

The Skilevaks

by Nathan Ilar Xenolyi

The following posts were originally posted on several different forums on the internet by an account with the username "ThreeOfCups". Typos have been removed, misspellings and grammatical errors corrected, and formatting has been cleaned up, but the text is otherwise printed here as it was originally posted.

Posted 10:30 p.m., Tuesday December 11 by ThreeOfCups:

I guess it all started with those missing eyes at the morgue. I mean, that's the first thing I can remember that I can connect with the skilevaks. Well, I guess I still don't know absolutely for sure that the skilevaks were responsible, but it seems pretty certain. I think the purple stain pretty much clinches it.

I only knew about the morgue business from the news; I didn't see it for myself. It was a weird story; the coroner and her attendants opened up the morgue in the morning and found that all the corpses there were missing their eyes. Not that there were all that many bodies; this isn't a big town. I think the story said there were eight corpses there. So sixteen eyes. (That wasn't nearly enough for all the skilevaks, of course. I guess most of them still had most of their eyes intact. They probably only needed a few replacements.) There was no sign of a break-in, no evidence of who could have done it. There was nothing damaged, nothing missing except the eyes. There was just a strange purple stain on the wall, and a strange spicy-sweet smell, barely noticeable over the formaldehyde. Investigators were unable to determine the source of the purple stain, which faded within hours of its discovery.

At the time, I thought it was just another strange news story. I didn't think it would have any impact on my own life. And of course it didn't, at first. The first thing that happened involving my circle of friends was about a week later, when Ethan said he'd seen something odd outside his house one night, through his bedroom window. He said it looked like a skeleton, or the upper half of a skeleton, dragging itself around his lawn.

Ethan didn't think it actually *was* a skeleton, of course. He said as much when he told us the story; though it looked to him like half a skeleton dragging itself around, he was pretty sure that was just a trick of the light or something, and after all he was seeing it at a distance, and he wasn't sure what it really was but a living half-skeleton didn't seem like a real possibility. Ethan wasn't superstitious; he wasn't the kind to believe in ghosts, or UFO reports, or to think when he woke up suddenly in the middle of the night that it was anything more than a bad dream. Ethan usually had a pretty good head on his shoulders—in fact, he was probably the brightest kid in school. Not that he was just into book smarts; he was creative, too; he was in theater, and sometimes starred in the school play, and he liked to draw, and I think he was pretty good at it, though not as good as Ca said he was.

Jeez, I don't want to go on about how great Ethan was. I mean, he wasn't perfect. He would get distracted and forget things a lot, and sometimes he had a hard time making decisions. And some of the things he drew were kind of... weird; I don't know what that was all about, but I think there were things going on in his head that he didn't tell us about. But there's a point to this; it actually turns out that it was important that he was so smart and creative, though we didn't know that until Maria told us. And anyway, going back to where I was in the story, I guess if he *hadn't* been typically so level-headed, the rest of us probably wouldn't have believed him.

Not about the half-skeleton, I mean; there was nothing hard to believe there. He didn't actually say he saw a half-skeleton, after all. He said himself he wasn't sure what he really saw, and that it probably just *looked* like a half-skeleton in the light. But the mushroom thing was weirder. I mean, not half as weird as what the half-skeleton really turned out to be, but weirder than just "I saw something that looked like a half-skeleton but probably wasn't."

The mushrooms appeared on his lawn a few days after he saw whatever he saw that looked like a half-skeleton. That didn't mean there was a connection, or at least that's what he thought at the time. Now we know they *were* connected, of course, but we didn't know that for sure then. It wasn't just that the mushrooms looked strange, though they did. I mean, it's not like a weird-looking mushroom would be all that special by itself. What was weird was that Ethan said when he tried to pick one of the mushrooms it just disintegrated in his hand. Not just once; he tried it a couple more times with the same result. So he said we should come out and see the mushrooms for ourselves.

Okay, that's... not good. My cheek was itching just now, so I scratched it, and it *came off*. Not my whole cheek, I mean, but a chunk of flesh came out, under my fingernails. I have to hurry and get this down before it gets worse.

So anyway, we came out to see the mushrooms. I guess I just went because I thought if Ethan said they were weird, they must be weird. Ca went, I think, just because it was an excuse to go to Ethan's house. But yeah, there were mushrooms. I didn't think they were as weird as Ethan said they were, though. I mean, with the build-up, I was disappointed. They were tall mushrooms, cone-shaped, basically, purplish-gray. Well, sort of purplish pinkish grey. Ca called it "thistle", but that doesn't sound like a color to me. But Ca always liked different color names; she wanted to be specific about colors. I said I thought it was puce, but she said puce is darker. So I said maybe it was

light puce.

Yeah, okay, I shouldn't be wasting time here writing about the color of the mushrooms. I mean, I'm just saying what we were saying at the time. And I teased Ca then, but I mean, she was really into different colors; she was probably right. I guess thistle probably is a color. I'd look it up, but I don't have time; just... okay, if thistle is a color, then I guess that's the color the mushrooms were. Thistle. A light purplish-gray, like I said. They were all different sizes; the tallest ones were maybe three or four inches tall, but most of them were a lot smaller.

So anyway, I asked Ethan what was so strange about them. I mean, he read a lot; maybe he knew enough about mushrooms to know these weren't normal. But he said he didn't know what kind they were, and he hadn't seen them before, but that wasn't what was so strange. He said it was the pattern. Usually mushrooms grow in rings, he said. They're not the whole plant—wait, no, I think he said they're not even really plants—but anyway, the mushroom, the part we see, isn't the whole creature. Most of it is underground, this huge net of fibers we don't even know is there. The mushrooms are just what the fungus uses to reproduce. So it's kind of fitting that mushrooms look kind of like penises, maybe, because they kind of serve part of the same purpose.

But the thing is, mushrooms, he said, they tend to grow at the edge of those underground nets. The hyphae. I remember the word Ethan told us for them now. Those are the fibers. Hyphae. I don't know how I remembered that. Yeah, so, the mushrooms tend to grow at the edge of the hyphae, so they grow in circles. That's why they used to have legends about fairy rings; step into the ring of mushrooms and you'd enter fairyland. But these mushrooms weren't in rings. They weren't in any pattern. They were scattered around the lawn pretty much at random. Just so many weird purple penises, sticking out of Ethan's lawn.

Well, not just the lawn. There were some actually growing up the wall of his house. That was weird, too. Especially since they shouldn't have been able to have hyphae there. That was where he'd taken them off, but they'd grown back, or others had grown back to replace them. He showed us. He took one off the wall, and it disintegrated. Just poof. Turned to dust in his hand. Except not even that, because the dust disappeared.

He said mushrooms didn't usually do that either. Well, okay, duh; I mean, you can buy picked mushrooms in the store, so obviously they don't usually do that. Though of course they don't sell this kind of

mushroom.

It was Ca who noticed that there *was* a ring of mushrooms, at one side of the garden. There was one place where there was an open space among the mushrooms, with mushrooms growing all around it. But I mean, the way the mushrooms were randomly scattered, that could have been just a coincidence. You have random patterns, you can see things in them. Like the constellations, just meaningless patterns of stars. Or... my house has a stucco ceiling, and when I was a kid I would find faces and animals in it. Once I thought I saw this hideous grinning face in the ceiling above my bed, and I could barely sleep for a week, till I put a poster up there to cover it up. Ca made fun of me for wanting a poster of Harry Potter on my ceiling, for wanting to stare up at wizards at night, but it wasn't really about Harry Potter at all. It was I needed something to cover up the face in the ceiling, and so when Gil gave me that poster I figured it would do the job.

So maybe the ring was just like the constellations, or the face in my ceiling, is the point I'm getting at here; maybe it was just some random shape in a random pattern. I mean, now I know it's *not*, obviously, but that's what I thought at the time.

We didn't see the ring on the wall, outside Ethan's room. I guess we didn't think to look too closely at the pattern of the mushrooms there. Which was kind of dumb, in retrospect. Though now that I think about it, I don't know if we would have noticed the pattern anyway, because there was a lot of ivy growing on that wall and it would have been hard to see the mushrooms. That's probably why we didn't notice the purple spot, too.

Anyway, none of us, even Ethan, knew enough about mushrooms to know what kind they were, or to think they were anything more than kind of weird. We didn't know anything about the mushrooms then, and at the time we didn't have any reason to connect them to the half-skeleton. I'm only writing about them because they were the first thing I saw firsthand that was connected to the skilevaks. Right then, all we knew was that there were strange mushrooms in Ethan's yard.

We asked Mrs. Puri about the mushrooms, though. Mrs. Puri was Ethan's neighbor; she was this little old woman who lived alone in the house next to his. I think she had family, somewhere, but they never seemed to visit her. She always seemed happy, though. She had a thick Indian accent that we sometimes laughed at behind her back. Ca was good at imitating her, too, especially the way she said "time to come". "Time" and "to" were always high-pitched, and then "come" was always low. Mrs. Puri was always talking about the "time to come";

she was convinced that some disaster was going to happen, though she never said what it was. She told us she had food and water stockpiled in her cellar for the “time to come”, and she even let us see her cellar once. You could get in through a door at the back of her house that was usually kept locked. It was dark in the cellar, and it had a dirt floor and it smelled like eggs—I don’t know why. There were boxes and barrels everywhere, with narrow corridors between them. And spider webs everywhere, too.

Anyway, we made fun of her fear of the “time to come”, too, along with her accent. I feel bad about that now. We shouldn’t have made fun of her. I mean, we never did it to her face, but still. She was a nice old lady; whenever she saw us she would bring cookies out. I don’t know why she always had cookies; maybe she kept them handy just for us. We often saw her out there working in the yard, with that red bandana over her forehead that she always wore. We thought when we were younger that that was some Indian thing, too, that it was part of traditional costume in India or whatever, and then we thought that maybe she wore it to cover up that dot in her forehead that some Indian people have, only then one day we saw her without it once and she didn’t have the dot. I guess she just liked to wear a red bandana, just like Maria always wore that fake diamond necklace, or Ethan always wore cargo shorts. Just because she was from India doesn’t mean everything she did had to be connected to that.

Anyway, though, Mrs. Puri was out in her garden when we came to Ethan’s house to look at the mushrooms, and she brought us some cookies, and we asked her about the mushrooms. She said they were “very curious”, though she might have been saying that just to humor us. Anyway, she didn’t know anything more about them either. She tried to pick one, but it disintegrated just like the one Ethan had picked.

Were there mushrooms like that around the morgue, before the skilevaks came for the corpses’ eyes? I guess there must have been, right? I never checked. And I guess they wouldn’t have mentioned those in the news report.

