing this madness. Turn and the shed is a glow of pink and deep orange swirls: rumble, rumble, rumble. Something festers in there. We chitter, our fangs bawl out a call, a minor chord yelp, and from inside the shed, our call is answered. Something roars, pops, gurgles to life. A stomach churns empty. Walk towards me, this growl seems to say, come closer, it says. And we do.

Blast to:

Eva, during this most beautiful moment of musical prayer, shuts her eyes and dreams. She feels the love between her and these girls. For this moment everything is beyond words. There are no bills, no letters waiting to be mailed, no hassles, no face of the man she used to love (as if!), and no future looming heartbreaks to be had. Not now. Not ever. This is it, a moment of oneness with herself and with all that is and all has been or ever will be.

Her fingers glide, hands stroke without conscious control, rubbing, tapping wood and string. The sound blends to the body. The tape clicks. This will live on, it says. This will be the one.

She rocks forward and back, turns until her body faces outside—perfect view of the glowing shed in the background. The rain pelts. She didn't even notice it was raining. The yard is pierced sepia, black, white, Technicolor flashes.

The first crack. The second crack. The night sky. The third crack.

Bliss: a heartbeat—louder.

It is just standing there. Eva can't believe what she is seeing, looks down at her hands and yes, they are still fingering, she is still here in the living room of a murdered person's house. Surely, she thinks, it's not him. But, that form—what the fuck?

The fourth crack. It's still there. She plays harder, hoping it will recede back into the depths of her imagination. It doesn't. It even looks like it's dancing—no, there are two, two weird forms dancing on the lawn like naked midgets. There are two of them now. Two. The cracks quicken over the yard like a strobe. Crack. It's covered in black fur. Crack. But it's a chicken? Crack. It looks human. Lena? Katrina? Robbie? "Holy shit," she screams. No one hears her through the wolf-walls of noise. She thrashes her guitar, can't stop staring out at the two monsters swaying not twenty feet from the bay window as the jam crescendos to anthemic glory. And there is something else, something stranger yet, still a shock—the familiar blue, white, and reds of a police cruiser. "We've fucking done it," she says. "We've done it," she yells. No one can hear. "We've conjured the dead. Holy shit balls to Sunday." She faces her bandmates, but is not playing anymore, just staring, hands to her cheeks, mouth in a perfect "o." The music clunks to a stop like a train skittering, crawling, and then nothing.

Pause—and we know why.

"What's wrong, Eva?" Mazz says. "That was fucking intense."

Eva just points at the strobing lawn and the girls see the lights looming up the drive.

The cops.

"Oh, fuck me," Sally says. "We're trapped and screwed. Oh shit, shit, triple shit."

Dawn: "I'm sick of all this cop talk and 'I'm scared' baloney. Let's do something about it. We're the Skull Girls and that, for the record, rocked." Eva trembles. "Eva, say something," but Eva is mute, just standing there as tears drip down her perfectly framed face. "Why are you crying?"

"Mon—mon—monster," she says, barely a whisper, arcing that final consonant up like a question. "I think I saw a monster."

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The beasts skitter to the shed. The cruiser peels into the yard, skids out on the lawn and clunks.

Donner's front door crashes open from a double shoulder ram. Hills and Ron tumble into the doorway at the same time, the front door, ripping from its hinges, slides out in front of them and they both slapstick on their backs like a couple of clowns. And they're up. "Grab a table," Hills says. "Barricade this door. Our lives depend on it. The world depends on it."

"Yes, sir," Ron says, but stops when he sees The Skull Girls all standing dead still in the living room. They look at him, nod. He looks at them. Neither know what to do. Ba-doom-ching. Shrug.

"Good evening, officer, we can explain ..." Eva says, but Ron is already one-arming it to the kitchen, kicking shut the back door, eyeing the broken fridge, sniffing the slop, and dragging the kitchen table through the living room where he and Hills jam it into place where the front door just stood before they barrelled into it.

"No, no, no," Hills says. "Grab the front door and prop it into *goddamn* place."

The girls are frozen, have shed their axes and stare at the two blood-soaked officers. "Ah, sorry. Evening ladies," Hills says, not sure whether what he is seeing is real or just a figment of his senile imagination. "Care to pass me that door?" All eyes take in the hunk of wood. Louder: "Pass me the fucking door." The girls scramble, grab it, and hoist it over.

Outside, the Tarantuleecheen and a smaller abomination stand at the shed, licking, mewing, bawling. Then, a third even smaller one, waddles out flexing its appendages. There are three. A family. And we get it: the fridge, the shed, and Tarantuleecheen—the bitch who birthed these suckers.

"We were just playing our music, officers," Mazz says. "You know, jamming out a family-friendly jig?"

"If you want to keep playing your music, move your jamming asses," Hills says. "You can start by shutting every door and window in this house." No one moves. "Now," he orders.

Eva nods. She's trembling like a puppy stuck in the rain. "You heard him, girls," she says, mustering strength. "Shut this place up."

And they do.

Dawn rushes upstairs to check windows. Mazz dashes through the first floor. Sally helps the officers place the table over the door and Eva moves to the living room window—to look, to wonder. She parts the curtain and takes in the lawn. Creatures. They are there, still watching. So perfectly still they are vibrating. "What are they?" she says.

"Nothing you want to jam with," Ron says, fumbling a hunk of wood, almost slipping in his own spilt blood.

"Hammer—now," Hills says, grunting, entranced by the sole project of getting this door squared away as if this one task will somehow save their hides.

Sally, from out of nowhere, tosses a hammer to Eva, who underhands it to Hills.

"Nails—hurry, hurry, hurry."

"Coming," Mazz says, running up, handing off a clump of rusty spikes to Hills who secures the table across the doorframe to keep the one they battered down in place. It works, until suddenly, a hairy appendage crashes through the wood as if it were cardboard and rips Hills' cowboy hat from his head.

"Arm yourselves," Hills shouts.

"I'm trying," Ron yells, eyeing his shoulder lump with empty wonder.

The girls scream, spin, dash in circles.

"Where's my knife?" Hills yells to the beast. The hairy appendage slithers in, clawing around for more booty to grab, but too late. Hills hauls back and nails the gross bastard right in the palm with a hammer. He drives the hammer harder and faster, mashing the palm like melted potatoes. Hills ungrips the hammer, shakes his hand. There must be a way, he thinks, to take this bastard's hand off.

The appendage flexes and they all watch it spurt out a fully formed hunk of its own flesh. Hills, resolutely: "I'll be. The devil doesn't want to go down to Georgia. You're in Hatchet County now, you sonofabitch and we do things our own way." With those words of wisdom, Hills opens wide and bites into the flesh of the beast. The strangest thing happens. The beast howls the most gut-wrenching cacophony this side of sanity. Ron grins, pushes Hills' head deeper into the appendage. Hills the Cannibal chomps and yanks fur, motor-mouths hard into that flesh, spraying gore, skin, and tissue like lotus-shaped fireworks.

