The Blackwood Chronicles

The Red-Eye Shift

Episode One

Izzibella Beau

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, locations, or events is purely coincidental.

This is just the beginning of a massive, unfolding journey for the Blackwoods. As an ongoing series, *The Blackwood Chronicles* is designed to give you that classic, addictive TV-show format—blending fast-paced, standalone monster hunts with a dark, overarching myth-arc.

Every short, punchy episode brings Garrett and Roxy closer to uncovering the conspiracy behind their parents' disappearance ten years ago. As they trace the fractured veil across the backroads of America, the anomalies will grow more complex, the cosmic entities will become more dangerous, and Garrett will continuously be forced to step back and trust his sister's amazing skills.

With the K5 Blazer packed, the silver loaded, and **Izzibella Beau** at the helm, readers can look forward to a serialized ride full of sibling banter, heavy atmosphere, and cosmic horror that unrolls one lonely highway at a time.

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Ten Years Ago

The hardest thing about the dark wasn't the shadows. It was the silence.

Thirteen-year-old Garrett stood by the living room window of their secluded cabin in the Missouri Ozarks, his forehead pressed against the cool glass. Outside, the night was pitch black, a storm rolling in low and heavy over the hills.

In the driveway, the matte-black 1984 Chevy K5 Blazer sat perfectly still, its hood catching the occasional flash of distant lightning. It had been sitting there for three days. The engine was cold.

Their parents had left it behind. That was the first sign that something was wrong.

"Garrett?"

A small, quiet voice came from the hallway. Nine-year-old Roxy stood there, clutching a frayed stuffed rabbit, her oversized pajamas pooling around her bare feet. Her eyes were huge, reflecting the yellow glow of the single lamp left burning. "Are they back yet?"

Garrett swallowed the lump in his throat, forcing his face into a mask of calm he didn't feel. He had spent the last seventy-two hours doing exactly what his dad had told him to do before they walked into the woods with a duffel bag full of silver and salt: *Keep the doors locked. Keep your sister inside. Don't look out the windows after midnight.*

"Not yet, Rox," Garrett said, his voice cracking slightly before he steadied it. "They probably just got caught on the other side of the ridge by the storm. Go back to bed."

"I don't like the noise," she whispered, stepping into the room.

"What noise?" Garrett asked, his ears straining. The house was dead quiet.

"The whispering," Roxy said, pointing to the heavy, salt-lined floorboards beneath the rug. "It sounds like... like stones grinding together. It's coming from under the crawlspace."

Garrett froze. He knew what was in the basement. He wasn't supposed to, but he had snuck down there once. He'd seen the heavy steel trunk, the ancient leather-bound journals written in languages that looked like jagged geometry, the jars of black powder, and the silver-bladed knives. He knew his parents weren't park rangers. They were hunters. They fought the things that slipped through the cracks of the world.

A sudden, violent gust of wind rattled the cabin.

The single lamp flickered, buzzed, and died. The house plunged into darkness, save for the strobing blue lightning outside.

Skrrrrt. Hssss. Return.

The old battery-powered radio on the kitchen counter hissed to life on its own, blasting a wall of static. Through the white noise, a chorus of overlapping, distorted voices began to chant.

Then came the smell. Old dust, rot, and sulfur.

"Garrett!" Roxy cried out, dropping her rabbit and lunging forward to wrap her arms around his waist.

The heavy oak front door—the one warded with deep, carved symbols on the inside of the frame—groaned. The deadbolt didn't click open; it *shattered*, the metal shearing apart as if struck by a battering ram. The door flew inward, slamming against the drywall.

Standing in the threshold was a silhouette too tall, its limbs too long. In the flash of lightning, Garrett caught a glimpse of identical, tailored black suits, pale claws, and eyes that burned with a sickening, horizontal yellow slit.

A Herald.

"The bloodline," a voice ground out, sounding like shifting rocks. "The mapmakers must be pruned."

Garrett didn't think. He didn't cry. A strange, cold survival instinct took over his thirteen-year-old brain. He grabbed Roxy by the collar of her pajamas, physically throwing her behind him toward the kitchen.

"Run, Roxy! The crawlspace! Now!" Garrett yelled.

He reached blindly onto the kitchen counter, his hand wrapping around a heavy, iron cast-iron skillet. As the creature lunged through the darkness, smelling of a dead world, Garrett swung with everything he had.

The iron hit the creature's arm with a loud *crack*, sizzling violently against its skin. The Herald hissed, backhanding Garrett with enough force to send him crashing into the kitchen table, splintering the wood.

Through the haze of pain, Garrett watched the creature step past him, heading toward the kitchen pantry where the hidden crawlspace trapdoor lay. But before it could reach it, the headlights of an oncoming car cut through the driveway.

A massive, booming roar echoed from the woods—the sound of a real-world shotgun firing silver buckshot.

