I sat up in my bed, I did. Those nightwatchers growling into the night. I screamed and screamed till my Ma couldn't drown it out anymore. She came running into my room like a baseball player to second base. She was freaked out. And she should be, as me, her third daughter, was drooling mucus and blood. Squeezing it out of my mouth, my Ma brought me some hot water, and told me to drink it. For it would cure the spell the nightwatchers put on kids that weren’t asleep by twelve at night. They stole that hour for themselves, those nasty rich and selfish fools. Wouldn’t let a kid take a dime, they wouldn’t. But my Ma knows me, every night trying to fool them creatures into letting me stay up till at least twelve thirty. Never works. I know every night my Ma will have to drag her sorry butt up to bring me my warm water. I smile, just thinking about how I know this is all made up. My Ma tells me this. I don’t listen though.

“Darn fool,” she says, “you know it’s fake.” My dad, who’s dead now, used to tell me about the nightwatchers. He used to say, “Now Ameli, you know you best get to bed now, those nightwatchers might be after you at this hour.” Ameli was his nickname for me. My real name is Amelia Macenzie Brown. Of course, all my friends call me Ami. I am twelve. Well, really twelve and a half. My birthday is seven months away in February. It is still summer in my town of Hadley, Massachusetts. Every birthday, I get a chocolate bar, five scratch-offs, (I never win squat), and twenty tokens to buy stuff at the winter festival in March. All real nice, ‘cept my Ma never gets paid much. Her wage is about $6.50 an hour plus tips. She keeps having to sell my dad’s old paintings. He used to paint waterfalls, lakes, rivers, anything with water. He painted them a pretty crying-tears blue. Best in Massachusetts if I do say so myself. Used to sell for $800 a pop, but that was when our town was a mighty empire sailing the great seas and conquering enemies left and right. Used to be about thirty thousand people living here. Thirty one thousand six hundred fifty two exact. Plus the new baby that had lived across the street. They hadn’t added her to the list yet. Now, just five years later, the population has decreased a lot. Now we can tell the exact number of people living in our town from just looking out the window. Just me, my mom, my sister, Beth, my other sister Tricia, our cat, and the lady across the street. Just a tiny population of five. I am over exaggerating of course, which my sister Tricia tells me I do every day. There are actually six hundred seventy one people in our town, yet most of them are lazy. They mostly stay indoors waiting to leave the town, or die of a heart attack. Anyway, back to me. I stayed up for a bit longer, disregarding my brain's instinct to pretend to go to sleep. My Ma left to go fend off the rest of our food from midnight raiders, and my older sisters laughed at me through the wall. They don’t know I can hear them, so they always talk about stuff I shouldn’t hear. How Beth is gay and hasn’t found a decent date in two years, or how Tricia had wonderful sex with her boyfriend Lane, but called it off after he cheated on her. Stuff I don’t like, how they talk about Ma, they say she’s a bitch, but I know it ain’t true, I know my Ma loves me more then them, they’re a bunch of sister’s in heaven. Tricia’s a girly girl, all pink all day, no school here, but still tries to impress boys with her big boobs, I ain’t lucky like her. All I got for boobs is a tomato. My Ma says I will be getting some bigger ones soon, but I doubt it. Beth’s boobs are barely visible, and sometimes people think she’s a boy cuz she dresses in all bland colors all day, trying to act all gay, like she isn’t one hundred percent gay anyway. They talk about pregnancy, how Tricia wants to hook up with Lane again, even after him cheating, which I don’t get. Maybe it’s a teen thing. They talk about their first periods, how I’ll be approaching period-age soon. I ain’t ready, my Ma says it ain’t too scary, but I beg to differ. I watch the stars above our house, they shine like diamonds. I wonder if I ever will get out of this hell-hole of a town. It’s as shitty as my Ma’s old Toyota pickup. It drove my Ma to work every day for nineteen years, she says. Long before she met my dad. Of course, the only work that happens in this town now, is the Kmart down the road from Main Street. Of course, Mr. Baintly paints everyone’s house a nice plush gray every winter, just another depressing thing. I get no school even though I dream of it every day. I grew up painting and cooking, and had high dreams of becoming a teacher and teaching art. No doubt in my mind that ain’t happening today. I read book after book about creepy stories, one about a smiling guy who plays around with kids, and haven't gotten to the end of it yet, but a mysterious trio is getting tormented. I watch series after series of horror stories, where a group of pretty girls gets messages from a mystery person. I have nothing to do with my time, but read, watch stuff, and occasionally shop for a few items that aren’t completely ruined in the houses of all the people who left. We currently have a graveyard where more than a thousand people have been buried. My dad was lost to the sea. I have always wondered what happened to him. Ma says he spent days traveling near the coast of the Boston bay, and then his boat got shipwrecked out to sea. I think he is still alive out there, waiting for a perfect time to come back. My Ma said he brought a lot of paint, brushes, and canvases with