Eva rushes at the door with a kitchen knife in hand and goes to work on the beast-wrist, just inches from Hills' bloody face, sawing, stabbing and chopping meat from sloppy bone.

Mazz backs up, finds herself walking backward toward the kitchen, head in a perpetual "no." Her cheeks balloon with whatever Skull Girl food she still has in her.

Gulp.

She rushes to the kitchen sink. The window above the sink reflects her face. Tears well and her face is a red blush. She lets those cheeks fill up to capacity, opens, and releases pounds of bile down the drain. Flies scramble, feast on her splattering puke. Again. Heave. Heave. Nothing. Just her heartbeat and a thunderclap. She feels better. Worse for the strangeness of it all, but better.

When she looks back up at her reflection, it's not her own face she sees, but the face of evil, pure unadulterated and mystifying evil.

A grizzled hand rips through the glass and grabs her by the hair. "Yeeeeeeep—," she yells. It's too late. Her Skull Girl body is wrenched from the kitchen like a popsicle at a Chinese market in July and out into the night. All we hear are sputters and the sound of ripped knickers as our Carpenter drone-beat comes swelling louder and louder and louder.

Dawn kicks open a door on the second floor. It's Donner's office, the one we've already been in. She sees the clippings, the sketched images, the map, the yarn. Pinpoints. Something clicks, feels right. "It's come home," she says. "This is it's home." She holds up a note and the note reads, "We're fucked, son, grandson, family and all. Sorry about the mess."

She bolts, lands on the first floor, sees that kitchen window all busted, picks up a fireplace poker. "Big trouble," she says. "Mazz?" But there is no Mazz, only her pukey remains and a cyclone of flies to pave the way.

Spin. Face us and yell, going straight into her black tunnel of a mouth: "Evaaaaaaaaa, it's Mazz."

But Eva is busy still sawing at the beast-wrist. The knife, all jagged and bent, won't chop through this monsterly bone, but given the loads of blood and ooze coating her body, something seems to be working.

Then it decides to get personal. A face, the face of a thousand forsaken animals mixed together fills the hole and, at the sight of such an abomination, she drops the knife as its tongue laps madly—obscene, evil perversion—and smacks her in the brow.

Hills stumbles back, too bloody to breathe.

Tarantuleecheen belches, pulls back its thread of an arm-chunk.

Ron, wasting no time on his revenge, punches the sucker in the face and it makes a sour sneer. "This is for my fucking son, you sucker." Gurgle. "And my arm!"

Hills is up, somehow he's armed with a power drill. He rams, levels it into one of the thing's eyeballs, goes past the cream, and screams. Red streaks shoot over him, fountain into the room like a slurpee hose on full-blast.

From other parts of the house, we hear skitters like fingernails trying to get in. We know what that means. It's a family reunion.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

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Outside, Mazz is fleeing naked, clothes littering the lawn, clawed, destroyed by giggles and claws. Those years in track and field paid off—those years stealing booze from your local convenience store—paid off. She's bleeding, though, her sliced up back running rivulets down her butt.

Rain hammers the yard.

Hustle, Mazz, hustle!

She's at the van, but she sees the tires: slashed, empty. A little furry thing brushes against her leg, whips past and back into the dark. Gone. No! It's there. It's at the window looking in. She freezes, ducks, pulls her arms around her body and sees Tarantuleechen at the front door. It's pulled itself away, is shooting goop and huffing and angry, it turns and soaks in her naked frame—belches something the opposite of contentment, something like, “me, hungry for human.”

"Eva," Mazz yells, but the rain is too pink noise drizzle and in this moment of imminent death, she's talking to herself something about “be aggressive, go fight, win,” making right all those years of wrong turns.

The thing takes a step. The world shakes. She backs up. It comes closer. Lightning pierces the yard and the little one that brushed past her is standing at the window, hopping up and down, tapping an eighth note puzzle. Another is on top of the house. The mother or father, or whatever the big one is, stalks closer. Mazz feels herself drain. Warmth spreads from her legs. It's okay, she tells herself. Your time is up. You, my dear, are through.

And with each doom-laden step, she feels the edge of the world comes closer, too No, her voice says, no, flipping, no. Do something to thwart this inevitability. She turns and her salvation is there—the shed.

The Tarantuleecheen stomps into us.

Mazz dashes for the shed door, throws it open and slam—latch, lock, breathe.

Just breath.

It's dark. She stumbles back. The moonlight from outside paints everything black and grey. Step. Pause. Oops! It's the third step that gets her—whoosh—the one that drops her down the rabbit hole that the giant egg covered, where the world cracked open.

A hole to the other side. Down she goes.

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"Mazz is gone," Sally says. "We should never have stopped here, Eva. This place is cursed worse than *House IV*."

"You weren't saying that earlier when jamming in a murder house was being discussed—make me want to puke." Eva spits.

A coffee table is thrown over the hole where the beast invaded and the officers stumble into the living room: all blood, dripping sweat, wheezing. Ron has a table cloth fastened to his shoulder stump like a cape worn by a rotting superhero.

"Get your *behinds* in here," Hills shouts from the living room. "The invasion has begun." He takes a deep breath. "And, for the record, mind telling me why you are having a concert here at the house of my good and, might I add, dead, friend, Frank Donner?"

"Thrill ride," Eva says. "Invasion of the Skull Girls."

"Carnage is not a thrill," Ron says. "I lost my son, and my arm, to that devil."

"Hold the tears, deputy," Hills says. "These girls didn't know a sasquatch was on the loose, did you girls? Or, *did* you?"

"No, old man," Eva says, "would be real deal reality TV, so stop blaming us for nothing."

"The real deal almost got your sweet ass killed, still might. Whatever that thing is, don't think it's going to stop just because we're tired and need to have a chat by this proverbial fireplace. In our case, proverbial trashy ass music room."

"There is no fireplace," Dawn says.

"Sweetie," Hills says, "tomorrow is my retirement. Tonight, however, is the anomaly to beat all anomalies. I protect folks from other folks, not from flesh-eating monsters." Everyone gasps when he confirms the nature of the beast: a bona-fide monster.

Outside, a howl, a belch, a rip and a scream fading back to silence.

Hills snaps his fingers, says: "They are not human, not animal, not of this earth." Hush. "Now, ladies do you or do you not want to survive?"

Eva: "That's a pretty easy one, sensei. The question is how are we going to survive. I hacked right through that thing and it just, you know."