Okay, I’m going to go ahead and post this now so if something goes wrong at least I have *something* up. More in the next post, knock wood.

Posted 11:25 p.m., Tuesday December 11 by ThreeOfCups:

Fuck. I'm an idiot. There's something I meant to put in the first post, should have put right at the top, and completely forgot. I guess I'll put it here; hopefully it's not too late.

If you found this message on a forum, posted by a user named ThreeOfCups, please, copy it and paste it somewhere else. Somewhere public, or somewhere private that I don't have access to. Do it now, before you read the rest. Please. I'm ThreeOfCups, and I'm afraid that after I'm one of them I'll try to delete the message. The only way to prevent that is for someone to post the message somewhere I can't get to it. I don't know how much longer I have, how much longer I'll still be me... there may not be time for you to read the full message first. If you're not already reading a reposted version that I can't delete, then repost it. *Now.* Please.

Yeah, I guess I could have just edited the first post and put that in, but I'd resolved to just get all this down as quick as possible and not do any editing, and I'm kind of afraid if I break that resolve and start editing things I'll take too much time, and I might not be able to get it all down in time. And I have to get it all down. There are things that have to be told. Like... the skilevaks' plans. What they're doing with those ghosts. Brr. I'll... I'll get to that when I get to it.

And now I'm sitting here writing about how little time I have, instead of actually telling my story. Fuck. Like I said, I'm an idiot. I know I should stick to the point, but... I guess this is kind of turning out to be more rambly and stream-of-consciousness than I wanted it to be. Sorry. I'll get back to the story now.

Anyway, after we saw the mushrooms—and actually a little before that, maybe, now that I think about it—Ethan was starting to look like he wasn't feeling well. I mean, mostly he looked tired. There were bags under his eyes, and he was kind of listless, and he wasn't as quick to speak up in class as he usually was. I asked if he was okay, and he said he was fine, but he kind of hesitated before saying it.

The mushrooms were still there a few days later. Ca asked him. I'm not sure why she asked him that; it's not like we thought the mushrooms were responsible for whatever was wrong with him. I guess she was just trying to make conversation.

It was about a week and a half after we saw the mushrooms that Ethan invited us over to his house. He said we could spend the night, watch TV, play on his Wii, whatever. We were a little old for sleepovers, but what the hell. We said we'd come. My parents were

concerned that there'd be adult supervision, if there were going to be boys and girls there, but I told them Ethan's parents would be there. Anyway, they mostly trusted us, and they knew Ethan was a good kid, so they let us go. Besides, I mean, in another two years we'd probably be off to college anyway; they were going to have to start trusting us sooner or later.

Mrs. Puri saw us coming. She was out trimming her junipers, wearing her red bandana. (I think maybe she wore that partly to keep sweat out of her eyes while she was gardening.) She said she would bring out some cookies for us, but I said that was okay, we were just going to Ethan's house and he probably had food in there. She said she had just gotten a whole pallet of Twinkies, to prepare for the "times to come". She said people might think Twinkies were a strange thing to hoard, but she knew it was a good idea because they could give a lot of energy, and they would last forever. I knew they wouldn't really last forever, because I found an old Twinkie behind my couch once and it was all moldy and disgusting, but I didn't tell Mrs. Puri that.

And now it turns out that not only do Twinkies have a limited shelf life, but so did the company that made them. Mrs. Puri's pallet of Twinkies was one of the last ones they would ever make. Times come for us all.

The mushrooms were still there.

Ethan's parents weren't there, as it turned out, but I hadn't been lying to my parents. Not intentionally, I mean, and if it's not intentional I guess it's not technically a lie. I'd assumed his parents would be there, and Ethan hadn't said they wouldn't, though I guess he hadn't actually said they would, so he wasn't lying either. His father was away in Arizona on some business trip (I think he worked for some company that sold power tools, though I'm not sure exactly what he did), and his mother had gone with him because she'd always wanted to see the Grand Canyon. They'd left Ethan in charge while they were gone; they figured he was old enough to look after his younger brother and sister.

Ethan had ordered pizza, and he'd got everything ready for his guests; he was taking pains to be a good host. But he still looked tired; the bags under his eyes were darker than ever, and every once in a while he *twitched*. He smiled when he saw us, but his smile seemed kind of sickly, and he made lots of jokes, but it didn't seem like his heart was in them.

Whatever was wrong with Ethan, it didn't seem to be affecting Taro and Wanda—his brother and sister. Taro was twelve, and Wanda was

nine. They acted like kids their age usually act, though they seemed maybe a little subdued. One time Taro dropped a jar of strawberry jelly getting it out of the refrigerator, and Ethan jumped at the sound, and then when he saw what it was he just looked at Taro and didn't say anything, and then he cleaned it up. He didn't even tell Taro he'd told him to stay out of the kitchen, even though he had. Taro didn't seem relieved that Ethan didn't tell him off, though. Actually, he seemed a little sad. I think Taro and Wanda saw that something was wrong with Ethan, too, and they were worried about their older brother.

Ethan told us we could sleep in the living room; the couch facing the TV folded out into a big, wide bed, and Ca and Maria could sleep there; the side couch was big enough for me to sleep on; and he would take the floor. We'd brought sleeping bags, but he had sheets and pillows, so we wouldn't need them.

One thing I noticed that was a little odd was that Ethan didn't seem to want any of us to go upstairs. I guess this wouldn't have seemed so strange to Maria, since she probably hadn't been to his house before, but I'd been over there before plenty of times, though I'd never spent the night. I'd been in his room, and in the upstairs study, and he never seemed to mind. This time, though, he seemed really uncomfortable with the idea of anyone going upstairs, even Taro and Wanda. (He said they could sleep in the living room, too, so they wouldn't feel left out... but I think it was really because he wanted to keep them downstairs.) He said it would probably be best if we used the downstairs bathroom. When Ca asked him to get a DVD of *The Muppets* from upstairs, he said we could watch something else instead.

Oh, fuck. I can barely move my legs. I thought they were asleep, but they're not. It's like they're half paralyzed.

Anyway, it's not just that he didn't want us to go upstairs. He kept glancing at the stairway, too, like he expected to see something up there. You can see the stairway from the living room pretty easily in Ethan's house. The entry doesn't have a ceiling, and the stairway descends by its side. I mean, obviously there's a roof up there eventually, but I mean there's no first-floor roof; most of the second-floor rooms open up to a passageway that's really just a sort of a balcony overlooking the entry. And the stairway goes down along the wall from this balcony; it makes a ninety-degree turn near the end into the entry, but just before it does there's an opening to the living room, so you can look through the opening and see the stairway clearly, all but the bottom few steps after the turn, and you can see a lot of the balcony up there too. Ethan's room is at the top of the stairway; if you

go up the stairs and go straight you'll walk straight into his door.

So, like I was saying, Ethan kept glancing at the stairway. Or maybe he was glancing at his bedroom door; they were in the same direction. He was trying not to be obvious about it, but it wasn't hard to notice. Even Taro noticed; he looked up at the stairway too to see what Ethan was looking at, until Ethan told him it was past his bedtime and he had to go to sleep.

The rest of us, Ethan and Ca and Maria and me I mean, stayed up later, after Ethan had made the kids go to bed. (I think Wanda stayed awake pretty late, actually; she was hiding under the covers and pretending to sleep, but I caught her peeking out once or twice. I didn't tell Ethan.) We watched *John Carter* and played some *Mario Party*, until we all were getting really tired. Then Maria suggested we tell ghost stories.

Ethan visibly shuddered. I mean that literally, like it's not just that he flinched; he really shuddered. This wasn't like Ethan at all, and I think everyone noticed that. And when Ethan said he didn't feel like a ghost story, Maria didn't say anything.

Actually, I think none of us said anything for a while. Then Ethan finally said there was a reason he asked us over that night. He said it was going to sound stupid, and then he stopped. I guess he really thought it *would* sound stupid, but as long as he'd already said that much there wasn't much point in stopping there. So he went on.

He didn't want to stay in the house alone, he explained.

Well, he wasn't completely alone, of course; his brother and sister were there. But none of us pointed that out. I guess I can understand why they wouldn't count; if there was something Ethan was afraid of, a couple of nine- and twelve-year-old kids wouldn't help much.

Anyway, Ethan finally told us he hadn't been sleeping well the last couple of weeks, and he finally told us why. He said beforehand that we weren't going to believe him, and if it had been anyone else I probably wouldn't have. But, like I said, Ethan wasn't the kind to think he saw things that weren't there, and he wasn't the kind to make up stories as a prank, either. Besides, it had been pretty obvious that he really hadn't been sleeping well, and it's not likely he'd have been faking it—nobody's *that* committed to a prank.

He'd been having bad dreams every night for a while, Ethan explained, but dreams he could never remember in the morning. He'd always been interested in remembering his dreams, though—I don't think he ever kept an official dream journal, but I do remember him sometimes telling us about dreams, and actually looking up what he'd

written down in that notepad he always carried around with him—and so he tried his best to remember the dreams he was having now. And finally, after a few days, he remembered part of it. He remembered some figures by his bed, one on each side. A strange smell. And some chanting.

Every night before he went to bed, he would tell himself he had to remember whatever he dreamed that night. That might sound silly, he said, but it had worked before; he'd remembered a lot of his dreams that way. And every morning, he'd try to write down what he remembered. After about a week, he was confident that he was always having the same dream. There were two figures, one on each side of the bed, and they were waving and chanting. He had trouble remembering any specifics beyond that. He thought they were kneeling skeletons, but he admitted he might only be remembering the half skeleton he thought he saw a few weeks before.

The thing was, though, it *felt* like he was waking up in the middle of the night and seeing figures that were really there. He wasn't sure it was a dream. Well, rationally, he was pretty sure. He'd heard of hypnagogic states (huh, that's another word I'm surprised I can remember), where you're sort of half asleep and you feel paralyzed and you think you see things. He did feel paralyzed during these dreams, so that fit. But the imagery didn't seem to fit with what he'd read about hypnagogic states, and the fact that it was always the *same* dream bothered him. Intellectually, he still was pretty sure it was just some sort of hypnagogic state, that it was all some hazy half-dream, that there wasn't really anyone in his room at night. But as much as he told himself that, there was a part of him that couldn't fully believe it, and he was kind of frightened to be in the house by himself, or by himself and a couple of kids.