him to paint on the open sea. It was worth two thousand dollars, she said. I miss him very much. My grandparents left a while ago. My grandma was really sweet and loving and baked the best cookies on the east coast. She laughed in a way that could always get you out of a funk. As for my grandpa, he was a somber old man, quiet on the outside, and rambunctious as a chicken on the outside. He built sculptures out of yard trash that he found, and let me tell you, they were wicked cool. He used to build them as high as a tree, and only then would he stop building. He built in the morning, he built at night, and sometimes he’d wake me up, and I’d help him build the Leaning Tower of Pisa out of piles of broken wood. We used to laugh, me Grandma and Grandpa, those were the good old days. No rats, no radicalists spreading misinformation, and taking all the town’s money. No evil crooks and villains as our politicians. Now, all we have is the Grand Council. Made up of eighteen Senators, and forty nine Representatives. We have a mayor too. John Ladner is his name. Mighty yet corrupt man. I hate him with all my heart. Our town has a noise level law. Anything above a talkative level is considered illegal, and you can get 5 months in the town jail. Murder isn’t rare, and every week, another person gets beat or shot to death. Death rate is really high. Fact is, it’s the seventh highest in the country, and second highest in Massachusetts. Not to depress my life more, is the new virus that has come to Massachusetts. One person dead and eight infected in our town so far. Might get worse, yet everyone is hundreds of feet away from each other usually anyway. We have barely any doctors here, barely any medicine to take. No cure for at least a year, plus the time it takes for the government to care about a town with less than a thousand people. My Ma hasn’t been feeling well lately, and I think it’s the rotten smell of rats and all the bacteria collecting in our house. We have to ration our food sometimes. The only fortunate one is Tricia. She has more money then our Ma, me and Beth put together. The richest person in our town is the former bank owner, Charles Memphisa. He has a net worth of eighty two thousand six hundred dollars. He never helps the poor though. The average amount of money that someone has in this town is thirty two thousand four hundred dollars, down from thirty seven thousand eight hundred dollars last year. This is all according to the small committee on money in our town. We have no bank because of the fear of looters. We are only allowed to speak quietly, and yelling is forbidden. I break this law many times, but never get caught because we have no police officers. I think my Ma ain’t too thrilled with this town either. We can’t leave cuz nowhere else is better, and we have no money to move. We ain’t got enough gas to go nowhere in my Ma’s car either. We are as stuck as jelly is stuck in a PBJ. Not to mention, we’d have nowhere to live, ‘cept maybe we could move to our Great Aunt Lea’s in New Jersey, but that’s about three hundred miles away from here. She is living in a better town called Basto. It’s a bit run down, but has a low crime rate. Real peaceful there too. I was there once when I was a mere three. Way before The Attack happened. I think Great Aunt Lea is a whopping ninety four years old! I’d normally do the math to see how long her life has been compared to mine, but it’s still really late, and I am still thinking. I hear my sisters still. They are talking about what to wear tomorrow. Really today as it’s after twelve. I overhear Tricia telling Beth that she is goin’ to wear a pink top and some short khaki pants. I sometimes dream of wearing stuff that Tricia wears. Magnificent flowing gowns in the crisp autumn air, but alas, my mind comes out of that beautiful dream, and starts to remember that I am in a dark room. Only one window. Rats scuttling anywhere they can possibly hide. Negative two degrees outside, and not much better inside. I cannot fathom how rotten this house is. It was built way back in the nineteenth century. Almost crumbling now, and I count every last hole in my ceiling. Twenty nine total. Rain is dripping in now. Covering my blankets in thick black and red drops. I cannot breathe and I don’t know why. “Help!” I scream, to no avail. It conceals me, it eats me up, taking away my life, taking away my tears, taking away my body. All I can focus on is the stars, the photo of my dad and me by the sea that was taken when I was four, and my panda bear stuffie named PaPa. I swift through the wind, the air blowing in my face, I see my dad, “Hello?” he says, “Dad!” I reply, no answer. I realize he is just a picture in my mind, and I realize for the first time since he disappeared, that he is truly gone. I will never hear his laughter again, never see him paint oceans, never see him and Ma cook hot dogs and peppers again. I will never remember what the right color was to brush into the ocean in paintings. And my brain hurts. More than it ever has. I feel betrayed by my body as I tumble down to the Great Barrier Reef, although my head throbs, I see very clearly my sister, Beth standing over me, questioning what happened to me. I think everything’s a dream right now, and she too, is not actually there, she is still talking with Tricia in the other room. I black out. My mind wiped clean for the night like a chalkboard wiped clean after a math test at school. Like all the people and buildings wiped out after The Attack. I black out. And I fall asleep dreaming of my long lost dad. Gone. Forever.