"Good question," Hills says. He carefully lifts off his cowboy hat, neatens his hair. "Hacking ain't going to do it, shooting ain't going to do it, neither." He's shaking his head slowly, groans, meets their eyes. "We have to rip these suckers apart skin from muscle, right down to the bone or whatever they're made of, grind, pulpify, shit them out." He licks his lips. Zoom in on yellowed teeth. "The only thing that'll stop these sons of bitches is cannibalizing them."

Eva rolls her eyes.

He resumes, "When I took a chunk with these old Don choppers, my teeth, that chunk didn't grow back. The howl was different, the feeling was different, the pain that thing suffered was different—real. Shit, she hacked into it, Ron shot and knifed it and it still kept coming. I know it's ridiculous, but It's worth our Hatchet County best."

No reaction.

Dead silence.

Dawn, a whisper, pointing to a framed photograph of Frank Donner: "He summoned them didn't he?"

Hills' eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

Dawn: "The old snort that lived here. I saw his room when I went upstairs."

Ron rubs his stump, winces, looks at his boots.

"Well," Hills says, "Donner wasn't what you'd call a normal member of the community. He ...um," Hills pauses, "believed in certain things that us ordinary folk just don't believe in—aliens, black magic, sorcery, tall tales."

Sally: "And now do you believe?"

Hills, serious: "Honey, after tonight, I'll believe in Johnny two-shoes the six-limbed monkey doing flying unicorns that fart Old Smokey through their earholes."

Eva: “Can’t you just call back-up? I saw the tube. Plenty of suits and all that.”

“Actors, all of them. Gregslist or some nonsense, hired by the TV station. The locals like it. This is Hatchet County, honey.” He looks at Ron—the cape, the stump—“we are the back-up.”

But something is watching from the window, panting and waiting.

That Morricone wail flows back up, but this time it is backed by a war drum: da-dum-da-dum-da-dum.

“We have to get Mazz’s body,” Eva says. “My girl didn’t die for nothing.”

“She could still be out there,” Sally says. “She’s a Skull Girl, a trooper.”

And Hills rises, rips his sheriff shirt from his shoulders, stands skinny chest out, unfurling his ponytailed locks, letting pepper hair flutter in the lamp light. It’s a sight to behold.

Ron’s jaw drops. “Sheriff,” he says, “what in Samhain are you doing?”

“I came into this world kicking and screaming and dammit, tomorrow I retire. That thing, Ron, stole my skull-handled knife, killed your son, upset these girls. Shit, stole one of these girls, and, in general, ruined my day. I’m going to retire that furry sonofabitch.”

Hills’ lean frame, khaki slacks and boots disappear into the kitchen.

Eva looks us dead on, cracks her knuckles. “Girls,” she says, “let’s do this—Skull Girls death match.”

Cue: saxophone drenched surf grind!

Ron doesn’t know where to look as clothes fly, drop, unzip, and suddenly, out of the confusion—for no good reason other than it must be this way—stand three underwear clad Skull Girls (mainly white and cotton). It’s enough to send goosebumps of grandeur up and down your spine. Swallow it.

Hills appears from the kitchen holding a cleaver in one hand, a fork in the other. “Suit up, Ron—or,” looking at the girls, “down.”

The Skull Girls dash furious around the house. They are fashioning weapons, garnishing kill-sticks and in the end Eva stands holding a broomstick spear, butter knife taped to the end. Sally dons a huge pair of garden shears, chop, chopping them like a steroid addled barber. Dawn wields a chain with a spoon jammed in one end. “This is for Mazz, girls,” Eva says. “This beast must pay.” All eyes on Eva. “Consider this the bonus track.”

Ron sighs, looks to where his arm should be, to the splotches of blood staining the tablecloth that drapes over him and says, "armed and dangerous." He rips his shirt off, grabs a gnarled fork. "Let's do this."

With a scream and feet flying forward, they bust down the barricade and stand huddled on the porch. Hills leads the way with the Skull Girls behind and Ron making up the rear, but Ron hears something from upstairs like the skittering of little feet on stairs.

From the dark: sluuuuuuuurp, blech!

The huge Tarantuleecheen huddles over a pile of what the group take to be Mazz's corpse. It's licking its gigantic paws, tentacles vibrating in ecstasy, gurgling spit and forcing chunks of something pink into the mouth of a littler one. But it stops and stares as the gang, tightening their grips, appear on the porch.

But before this showdown can properly begin, it is preemptively disrupted by the smallest beast skittering, leaping from the open doorway onto Ron's back—and it sinks leech-fangs in his neck. Close up on those fangs. Ron screams anguish. Sally spins, whips the shears into a locked position, and stabs the little thing in its inhuman skull. Black fluid shoots out, spatters her chest, but Ron is a gurgling scream. His eyes go fuzzy, blood leaks from his mouth.

Blam! Our Tarantuleecheen, charges, tackles Hills who trips, tumbles off the porch.

The battle has begun. Cue battle sludge speed metal.

Eva makes a dash to the shed leaving Dawn confused.

Dawn stumbles onto the lawn. The littler one is waddling toward her, tongue flicking as if sucking flesh through the air.

A howl and rip explodes as Ron's head bursts into a million chunks of gore. "Damnit, lady," Hills yells, "you were supposed to save him, not let him die. He was my best man." Too late. Hills' face scrunches. He holds back tears, gulps pain to keep it hidden. Ron's body sinks to the porch.

Tarantuleecheen tackles Hills. They both go down, the lawn, a killing floor.

Looking eye to eye-nub at the beast that has officially ruined his retirement, Hills curls a stiff lip and laughs maniacally. But, the stench. Tarantuleecheen is dripping, sopping with filth. Hills throws a knee into the groin of evil, but it does not budge, instead presses its sloppy goo harder into his old man's body. He strains. Just like fishing, he thinks.

A rod arcs past. Eva thrusts her spear at the critter, tries to pin it to the porch. It's too fast. Her spear rockets, nails a plank instead and sticks. The shed. So close. She jams her shoulder into the shed door. It's jammed shut.

The littler Leechen jumps, affixes itself to Dawn's head, but Dawn is smarter than that and head-bangs the sucker off and, as it's floating midair down, she spin kicks it through the bay window. Glass shatters, hits the littlest one who squeals like a field of pigs rolled in cuts.

Hills throws his face into Tarantuleechen's neck, rips out a chunk of wet fur. "You taste like trash," he yells. A fisted tentacle jabs him in the gut, tries to weasel its way under the flesh. Another one pummels his chest. Tarantuleechen's mouth-hole opens wider. It gurgles. Hills pulls at its tongue, yanking and kicking at the same time. A bolt of Hatchet County strength seizes Hills, gives him that burst to capre diem this, his last day on the job. Grit teeth. Wheeze, old man. Push, baby, push. Tarantuleechen flies back, something crunching under it: the lawn gnome.