After that, he wasn't the only one who kept glancing toward his bedroom door. I mean, I don't know if any of the rest of us really expected to see something there—I don't know if *Ethan* really expected to see something there—but we couldn't help looking. Like I said, if it had been anyone but Ethan who had told us this, we probably would have thought it was silly, but coming from him we couldn't dismiss it that easily. Actually, I take it back. I think we would have taken it seriously from *anyone* if they said it the way he said it. He was obviously really distraught; he really seemed... okay, this is going to sound kind of cheesy, but he seemed *haunted*. The way he talked would have spooked us coming from anyone. The fact that it came from Ethan just made it worse.

As it turned out, we didn't need to keep looking at the bedroom door all that time. Maria *heard* it before we saw anything.

It was a creak she had heard, she later told us. Not a loud creak, like in a haunted house in a movie. Just a very quiet sound she would never have heard if everyone else hadn't been dead quiet right then. Maybe it was the door opening; maybe it was the floor creaking—it did that sometimes, the floor of the balcony up there at the top of the stairs.

But like I said, she only told us later what she heard. Right then, we just saw her suddenly turn toward the stairs. We'd all been sort of glancing at the stairs for a while, but we hadn't done it that openly; it seemed like Maria had heard or seen something. And when I looked up at the top of the stairs, I saw it too.

"The door is open," Ca whispered, but it wasn't necessary. We could all see it.

Not much; it was just slightly ajar. But Ethan's bedroom door had been closed before. I was sure of it. And nobody had been up there. And it wasn't like the door would have opened on its own—it had a latch, like an ordinary door; it wouldn't just open without someone turning the doorknob.

I'm not sure how long we were looking at the door, waiting for something else to happen. But nothing else did, for a long time. Maybe a minute. Maybe ten.

Then, slowly, and this time silently, it opened farther.

The lights were off upstairs. It was pitch dark in Ethan's bedroom, and close to it in the hallway aside, the only light coming from the windows in the entry. Still, there was just enough light that we would have seen if there was something in the hallway, or if something came out of Ethan's room. Nothing did. Not right away, I mean.

Naturally, I think we all kept looking at the door for a while. Waiting to see if anything else would happen. Nobody talked. But after a while, Ethan apologized for having scared us, saying it was probably nothing, and I think that let some of the tension off, even if it was pretty obvious he didn't really think it was nothing. I don't think any of us fell asleep, but at least we didn't keep our eyes glued to the door.

And then a little while later—maybe ten minutes, maybe an hour—I glanced back at the door, and this time there *was* something there.

There was something in the hall, something maybe half the height of a man. Like I said, the hall was very dark, and the light from the entry windows was just enough to let me see that something was there, but I couldn't tell what it was; I couldn't see it as much more than an

indistinct shadow. From what little I could tell, though, I thought it *looked* sort of like half a man, too—the upper half, without the legs.

I didn't think then of the half-skeleton Ethan had thought he saw on the lawn, but I sure as hell thought about that later.

I couldn't make out any features, other than a vague impression of two arms and a head. I thought there was a darker band around the eyes, like a burglar's mask or something, but it was so dark already I couldn't be sure.

Out of my peripheral vision I became aware that the others were looking at it too. I don't know if they all happened to notice it on their own, or if they heard me gasp when I saw it. Probably that, probably the gasp.

The thing wasn't moving. It was just sitting there, at the top of the stairs, just outside Ethan's room, staring down at us. At least, I assume it was staring down at us; I couldn't see the face well enough to tell. And for a while, that's all it did.

Then, slowly, very slowly, one arm began to move. Slowly, the arm rose.

There was something dangling from its arm, barely visible in the near-darkness. I couldn't tell what it was. I didn't know if it was the remains of a tattered sleeve, or if it was shreds of dangling flesh. Actually, even with what I know of skilevaks now, I still don't know; it could have been either.

Slowly, the arm bend, and slowly, its hand reached toward its torso.

I'm not sure what the others were doing. I wasn't paying attention to them. My eyes were fixed on the shadowy figure by the door.

It was too dark to see what the thing at the top of the stairs was doing. I think I got the impression that it was somehow reaching into its own torso, but I don't know if that's really what I thought then, or if I'm giving myself too much credit using the benefit of hindsight.

Anyway, after a few seconds the thing's arm twitched, and something the size of a walnut flew out of it and bounced down the stairs.

My eyes followed the object the thing had thrown. It was too small, and the entry was too dark, to see what it was, but whatever it was it seemed to have come to a stop on the landing where the stairs turned toward the entry, right at the rim of the opening into the living room.

I looked back up at the top of the stairs, but the shadow wasn't there anymore. Ethan's door was still open, but the balcony was empty.

None of us said anything for a while. When we did, it was in hushed whispers, and it wasn't important. "Did you see that?" "What

was that?" Questions like that that had to be asked, but that didn't have meaningful answers.

It was Maria—she was always the bravest—who finally got up to see what it was on the landing. This might have been an hour after we'd seen the thing at the top of the stairs, or it might have been two hours, or maybe it was fifteen minutes. She walked up to the landing to get a close look at what the thing had thrown.

When she turned back, her eyes were wide and her mouth was thin.

Ca asked her what she had seen.

She said the thing on the landing had rolled away as she approached and fallen through a gap between stairs; she hadn't been able to get close to it. But she'd gotten close enough to get a better look at it, and she said it had looked like a human eye.

I'm not sure whether any of us got any sleep that night.

More in the next post.

Posted 12:32 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

At school the next day, I guess after he'd had a chance to pull himself together and get partly over what had happened that night, Ethan thanked us for saying with him that night. Despite the thing at his door, this was the first night in almost two weeks that he *hadn't* had that nightmare about the chanting figures by his bed.

Of course, the thing at the top of the stairs might have been a nightmare, too. But if it was, it was one we all had.

The nightmare may have skipped that night, though, but it came back afterward. And with every night that passed, Ethan remembered a little more about it. Since we were all kind of in on it with him now, and since he'd already told us enough to not feel ashamed of telling us more, Ethan kept us all up to date on all the details.

Fuck. That's something else I should have put in the first post. I keep saying "us", but I've never really said who we were. I mean, I've mentioned our names, but I haven't told you anything about us. Hell, I think I've given a more detailed description of Mrs. Puri than I have of Ethan or Ca. So, yeah, before I go on with the story, I guess I should sort of introduce the dramatis personae (did I spell that right?) [*He didn't, but the spelling has been corrected in this reposting.*]

Okay. I'm Jesse. Jesse Zarzecki. (ThreeOfCups is the handle I use on forums, but it's not my real name, of course.) I'm sixteen, and I'm in eleventh grade. Actually, we were in all eleventh grade, so I may as well say that now so I don't have to repeat it for everyone. I have dark brown hair, and I'm maybe a little short for my age, but my mother always says I'll grow into it, although I probably won't because I've already had my growth spurt and I'm not even sure what the "it" is that she keeps saying I'll grow into. I like football, but I'm not very good at it; I tried out for the school football team, but I didn't get in. Which is just as well, in retrospect, because I've met some of the kids on the team since then, and I don't think we would have gotten along very well. Bleh. I'm rambling. I shouldn't go on about myself anyway; I mean, I'm not that important to the story. I'm just the one writing it down.

Ethan Rin is half Japanese, on his mother's side, but he doesn't look it. I mean, I assume he doesn't look it, but I don't know any other half-Japanese people, except his brother and sister, so maybe that's how half-Japanese people normally look. I don't know. Anyway, he's got sort of honey-blond hair (that's what Ca calls it), and maybe his eyes look kind of Asian but maybe I'm only saying that because I already

know he is. I don't think I'd have guessed he was half Japanese to look at him. (Actually, I think he said his mother has some Chinese ancestry, so maybe he's, like, one quarter Japanese and one quarter Chinese, or three eighths Japanese and one eighth Chinese, or something. I don't know the breakdown.) He's kind of skinny, with big hands and feet, but he has a really handsome face. That's what Ca says, anyway; I guess I wouldn't know. Though he does get a lot of attention from the girls in general, so I guess Ca's not alone.

Why am I writing about him in the present tense now? Never mind. Moving on.

Ca's my sister. Her name is actually Jessica, but I call her Ca. Yeah, my parents did that thing where they give twins similar names—Jesse and Jessica. Only in our case I don't think they thought it through, because our names are a little *too* similar; they both have the nickname "Jess". So as kind of a joke, I started calling her Ca and she called me E, and I guess we just kind of stuck with it, and that's what we normally call each other now. Nobody else calls us that; we're both just Jess to our friends when the other one's not around, or Jesse and Jessica when we're both there. We also have one older brother and sister—not twins—but they're both in college and don't really come into the story. Anyway, Ca has a big crush on Ethan, which is why she wanted to go with me to his place that first time. I'm not sure whether he liked her back or not; maybe he did, but maybe he was just being friendly. Ca considers herself quite an artist; she likes painting, and I guess she's pretty good at it, but lately she's been trying to learn to do art all digitally, too.

I'm using the present tense again. Sorry. I guess I'm just used to it. Bear with me; like I said, I'm just trying to get this all down... I don't have time to go back and edit. But anyway, in Ca's case, I mean, technically I guess she *could* still be alive...

Anyway. Maria. Maria Barros. She's kind of the odd one out, because she wasn't really a member of the group before—well, not that there was really a group to be a member of before. But I mean, I barely knew her; she was a friend of my sister. She was there at Ethan's house at the sleepover just because it seemed weird to have two boys there and only one girl, so Maria invited her along. But after we were all there to see the thing at the top of the stairs, well, I think that kind of brought us all together, made us all part of something; we had this thing we shared, so she was always included from then on. Next to Ethan, Maria was probably the smartest of us. Ironically, she'd always been really interested in the "paranormal", like Bigfoot and aliens and all of

that. She didn't *believe* any of it, but she thought it was fun to read about. You'd think that would come up, would have ended up helping us out, but it didn't. She'd never heard of skilevaks.

I don't know if Maria had any brothers or sisters. I guess it doesn't matter; I only mention it because I mentioned Ethan's brother and sister, and Ca's and mine, so I figured I should mention hers too, but I don't know if she had any. It never came up. Wait, yes, that night in the castle, she did talk about her sisters then. So she did have sisters. No brothers, I think.

So that's the crew. Such as we were. So I guess I should get back to the story.

I was talking about Ethan's dreams. Or "dreams". Yeah. So, like I said, he was remembering his dreams better now. He was sticking to his system of telling himself before he went to sleep that he had to remember his dream that night, and of writing down each morning as much as he could recall. And it was paying off. Every day, he remembered a little more than the previous day.

My hair is falling out.

The dreams were still always the same. He would wake up, and there would be two figures standing over him. He was paralyzed; he couldn't move; he could only see them out of the corner of his eye—he couldn't even turn toward them to get a better look at them. But from what he could make out, they looked like skeletons, or at least the upper parts of skeletons. At least, their heads looked like skulls, as far as he could tell; below that, they went farther into his peripheral vision and were harder to see. There was something weird about their eyes, like they both had black masks or big black ears, or both, but again, he was just seeing them out of the corner of his eye, and he couldn't get a good look.