The Herald paused, its smoky head whipping toward the window. Realizing its window was closing, the creature let out a wet, clicking laugh. "The map remains hidden. For now."

In a blur of dark mist, the creature vanished back into the storm.

Minutes later, a family friend—another hunter, bloody and battered—had burst through the door, throwing Garrett and Roxy into the back of the Blazer and tearing away into the night. He told them their parents had been taken. Not killed. *Taken* across a threshold by a cult serving something older than the stars.

Present Day

Garrett blinked, the memory fading as the harsh morning sun of Interstate 40 beat down through the windshield of the Blazer. He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel, his knuckles whitening as he glanced across the console.

Roxy was fast asleep, her head leaning against the passenger window, her hand still unconsciously resting near the grip of her Glock.

Ten years of moving from motel to motel. Ten years of learning the geometry, loading the silver shells, and hunting down every whisper of a cult or a cosmic tear. They weren't just saving truckers on lonely highways. Every monster they put down, every Herald they unraveled, was a step closer to the source.

They were tracking a trail ten years cold, and it was finally heating up.

Garrett reached over, gently pulling a loose strand of hair out of Roxy's face so she could sleep. "Hang on, Mom. Hang on, Dad," he whispered to the empty dashboard. "We're coming."

He stepped on the gas, and the Blazer roared down the highway, chasing the shadows all the way to Little Rock.

Chapter One

The fog off Interstate 40 didn't roll; it crept, thick and gray, smelling faintly of ozone and rotted pine.

At 2:14 AM, the highway was dead. The only light belonged to the halogen high-beams of a Peterbilt semi-truck, its diesel engine a steady, rhythmic thrum against the silence of the Arkansas backwoods. Behind the wheel, Ben Miller blinked hard, his eyes scratchy from fourteen straight hours of asphalt. He reached for his thermos, found it empty, and swore softly.

Then the radio died.

The classic rock track faded into a heavy, suffocating static. It wasn't the normal hiss of a lost signal. It was rhythmic, like a slow, deep breath taken by a throat too large to be human.

Skrrrrt. Hssss. Return.

Ben frowned, reaching out to twist the dial. "Come on, piece of junk."

A massive thud rattled the top of the trailer.

The entire eighteen-wheeler shuddered, the tires groaning against the asphalt as if a sudden, immense weight had dropped from the overpass above. Ben gasped, his hands gripping the steering wheel as the truck fishtailed slightly before he slammed on the brakes. The semi skidded to a halt in the middle of the dark, two-lane highway, hazard lights casting long, rhythmic amber flashes into the tree line.

Silence returned. Heavy. Absolute.

Ben grabbed a heavy iron tire thumper from beside his seat, his knuckles white. He checked his side mirrors. Nothing but the empty road stretching back into the fog.

Thud.

Whatever it was, it moved to the roof of the cab. The metal ceiling bowed downward, just an inch, right above his head.

Panic, cold and sharp, flooded Ben's chest. He didn't look up. He threw the truck into gear, stamping on the gas, but the wheels just spun. The back of the truck felt pinned to the earth.

Through the windshield, the fog parted.

Two glowing, amber discs ignited in the dark woods just twenty yards ahead. They weren’t animal eyes—animal eyes reflected light. These burned from within, casting a sickly, geometric silhouette across the asphalt. It looked like a wolf, but stretched, its limbs too long, its joints bending at angles that made Ben’s stomach turn just to look at.

The radio roared back to life, but it wasn't music. It was a chorus of overlapping, whispering voices speaking a language that sounded like grinding stones.

The driver’s side window shattered.

Ben didn't even have time to scream before something dark, heavy, and smelling of ancient dust dragged him out into the night. The iron tire thumper clattered against the asphalt, rolling into the ditch. The cabin door swung open, creaking in the wind, leaving only the rhythmic clicking of the hazard lights.

Three hours later, the matte-black 1984 Chevy K5 Blazer cut through the fading fog, its modified V8 engine rumbling like a thunderclap.

Garrett sat behind the wheel, one hand resting casually on the shifter, his eyes scanning the tree line with practiced precision. A faded flannel shirt was thrown over a black henley, his jaw dark with a couple days of stubble. He glanced to his right, where Roxy had her combat boots propped up on the dashboard, completely ignoring the "No Boots on the Dash" rule he’d reiterated roughly four hundred times since Texas.

She was engrossed in a crumbling, leather-bound notebook, her thumb tracing a bizarre, spiral symbol she’d sketched in the margins.

"You're going to give yourself a concussion if I hit a pothole," Garrett muttered, reaching over to tap her knee. "Boots down, Rox."

Roxy didn't look up, merely shifting her feet down an inch so they rested on the glove box instead. "Relax, big brother. The Blazer’s suspension is so stiff I feel every pebble anyway. Besides, look at this." She turned the notebook toward him. "The missing truckers along this stretch? It’s not a standard Wendigo or a stray pack of Lycans. Look at the spacing of the disappearances. Exactly forty-three miles apart. Six points so far."