Sally catapults from the porch and rushes Tarantuleechen, tackling it. They tumble end over end.

Hills sends his cleaver ripping into the littlest one's flesh, splitting apart reptilian fur, ancient doom. He hacks and hacks, but the littler one has flung itself at Eva. She is knocked back, weaponless. "Dawn," she yells. Dawn is clutching her leg. The feast is just warming up.

Eva stands, positions herself in front of the shed door, still jammed, and the littler one runs back, spins to face her and charges full-throttle. She bends low, arms out ready for the tackle. It sends itself barreling into her. She moves out of the way and it crashes into the door, throwing it wide open, and right into the arms of Mazz.

Lightning strikes!

With rain hammering down, blood and gore-chunks everywhere, all eyes, even Tarantuleechen's, stop and peer at the warrior woman in the shed.

Covered in slimy goo, Mazz stands huffing. She holds a sickle. "No one ever said rock-n-roll was easy," Mazz says. "I'm alive." She rabbit punches the littler one and swings the sickle into its flesh, chopping it in half. Eva jumps in and starts chomping the remains. In between bites, "I know this looks sick and weird, but," chomp, gurgle, swallow, "trust me, Mazz, it's the only way."

"You are out of your skull."

“And you,” Eva says, “are alive. I’ve,” chomp, chomp, “never been happier to see you.”

But Tarantuleecheen has picked up Hills and throws him through one wall of the shed. He comes crashing down near the hole, rolls, slides, and almost drops into the abyss.

Outside, Dawn and Sally have gone to work on the littlest one, brainbits pouring down their chin, zombieing the remains, puking and eating, chewing and retching.

Hills picks himself up, eyes a freshly woven noose.

“Knew that this guy collected girlie mags?” Mazz says, “that’s a given. The noose? I made it, sailor. You never know.”

Tarantuleecheen bolts in through the demolished wall and Mazz swipes her sickle at a leg, while a chain with a spoon on the end of it comes flying, wraps around Tarantuleecheen’s head. With a sickle stuck in, the girls yank and the foot tumbles down the hole. Hill has the rope and he charges. “Plan B,” he says. “Rope this heifer.”

But the littler Leechen is bawling, growing. Dawn leaps in and laps at the remains, gorging herself on the fur and the skin and the bile. “Amen to cannibalism,” Sally says, wiping blood off her chin, swallowing bits of her own bile. “Now, this is punk.”

The smell is overwhelming.

The team wraps rope and chain around Tarantuleecheen, but with every twist, the strength of the beast pulls taught the rope, the chain; the thing is a menace. Eva grabs a girlie mag pin-up and holds it in front of the beast. It stops writhing, just stares—fuming. “Looks like our hero is a perv,” she says. Hills ties, double ties, triple ties the rope and the chain around the body and tentacles of the beast. “So cute, right, big boy?” Eva says. The beast snarls, grunts, and farts green rot.

They stand over Tarantuleecheen, peer down at his helpless form. Eye-nubs dilate worry. Blood-smearred and fuming, this is one crew you don’t want to mess with.

“Let’s get it in the house,” Hills says, “and,” burp, “retire this beast.”

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Tarantuleecheen is dumped on Donner’s dining room table. The table is just large enough to hold its massive girth, but those appendages strain, push to break free.

The girls have redressed—slightly, done themselves back into pristine punkers like none of the outside carnage ever happened.

Hills slumps on the porch smoking one of Eva's cigarettes. His lips move in the mumble of a litany of guilt and disbelief. He burps—resolutions come in time, he thinks, and there'll be plenty of time to dig into old Donner's study room upstairs to unravel this hell of an awful day.

Hills drops the cigarette butt and, stuck there in the cracks between steps, pulls up the worn shred of a page, something from, what appears to be, an ancient book. He sniffs it. "What's this here, Donner? A love poem to bring your dead hide back from the land of dirt?" He holds the scrap in his hands, pulls it close to his face, reads the phrase, "... for those who dare to lick the seed of fervent evil, inhale dusk-dark, a glowering stench, a beast of eight million night wounds stuck to the planes of Underdoom—" and that's all it takes for him to—gurgle, hiss—his stomach is not having this after-air kill zone—contemplate a proper course of action. Gut pain rails him and he clenches, tightens to keep these cold shivers from soaking his bones. "Must have eaten something funny," he says. "No. Nothing funny about it."

Eva now stands behind him, runs a hand through her hair, crosses her arms and takes in the wind, the rain.

"We're going to get to work on The Magic Shitstorm," she says. "We could record the chow, release it as a bonus track, maybe even get some Super 8 video shots of us all digging in, but, no. Not going to happen. You'll be happy to know, we've come to the conclusion that it'd be best to get this shindig nightmare over as soon as possible, get out of here before we're all jam packed in the old man's toilet with a case of the beast runs." She pinches her nose. "The aftermath won't be televised." And her stomach whines, a lump writhes below her breast, a bump she pushes back down, patting her stomach and clearing her throat.

Hills: "I've lost all my men and you're thinking about making a music video." He rubs that paper scrap. "Fitting."

"We take what we can get," she says, already walking back into the house. "We'll be waiting for you."

And Hills stands clutching his back, leans against the porch beam, pocketing the scrap.

Something glints against the moonlight—a blade?

A coyote howls in his stomach and somewhere out there, too.

Hills stands rigid, arms at his sides, but his gut is a trash compactor ready to burst from too much gut-sludge.

“Who’s out there?” he says, knowing full well that in these situations it’s better to wait and be silent than it is to give one’s prey any kind of indication of one’s whereabouts. Of course, he thinks, it’s probably just the wind.

Shuffling at the treeline: a cracked branch, a crunch, a snap. A shape streaks just at the edge of his eyes—nothing, surely nothing. It’s over. Catch you on the other side, Ron. He walks to the far left of the porch, looks out at that nothing and sees only the blackest of trees, feels, knows that something still isn’t right in this, his beautiful and deadly Hatchet County.

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“Clever, please,” Eva says, “we’re going to make meatloaf out of this mother.”

Dawn: “I don’t feel right. Don’t think I can stomach round two.”

Someone farts.

Mazz lifts a chainsaw, “There’s no way I’m touching that thing with my tongue. Parasite central. I know that being in the Skull Girls means ‘anything goes,’ but I never figured that ‘anything’ would include gnawing monster guts.”

And Sally is mid-stride, high-tailing it to the bathroom, hand clenched over her mouth, cheeks rounding outward, face grey from keeping down whatever wants to come up. Hills, heading past her, just shakes his head, burps a wet one, pushes stale air out his mouth surprised at how rank his own gas is.