They weren't chanting either, not exactly. They were making a noise, but it was more wordless singing than chanting, and not exactly singing, either. There were other sounds there, sounds a human throat could never make; the best Ethan could describe them was like a quiet foghorn, and crystal rain, and a wind blowing through curtains of flesh, but he said those weren't really good descriptions either. And as they sang, or whatever it was they were doing, they would move their arms rhythmically. Something else was moving, too, below, but it was outside of Ethan's line of sight.

There was one more thing, he said. He'd searched his room one morning, and he'd found a purple discoloration in the back of his closet. It didn't look like mold, or like paint, or like anything, really,

except that the wall was a different color there. But it was gone by the time he got back from school. He'd looked for it the next morning, and it had been there again—as far as he could tell, the same shape, and the same color. Again it was gone when he got back home, and the same every day. One weekend, when he was home all morning, he left his closet door open and watched it, and he saw it slowly fade away.

He asked us to come over the next Saturday and see the spot for ourselves. So we did.

The mushrooms were still in the yard. There weren't noticeably more of them than before, but there weren't noticeably fewer, either.

I noticed as soon as I entered Ethan's room that there was a weird, faint smell in it that I didn't remember before. Sort of a pungent, cakey smell. I thought it was familiar, but I couldn't place it. It was only a few days later, going through my mother's spice cabinet for something unrelated, that I found out what it was. Nutmeg. The room had a faint smell of nutmeg.

Ethan didn't smell it, but everyone else did. He said maybe it had been gradually building up in his room and he'd gotten used to it.

Ethan's closet was kind of a mess—he may have been good in school, but no one could ever call him well organized. Still, there was enough clear space at the side of the closet that the spot he pointed out was visible. It was there, a purple spot about three feet tall. This spot wasn't the thistle purple of the mushrooms; it was a darker purple that Ca called "imperial". I don't know where she gets these color names; I guess maybe they're on her tubes of oil paint? Anyway, it was a dark bluish purple color, sort of like an eggplant. Its shape was irregular, sort of a lopsided oval, or some kind of polygon with rounded edges.

The smell was a little stronger there. There and by Ethan's bed.

None of us knew why the spot was there, of course. We all looked at it, we all agreed it was weird, and none of us knew what it meant.

As we were leaving the room, though, Maria stopped and took a close look at Ethan's computer. Ethan asked what she was looking at.

"You have a webcam," she said, pointing to the little camera on the top of his monitor.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Do you know how to use it?"

"I don't use it very often. But yeah, I know how. Why?"

She turned the monitor slightly, so it was pointing at Ethan's bed—it had already been pointing in sort of that direction anyway, so it didn't take much of a turn.

"Can you turn it on and leave it running tonight and recording?"

Well, of course we all saw what she was getting at. And Ethan said it was kind of silly, that he knew he was just imagining things and there'd be nothing to record... but it was just a token protest. I'm pretty sure he wanted to see for sure what was or wasn't going on in his bedroom at night, wanted proof that he was just dreaming, that the weird singing figures weren't there. So he said that night he'd set his webcam up, and we'd all come over to his house the next morning to see what happened.

Mrs. Puri was out in her yard when we got to Ethan's house; she hadn't been there on Saturday, but I guess she doesn't spend *all* her time gardening. We stopped and talked for a while, and she gave us cookies with coconut. I don't like coconut much, but I didn't tell her that. At her prompting, I took a couple of extra cookies to give to Ethan, though I wasn't sure whether he liked coconut or not.

Ethan wasn't in the mood for cookies anyway, though he said he'd eat them later. He wanted to see if there was anything on the recording. He'd wanted to watch it himself, but Maria had made him promise the previous night to wait until we got there.

Maria took charge of searching the video, I guess since it had been her idea. The beginning was just Ethan setting up the video and then getting into bed—mindful of the webcam, he didn't fully undress until he was under the bedsheet. Then Maria fast-forwarded through the video until we saw something significant. There was a brief time when Ethan had the covers thrown off and we could see his butt (apparently Ethan slept in the nude), but we fast-forwarded past that; normally we would have given him a hard time about that, but after what we'd seen at the top of the stairs we were all taking this seriously. (Besides, honestly it was dark enough in his room that it's not like it was clearly visible anyway.)

Then there was movement in the video, besides Ethan's movement as he tossed in bed, and Maria stopped it. There was something in the background, but in the paused video it was a little blurry and hard to see. She rewound it a few seconds and we watched.

At first it was just Ethan sleeping, all but his head and shoulders underneath the bedsheet. Then something came behind the far side of his bed from the left side of the frame. The webcam picture quality wasn't great, and the dark room made it even harder to see—Ethan had left his curtains open, so there was some moonlight, but that was it. But from what we could see, it looked like the upper half of a skeleton. It wore a spotted dress, the bottom part of the dress dragging free along the ground as it walked along on its hands.

The weirdest part was the head. There was something on the head, as Ethan had described, but it wasn't ears, and it wasn't a mask. It looked like there was a bat perched on the front of the thing's head. When it reached the center of the bed and turned to face Ethan, though, and so also face the camera, we got a better look. The picture quality was still not great, but it was enough to show that it wasn't exactly a bat; on the thing's face seemed to be just a pair of bat wings stuck together with no legs, or mouth, or other features. Well, almost no other features; it did have eyes, more or less in front of where the skull's eye sockets should have been, though closer together.

The skilevak positioned itself by the side of Ethan's bed, and it waited. And then another skilevak came in from the same direction, this one on the near side of the bed. We didn't get as good a look at this one; it was too close to the camera. We could see, though, that unlike the first skilevak this one wasn't wearing anything. And its ribcage was full of eyes.

Wait a second, I guess maybe I shouldn't be referring to them skilevaks yet. I mean, we didn't know at the time that that's what they were called. They are called that; it's not just a name I made up. But we didn't find that out until much later. At this point all we knew was that they were weird skeleton things. Still, I guess I may as well keep calling them skilevaks anyway; I guess it beats just calling them "things" or "shapes" or whatever, even though that's pretty much what we called them then because we didn't know any better.

The second skilevak stopped pretty much right in front of the camera, so it took up much of our field of view. But we could still more or less see what was happening. The skilevaks started waving their arms around and droning some weird sound. Ethan—the past Ethan in the video, not the current flesh-and-blood Ethan who was there with us—Ethan woke up, and his eyes widened, but then he froze. Paralyzed, I guess.

The sound quality on the webcam recording was even worse than the video. I couldn't make out much of the sound they were making. Mostly, it sounded like wordless singing, like Ethan said, though I did think at one point I heard a little of what he had referred to as the quiet foghorn.

For twenty minutes—and this time I can be more exact, because the video had the time on it—that was all that happened. The skilevaks sang and swayed, and Ethan was frozen in his bed. Then they stopped, and they filed out, first the farther one and then the near one. And only after they had left, Ethan shook and fell back asleep.

Fuck. The side of my chin just started dripping pus or something. I'd better get something put over that before it gets on my computer. This is probably a good time to end this post anyway. More next post.

Posted 2:12 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

Okay, I don't want any more delays like that. I don't have long. I can already feel them in my mind. Or feel my mind changing to theirs. But if that was happening, would I feel it? I don't know. Anyway, I put a scarf around my neck so anything else that leaks out won't get to the computer. The scarf's going to be ruined, but that's the least of my worries.

It wasn't easy to get the scarf. I can't move my legs. I had to drag myself over. Like them.

Anyway, not only did we know now that Ethan wasn't dreaming, we actually knew, sort of, what it was that he wasn't dreaming about. We knew what was coming into his room, I mean. And the direction from which it had entered the frame—well, that was the direction of the closet. Whatever these things were, they could have been coming from there.

It was Ca who pointed that out, but we were all thinking it.

I think I mentioned before that Maria was kind of into paranormal stuff. She said she could post this online, ask about it in some forums she frequented, see if it rang a bell to anyone. Ethan said go ahead, and she did. Not just the twenty minutes with the skilevaks; she posted the whole thing, as a bunch of separate files, in case there were other clues there she was missing, though she pointed out the part with the skilevaks as the most significant.

It didn't help. Nobody had heard of skilevaks. The part of the video with the skilevaks got a lot of comments, but none of them were helpful. Some people just commented about how freaky the video was, and other people commented about how it was obviously fake. Nobody knew what the batface skeletons were. The other segments of the video, the ones of just Ethan sleeping before and after the skilevaks came, got few or no comments at all, which I guess isn't surprising—except the one where Ethan threw off the covers and his butt showed; that one got some comments, but they weren't helpful either. So I guess there were no clues we were missing.

As for the forums Maria asked around on, nobody there knew what the batface skeleton things were either. Somebody named some mythological creature out of Thailand called a "Khon Tun", but that turned out to be a total false lead; we checked it out and it had nothing at all to do with what we saw except for an affinity with music, so I'm not sure why they brought it up. Either they got it mixed up with something else, or they were just taking an excuse to show off their

knowledge. Anyway, yeah, turns out that posting the video online didn't help.

Oh, wait, I should probably include links to the videos here, duh. I mean, that way you can see for yourself. Hold on, let me find them.

Fuck. They're gone. Her whole account has been closed. Of course it has. Maria would have done that after her change. Just like I'm afraid I'm going to delete these posts. Fuck. I guess that means I'm right to think I'll delete these posts, so what I said earlier about reposting them elsewhere? Yeah. Seriously. Do that. I hope someone will see them in time. Hm. Maybe someone has those videos saved somewhere, too; maybe they'll turn up someday. I don't know if they'd do any good, anyway, though. I mean, like I said, some people thought they were fakes. They're not going to convince anyone who's not already convinced by my account.

But I'm getting ahead of things; I mean, I'm going on about the responses Maria eventually got to what she posted, but before that I was still at when we were seeing the videos for the first time. I guess there's not too much else to say about that, though. So we knew something was really coming for Ethan in the night, but we still didn't know why, and we didn't know what to do about it. Ethan said he'd maybe sleeping in different rooms, if his parents would let him; after all, he hadn't had the "dreams" when he was downstairs with us that night when we were all there. Beyond that, none of us had too much idea what to do.

Sleeping in a different room didn't help much, as it turned out. The skilevaks found him. And whatever they were doing, they kept doing it. He kept having the "dreams". As often as he could, Ethan talked his parents into letting him sleep over at a friend's house. That worked; the skilevaks didn't get him there. But they didn't let him stay over at friends' houses every night, and every time he slept at home the skilevaks came.