Garrett glanced at the sketch. "A perimeter?"

"An apex," Roxy corrected, her eyes bright with the thrill of the puzzle. "If you connect the coordinates, it doesn't make a circle. It makes a non-Euclidean hexagon. Someone isn't just hunting for food. They're marking territory. Or drawing a door."

Garrett's grip tightened on the steering wheel. The combined lore—the local monsters acting as frontline grunts for weird, cosmic cults—was becoming a regular occurrence. "Great. Space cults and roadside attractions. My favorite." He slowed the Blazer as a glowing neon sign cut through the early morning gloom ahead: *The Rusty Anchor Diner & Diesel.* "We're low on gas, and I need coffee before I look at any more geometry. We ask around, see if anyone saw Miller's truck disappear last night."

"Sounds good," Roxy said, closing the book with a snap and sliding a lockpick set into her jacket pocket. "But if you glare at the cashier again because he breathes in my direction, I'm popping your tires."

Garrett pulled the Blazer into the gravel lot, the engine letting out a final, throaty growl as he killed the ignition. He cut her a flat, deadpan look. "I don't glare. I observe under-qualified threats."

"He was sixty, Garrett, and he had a walker."

"He looked shifty," Garrett said seriously, opening his door. "Let's go."

Chapter Two

The bell above the diner door jingled with a tinny, cheerful sound that felt entirely out of place for five in the morning.

Inside, *The Rusty Anchor* smelled of burnt coffee, stale grease, and industrial bleach. Yellowing fluorescent lights flickered overhead, humming a low, irritating B-flat. A lone trucker sat in a corner booth, staring blankly into a mug, while a young guy in a grease-stained mechanic's shirt leaned against the Formica counter, scrolling on his phone.

Garrett stepped in first, his broad shoulders automatically blocking the doorway for a half-second as his eyes swept the room, checking the exits, the blind spots, and the occupants. Only when he deemed it clear did he step aside, letting Roxy slide past him.

"Two coffees, black," Garrett said, his voice a low rumble as they hit the counter.

The kid behind the counter dropped his phone. He was maybe twenty, with a bad haircut and a name tag that read *Cody*. He opened his mouth to give a standard, tired customer-service greeting, but his eyes locked onto Roxy.

Roxy gave him a small, polite smile. She looked entirely harmless in her oversized corduroy jacket, but beneath the counter, her hand was resting casually near the silver-coated knife tucked into her waistband.

"Hey," Cody said, leaning forward on his elbows, a greasy smirk spreading across his face. "We don't get many fresh faces around here this early. Especially beautiful ones. You guys lost?"

Before Roxy could open her mouth, Garrett stepped directly into Cody’s line of sight. At six-foot-two and built like a brick wall, Garrett completely obliterated Cody's view of Roxy. He placed his massive, grease-stained hands flat on the counter and leaned in just enough to make the laminate wood groan.

"We’re not lost," Garrett said, his eyes turning to chips of ice. "We're looking for information. And the coffee."

Cody swallowed hard, the smirk vanishing instantly as he instinctively took a step back, his eyes darting to Garrett's knuckles, then to his chest, then back to his cold glare. "Uh. Right. Two blacks. Coming up."

Roxy let out a loud, dramatic sigh behind Garrett's back, leaning her head against his shoulder blade. "You are exhausting," she whispered.

"I'm establishing boundaries," Garrett muttered back, not breaking eye contact with the kid as he poured the coffee into two thick ceramic mugs.

"You're establishing a restraining order," Roxy shot back. She deftly slid around her brother's left flank, leaning against the counter with an easy, casual grace that completely reset the tension. "Ignore him, Cody. He hasn't had his morning protein shake. We're looking for Ben Miller. He drives the blue Peterbilt. Was supposed to make a delivery nearby, but his dispatcher lost his GPS signal around 2 AM."

Cody looked nervously at Garrett, then back to Roxy, clearly realizing who the safer sibling was. "Ben? Yeah, I know Ben. He usually stops in before his drop-off. Never showed last night. But... man, you guys aren't the only ones looking for him."

Garrett reached into his flannel pocket, pulling out a crisp twenty-dollar bill and sliding it across the counter. "Who else is looking?"

Cody's hand snatched the bill, sliding it into his pocket. "Two guys. Came through about an hour ago. Didn't look like truckers. Wore matching black suits, even though it's pouring fog out there. They were asking weird questions. Not about Ben, exactly. They wanted to know if anyone had seen 'the stray dog' near Mile Marker 14."

Roxy and Garrett traded a quick, sharp look.

"A stray dog doesn't take down an eighteen-wheeler," Garrett said.

"That's what I thought," Cody agreed, leaning in closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "But one of the suits... man, he was freaky. He took off his sunglasses for a second to wipe them, and I swear to God, his eyes didn't look right. They looked like... like the pupil was split. Like a goat or something."