Eva: “This is all your grand idea.” She cracks her knuckles. “‘Eat, eat, eat,’ you spoke and we certainly did—Lord knows we tried. You have first dibs on this one.”

The Tarantuleecheen is writhing, whining and panting, eye-nubs looking around every direction for some way out of this direful situation, but there is only one way out and Hills grits his teeth, nods.

“Yeah,” he says, “sometimes life’s a bitch. Sometimes it’s a feast.”

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Sally's head is planted over the toilet bowl and what's coming out of her mouth is not food, not liquid, but a massive blast of bile-soaked fur clumps.

She tries to swallow, can't.

What's coming out of her mouth is the littlest little critter we've seen yet—a mini-beast. Sally's arms are shaking with vomit seizure. She throws her head back for us to get a good look at this devil. The thing writhes, pushes itself out further, it's long—wiggles, tasting air, squealing—aims right for the toilet water, but in the middle of this, her painful evacuation, it's the front door opening and shutting, even though we know all parties are accounted for. And from Sally's shivering head turning just for one second to meet that sound and how she eeks out a grunt, we know something is not right and we're:

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Zooming back through the house, somehow larger than we remember it, expanding—hallway, door, a velvet painting of dogs, finger paintings of beasts, those dentures broken, clacking—and then to the living room where Skull Girl gear still litters the furniture and those amps, they buzz—we're drawn through this emptiness:

Thunderclaps snap with the prowl and steady pacing of two black boots, boots we've seen, but are yet to identify.

Moving up the body, our eyes are drawn to the book, Donner's book, and clenched within those fingers, a machete—kaboom!

It's Sally ramming her head against the mirror, trying to smash the glass with her face to slice open this furry turdeel that's oozing out her gaping mouth, but slimy tentacles are spitting, belching, clawing the air and with one final push, she muscles up, heaves the beast out of her throat.

Instead of plopping in the toilet, the thing skitters along the tiles, leaps into the bath tub. The sound of dry slipping is too gross, too loud and it squeaks out an awful cry like any mouth-baby would.

Sally pants, drools green goop down her chest, dry retches bits of stomach and when she pulls her head up to the medicine cabinet mirror to take in the mess she's become—the heroic oral-birth—she just has to pause, to pant, to clear her throat.

Behind her is our stranger—in a skull mask!

In one quick motion, she grabs the only thing in front of her worth grabbing: Donner's plastic denture case. She raises it up in a quick strike—we can only assume, to gouge the eyehole of that skull mask—yet in the upward arc of the case, the skull knife, the death-tool of the masked stalker, is already plunged straight through her spine and out her stained chest followed by one grizzled and goopy hand that holds the knife up, making sure she can see it in the mirror. Our killer thrusts up the blade and Sally goes limp letting the blade sever her entire chest open. The knife pulls back. Her slack face nails the sink and crumples to the floor.

The bathtub. It's the slithering—louder now, squeaking, skittering. Skull Mask throws open the shower curtain. The thing is forcing itself down the drain. Skull Mask stabs the knife to the tub, slips on Sally's corpse-juice and tumbles, nailing his knee, slipping, regaining. He grunts, shakes his head, and rises—footsteps.

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“Where's Sally?” Hills says, uniformed again, made up to be the sheriff we want him to be, but still noticeably uncomfortable as if the gravity of all this unusual death has taken its toll, has become just too much for him to handle. “We can't start this feast without her.” He pokes the beast, kneading skin to feel where his skull knife should be—in the belly of the beast. “Better wait.”

“Sally,” Dawn yells, swallowing, garbling that last vowel sound on something pushing up against the inside of her throat.

“Are you stalling, old man?” Mazz says. “None of us want to be here, anymore than you do, so,” she sings, *“let's get it on.”*

Eva: “Not what Marvin had in mind when he wrote that tune.”

Boom! Another room. Something drops.

“What was that?” Dawn says, gulps—tight on that throat, a trembly lump ping-ponging around her neck shoots down into her stomach.

“You don't look too good, honey,” Hills says.

“I've seen better days,” she says. “Everything's fine, though. I'm fine. Totally fine.”

Eva: “Better Days quote unquote.”

“The worst day,” Mazz says.

It’s then something heavy thuds again from a nearby room. Everyone, even Tarantuleechen, stops and for two seconds they all just look at each other. Hills fists, unfists and Mazz spins, jets down the hall toward the sound. “Sally,” we hear her say, but we turn back at our much too full and slightly weirded out group as they slowly turn and look at Tarantuleechen who almost, in that moment, shrugs beastly shoulders-mounds and sighs at the inevitable doom to befall it.

Mazz tiptoes through the living room, grabs the bass guitar, ripping it from its plug, hearing at that moment the kitchen door bang and the sound of steps outside—running. The sound of skittering feet. She’s drawn to the bathroom—goop and blood seep out onto the hallway carpet—Sally, she thinks, please let this not be you. We know, though. We know all too clearly that it most certainly *is* Sally.

As Mazz peers into the bathroom, she sinks in a slow-motion silent cry and Sally’s dead eyes seem to say, “avenge my death, Skull Girl, avenge my death.”

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Meanwhile, back in the dining room of unholy stench, Hills, Eva, and Dawn are chopping Tarantuleechen into tiny bits. It’s not pretty, nor is it meant to be. Buckets of gore explode with each flesh gash and bits of the beast are now dripping from the walls and ceiling. It looks like the cavernous insides of a body, walls, red and fleshy—buckets of gore.

Dawn turns away from the group, grabs her stomach and vomits, but what comes up is not just the day’s grub, but something fleshier, stickier, thicker like bug paste.

“This is how Ron would’ve wanted it,” Hills says, throwing a fist right into the beast’s guts. “And where in Sam Hell is my knife, you little shit!”

Eva feels something fester deep within her guts—she’s strong, though, swallows, and drives her elbow into the eye-nubs of the beast, popping them like jelly bubbles or slime candles.

“So what,” Hills says, still thrashing around for the knife, “brought you girls here to Hatchet,” splat, “County?”

“To be honest with you,” Eva says, mashing open guts, “we were just passing through, but—”

“Bullshit,” Dawn says, “Tell him about the Hog Tit or Turd or Toon—place we played.”

“That juke joint over in Iron Field?” Hills asks.

“Okay,” Eva says, “It’s a long story—too long to, you know, has to do with my ex-”—and from outside the house, from the shed comes the loudest snarl-squeal the group has ever heard. It’s so loud and piercing that the force of it actually blows them all up off their feet and slams them down like a bomb. The room rocks and rumbles, our gutted Tarantuleecheen’s table cracking, crumbling, sending beast bits all over us.