One thing we did do is try the webcam trick again. But this time, we had the webcam facing the closet, with the closet door open. Unfortunately, we didn't take into account how dark the closet was; it was on the far wall from the window, after all, and the window was the only source of light in the room. It had been hard enough to make out the skilevaks standing around Ethan's bed, which was next to the window; pointing at the closet all the webcam recorded was hours of darkness. We tried it again, with a light pointing toward the closet, but apparently that made it too obvious what we were trying to do—and whatever these things were, they evidently weren't computer-illiterate.

That morning the webcam recording had been stopped, and all our previous recordings had been deleted from the hard drive. (Not the copies Maria put online, though—I'm pretty sure those weren't deleted until much later, after she joined them.) So yeah, we were pretty sure after that we weren't going to catch them on the webcam again.

Ca brought up the idea of waiting inside the closet to catch the monsters arriving. We were all sitting at the same table at lunch that day, Ca, Maria, Ethan, and I—like I said, the four of us hadn't exactly been a close-knit group before, but after what we'd been through together we were now. So Ca said she could wait in the closet all night to catch the monsters arriving.

"It's too dangerous," Ethan told her. "You don't know what they'd do to you if they saw you hiding there."

"Besides," I put in, "Mom and Dad will never let you stay in a boy's room alone. I doubt Ethan's parents would be happy with the idea, either."

"They don't have to know about," Ca said.

"Thanks," Ethan said, "but no. It's way too dangerous."

"The spot was on the left wall of the closet, right?" Maria asked.

"Yeah. I think so. Why?"

"I'm trying to visualize your room's position in the house. Your room's in the corner of the house, right? There's a window looking over your backyard, but the wall to the right of the window, where your desk is, is also an outside wall."

"Yeah, I guess so. There's no window there, because it would just face Mrs. Puri's house, but yeah."

"So if they're coming through the wall there, they're coming from outside."

"We don't know that they're coming *through* the wall," Ca said.

"Maybe the purple spot is like a portal or something."

"Is there anything strange on the outside wall at that point?" I asked.

"I don't know," Ethan said. "I guess we never really checked."

"Let's go over after school and take a look," Ca suggested.

"There might not be anything then," Maria said. "If there *is* something there when the things come, it might fade during the day like the spot in the closet. We should take a look tomorrow morning."

So we did. We didn't really talk about it more that day; I guess there just wasn't anything to talk about. Or maybe it's that there was *too much* to talk about, and we didn't know where to start. But the next day, before school, we all went over to Ethan's house.

Like Ethan said, that wall of his house faced Mrs. Puri's house. The two houses were pretty close together, so there wasn't much more than a narrow alley between them—two narrow alleys, kind of, because the wall between the yards of the two houses went right down the middle, so each house had kind of an alley of its own. The only way into that alley without climbing over a wall was through the backyard, so Ethan let us all into the backyard and led us around the house to the alley. (I guess it's not technically an alley, since it's part of the yard, but I'm not sure what else to call it.) There was kind of a rickety wooden gate leading into the alley from the main part of the backyard; it didn't look like anyone went back there very often. Back behind the gate all there was in the alley was a bunch of weathered cabinets that made it narrower than it already was. Ethan's dad was kind of a packrat; it was probably his stuff in there.

Anyway, we all looked up at the part of the wall that would have been about where the closet was. It was hard to see, because it was up on the second floor, and like I said there was a lot of ivy there. Also we had to kind of estimate where it was, how far from the corner, based on how wide we remembered Ethan's room being. And because the alley was so narrow, we couldn't step back far from the wall for a good look. But we thought we knew roughly where it should be.

"I think I see something," Ca said. "There *is* kind of a purple spot there."

"Where?" I asked.

She pointed. "Right there. There's a spot on the wall that looks kind of purplish."

I couldn't really see for sure what she was pointing at. There was a place that there *might* have been a purple spot, but it might have been just a shadow.

"I'm going up," Ethan said.

I didn't know what he meant at first. "What?"

"Boost me up," he said, and kind of reached for the top of the cabinet.

So I made a step with my hands for him to step on, and Maria helped too, and he climbed up to the top of the cabinet. Then he stood up. The cabinets weren't a full story high, so he wasn't all the way up at the second story level where the spot would be, but he was a lot closer than we were.

He looked at the wall. "Whoa."

"Do you see the spot?" Ca asked.

"Not yet. But there are... mushrooms. Those weird mushrooms

from the lawn. They're up here too." We saw him reach for something. "Disintegrated. Fell apart. Just like the others."

"Do you see the spot?" Ca asked again.

Ethan looked up. It's not just that he wasn't at exactly the right altitude; he wasn't quite far enough over, either. The cabinets weren't directly under where his closet would be; they were a little to the right. To the left, directly under the closet, was a pile of tangled wire, for some reason, that probably wouldn't support his weight. Anyway, though, he looked up and to his left.

"I... I think so. It's kind of hard to see from here with this ivy in the way. I'll see if I can get closer."

He pulled at the ivy—I thought at first he was trying to pull it down, to get an unobstructed view of the spot on the wall, but he was just testing its strength. It held, and so he started climbing the ivy across the wall to a spot.

"Okay, yeah, it's here. I totally see it. There's a purple spot on the wall, just like inside."

"What are you doing?" a voice with an Indian accent suddenly said.

It was Mrs. Puri, of course; she'd come out in her yard and seen Ethan climbing on the wall, and she was worried.

Ethan was a little startled by the question, and he lost his hold on the ivy; he snatched for it to get a grip again, but he only grabbed a few leaves that came off the stem, and then his feet slipped and he fell. Fortunately, the pile of wire broke his fall, mostly, and the ends weren't sticking out so he didn't even get badly scratched. It could have been a lot worse.

Well, I guess in the long run it *was*, of course. What eventually happened was a hell of a lot worse than a one-story fall.

"Oh, dear, oh, my," we heard Mrs. Puri say, and then, while we helped Ethan up out of the tangle of wire and we were asking if he was all right, we saw Mrs. Puri's head poke over the wall at the end of the alley, the one that led to the front yard. (She must have been standing on something; she wouldn't be tall enough to look over the wall normally. But that's not a big deal; there are plenty of flowerpots and things there should could have been standing on.)

"Is everything okay?" Mrs. Puri asked.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Puri," Ethan said. "I'm not hurt."

"Why were you climbing on the wall? That is not a safe thing to be doing."

"I just... I thought there might be something wrong with the wall there. I was just checking it out."

“That is not a safe thing to be doing,” Mrs. Puri repeated. “You should have asked your parents for help.”

“I’m sorry. I guess we just got excited.”

“You do not have to apologize to *me*.” She looked us over. “Are you sure you are okay?”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Puri. Really.”

“Good.” She shook her head reproachfully. “Well, why don’t you come around to the front yard and I will bring you some cookies.”

They were sugar cookies this time, big sugar cookies that, for some reason, each had red sprinkles only on one side.

“I am glad that you were not hurt,” Mrs. Puri said as we munched the cookies, “but I still do not think it is a thing that you should be doing.”

“Don’t tell my parents, okay?”

“Perhaps that is just what I should do. But you will not do it again, will you?”

“I’m not going to climb on the wall again, no.”

“Good. Then perhaps your parents do not need to be told. Anyway, though, perhaps it is good that you are so agile. Perhaps it is good that you can climb so well. You should not be climbing on houses now, but that skill may serve you well in the time to come.”

After we were done with the cookies and Mrs. Puri was out of earshot, we discussed what to do next.

I think the end of my nose is about to fall off.

“So the purple spot lets them... go through the wall somehow?” I said.

“That’s what it looks like,” Ethan agreed.

“But where are they *coming* from?” Maria asked. “Wouldn’t people notice those skeleton things dragging themselves through the town?”

“I *did* notice one, once,” Ethan said. “But that was before the... before they started coming to me. As far as I know.”

“We’ve got to watch for them,” Ca said. “Find out where they’re coming from.”

“You can’t stay in my closet.”

“I don’t mean in the closet. I mean we need to watch from outside.”

“You want to stay outside all night watching for the skeleton things?” I said.

“Not all night. We know from the webcam footage what time they come. Assuming they come about the same time every night. We just need to watch that night and see where they’re coming from, and where

they go.”

God damn it. Now my hands are starting to crack. They’re not leaking pus or anything yet, but I’d better wrap them up with something before they do start leaking and ruin my keyboard. More next post.

Posted 3:31 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

Anyway, we decided to go out at night about 2:30 a.m. and see if we could tell where the skeleton things were coming from. Not all of us. Just Ca and me. And Ethan, of course, was in bed. He'd wanted to come out and watch too, said it would be better than being in there again paralyzed while the skeletons sang to him, but we decided if he wasn't in bed the things might know somehow and might not come, and it was worth risking one more visit from the things to find out where they came from and hopefully stop them once and for all.

We borrowed our parents' car and watched from there, from the street. We didn't ask our parents about the car; Ca just took the keys from where Mom leaves them in the downstairs closet. I guess technically we were sort of stealing the car, but I mean, what were we supposed to do? Ask them if we could borrow the car so we could track down some evil legless skeletons? It's not like they would have believed us. I guess we could have shown them the video (the copy on YouTube hadn't been deleted then, of course), but they probably would have thought that was a prank or something.

I don't know. Maybe if we'd tried hard enough we could have convinced them. I mean, probably not, but maybe there was something we could have done. I don't know. Too late now, I guess. Doesn't matter now.

Mom, Dad, if you read this someday, somehow... I'm sorry. Maybe I should have trusted you more. Maybe I should have told you. I love you. Tell Abe and Zelda I love them too. Jessica would say the same thing, I'm sure, if she were here. We love you. We're sorry. I'm sorry. It's not your fault.

Oh. god. what's going to happen if Mom and Dad try to come into my room in the morning? I'm not going to finish typing this before it's time to get up. Of course, they probably still think I'm missing; they don't know I came home last night. Still, they could check my room. And I mean, the door's locked, but the fact that the door's locked is going to make them know I'm here, or that *someone's* here, and then they'll probably get a screwdriver or something and break into the room. Oh god. I don't want them to see me like this.

Okay, I can't stop to think about it now. I've got to get this story down. Maybe if I hurry I can finish before they wake up.

I just realized I'm not breathing. How long have I not been breathing?

Focus. So Ca and I were watching Ethan's house from the street.

Watching, specifically, the outside wall of the house where the purple spot was, where the skilevaks were apparently coming through.

It was dark outside, of course. All the houselights were off, and the streetlights were far enough from the houses that not much of their light reached them. Still, we figured between the streetlights and the houselights it should be enough.