Roxy's fingers twitched against her notebook. *Cosmic architecture,* she thought. *The cultists are already on the ground.*

"Mile Marker 14," Roxy said, giving Cody a warm, dazzling smile that made the kid blink. "Thanks, Cody. You've been a massive help."

"Anytime," Cody stammered, his cheeks turning a faint pink. "Hey, if you're staying around town, maybe I could show you—"

Garrett grabbed both coffee mugs in one hand, grabbed Roxy's shoulder with the other, and began steering her toward the door. "We're leaving," Garrett barked over his shoulder. "Keep the change."

As the diner door jingled shut behind them, the cool morning air hit their faces. Roxy wrenched herself out of Garrett's grip, a fierce grin on her face. "A goat-eyed suit? Garrett, that's a Herald. They're trying to contain the cryptid before it draws too much attention to the ritual site."

"I don't care if it's the Pope," Garrett said, walking fast toward the Blazer. "Nobody is showing you around town. Get in the truck."

"Oh, come on, you can't tell me you aren't a *little* proud of how I handled that," she teased, jogging to keep up with his long strides.

Garrett popped the driver's side door open, pausing to look over the roof of the K5 at her. The humor left his face, replaced by that heavy, familiar weight of a brother who had seen too many things go wrong. "I'm proud you're smart, Rox. But I'm not proud when you play bait. If those suits are Heralds, they aren't human anymore. They don't just want to kill us. They want to tear our minds apart."

He climbed inside and slammed the door. Roxy stood by the passenger side for a beat, the teasing air fading. She climbed in, pulling her boots down off the dash without being asked.

The Blazer's engine roared to life, a deep, angry mechanical growl that shook the loose gravel beneath the tires. Garrett threw it into reverse, spun the wheel, and tore out of the lot, aiming the matte-black beast straight toward Mile Marker 14.

Chapter Three

The highway flattened out into a desolate stretch of cracked asphalt, bounded on both sides by dense, suffocating Arkansas pines. The fog had settled into the dips in the road, pooling like thick milk.

Garrett slowed the Blazer as the glowing green reflection of a highway sign caught his headlights: *Mile Marker 14*.

Just fifty yards past the sign, the blue Peterbilt sat abandoned in the middle of the right lane. Its hazard lights had died, leaving the massive vehicle looking like a beached whale in the gloom. The driver's side door hung open, creaking rhythmically as the wind caught it.

Garrett pulled the Blazer up at an angle, letting the heavy steel front bumper shield them from the semi. He kept the engine idling, a low, protective rumble.

"Stay in the truck," Garrett said, his hand already reaching between the seats to pop the lock on the hidden cargo deck.

"Not happening," Roxy said, her seatbelt clicking open before he could even finish the sentence. "If there's cosmic residue out there, you won't even know what you're looking at. You'll think it's oil."

Garrett let out a sharp breath through his nose, knowing he wasn't going to win this argument. He killed the engine, grabbed a heavy-duty tactical flashlight from the door pocket, and stepped out into the damp air. Roxy met him at the back of the Blazer.

Garrett pulled back the mundane dog bed, punched the four-digit code into the digital lockbox, and the heavy steel drawer slid open with a metallic hiss. The interior was a pristine, terrifying armory. He pulled out a heavy-barreled Remington 870 shotgun, slinging a bandolier of bright red shells loaded with rock salt and silver slugs over his shoulder.

He handed Roxy a sleek, matte-black Glock loaded with silver-tipped rounds and a heavy iron crowbar etched with protective runes. "If something moves, you don't talk to it. You don't study it. You put a hole in it."

"Got it, Dad," Roxy muttered, checking the magazine with a practiced click.

They approached the semi-truck side by side, their boots crunching softly on the gravel shoulder. Garrett shone the flashlight beam into the cab. The driver's side window was completely shattered, glittering glass littering the asphalt like crushed ice.

Roxy stepped closer, her flashlight illuminating the driver's seat. "Garrett, look."

On the headrest and the steering wheel, there was no blood. Instead, there was a thick, iridescent black slime that seemed to slowly pulse, refracting the flashlight beam into sickly purples and greens.

"The cryptid's saliva," Roxy whispered, pulling a small glass vial and a cotton swab from her jacket pocket. She carefully took a sample, her eyes wide. "It's a Ghaunt-Hound. A traditional folklore hellhound, but mutated by the void. They don't eat their prey. They paralyze them and drag them to the altar."

Garrett didn't care about the science. He was looking at the ground. His flashlight beam caught heavy, deep gouges in the asphalt—claw marks that tore straight through the stone. They led away from the truck, tearing a path straight through the brush and into the dark tree line.

"We got a trail," Garrett said, racking the shotgun with a heavy, intimidating *clack-clack*.

Before they could take a step toward the woods, high beams cut through the fog behind them.