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The next morning, I woke up to find a small piece of bread and jam next to me, and one mint leaf melting away into the cup of hot water. Almost attempting to change it’s flavor, only to fail. Ma is sitting in the broken chair next to my bed, quietly looking out the window over the rising sun. “Hey Amelia'' she says, quickly looking at me, and then back again. I feel an overwhelming sense of worriness in her wavering voice, as she gets up, and shuffles across the bare and cold floor. I feel like wrapping my arms around her till she tells me what has her in a fret. I yawn and ask, “Ma, what’s wrong?” Her voice cracks through the air like a baseball bat, “No, Honey, nothing is right. We have little to no food left, I have a small job, and might lose it, and if we move to Aunt Lea’s, I’ll have no job.” I felt like I was on the Titanic just before it went under. Voice quaky, Ma says, “I have decided that we will begin the long journey towards Aunt Lea’s house. We must be careful, because the mayor has made new restrictions.” “Like what?” I ask, trying to clarify what I’m hearing. “No one is allowed out of town, if anyone catches someone tryna leave, they have a right to bring us in.” Ma said, her voice almost a faint whisper of a noise. “You know how our mayor thinks of dark skinned Italian people like us.” Those words wrecked my insides. Tearing apart my organs and putting them back together again. My body is getting quaky. “But Ma, why does he think that we’re not as worthy as our whiter neighbors?” I asked, wondering how Ma could live with it. “Nevermind about that,” Ma said, “We need to get everything together that is important. Socks, shoes, all your clothing, and if you must, bring PaPa too. We will need some food, although we have slim to none.” As we gathered as much as we could, awaiting the right time to attempt to leave town, Tricia and Beth were out on the empty street, buying some more food, with some of the money that we have left. As soon as they came back, it was almost sunfall. “Okay, we best be moving now.” Said Ma, her voice stronger than usual, and with much confidence. As we crept down the winding staircase, we frightened the stray dog at the fourth level of our building. “Shush silly dog,” Ma whispered. Soon, we got to the lowest floor, and crept out of the building, careful not to step on anything. We passed the five hundred feet mark, then four hundred feet, three hundred, and then the most disastrous thing happened. Ringing in my ears, no pounding in my ears, then all I can hear is “Crack crack crack,” Ma looks behind us, and screams, “RUN!” guns drawn and shooting, white men running towards us, angry roars from the crowd shouting, “Get em!” Beth seems out of breath, burning tears are running down my cheek, dripping onto my shirt, as we finally make our way across the road, to the other side, where we can finally rest. “Ma, I think I been shot,” says Beth. I look over and I see her open wound, gushing red liquid, which I cannot even identify in the spur of the moment because I was hit too. I have red all over me. Caked dirt on my trousers, my shirt ripped to shreds, I can’t breathe. I feel for the bandages I brought in my backpack when I realize I can’t see Ma. “Ma!” I scream, to no avail. I try to help Beth cover her wound, but it seems to only get worse by the second, I can’t find Tricia either, until I realize she, too, was shot. But the bullet that got her, only shredded past her left arm. Mine was on my leg, and Beth’s on her upper back, but probably jutting right through her. I see Tricia grab bandages and take pieces of clothes, and tie them over my wound, and then Beth’s. Beth isn’t moving, but Tricia convinces me she is just too tired to wake up. In the morning, I wake up to see dried blood all over me, and Tricia is eating some cold pizza that we packed. Beth still isn’t moving, and I think she’s dead. Her eyes are shut, and I’m scared. Ma ain’t nowhere to be found. Finally, Tricia see’s that I’m awake, and comes walking over. Her bandage over her wound is infected and black, but she ain’t paying attention to it, she’s paying