It was Ca who first saw it, of course. She was always better at spotting things than I am. Like, she was always the one to find Waldo. You know, in the *Where's Waldo* books? Only now it's *Where's Skilevak*. Ha ha. Oh, wow, that's not funny. That doesn't even make sense.

Sorry. It's hard to stay focused. It's—never mind. I've got to concentrate.

So, like I was saying, it was Ca who first saw them. Only she didn't see them in time. I mean, she didn't see where they came from. She saw them when they were already climbing up the wall. That's what they were doing, climbing, pulling itself along the ivy toward the purple spot. (Not that we could see the purple spot, of course, but we knew where it was.)

We got out of the car to take a closer look. It wasn't the same two as before. One wore a T-shirt, and one had on some sort of collared blouse with vertical stripes. Actually, maybe it *was* the same two as before; I mean, if they can delete files from a computer, they ought to be capable of changing clothes. Anyway, one of them was almost at the spot; the other was still near the bottom front of the house. The fact that it was near the bottom front of the house was kind of a clue to where they came from—I mean, it at least showed they were coming from in *front* of the house, not through the backyard—but it wasn't nearly enough.

They were too far away for us to make out many details; we wouldn't have been able to see the wings on their faces if we didn't already know about them. Actually, we couldn't really see those even if they'd been closer, because they were on the fronts of their faces, and the fronts faced the wall. One thing we did see was that it almost looked now like they had legs. There was something coming out of the bottom of their torsos, anyway, though in the darkness we couldn't really get a good look at what it was. They weren't normal legs; they were too shapeless, and seemed to be made up multiple pieces. But they were about where legs ought to be.

But anyway, we saw them clambering through the ivy like legless monkeys. I don't think they saw us. If they did, they didn't react. The

top one got to the right spot in the wall, and then it... kind of *pushed against it*. It didn't immediately go through; it just pressed itself against the wall and gradually passed through it. First the skull, then the rest of the body. Last, we caught a glimpse of the bits of particles, of whatever they were, that made up their new legs. (We know what they are now, of course, but I mean we didn't then.)

The second thing got to the purple spot just as the first one finished going through it. The same thing happened—it pressed up against the wall, and it slowly passed through. And then they were both gone.

Ca and I went back to the car. We weren't sure what else to do.

"Did you see where they came from?" I asked her, though based on when she pointed them out I already knew the answer. She just shook her head.

After a moment, she spoke again. "We can watch them come *out*, though."

That was true, of course. Based on past experience, it would only be about twenty minutes. So we waited.

The things came back out. The one in the T-shirt was first, the same one that had entered first. This time we stayed in the car. We didn't want them to see us. I kind of wished I had brought a pair of binoculars or something. That way I could get a closer look. But anyway, it didn't matter too much. Right now we were only trying to find out which way they were going. And we wouldn't need binoculars for that.

Of course, later we'd get a *much* closer look at skilevaks, much closer than any of us would have wanted to. Especially Maria and me. Ha ha. Oh god. It's not funny.

It came out through the wall as slowly as it had come in. First the skull—and now, even in the dark, we could see those wings over its eyes, that face-bat or whatever—and then the hands, and then the hands kind of braced themselves against the wall outside the spot and helped pull the rest of it through. Next came the shoulders, and then the torso. There was some kind of logo on the front of the T-shirt; I hadn't seen that before. I couldn't make it out from here, though. Finally, when it got its torso out, those tiny bits that had been trailing down as legs followed.

As the T-shirt thing started making its way down the wall, the one in the blouse started coming out. We kept watching the one in the T-shirt, though, to see where it went. It climbed down toward the front of the house, and then it looked like its "legs", or whatever those clusters were that took the place of legs, retracted into its body. It started

crawling across the lawn. Our view from the car was impeded by some bushes, so we couldn't watch it on the lawn itself, but we waited for it to leave the lawn.

It didn't, and we were afraid whatever it had done we would lose sight of it soon, so we got out of the car. We didn't even say anything to each other; I guess we both kind of had the idea at the same time. So anyway, we got out of the car and ran to the lawn, or at least to where we could see over the bushes to the lawn. There was no sign of the thing in the T-shirt, but we got there just in time to see the thing in the blouse sinking into the ground. It was apparently doing it face first; we just saw the back of its head and torso gradually descending and disappearing.

I'd brought a flashlight; I didn't think we were going to need it, since we didn't want to catch the things' attention, but I'd brought it just in case. Anyway, now that the things were gone I guessed it couldn't hurt to use it, and I shone the flashlight on the spot where we'd seen the thing sink out of sight.

There was no grass there, but that wasn't too unusual. To be honest, Ethan's parents were never very careful about their garden. There was a big contrast between Mrs. Puri's well-tended flowerbeds and the Rins' patchy lawn. So the fact there was a bare patch in the lawn wasn't too surprising by itself. But the ground there was *purple*. The same purple, the same "imperial", right Ca? as the spot on the wall. And about the same size, though I couldn't vouch for the shape, since it was all irregular.

And the purple spot was surrounded by those weird mushrooms.

If I'm not breathing, is my heart beating? I don't know. I can't feel my pulse, since I've got my hands wrapped up in toilet paper so they won't leak pus on my keyboard. I guess it doesn't matter anyway. Even if my heart's still beating now, it won't be for long.

There was nothing more to do there that night. Obviously we wondered whether there were mushrooms around the spot on the wall, too—Ethan had said he'd seen mushrooms up there, but not necessarily in that exact spot. I shone my flashlight up there, but if we couldn't see the wall well during the day with all the ivy on it, we certainly weren't going to see it at night. Anyway, we'd done all we could do there for now.

The next morning, though, Ca and I got up early and went over to Ethan's house before school again to tell him what we'd seen. He went over to the lawn with us and saw the purple spot. During the day, it was pretty obvious, once you knew what you were looking for. We'd

just never really checked the lawn out in the morning before. There was nothing more to do there either, though, so we went to school.

We filled Maria in during lunchtime, and this time she had the idea about what to do next.

“So it’s the mushrooms.”

“What’s the mushrooms?” I said.

“The mushrooms. They must play a role in creating the portal. Or whatever it is.”

I was going to say “What makes you say that?”, but then I knew what made her say that. I mean it was kind of a “duh” moment; in retrospect it was pretty obvious. The things had gone around planting the mushrooms somehow (I don’t know if that’s the right word—do you “plant” mushrooms?) to prepare the way for them to get inside. I mean, seriously, Ethan *saw* the “half-skeleton” crawling around his lawn before the mushrooms appeared. And even if he hadn’t, with two weird things happening at the same time like that, the mushrooms and the things in Ethan’s room, yeah, it’s pretty likely they’re related. I felt really dumb for not having known before that the mushrooms were what was letting the things get to Ethan.

I guess Ca and Ethan were thinking about the same thing, because none of us said anything for a few seconds. Also, my mouth was full of pizza. The pizza they sometimes have at school lunches wasn’t as good as the pizza you get from a pizza place, but it wasn’t all that bad. It was better than their chow mein, anyway. Yuck.

Ca finally spoke up. “We’ve got to get rid of the mushrooms.”

“They just disintegrate when you pick them anyway,” Ethan said, “but they come back. I’ve picked a lot of them, but there are always more.”

“But have you picked them all at once?”

Wait... how long have I been writing everyone’s dialogue here? It just occurred to me how weird it is that I can remember everyone’s exact words. I mean, I *can*; this dialogue I’m putting down isn’t just paraphrasing. It’s exactly what people said. But I shouldn’t be able to remember that. I don’t have a photographic memory or anything (actually, would that even apply? Would photographic memories make you able to remember conversations?) I don’t usually remember people’s words this well. But now suddenly I can remember vividly every detail of what happened in the last few days. I guess that’s part of the change. I guess they have better memories than we do. Than you do, I mean. Than I used to.

Maybe there’s an upside to this after all.

I don't mean that.

Anyway, we agreed that we were going to go to Ethan's house after school and get rid of all the mushrooms we could find. Every mushroom on the lawn we were going to pick. And if they grew back, we'd keep doing it. We'd wipe the mushrooms out, and with them, we hoped, we'd remove the skeleton things' way into Ethan's yard.

So that's what we did. We went through there, and we went over the whole yard. We started with the mushrooms around the purple spot, careful not to touch the purple earth itself (that came later), but pulling out all the mushrooms. Letting them disintegrate in our hands. Then we went over the rest of the yard. We looked under bushes and shrubs, among the flowers, *everywhere*.

It took a while, because we were trying to be thorough. Mrs. Puri came out at one point and asked us what we were doing.

"We're getting rid of those mushrooms," Ethan told her.

"Why?"

"They... we think they might have some bad effects."

Mrs. Puri didn't have a response to that, but a minute or two later she brought us out some cookies. Peanut butter cookies, though they seemed to have a hint of curry or something, which sounds like it should be weird but they were actually pretty good. We ate the cookies, and kept pulling out the mushrooms.

We even got all of those on the wall that we could reach easily. We didn't climb the wall to get every mushroom off of there, because we figured Mrs. Puri might tell Ethan's parents and things could get awkward, plus we figured it probably wasn't necessary. We just had to keep the mushrooms off the lawn. It didn't matter if there were mushrooms on the wall to get *in* Ethan's house if they didn't have a way to get *to* Ethan's house in the first place.

That might have been a mistake. But honestly, probably not. I'm pretty sure even if we'd gotten all the mushrooms off that wall, they would have found another way into his house anyway, just like they found another way into his yard.

Okay, I've got an idea for how to keep my Mom and Dad from finding me in my room in the morning. I'll take my laptop into the attic and finish writing this there. They won't look for me there.

I'm not sure how I'm going to get into the attic if I can't move my legs, but I should be able to pull myself up, I think. We seem to be good at that.

Signing off for now. More in the next post.

Posted 4:55 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

I'm writing this post in the attic. That should buy me enough time to finish. I mean, maybe my parents will look in the attic eventually, but probably not today. And by tomorrow I'll be gone. Part of me, I mean. There's a desk up here, so it's not too bad—I think at one point Mom was thinking of turning the attic into a study, but it never happened.

I was worried about how I was going to bring my laptop up here, since I would need both arms to climb, but it turned out not to be that hard. I just put my laptop in my backpack and put my backpack on—I didn't need legs to do that. Climbing up the ladder into the attic wasn't easy, but I made it. I was able to move my legs a little, which helped ; I guess they're not completely useless yet. I was afraid my parents would wake up, especially one time when I accidentally knocked this box off a shelf on the way to the attic (the ladder to the attic is in a closet with shelves on the side). But I guess they didn't hear it, or they thought I was dreaming; anyway, they didn't come out of the bedroom. I should be okay in the attic, at least for long enough to get this done.