A sleek, pristine black sedan pulled up onto the shoulder, its engine whispering where the Blazer roared. The doors opened in unison, and two men stepped out. They wore sharp, identical black suits that didn't have a single wrinkle, despite the damp air.

As they stepped into the beam of Garrett's flashlight, the man on the left took off his sunglasses. In the pale morning light, his eyes were wrong. The pupils weren't round—they were horizontal, yellow slits, like a goat's, shifting with a sickening fluid motion.

"Turn the light off, boy," the goat-eyed suit said, his voice sounding like two dry stones grinding together. "This is a closed scene. Federal jurisdiction."

Garrett didn't drop the light. He shifted his weight, putting his body squarely between the suits and Roxy. He raised the shotgun, aiming it straight at the speaker's chest.

"I don't see a badge, goat-boy," Garrett growled, his knuckles turning white on the grip. "And I don't think the feds wear eyes like that."

The second suit let out a wet, clicking laugh. His jaw unhinged slightly, just half an inch lower than a human jaw should go, revealing a row of sharp, needle-like teeth. "They're persistent, aren't they? The little apex scavengers. They think their silver and iron can stop the turning of the wheel."

"Garrett," Roxy whispered from behind his shoulder, her voice tight but steady. "Don't shoot the chests. Heralds don't keep their hearts where we do. Aim for the throat or the knees. We need to split them up."

The goat-eyed suit smiled, a cold, empty expression. "The girl knows her geometry. Shame she won't live to see the masterpiece finished."

With terrifying, unnatural speed, both suits lunged forward, their hands lengthening into pale, elongated claws as they tore across the asphalt straight toward them.

Chapter Four

Garrett didn’t hesitate. The moment the suits lunged, he pulled the trigger.

BOOM.

The Remington roared, a blinding flash of fire illuminating the fog. The blast hit the goat-eyed suit dead in the shoulder. A normal man would have been flipped backward, but the Herald merely stumbled, a chunk of his expensive black suit shredding away to reveal gray, fibrous muscle underneath. No blood came out—just a puff of dry, black ash.

"Roxy, move!" Garrett roared, racking the slide. A smoking red hull clattered against the asphalt.

The second suit bypassed Garrett entirely, targeting Roxy with its unhinged jaw wide, aiming to tear her throat out. Roxy didn’t panic. She dropped low, sliding on the damp asphalt right beneath the creature's outstretched claws. As she slid past, she swung the runed iron crowbar with everything she had, cracking it hard against the back of the creature’s knee.

CRACK.

The iron sizzled against the creature's flesh, a smell like burning hair filling the air. The suit shrieked, its leg buckling at a grotesque angle.

"Garrett! Iron works on their joints!" she yelled, rolling back to her feet and bringing her Glock up, firing three quick rounds into the limping creature’s chest to keep it back. The silver-tipped bullets thudded into its torso, slowing it down but failing to drop it.

Meanwhile, the goat-eyed suit was back on Garrett. It slammed into him with the force of a runaway freight train, knocking the shotgun from his hands. They went down hard onto the gravel shoulder. The creature’s elongated claws dug into the leather of Garrett’s jacket, tearing toward his face.

Garrett jammed his forearm up under the creature's chin, choking it back as he struggled against its unnatural, dead weight. The smell of old dust and rot was suffocating. Through the horizontal slit of the creature's eyes, Garrett could see a faint, swirling purple void.

"Get... off... me!" Garrett grunted. He reached down to his boot, pulling a heavy, silver-plated hunting knife. With a brutal upward thrust, he drove the blade straight into the side of the Herald's neck.

The effect was instantaneous. The silver-and-steel combination tore through the core of the creature's throat. The goat-eyes rolled back, the body stiffening before dissolving into a massive wave of black, greasy ash that collapsed all over Garrett’s chest, leaving him coughing and gagging.

"Garrett!"

He looked up just in time to see the second suit, despite its broken knee, pinning Roxy against the side of the K5 Blazer. Its needle-toothed jaw was inches from her face, its claws scraping grooves into the truck's matte-black paint. Roxy was holding it off with both hands pressed against its collarbones, her teeth gritted, refusing to scream.

Fury, hot and blinding, completely took over Garrett. He scrambled to his feet, grabbed the iron crowbar Roxy had dropped, and sprinted forward.

"Hey! Dumbass!" Garrett yelled.

The creature started to turn its head, but Garrett didn't give it the chance. He swung the iron bar like a baseball bat, catching the Herald squarely across the throat. The runed iron bit deep, sizzling violently, and with a sickening *pop*, the creature's head unraveled into dark mist. The rest of the body slumped forward, dissolving into ash before it even hit the gravel.

Silence slammed back down on the highway.

Garrett dropped the crowbar, breathing heavily, his chest heaving. He rushed over to Roxy, grabbing her by the shoulders and turning her side to side, his eyes scanning her for wounds. "Did it bite you? Did it scratch you? Look at me, Rox, are you bleeding?"