attention to the hills in the south. “We best be moving now”, she says, softly in a half annoyed tone. “But what about Ma!”, I sob. Tricia paces back and forth, trying to ease the pain of losing her sister. “She’s gone.” She says suddenly. As she collects all of our stuff, laying across about 60 feet of grass, I get up, too, and stumble over the few rocks that are pushing themselves out of the ground, almost like they’re trying to escape. We grab some sticks and start digging. “We need to bury her before the flies get her,” says Tricia. I can see it in her eyes. Her beautiful dark grey eyes. I wish I had eyes like hers. My eyes are a blurry tan. I see her pain, the pain of losing a sister, I don’t matter nearly enough to her as Beth did. As we dig the hole, many worms start squiggling all around her, as if called by her zero pulse. About one foot deep the hole goes down. Far from the middle of the earth. How I wish I could be at Great Aunt Lea’s right now. Eating lemonade on the front porch, BLT’s and stuff. Simple but delicious apple pie, all melting on my tongue as if it is the best in the world. But no. I am not there, I tell myself. I am still miles away from her and beautiful New Jersey. As we pile dirt on top of Beth, I begin to cry inside. Why did this have to happen to me? To us? I don’t know the answer, but somehow I overcame it. As we finish with the dirt, we start slowly walking towards the mountains, hopefully towards a little bit of hope in New Jersey. From the geography I know, we have to cross Connecticut, and a sliver of New York to get to New Jersey. **It** is nearly two O’clock in the evening, and we have barely moved. I counted how many steps we have taken, and it is one thousand two hundred and ninety four exact. Much less than we should have. I cannot see the entrance of our town anymore. The mountains still seem so far away. We walk another few hundred steps and then Tricia says, “Let's stop for the day, and make a shelter to sleep.” We start collecting some bark from nearby trees, some leaves for a padded ground, and then we rummage through the stuff that we were able to take with us. Not much, but enough to keep us alive. Some food, mostly random stuff, like corn, beans, and some other canned stuff. We have some bandages left, not many though, maybe ten, fifteen. We have a few changes of clothes, in Hadley, we only had one clothing store, and it was run down, and never had any of the right sizes. Most of our clothes were lost back when we were being chased. We brought some cooking utensils, including a small collapsible oven. We also brought a few meaningful items with us. I brought PaPa, my stuffy, and a picture of my dad and mom. I also brought twenty two dollars, my whole life savings. Tricia brought a few makeup items, ninety eight dollars, and a picture of her and Beth together when they were 6. Ma brought a picture of dad, and of me, Tricia, and Beth. Ma always said she had no favorites, but we all knew her favorite was Tricia. I don’t want to think of Ma as dead, but what else can I do? She wasn’t there when we stopped, and for all we know, she could’ve gotten killed back there. I sure hope not, but it seems very possible. I see Tricia coming back, she has lots of leaves and random objects in her hands. As she starts laying the stuff out, I see a hammer, some random sticks, a few tiny rocks, and some ropes. I wonder how she got all of that stuff. Maybe they were just there? We build our miniature house until it looks perfect. Takes about 2 hours in all. After that, we grab all our stuff, and climb in. It is real tiny, but just enough to fit two people and a few bags. As we look at the time on Tricia’s watch, we decide that we should start making some food for dinner. We get out the beans and corn, and make a small mixture in a small bowl that we brought with us. It tastes like grass, but we have to eat it, or else we would go to bed hungry. We have three bottles of water, which is not nearly enough to get through more then two days. But I tell myself to not worry about that until tomorrow. I lay with my head upwards and think about all the things in life. Water. I am thirsty but Tricia