“Mazz,” Eva shouts. “The fuck?”

“The double fuck,” Dawn grunts, but for her, as she spins around, it’s too late. Her mouth is filled with a slithery beast that is now forcing its way out of her throat and the strange thing is, this slithery abomination has a balking beak of the beast. Before Eva can gain a foothold—the house rocks again—Dawn is wrenching on the thing. It chomps down on her hand, though, turns that hand to mush right before her eyes.

Burp—it’s Hills: “We’re in for a treat.” He pulls out that scrap of paper he found on the porch, synapses popping in new ways, ways that just might save the day, as if pulling out that scrap of Donner’s legacy was the best thing to do. Read it, Donner’s voice seems to echo from beyond. “Tomorrow I retire,” he yells. “Is this what you want, Donner?” and, compelled by some thought he knows not where from, reads, “... for those who dare to lick the seed of fervent evil, inhale dusk-dark, a glowering stench, a beast of eight million night wounds stuck to the planes of Underdoom. To the Fundament Fields of Blorthox and the Cast of Imp Glowlers, you now return to the Plague Center of Abyss Mountain. Haunt us no more, O’ Gelatinous Whore of a Hen-Shitter’s Bride. It is the time for all time to obliterate you once and for all. May the Portal of Owlbane open, Pig!”

Slow motion: Hills projectile vomits over the croon of a violin.

And the thunderous boom outside, the rocketing blast that knocked the room sideways, for a beat, stops the world from moving.

Everything stills—even those night crickets.

And then, like a flurry of squeals, it happens.

///

Mazz runs to the kitchen, not even noticing the strewn viscera of the dining room massacre. It’s as if the house itself has mutated. She can no longer even remember where the living room is,

thought is was close, but now it seems far, too far like a dream film on late night cable. Doesn't matter, she thinks. And peering out the kitchen window, she sees him, sees Sally's killer standing in front of the shed, holding open some book with one hand, the other raised to the sky and she can hear his voice—she's heard that voice somewhere before—bellowing out some strand of gibberish and as he slams shut the book, a nastier slam rockets her back, shoves her against the fridge so hard, the fridge door embeds itself right into the racks, shattering milk jugs, orange juice and whatever other slop Donner had hiding in there.

But she's up and throws herself through the kitchen door, out into the night, and rolls onto the lawn.

The world has taken on an eerie greenish glow.

“Hey skull,” she yells. “Party's over. Right now.”

Look down: she's still holding her bass guitar, but the tuning pegs have been busted clean off in the blast leaving a jagged, sharp edge to the wood like a malformed stake. Thick strings hang off and flutter in the after breeze of whatever just happened.

“Album of the year,” she says.

At that exact moment, Hills' old croon of a voice completes the torn passage.

In slits of melodrama:

Hills finger tracing over those words, repeating the spell we just heard in a hushed whisper.

Eva, standing, brushing gore off her body, somehow sexier now, more alive.

Mazz taking slasher steps of her own toward Skull Mask.

Skull Mask's hand opening, dropping the book to the grass.

Dawn's dead body—something still pulsing from her innards.

Tarantuleecheen, not so bound anymore, crawling in a lump of gore toward Hills—Hills, oblivious, determined, palming his knife, dropping the scrap of paper.

The shed jittering slightly, beating slow like a heart.

Dawn, turning to face us, a nasty black beast-beak hanging from her mouth and us zooming slowly into her, her mouth suddenly expanding to a size mouths shouldn't expand to—eyes bulge, nostrils flare, cheeks balloon—her head explodes, showers us.

And right when that first smatter of gore nails us, it's the shed, too, ballooning now—

Skull Mask turns his head back to look.

And the shed explodes with a green light blasting both Skull Mask and Mazz clear across the yard.

///

When the smoke clears Skull Mask has his back to Mazz. He's standing surrounded by the shed's innards, gazing down into a room-sized green gash in the ground. Mazz, scrambling achingly, slowly to her feet, is mesmerized by the glow coming from the gash, those whispers trailing out of it, calling, "Mazz, Mazz, won't you come play?"

She doesn't, though. Skull Mask slams shut the book and pulls out a machete from the back belt of his police uniform. Mazz, not taking her eyes off him, squats, studies the jagged neck of the bass guitar, a proper tool for revenge.

"Skull Mask: "So you made it this far?"

"Feels like the beginning," Mazz says, slapping the bass neck into her palm.

"So much you'll never know," he says, taking a step closer.

And that voice is familiar to Mazz. She's heard it before, in time past, but it couldn't be. It just shouldn't be.

Mazz: "Do or die, right?"

Skull Mask: "No do. Only die."

They are five feet from each other. Skull Mask has stepped over the debris and Mazz, still shaking the neck in her palm, is bracing herself and wondering, feeling strange vibes about this figure: too close, too right there to unravel who he could be. His eyes are big eyes under the eye-slits, dark and penetrating, but it's the gait that clues her in, gives her imagination room to wonder, reason to suspect this blast from the past to be none other than—

"I know you," she says. "I don't know how I do, but I do." She spits. "You are pathetic."

"What you know is going to kill you, little Mazzy," he says. "So much for your album of the year. He waves the machete with kung-fu grace. "Your fifteen minutes are up." He double fists it like a sword. "No one is going to know what happened to little Mazz and her gang of so-called musicians. Could have been so simple."

“It’s not like that, *Tim*,” she says. And it clicks. He knows that she knows. The gig he’s trying to pull is losing strength. He yanks the mask tighter, smooths it against his skull. She shakes her head, cracks her elbow. “Nice homage, asshole.”

They are face-to-face.

“Fitting, this skull,” he says. “We could have been larger than life.”

“And now we’re in act three, bottom of the second half,” she says, taking the final step and, with the speed of a hummingbird, raises back the bass neck, letting it slice, smack him right in the ear like a snowboard on fire. Crack!

He twists in pain from the blow, down to one knee, but the machete is tight in his grip. “She doesn’t want you, Tim,” Mazz yells. “None of us want you.” She gives him the Louisville treatment smack dab in the other ear. “And this is how it ends.” She’s fuming. “You won’t hear a thing.”

And it should have ended here: Mazz delivering the death blow to Skull Mask Tim, but it doesn’t, for Tim’s machete swings and, right as Mazz is angling up the bass for the final blow to Tim’s soft skull, he levels her in the bare calf and the blade is sharp. It digs in. Blood gushes from her leg wound and that gasp, the howl she belts out, is a lesson in operatic pain. Despite this, she brings the bass down on his bloody fake skull head.