"Garrett, I'm fine! Let go, you're bruising my arms," she said, twisting out of his grip, though her breath was shallow and her heart was visibly hammering against her ribs. She looked at the scratched paint on the Blazer and let out a weak laugh. "Look at that. You're going to have to buff that out."

"I don't care about the paint," Garrett snapped, his voice shaking slightly with residual adrenaline. "I told you to stay in the truck. You almost got your face eaten."

"And if I stayed in the truck, that thing would have ambushed you while you were wrestling the first one!" Roxy fired back, her own adrenaline bubbling over. "We’re partners,

Garrett! Stop trying to play the lone savior. It’s annoying, and frankly, it’s going to get us both killed."

Garrett closed his eyes, taking a deep breath of the damp air to steady himself. He knew she was right, but admitting it felt like admitting he couldn't keep her safe, and that was a pill he couldn't swallow.

"Whatever," he muttered, turning around to retrieve his shotgun and wiping the black ash off his jacket. "The trail goes into the woods. If those things were trying to stop us, it means the Ghaunt-Hound is close to finishing whatever it's doing with Miller."

Roxy wiped a smear of ash off her cheek and checked her Glock's magazine, sliding it back in with a sharp slap. "Then let's go finish it first."

Chapter Five

The tree line swallowed the highway's pale light, plunging them into a claustrophobic maze of damp pine needles and rotting wood. Garrett led the way, his heavy flashlight beam cutting a jagged path through the dark. The tracks weren't hard to follow; the Ghaunt-Hound was massive, leaving snapped branches and deep, gouged tracks in the mud that oozed with that same iridescent black slime.

"The air is getting heavier," Roxy whispered, her voice barely carrying over the crunch of their boots. She adjusted her grip on the Glock, her eyes darting between the trees. "The ambient pressure is dropping. That's not weather, Garrett. That's a spatial tear."

"Just keep your eyes open," Garrett muttered. He held the Remington at low ready, his finger resting just outside the trigger guard. Every crackle of a dry twig made his shoulders tense. He kept adjusting his stride, subtly keeping himself half a step ahead of her, a shield against whatever was waiting in the dark.

Roxy noticed, of course, but she chose to save her breath. The further they walked, the more the woods changed. The natural sounds of the night—the crickets, the wind in the canopy—had died completely. Replacing them was a low, vibrational hum that vibrated straight through the soles of their boots, a sound that felt less like audio and more like a headache coming on.

The slime on the trees began to form patterns. It wasn't random anymore. The black goo dripped down the bark in precise, interlocking spirals—the same non-Euclidean geometry Roxy had sketched in her notebook.

"We're close," Roxy breathed, pausing to touch a tree. The bark beneath the slime was dead, brittle as ash. "The entity's presence is bleeding the life right out of the soil."

A wet, heavy crunch echoed from a clearing up ahead.

Garrett clicked off his flashlight instantly, plunging them into pitch-blackness. Roxy followed suit. They crept forward on instinct, moving toward a dim, sickly violet glow that pulsed through the thick brush.

They crouched behind a fallen oak log at the edge of the clearing.

The quarry opened up before them, a massive, carved-out bowl of gray stone. In the center, a circle of crude, jagged monoliths had been dragged into place. Painted across the stone floor in glowing, iridescent slime was a massive hexagon, its lines twisting and refracting into angles that hurt to look at directly.

Ben Miller, the trucker, was tied to a stone pillar at the center of the sigil. He was conscious but pale, his eyes wide with absolute terror as he stared at the creature pacing around him.

The Ghaunt-Hound was a nightmare born of folklore and the void. It had the rough shape of a massive, starved wolf, easily the size of a grizzly bear, but its skin was a hairless, bruised gray, stretching over visible, pulsing veins. Where its eyes should have been, there were only twin pits of swirling, violet smoke. Its jaw split open in four directions, dripping the black, geometric slime onto the ritual floor.

"It's preparing the anchor," Roxy whispered, her eyes scanning the outer edge of the circle. "Look at the cornerstones. There are three focal points holding the barrier up. If we don't break those, your shotgun won't even scratch it."

"How do we break them?" Garrett asked, his eyes locked on the trucker, who was starting to lose consciousness as the violet light crept up his legs.

"The runes on the outer stones need to be disrupted with iron or silver. If you can smash the focal points, the barrier drops, and the hound becomes corporeal. But the second we step out there, it's going to hunt."

Garrett turned his head, looking her dead in the eye in the dim violet light. The overprotective older brother was completely gone, replaced by the cold, calculating hunter.

"I'll draw it off," Garrett said, his voice flat. "I'll make enough noise to keep it focused on me. You slip around the perimeter, break the stones, and get the driver loose."