Anyway, the next morning there was no purple spot in the yard, and no purple spot in Ethan's closet. There *were* a few new mushrooms, but they were small, and there weren't nearly as many as before. And we made sure to pull them all out. If they weren't going to grow back faster than this, we shouldn't have any problem keeping ahead of them.

And sure enough, Ethan didn't have any dreams that night. Or the next night. The dark circles under his eyes were starting to fade; he was starting to get back to his old self. We kept going over to his house to pick mushrooms every day, just in case, but they never grew back fast enough to be a problem. It looked like it was all over.

That lasted for about a week.

It was a Thursday, and we could tell as soon as we saw Ethan at school that something was wrong.

"They came again," was all he told me between classes, but we talked more at lunch.

Not that there was too much more to say. They came again. They were back. That night, once again he'd awoken, paralyzed, to two half-skeletons with face-bats singing by his bed.

There was no purple spot in his yard this morning, at least none that he could find. He looked. But the purple spot on his closet was back. And so were the skilevaks (though we still didn't know they were called that).

We talked over the matter at lunch, but it was pretty obvious there was only one thing to be done. Ca and I would sneak out about 2 a.m., borrow our parents' car again, and watch that night, to see where the skilevaks were coming from now.

"I want to come too this time," Maria said. "Just in case."

She didn't say just in case what, but there was no reason to tell her no, so we said yes. We said we'd stop by and pick her up on the way to Ethan's house.

So once again we were sitting in our parents' car outside Ethan's house, watching for the coming of the skilevaks. This time they were easier to spot. They weren't crawling from the lawn.

The first skilevak was wearing a spotted dress. Maybe the same one from the webcam footage; I'm not sure. Anyway, we saw it when it climbed up and stood on top of the wall between the houses. That was the best look we'd gotten so far of its "legs", though they were still too far away and the night was still too dark for us to make out details. It looked like maybe they were made out of a bunch of tiny round rocks or something. Anyway, it stood on the dividing wall for a moment, and then it jumped the three feet or so to the wall of Ethan's house and grabbed onto the ivy. As it was climbing up the wall, the second skilevak also climbed up on the dividing wall, and then it also jumped to Ethan's house wall. This one was wearing a dress shirt with a *tie*, of all things, and it was dark and I couldn't swear to it but I'm pretty sure the tie had a Christmas tree on it.

They hadn't been coming from Ethan's yard this time. When they climbed onto the wall, they were coming from the other side. They were coming from Mrs. Puri's backyard.

It occurred to me then that we hadn't seen Mrs. Puri for a few days. We'd been at Ethan's house almost every day pulling mushrooms, and she hadn't come out and offered us cookies like she usually did. She hadn't been there at all.

I got out of the car and I went over to Mrs. Puri's front yard and I looked at it with my flashlight. Her usually immaculate garden was getting overgrown; there were weeds between the flowerbeds, and her hedges needed trimming. I mean, not a lot; it had only been about a few days, or maybe a week at most. But if I looked closely, I could tell it hadn't been tended for a while.

I looked at her front porch to see if there were newspapers piled up there. I didn't see any. But I wasn't sure if Mrs. Puri got the newspaper anyway. Besides, even if she did, someone might have taken them.

Maria had followed me to the yard. “Get back in the car! The skeleton things will see you!”

“They’ll be in there for twenty minutes. We have time.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

I guessed she was right, and I turned to go back. But then I thought of one more thing. I shone my flashlight around the yard one more time, focusing on the lawn.

I didn’t see any mushrooms. But then, the things hadn’t been coming from her *front* yard.

Maria didn’t say anything further as I searched the lawn, but she seemed relieved when I finally headed back to the car. She got in after me, and we waited for the skilevaks to come out.

They did, again in the same order that they had gone in. The skilevak in the spotted dress climbed down the wall of Ethan’s house till it was almost level with the dividing wall, then pushed itself off, caught itself on the wall, and lowered itself to the other side. The skilevak in the tie followed.

I started to get out of the car, but Ca caught my hand. She was right. We needed to check out Mrs. Puri’s backyard, of course, but we needed to wait long enough to be pretty sure the skilevaks had gone.

So we waited there, a few more minutes, none of us talking. Then I got out of the car, and this time Ca didn’t stop me. Ca and Maria followed me as I went to the gate at the far side of the house. The gate was closed and latched, but I knew that most of these gates you could reach over and unlatch from the outside pretty easily. They were impassible barriers from the outside when I was a little kid—once I’d accidentally wandered out the gate of my backyard and it closed and latched behind me and I couldn’t get in and I panicked and cried until my parents heard me and came out for me (I am not proud of this). But now of course I was easily tall enough to just reach over and unlatch it.

So I did. And we went into Mrs. Puri’s backyard.

I’d only been here once before, and I don’t think I paid much attention. I mean, Mrs. Puri had talked to us out in the front yard a lot, and sometimes she’d even invited us in, but the only time I’d been in her backyard was when she took us through it to show us her cellar. It was nice, though. A lot of the backyards here had swimming pools, but hers didn’t. It was all just garden. Grass and flowers everywhere, and some fruit trees, too, one with lemons and one with grapefruit and one with little orange fruit I didn’t recognize but that Maria said were persimmons. It was obvious Mrs. Puri put a lot of time into her garden, though again when I looked closely there were signs she hadn’t been

tending it lately.

It wasn't really evidence of her getting lax with her gardening that I was looking for, though. As I shone my flashlight around the back lawn, what I was looking for, of course, was mushrooms. If the skilevaks came from here, I fully expected to find weird light purple mushrooms all over the lawn, and somewhere a circle of them with dark purple dirt in between.

I didn't find that, though. I couldn't find any mushrooms. We looked everywhere, in the flowerbeds, under bushes, between shrubs and the wall. We'd seen the skilevaks come from here, but I didn't see any mushrooms.

Then Ca caught my arm and pointed. "E, look."

She was pointing toward the back of the house. I shone my flashlight in the direction she was pointing, but I didn't see anything at first. bfvGod damn it. That was my tongue. It just fell out and hit the keyboard. I guess I don't need it. As long as I can keep writing, I'm not going to need to talk right now. And they seem to be able to talk without tongues anyway. Actually, I didn't think of that before. How do they do that? They don't have tongues or vocal cords, but I've heard them talk. Okay, getting off the subject again. Anyway, I'd better not lean over my keyboard so much, so if anything else falls off my face it's not going to hit it.

Anyway, like I was saying, I didn't notice anything where Ca was pointing at first. There were no mushrooms there that I could see. I was going to ask her what she was pointing at when I saw it.

The cellar door. It was standing open.

We motioned Maria over, and we all went toward the cellar. If the skeleton things had come from Mrs. Puri's backyard, and they weren't coming out of the ground directly, then maybe they were coming from here. It was worth checking out, anyway.

Outdoors, we could have gotten around without the flashlight. I mean, it was dark, but it wasn't *pitch* dark. In the cellar, of course, it was a different story. There was some light coming in from the cellar door itself, but once we were away from the cellar door the flashlight would be the only source of light. I'm sure there was a light switch somewhere, but I didn't know where.

The first thing I noticed in the cellar, though, even more than the darkness, was the smell. I've read books where they described the smell of rotting meat as "sickly sweet", and yeah, I guess that about covers it. Anyway, there was a strong stench of rotting meat down there. Though over it, there was also a scent of nutmeg. It was like

someone had left spicy meatloaf sitting out for a couple of weeks.

The second thing was the boxes and barrels that lined both sides of the cellar entry, Mrs. Puri's stockpiles for the "time to come". There was only a narrow passage between them leading further into the cellar, so we didn't have much choice which way to go. I looked at some of the boxes as we passed. They were all carefully labeled with markers in Mrs. Puri's elegant, heavily slanted handwriting. One box said "beans", another "dried fruit", and another "powdered milk". I stopped looking at them after that. It was more important to look where we were going.

And then I saw it. A mushroom. The cellar floor was dirt—I guess it was what you call an unfinished basement, though I don't think she ever had any plans to finish it—and there was a mushroom growing in it. Yes, one of *those* mushrooms. Big, cone-shaped, light purple.

Maria stepped forward to pick the mushroom, I guess just as a test. Sure enough, it disintegrated in her hands.

I looked around the cellar for more mushrooms. I found them. There was a small one near a box labeled "oats", and another at the foot of a wall of barrels in front of us, where the passage we were following between the containers came to a T intersection. There were only a few scattered mushrooms here, though. There were no circles of mushrooms, and no dark purple spots on the ground. We'd have to keep going.

We got to the T intersection, and I looked both ways; in both directions were similar narrow passages, which later came to intersections of their own. God damn it. Mrs. Puri's basement was like a maze. I didn't know which way to go, but Maria suggested going where the smell was stronger.

"*Stronger?*" That didn't sound appealing to me.

"Well, that's where we're more likely to find something, isn't it?"

I thought the smell was bad enough here, but she had a point. The nutmeg smell seemed to be about equal in both directions, but the rotting meat smell was stronger to the right, so that's the way we went. I kind of hiked my shirt up over my face to try to keep the smell out of my nostrils, but it didn't work all that well. Anyway, we were going through the passageway, and I was trying to be careful and look out for things with the flashlight, but I guess I wasn't being careful enough, because I stepped in something soft. It made kind of a wet squishy sound, and slid out from under my feet, and I almost fell; maybe I would have, if Ca hadn't caught me.

I shone my flashlight on the object I'd stepped on to see what it

was, and I wished I hadn't.

It was a bit of flesh. Muscle and skin. Dark brown skin, the color of Mrs. Puri's. It was maybe about six inches across, and it was wormy and decaying. Actually more decaying than it should have been, given the time frame, I thought, though naturally I wasn't an expert in that sort of thing.

Not like now, when I've got personal experience with decaying. Ha. Ha ha ha.

Yes, I typed "ha ha ha", and you're going to have to live with it. If I'm going to be laughing, I may as well share the laughter. Hey, it beats typing "LOL".

Oh, god, why *am* I laughing? It's getting to me. Damn it.

I think I'll go ahead and post this now. I know it's kind of a weird stopping point, but I don't want to go too long and risk losing the post if the power goes out or something—besides, I'm not sure if there's a maximum length of posts on this forum, and I don't want to have to waste time copying and pasting part of it into a new post. So here it is. More in the next post.

Posted 5:42 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

Anyway, when I said the flesh was wormy, I mean that literally, as in we could actually see worms coming out of it. Not just worms; there were flies, too, that I guess had been sitting on it and were disturbed when I stepped on it. And looking closely at the floor I saw what I thought might be the footprints of a rat. Footprints made tracking blood, I mean, of course.