Hills and Eva burst from the front door, coughing up bits of gut, the green light knocking them back and they shield their eyes. The green is a pulse and from within the center of the haze, they see two blurry figures duking it out to the death. Eva’s heart flips into her throat. It can’t be, she thinks, as the image unblurs. It is. It is. It is. Focus. Hills grips his chest, grunts out a snore. Heart attack? Shock? Eva slaps him in the face. He sharpens, glares out at Mazz and Tim, points:

“Friend or foe?”

“A long story,” Eva says. “And so over.”

What we don’t see is what Eva is holding. She has wrapped a guitar cable around her hand with a distortion pedal affixed to the end: a mace of heavy metal.

Hills holds his knife, stares down at it and smiles. “You’re all I got, sweetie,” he says, stroking the handle. His gut rumbles.

“Don’t get too attached,” Eva says. “We’ll bite.”

“I wasn’t ...” and he lets it trail, drowned by Mazz’s scream from the calf slice.

And the green haze is fading to black, the rain stopping on a dime, but the sky ignites in a rumble swirl of black thunder. “Come on, Frank,” Hills says, shouting to the heavens. “You started this mess.”

“Tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiim,” Eva yells and all stops, just a heartbeat, a breath.

Mazz wobbles back, clutching her leg, falls down and crawls out of frame.

Tim rises, rips off the skull mask. He stands there with both ears bleeding rivers down his chest. “Remember me, babe,” he slurs. “I made it to your Hatchet County debut.”

Eva: “Tim, I broke up with you. Kicked you out of the band. It’s over, Tim. Over.”

“That’s not what you said last night.”

Hills and Mazz both turn, give Eva the question mark brow of, “huh?”

Eva gropes for words. “That was ... wasn’t supposed to happen.” She frowns. “I was confused!” The cable is tight in her grip. She walks toward Tim.

“Now you’re ready to rock,” he says, but she’s not listening anymore and she hauls back, shoots something sporous out her throat.

“Sheriff, if that four-track is still in the living room? I want you to press the record button, because this sorry sack of waste’s last moments need to be put down for posterity so the world can hear how pathetic he is.” Hills shoots a glance to Mazz who, gripping her thigh, shrugs. Hills shrugs back like maybe this is a good idea. “Tim, you are not a Skull Girl. Last night was a fluke.” She pushes her hornrims into place. “I didn’t have my glasses on.” Her bowels gurgle. “Besides, what were you even doing at that joint, stalker?”

“This is deeper than you think.”

“Try me.” She’s angry.

He spits blood, sinks to his knees and sobs. “I grew up in Hatchet County, Eva. Born and raised. And this ... your murder house is my dead grandpa’s place.”

Hills, at the door, about ready to rush in and try to figure out how to arm the four-track, stops, says, “you are Frank Donner’s grandson? So, you’re dad is—”

“Yes.” He looks up to the clouds. “Old Man Donner the second.”

“Slain by that beast of the woods those years back.” Hills looks down at his feet. “He was a good man. Sorry for your,” beat, “losses.”

Tim twists the machete in his hand between sobs. “And when I heard that my dearest Eva was going to be spending some time—yeah, Bait and Tackle tells all—I had to join in on the

festivities. I know these woods like a bedbug knows good sheets.” He sounds weepy. “I want back in, Eva. Let’s play.”

“You had your way in last night, asshole,” Mazz says.

“It does look like we’ll be,” Eva coughs, “hiring in the near future, but, oh yeah, I forgot, we have a no psycho-stalker-creep policy in the contract, which rules you out. So sorry.”

And the banter goes on, but fades. We follow Hills into the house. He spits a wob of slop on the carpet and it crawls away. “Dawn?” he yells. “What the hell was her name? Don? Donna?” He reaches for the four-track, leans over to hit the record button—or at least to find it—when he sees the darndest sight. Tarantuleechen is sitting in the recliner, but instead of the hulking gross beast we have become accustomed to, it’s a pile of furry bones with three eye-nubs and a mouth-hole. Inside that mouth-hole, Donner’s dentures. Hills freezes. He looks at us and his face makes the most, “I don’t want to deal with this shit,” face like this was a blooper reel. But this is real. Tarantuleechen lunges.

This time, though, Hills is ready. As the goopy beast flies through the air, Hills swings his knife into the beast. The problem is that the beast is no longer solid. The knife, his arm, and the entire mass of evil wraps itself around him, suctioning onto him and his world goes dark green.

Upon impact, the green gash of the shed booms, rocks the world again and Eva, Mazz, and Tim blast apart. This time, Tim is the first one up. No more tears. His doopy explanation is over and he’s limping toward Eva who has hit her head on the porch beam. The machete is raised. Eva looks into the house only to see Hills covered in slime. Tim screams, machete diving toward her. “What the—” and it’s too late. Tim is upon her, bringing down the machete. She gasps: the tip of the blade, his grinning face, and almost her whole life flashing in those few seconds before her inevitable death. But the blade stops, drops when Tim, suddenly fearful, releases his grip on the hilt. He’s staring into the house at something nasty.

Dawn!

Except it’s not purely Dawn, but definitely Dawn’s smoking hot body—with the head of a gigantic hen. Eva hears bowels jiggle, her own or Tim’s, can’t be sure. The Dawn-hen charges right into Tim, knocking him back and peck, peck, pecking his head to a pile of mush. Streams of brains rain down. Jugs of blood rain down. Pockets of skull rain down. The things lops at the mess and chicken bawks a squeal that almost blows Eva’s eardrums. It’s better than feedback, Dawn. Thank you.

Across the yard, so close to the gash, is Mazz. She's peering into the hole, those voices beckoning, reaching out to her to sink into the warm depths of whatever deceptive desires it offers.

"Mazz, get away from there," Eva yells. "Dawn," she sobs, burps up a furball, and shields her face. The gash rumbles again, cracking open the lawn.

Inside, Hills is wrestling against the slime, peeling off bits and chunks, flailing around the room, knocking over amps and drums, instruments and furniture. The place is a wreck. His elbow slams back, nailing what we finally see is a framed picture of Tim, Frank Donner, and what must be Old Man Donner. "It comes to this, does it?" Hills yells, pushing his body into the kitchen.

Dawn stomps closer to the hole, her hen-head squealing and murderous. Mazz scrambles, looks around for her bass neck, but it's nowhere to be found. When she sees what happened to Dawn, it's like a revelation of things to come, the one thing that makes her go limp, give up. She just stares at the mutated murderer. "Take me! Take me!"

It's not that easy, though. Eva is already rushing, charging, cheerleader flipping across the lawn, that machete braced tight and with one mighty swoop, lops off the head of the chicken monster. "Sorry, Dawn, but it's time to rest." The head flies up in the air, end over end, and sails perfectly into the gash.