"Garrett, it's too fast—"

"You're faster than I am, Roxy," he interrupted, placing a heavy hand on her shoulder. It was the first time he'd admitted it out loud. "You know the geometry. I know how to take a hit. You break the locks, I'll keep the dog busy. Go."

Roxy stared at him for a fraction of a second, then nodded sharply. She slipped into the shadows to the left, vanishing into the brush without a sound.

Garrett took a deep breath, checked the safety on the Remington, and stood up from behind the log. He didn't just walk into the clearing; he brought the noise.

He racked the shotgun, the heavy mechanical *clack-clack* echoing off the quarry walls like a gunshot.

"Hey! Fido!" Garrett yelled, stepping out onto the gray stone.

The Ghaunt-Hound froze. Its four-way jaw snapped shut, its eyeless, smoky head whipping around toward the sound of his voice. It let out a sound that wasn't a growl—it was the screech of tearing metal.

The beast lowered its massive chest, its elongated claws digging into the stone, and lunged straight for him.

Chapter Six

Garrett braced his boots against the quarry stone, raised the Remington, and fired.

BOOM.

The blast of silver buckshot tore into the fog, but the moment the pellets hit the perimeter of the glowing violet hexagon, they scattered into harmless sparks. The invisible barrier was still active. The Ghaunt-Hound didn't even slow down; it closed the distance with terrifying, fluid speed, its massive paws thudding against the rock.

Garrett dove to the right just as the beast slammed into the spot where he'd been standing. The wind from its passing smelled like ozone and a dead freezer. The creature's elongated claws gouged deep, ragged tracks into the solid stone, throwing up a cloud of gray dust.

"Roxy! Anytime now!" Garrett shouted, rolling back to his feet and racking the slide to chamber another shell.

On the far side of the clearing, Roxy was a blur of dark corduroy against the gray rock. She slipped up behind the first focal monolith. The stone was etched with a jagged, bleeding spiral. She didn't hesitate—she brought the runed iron crowbar down with a two-handed swing, smashing it dead center into the rune.

CRACK.

Blue sparks erupted from the stone. The sigil sputtered, the violet light fading from that corner of the hexagon.

The Ghaunt-Hound whipped its head toward her, its four-way jaw splitting open in a deafening metallic shriek. It recognized the threat to its anchor instantly. It turned away from Garrett, its massive hind legs bunching to spring toward Roxy.

"Oh no you don't!" Garrett yelled. He sprinted forward, grabbed a heavy jar of rock salt from his tactical vest, and hurled it like a grenade. It shattered directly against the beast's flank.

The salt didn't kill it, but the concentrated purity of the mineral hissed violently against the void-mutated flesh. The hound roared in irritation, its focus snapping back to Garrett. It lunged, swinging a massive, heavy paw that caught Garrett squarely across the chest.

The impact lifted Garrett off his feet. He flew backward, crashing hard against the rocky ground, the breath driven from his lungs in a sharp, painful gasp. The Remington skidded out of his reach.

CRACK.

Roxy had reached the second stone. She shattered the rune, and the violet light across the quarry floor began to flicker violently, the geometric lines warping and breaking apart like cracked glass.

"One more, Garrett!" she screamed, sprinting toward the final monolith near the tied-up trucker.

But the Ghaunt-Hound was done playing. Sensing its window closing, the beast ignored Garrett's crumpled form and charged straight at Roxy, its jaw wide, ready to swallow her whole.

Garrett forced himself up, his ribs screaming in protest. He couldn't reach the shotgun in time. He couldn't run fast enough to intercept it.

"Roxy, drop!" he roared.

Roxy heard the panic in his voice and didn't question it. She threw herself flat onto the cold quarry floor, sliding hard against the base of the final stone.

The Ghaunt-Hound sailed right over her, its massive shadow blocking out the violet glow. As it bypassed her, Roxy reached up from the ground, gripping the iron crowbar with both hands, and jammed the sharp, curved end straight into the final rune etched into the base of the pillar.

SHATTER.

The final monolith split down the middle with a sound like a thunderclap.

The geometric hexagon vanished instantly. The violet barrier dropped, and the Ghaunt-Hound let out a raw, fully physical howl of agony as the cosmic energy holding it to this dimension snapped. The smoke in its eye sockets turned to solid, burning matter. It stumbled, crashing heavily to the stone floor just a few feet away from the semi-truck driver.

It was fully corporeal now. And it was bleeding.

Garrett was already on his feet, his silver-plated hunting knife in one hand and his recovered shotgun in the other. He didn't give the beast a chance to recover. He closed the

distance, jammed the barrel of the Remington right under the creature's jaw, and pulled the trigger.

BOOM.

Without the barrier, the silver slugs did exactly what they were meant to do. The Ghaunt-Hound stiffened, its massive body convulsing once before it collapsed into a heavy, motionless heap of gray flesh that immediately began to dissolve into a thick, harmless gray ash, blowing away into the morning wind.

The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the ragged breathing of the siblings.