said we should spare water until we absolutely need it. I can’t blame her for wanting to save it, but I don’t know how she can withstand the urge to drink all of it. I think of Ma, and hope she’s okay. Maybe Dad and her are together in heaven, or maybe they are both alive. Tricia says goodnight and rolls over to the other side of the nature-made tent. I say goodnight back, but as soon as Tricia is asleep, I peep out the tent, and make my way outside. I have a plan, and it might involve some high level running, and quietness to work out. I know it’s a few miles away, and it would take an hour to work, and my body is still in pain after being shot, and walking so much, but I really need to know if Ma is dead, and the only way to know for certain is to go back and check. I also want to get some more water for Tricia and I to drink. I forgot to make my most important thing with me, and that is Aunt Lea’s phone number. While there is only an eleven percent chance that we would even be able to find a payphone left to call her, it is worth knowing just in case. I grab a flashlight, a few batteries, and a small handful of carrots so I don’t starve. I also take one bandage, carefully, so I don’t wake Tricia up. I click the flashlight on, and crep out of the tent. It is pretty dark outside, but not pitch black yet. I make sure not to step on the big rock outside of the tent, and begin my hour or two journey back towards Hadley. I walk about ten yards, and then decide to start running. The wind in my face feels wonderful, rippling my face, and making my mind clear instantly, only thinking about my feet pounding the ground, and the fresh smelling night air. I run for what feels like hours, but it has only been a half hour. I see the big rock that was halfway back. I kept running, and soon I found myself at the edge of Hadley. I creeped towards the checkpoint, where I could hear a few people talking. Quickly, I walk across the pavement, and make my way back to our house. One block away from my house, and hear screaming. Lots of it. I run towards the screams and see the unimaginable. Piles of burnt rubble, books, TV’s, anything. Children getting burned, and lastly, houses doused in flames, as high as the eye can see. First walking, then running towards our house, and once I am there I will know if it’s OK. I get there, and the whole building is completely flooded with water, and our house is burnt to the crisp. I can’t hold it in, and start crying. I run like I’ve never before, there are no water bottles left, and no phone number either. I keep running, past the gates of Hadley, past the first rock, past the tent, past the mountains, past human life, and I can see the tent, but not because I am running, because I just had a nightmare, and woke up screaming. Tricia wakes up, and calms me down. I wonder why I had such a scary memory of the town, and why I had such a vivid dream. I remember stories of all the people who can predict what is going to happen. A prophet they’re called. I ain’t really religious, but I do believe in the spirit of someone or something watching over all of us. Good or evil, man or woman, maybe neither. I think about dreams, and prophets, and how cool it would be to predict the future, but I know that’s not gonna happen. It is still pretty early in the morning, and since I didn’t actually waste as much time as I thought, I could go back to bed. But I don’t feel like it, and so I sit up again, and say, “Tricia? Do you think that Hadley is OK?” Tricia sits up too, and fumbles to find words. “Yes, Amelia, now go back to bed, we have a long way to go tomorrow.” Tricia lay back down, and covered herself with the tiny blanket we brought. I find my tiny blanket, and lay down again. I feel sleepy, and I hope I don’t have another nightmare. I remember the creepy book I read a while ago with the Smiling Man. I remember that I didn’t finish it, and that I brought it with me. I rummage around for it in my bag. I find it, and open it to the part where the three kids are in a cornfield and they lose each other. I drift away to sleep while thinking about the man, Seth. I close my eyes and fall asleep until the morning.