Everything stops.

We hear nothing, but know the head is drifting down, making its way to Underdoom.

It splats.

The final rumble that belts forth from the hole is enough to blow out all the windows in the house and both Mazz and Eva are flying up over the treeline, their bodies close in the air, so close they can reach out and grab one another in an embrace of skull love.

The blast sends Hills right into the oven and, as he's now pouring barbeque sauce over his entire body, kicking and screaming, we see where this is going. Walls crumble. Things explode. Tarantuleechen is gnawing as if mouths are popping up over it's body, but right as the chicken-head hits the bottom of the other side, we hear the sizzle—the sacrifice is complete.

"Turn your ass into a hot dog sub," Hills yells through the chaos, opening wide and chomping down into his own arm, but when his teeth hit flesh, it's his own flesh that he tastes. He yelps.

Pull back. He falls over. There is nothing on him, except dust, wood, walls, and blood.

Meanwhile, Eva and Mazz, having catapulted up into the sky are now barreling down to the ground, right into the gash. The gash laughs and the girls hear the strangest sound coming from the depths of that evil pit. It seems to say, “thank you, I’m full.” With that, the gash immediately seals shut and the girls come crashing to the lawn and roll, nailing themselves against a smoldering pile of Donner’s girlie mags.

All over the lawn, the spit-up remains of Tarantuleecheen and its spawn are sizzling, burning up in green smoke, dissolving to nothing. The sound is the sound of a hundred squealing pigs.

Hills grips a sink chunk, pulls himself up and there, on a shred of counter, is an unopened pack of cigarettes. “Well, I’ll be. Isn’t that something.”

And the night snaps to a pinkish blue.

We hear a bird and two and the sun.

The beautiful sun.

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The sign outside “The Hog Turd” flickers neon pink. Cars and motorcycles line the gravel parking lot, stretch out on the sides of the road and something inside is fading up, burning with a sharp edge of feedback. And then, all of a sudden, a scream we’ve heard before, a familiar entrance to the ritual about to unfold.

Eva: “*one, two, three, four—*” and it’s on! Eva dives to the ground, assaulting her guitar, licking the neck, slamming fists to the pick-ups. Mazz, that bass neck now rigged up on a tiny tabletop, smothered in cables and being massaged by her expert hands, growls with each stroke. She’s possessed.

Close-up on her sewn leg, a chicken tattoo. Move up that leg to her wicked grin. She blows a kiss. And over her shoulder we see the backbone of the band, an oddball to boot, some long-haired old hippie in a bloody sheriff’s uniform, eyes closed, a fishing rod propped up behind his dime store drum kit. Does he even know how to play? Does it matter? It doesn’t, for the shamanistic rhythm that’s coursing through his old veins is enough to send creepers up and down your jellied spine. And what’s that taped to the ride cymbal? Is it a knife? It is. It most certainly is. A skull knife.

The crowd at The Hog Turd is going bonkers over this noise ceremony. Punks are thrashing and slamming. A Japanese schoolgirl dives from the sound system, casting her body to the void of noise. A group of firefighters beat each other up at the bar, their fists are hammers and covered in rotten teeth. A man in a werewolf mask does the locomotion before being clotheslined by a Lucha Libre mask who follows it up with a jump kick into the chest of a fat man in a stovepipe hat. The place is a carnival.

Smoke drifts over the entire place. The crowd is swelled to beyond capacity like the Maruonuchi line on a Friday night. Is that a skull masked stranger we see ordering a vodka and tonic? Or, is that goopy tub of eye-nubbed slime in the corner whispering into your sister's ear?

Nothing matters. The noise is too good.

“Thank you, Hog Turd. You rock! We've been Eva and the Retirees. Sayonara and happy trails!”

The applause fades to black, to the sound of a van hatch slamming. It's the Skull mobile, spattered in blood, but running nonetheless.

Hills pats his hands together, shaking off another good load, another exquisite show with this new post-retirement band. Life is good.

He's waiting in the passenger seat. Mazz is reading a pulp novel in the back, a flashlight in one hand, pulp in the other. Her lips mouth the words. Eva stands outside the van, autographing breasts, both male and female, high-fiving avid fans, and saying goodbye to this dunky shithole of a juke joint, hoping never to see it again. Her black pen scribbles on a teen nerd's forehead. Behind her, we catch a glimpse of what could be, but too blurry to make out, a skull mask and then it's gone, splashed over by more zombie fans clawing their way toward her. “Another busy day,” she says, “in paradise.”

The driver's side door slams shut. “Crank it up, Hills,” she says. “Think we can make it to the Big Crapple by sunrise?”

“You want the secret weapon, yeah? Just say so.” Hills reaches down, up, and slaps a Hatchet County police siren to the top of the car, one of those solo lamps, and instead of Finnish death-grind, a terribly twangy country tune blurts from the van's system. Mazz jumps: “Ease into it, pricks, I'm almost done with this mondo sucker. I've got goals, you know.”

“Put the porn away, bookworm. We’re outta here.” Eva slams it, tearing past fans as they part to let the death mobile rip through. She skids out onto the main road and they shoot out of their faster than a jackrabbit doing speed rails in your mom’s mini-van. And:

Kersplat!!!

Of course they nail something. This time it’s more of a bump. No blood. Eva passes a light to Hills who puffs a Cuban, and to herself lighting up a blunt. She rolls down the window and grabs what can only be an addition that Hills made possible (along with the groovy cop light)—a CB radio. Hills exhales, chuckles, and shuts his eyes. Mazz smirks, dives back into the book.

Eva clicks the CB and, “this is the Skull Girl express. If you’re ever out in the middle of butthole nowhere, do check your tire pressure and lay off the jerky sticks. The last thing you want is to take a wrong turn and end up sucking snot over your ex-boyfriend’s stalker tendencies while battling toilet beasts from Hell. Take it from me, Eva, a Skull Girl, life is too short to play by the rules, so go fuck yourself and never sleep.” She laughs. “Over and out.”

And as she mouths the last word of her soliloquy, we’re watching those taillights dip over a hill and move down to what the van crunched just miles back.

It’s a book and with the wind picking up like it is, those pages are fluttering open, fluttering to the dead middle of this ancient text. We’ve seen this book before.

A skunk ambles over, sniffs and hunkers down, its eyes popping at the green gas seeping from the pages in a mist of possibility. The way the book is jiggling, flopping like a breakdancing fish, and the skunk, as if this is even possible—but it is!—appears to be reading, chanting something in its gravelly skunk voice, the little skunk mouth mumbling, muttering low, and those eyes look up, straight up into our own torn open mind about what this critter just released.

That’s when it starts.

THE END