Roxy lay on her back for a second, staring up at the gray sky as the morning light finally began to break through the canopy. She let out a breathless, triumphant laugh. "Told you... I knew the geometry."

Garrett walked over, his face pale under the sweat and dirt, and extended a hand. He pulled her up with a tight, fierce jerk, refusing to let go for a long beat. He scanned her face, seeing the dirt on her cheek but no blood.

"You did good, Rox," he muttered, his voice rough. He cleared his throat, quickly turning away to hide the emotion as he walked over to the stone pillar. "Now let's get this driver untied before he wakes up and thinks he's having a really bad trip."

Roxy smiled, wiping the dust off her jacket as she followed him. "You know, Garrett, you almost sounded like you trusted me out there."

"Don't get used to it," Garrett said, slicing through the trucker's ropes with his knife. "You're still not driving the Blazer."

Chapter Seven

Ben Miller groaned, his head lolling forward as the ropes holding him to the stone pillar fell away. Garrett caught him by the shoulders, bracing the heavy-set trucker before he could faceplant onto the gray quarry floor.

"Whoa there, easy," Garrett muttered, adjusting his grip to hoist the man up. "Roxy, grab his other side."

Roxy stepped under the trucker's left arm, slinging it over her shoulder. Together, they began the slow, agonizing march out of the quarry basin, navigating the loose gravel and the remnants of the shattered monoliths. The air was finally beginning to clear; that heavy, metallic taste of the cosmic void was fading, replaced by the crisp, damp scent of an Arkansas morning.

"Mmm... what... what happened?" Ben mumbled, his boots dragging in the dirt. His eyes blinked open, glassy and unfocused. "The dog... the eyes..."

"You hit a massive deer, man," Roxy said smoothly, her voice a perfect blend of comfort and authority as they neared the tree line. "Wrecked your rig, walked into the woods looking for help, and took a pretty nasty tumble down into the quarry. You've got a mild concussion, but you're going to be fine."

Ben blinked at her, his brain trying to piece together the fractured memories of glowing hexagons and unhinged jaws. "A... a deer? But the radio..."

"Classic highway hypnosis," Garrett added, his tone flat and unblinking. "Happens to the best of us on the red-eye shift. Just keep moving."

By the time they broke through the trees and back onto the shoulder of Interstate 40, the sun was fully above the horizon, burning away the last of the stubborn fog. The blue Peterbilt still sat in the road, but now it just looked like a mundane traffic hazard.

They propped Ben up against the front tire of his truck, giving him a bottle of water from the Blazer's cab.

"The highway patrol should be passing through on their morning run in about twenty minutes," Garrett told him, tossing a silver blanket from their first-aid kit over the man's shoulders. "Stay put."

"Thanks... kids," Ben muttered, clutching the water bottle with shaking hands.

Garrett didn't answer. He caught Roxy’s eye and jerked his head toward the K5. They walked back to the matte-black beast, their joints popping and muscles aching in the harsh light of day.

Garrett opened the back hatch, lifting the heavy dog bed to slide the secret armory drawer back open. He meticulously wiped down the Remington 870, ensuring every trace of gray ash and rock salt was cleared from the mechanism before locking it away. Roxy slipped her Glock back into its foam-lined cutout and carefully placed the glass vial of iridescent slime into a secure, warded metal case.

"So," Roxy said, leaning her elbows against the tailgate, watching her brother work. "Six missing truckers. A non-Euclidean hexagon drawn across three hundred miles of asphalt. We broke the anchor here, but what about the center of the shape?"

Garrett closed the drawer with a solid, metallic *clack* and dropped the false floor back into place. He turned around, his face serious as he leaned against the truck next to her.

"The center of that hexagon is exactly where we started," Garrett said, his voice dropping. "Little Rock. Whatever cult is pulling the strings on these Heralds, they aren't done. This was just a perimeter lock. They're preparing for a major breakthrough."

Roxy’s eyes lit up with that dangerous, brilliant curiosity that both loved and terrified him. "Then we need to get to Little Rock before they open the door wide."

Garrett looked down at her, seeing the smudge of ash still on her jaw, the determination in her eyes, and the slight tremor in her hands that she was trying so hard to hide. He sighed, reaching out and roughly tugging the brim of her beanie down over her eyes.

"Yeah, we do," Garrett said, walking around to the driver's side door. "But first, we're finding a motel with working plumbing. You smell like cosmic rot and cheap diner coffee."

"Hey!" Roxy yanked her beanie back up, throwing a handful of gravel at his back as he climbed inside. "You don't smell like roses either, big brother!"

She hopped into the passenger seat, slamming the door shut. Garrett cranked the key, and the modified V8 engine roared to life with a deep, authoritative rumble that seemed to shake the very asphalt beneath them. He threw the Blazer into gear, pulling out past the stranded semi, and pointed the matte-black fortress down the open road toward Little Rock.