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The next morning, I wake up to the sound of a squad of birds above us, squawking like there’s no tomorrow, I get up, and Tricia is already making an egg for each of us. No bread to go with it, as bread is not something that we brought with us, as we only had a few pieces left. Eggs cooked by themselves are very gross. No cheese either, because there isn’t a dairy farm anywhere near here, at least not that I know of. Me and Tricia eat fast, eating every piece even though it is nasty. After that, we pick up everything, including the little tent that we made. We start to walk in the direction of the mountains, step by step, waiting for a place to rest. Only thirty minutes, and me and Tricia’s bones already ache. We pause for a moment, taking in the surrounding view. Some shrubs and bushes that way, a tiny lake that way, oh wait… “A lake!!!!!” I scream, pulling Tricia’s hand and knocking both of us down. “Maybe it has fresh water,” Tricia said. We head over to it, and take a hand to scoop some water onto. We slurp and slurp until we are so full, we could fall over and roll like a basketball. We walk back over to our bags, and find a squirrel trying to take our nuts. We brush him off the bag, and he scurries away. Tricia and I continue walking. We see trees upon trees upon trees. All looking different. Different shapes, different sizes, different colors. I have never seen so many different colors since before The Attack. We get to a clearing and see apple trees all lined up in rows of nine. We grab a few, put them in our bag, and then we hear a faint cry. Not a human cry, an animal cry. Almost like a cat meowing. We put our bags down, and listen again. “Meow.” We hear it again. Then we see a tiny gray kitty, almost invisible unless you get close. Underneath the tree, the tiny kitten meows, and I realize the kitty is hurt. Her front leg is bleeding. I think the kitty is a female kitten. Tricia takes a bandage, one of the last ones, we have eight left, and ties it around the kitten. She meows again, but this time she gives a cute look almost as if saying thank you. I pick her up and she feels so soft against my rough and ragged hands. She meows again, and I put her in one of our bags that isn’t full. I tuck her in, and she instantly falls asleep. Me and Tricia collect a little more water in our bottles, and take a little bit of it to put in a container for the kitty. We zip the bag halfway closed, as to make sure she doesn’t fall out, and then we keep walking. We walk for what feels like forever. And we finally get to a bench, and sit down. Tricia sits down, and then gets back up again. “I see footprints!” Says Tricia. We start moving towards the footprints. They are pointing towards the mountains, so we keep following them. Step after step, we feel like we get no closer. Sooner or later, we get to a white brick fence, and a wooden door. We open the door, and walk through it. On the other side we see a bunch of apple trees, peach trees, and many other things. Blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, and more. The path is beautiful and laid with pretty rocks of all colors. They are so amazing, and they are like a never-seen-before movie that is so good, you wanna watch it all over again. We walked up the path, and it bended a few times and then up ahead we saw a beautiful house, almost a mansion. We walked up to the steps, and then walked to the humongous door. We admired the architecture for a quick second before knocking on the door. We hear clanking and thumping and then the door opens, and we find ourselves looking into a magnificent living room, with gold chandeliers, and tapestries that are hundreds of colors that I have never seen before. A small but quite wide lady comes walking our way. “Hello,” she says, “who are you all?” I start speaking quietly, but Tricia saves me and starts talking instead. “We come from Hadley, Massachusetts” she says loudly, but as not to kill my eardrums. The lady gasps, and stares at us. “Honey Bee!” She screams. A man dressed in all different colors comes down the stairs banging his knees and scraping his feet. Not really, but sure seems like he is in for some mighty splinters. “Yes darling?” He says, dashing over to the woman. “These poor children have come all the way from Hadley.” She says. The man goes back upstairs and carries a big bag down the stairs. “Here you go.” He says. Inside the bag was a bunch of stuff. There were clothes that were like the ocean, and earrings like the sun. Tricia and I took a few things, and put them in our bags. Then we followed the man and woman into a gorgeous room filled with tables and more gold chandeliers. We sat down at a table and started asking questions. **Like, why were they helping us?** The lady walks over to the counter, and brings us some tea. We drink it slowly but surely, making sure that we drink every last drop of it Leaving none behind. She walks back over to the counter, and gets another thing for us. A platter of cookies, bread and butter, grapes, jam, and pizza bites. All seeming as big as the moon. We slow down eating just enough to hear the man come into the room, and ask us, “So, you two. We have a few questions about your family, and your, um, ability.” Tricia looks at me as I start to ask, “What do you mean… ability?” The couple sits down at the table and sighs. “Nevermind that, nevermind that…'' The lady says forcefully. She hands us more food, and tells us we should fill up. Tricia asks, “May we know your names?” The man clears his throat. “My name is, uh, Jack! Jack Forester. And my wife’s name is Minty Forester.” I think for a moment, and finally have a feeling like somehow I had heard those names before. Probably not, but the lady’s name. “Minty.” It seems so familiar and then it finally rushes back to me. Forester was a given last name for the leaders of The Evil Side in The Attack. Oh no. The Attack. I try to look into Tricia’s eyes, but she is too busy chomping down on her food. I try to get up out of the chair, but then I realize that I can’t move. Suddenly, Jack Forester is behind me, as if he magically moved from one side of the room, to the other. He glares at me, both eyes fixated on me, pondering what to do.

To be continued in April 2021...