This wasn't the source of the stench, though. I mean, I'm sure it was part of it, but it still got worse up ahead. So we kept going. I mean, what choice did we have? So yeah. We went on through the passages.

I shone my flashlight in the side passages we passed by too, in case there was anything important there. In the first one we passed, I saw something dark brown that I'm pretty sure was a liver. Or what was left of one; it was pretty badly decayed too. We saw more bits of flesh, a few more organs that I'm not sure what they were, then finally at one point there was a huge lumpy pile of something in the corridor that it took me a while to recognize.

It was an intestine. I'd never seen an intestine before, except in pictures. But there it was, all over the floor.

I threw up. Right on the intestines. I'd like to say it was the smell, and it maybe it was. The smell was really bad. But honestly, it may have been just the concept of what we were seeing. I've never been all that squeamish, but I mean a cellar full of rotting flesh and organs was a little hard to take. Well, okay, "full" is a little bit of an exaggeration, obviously. I mean, in total if you put it all together there was only one person's worth of skin and internals; it was just scattered all around.

I think I heard someone else throwing up behind me. I don't know if it was Ca or Maria. I didn't ask, and I didn't look.

Oh, god damn it. Speaking of internals, my right index finger is kind of getting squashy and making it hard to type. I may regret this, but I'm going to take off the toilet paper I wrapped it with and see what's wrong. Like I don't know.

jjjjjjjjnnunjunjunjunhuynh

Sorry. That was a test. I was just making sure I could still type with that finger. I don't know why I thought I couldn't. I mean, it still moves, and it can still press down the keys, obviously. But... yeah, I took off the toilet paper and the flesh of that finger had pretty much liquefied. Well, no, not all of it, but enough that the rest came off. Yeah, from the second knuckle up that finger's just bone now.

The weird thing is, though, I can still *feel* with it. Like the flesh is still there. Well, no, not like that, exactly; I mean, it's not like I have phantom flesh like people have phantom limbs. But I can feel with it even though it's just bone. That's kind of weird; I mean there are no nerves there, are there? But I guess it's no weirder than the fact I can *move* it even though it's just bone. If anything, it's maybe a little *less* weird than that.

Okay, I've wasted enough time with my finger. Bare bone or not, as long as I can still type with it I can finish my story. This is going slower than I thought; I've still got a lot to tell.

So, yeah, we stepped over the intestines and we kept going. The intestines weren't the last thing we saw, not by a long shot. There were scraps of flesh everywhere. At one point we disturbed what I guess was a feral cat with one ear torn off, eating what I think might have been a heart. The cat hissed at us and swiped out a claw, and then grabbed the heart in its mouth and darted off down another path between the food storage containers.

We went slow, partly to stay quiet in case there were any of those skeleton things lurking around, partly to avoid stepping on anything else. We weren't even sure where we were going by this point. The stench was all around us; it was hard to pinpoint a particular direction where it was worse. We just knew there had to be something here. We had to find where the face-bat skeletons were coming from.

Oh, yeah, the mushrooms. We saw lots more of those. They were all over the cellar. But they weren't especially dense anywhere, as far as I can tell. I always kept an eye out for somewhere they formed a circle, but we didn't see any. We saw plenty of mushrooms, but they all seemed just randomly scattered. No circles. No purple spots.

The intestines weren't the last thing we saw, but I thought they'd be the worst. They weren't. The worst was when we came around a corner to a place where the maze finally kind of opened up, and there was a stairway that I guess led up to the rest of the house. And lying on the ground there was a pair of legs.

Just the legs. Well, the legs and the pelvis. The upper body was missing. They were wearing pantyhose and low wedge shoes, and they just *ended* at the waist. Aside from that, they looked pretty much intact, though pretty badly decomposed. They were as wormy as the flesh we'd encountered earlier, and one hip it looked like something had been eating, maybe that feral cat we'd seen. They were lying there face down on the floor.

I almost threw up again. I probably would have, if I'd had anything

left in my stomach to throw up.

It was Mrs. Puri, obviously. Or half of her, anyway. It had her dark brown skin color, though now a little more pallid, and I was pretty sure I recognized those shoes. For a brief moment I wondered where the rest of the body was, and then of course I realized that we'd been *seeing* the rest of her body, though in pieces.

Except that we hadn't. It hit me that for all the flesh and organs we'd passed in the cellar on our way here, we hadn't seen any bones. Not even a sliver of one. The bones were present in the legs—they were holding their shape, so the bones had to be in there, and we could even see them in places, a bit of the spine and pelvis at the waist, and some of the pelvis exposed at the hip where the flesh had been eaten away. But we hadn't seen bone anywhere else. Skin, muscle, viscera aplenty, but no bone.

I didn't know if there was any significance to this, though in retrospect I guess maybe it should have been obvious.

Anyway, though, this wasn't what we were looking for. We were only following the stench because we had nothing else to follow; what we really wanted to find was where the skeleton things had been coming from. And it seemed a good bet it was here.

It wasn't, though. I shone my flashlight all around the open area at the base of the stairs, and once again there were plenty of mushrooms, but not in any pattern. I looked all around, but I didn't see a circle of mushrooms anywhere. Then I felt kind of a sick feeling as I realized there was one place I wasn't looking. Under the legs.

When I walked toward the legs and lifted my foot to move them, though, Maria guessed what I was doing and stopped me.

"It wouldn't be under there. The things wouldn't have been able to go through it if the body was blocking it. Besides, it's not big enough to cover all of it. We'd see the edges."

She was right, and I was relieved that she was right. I really hadn't wanted to move the legs, and I was glad I wouldn't have to. But that meant we still had to keep looking for the mushroom ring.

I took one more look around the open space where the legs were, but it was clear it wasn't there. We'd have to explore the rest of the cellar. Honestly, though, after the intestines and especially after the *legs*, the worst was over. We saw more scattered bits of flesh (still no bone), and at one point Ca was startled by a rat that ran across the top of boxes in front of us, but there was nothing else in the cellar as bad as what we'd already seen.

When we did find the circle, it turned out to be on the opposite end

of the cellar from the legs and most of the flesh. So I guess following the stench turned out not to be the right way after all, though I don't blame Maria for suggesting it. It was good idea, given little what we knew at the time.

I still can't get over the way I can still *feel* things with a finger that's bare bone. I don't know why that seems weirder to me than the fact I can move it, but it does.

Anyway, the circle of mushrooms was on the far side of the cellar from the legs and all; we'd explored almost the whole maze by the time we got to it. But when we finally found it, we knew it when we saw it. The mushrooms formed a circle there, at the corner of the wall near a bunch of barrels that apparently contained dehydrated carrots (I hadn't realized there was even such a thing as dehydrated carrots). And in the middle of the circle, in the light of the flashlight, we could clearly see that the ground there was dark purple.

We all stood there staring at it, and then Ca said what we were probably all thinking.

"Now what?"

"So do we pick all the mushrooms from the cellar?" I wasn't looking forward to that at all, since it would mean rooting among all the rotting pieces of Mrs. Puri to find them all.

"I don't think that would do any good," Maria said. "They'd just find somewhere else to come from."

"So what *do* we do?" I asked.

"I think we'll have to go in after them."

"*They* can go through the purple, but *we* can't," Ca said.

"How do you know? We haven't tried."

Maria knelt down by the purple spot on the floor. And then she bent forward and placed her hands on the ground there, and her mouth firmed up in concentration.

"What are you doing?" I asked her. "Are you just going to sit there and try to think about passing through the portal?"

She didn't answer then, but that, as it turned out, was *exactly* what she was doing.

Maria was as surprised as anyone when suddenly her hands passed through the ground, and her arms followed. Her eyes widened, and she tried to draw back, but it was as if once she was partway through the ground kept sucking her down, like quicksand in the movies. I grabbed her waist and pulled, and Ca grabbed me to make sure I didn't follow her, and between the two of us we managed to pull her out. Her arms started to emerge back out of the purple ground, slowly at first, and

then it was like the ground *let go* of her, and we all fell back ward against the dehydrated carrot barrels, me on top of Ca and Maria on top of me.

“I wasn’t sure that would actually *work*,” Maria said, her eyes still wide.

“You really want to follow them down there?” I said.

“We have to. If we’re going to stop those things, we have to get to the source.” I think I said before that Maria was the bravest of us, but though she was trying not to show it she was afraid; her voice quavered, and almost died out by the end of her utterance.

“Where does that lead?” Ca asked. “The sewers?”

“Maybe. What else is underground here?”

“And what do we do once we’re down there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what’s there. But it’s the only way to stop them. Getting rid of the mushrooms only worked for a little while; we’ve got to figure out where they’re really coming from, before that.”

“So you want to go through some weird portal? Now?”

“No, not now. Later.” She got up and started pacing. “For one thing, we have to tell Ethan. And we’ll need a rope. So we can climb back out. Maybe some food, and other supplies... we don’t know how long it’s going to take. Tomorrow is Saturday. We’ll do it then.”

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” I said.

“We have to do it. Not just for Ethan; what if after they’re done with him, they start coming after the rest of us? We have to stop them, and to do that we’ve got to find their source. Tomorrow morning, we’re going after them. We’re going to take the fight to the enemy.”

She was talking like she was planning some great adventure, but honestly I’m pretty sure she was talking that way mostly to get her own spirits up and conquer her own fear. I mean, I’m not putting her down for being afraid. Hell, I’m sure Ca and I were way more afraid than she was. You’d have to be an idiot *not* to be afraid.

Which is not to say that we weren’t idiots. I mean, given later events, the consequences of what we did, you could certainly make that argument.

Okay, this is probably as good a time as any to end this post. More in the next post.

Posted 6:51 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

We went home after that and got a few hours' sleep. You wouldn't think we'd be able to sleep after something like that, but somehow, we did. Or I did, anyway. I don't know for sure if Ca and Maria slept, but since neither of them seemed too tired the next day I'm guessing they must have.

Early that morning before school, we went to Ethan's house and told him what we saw. The short version; I mean, we didn't give all the details, but I told him the mushroom ring was in her cellar... and that so was what was left of Mrs. Puri. He wanted to see what was in Mrs. Puri's cellar for himself, but I told him there wasn't time before school. Besides, it really wasn't something that was pleasant to see.

"You'll see it tomorrow morning, anyway," Maria said. "We're going down there after them."

"After the things?"

"She was talking about this last night," I said. (Technically I guess it had been very early that morning, but I'm pretty sure he knew what I meant.) "She thinks we have to cut them off at the source if we want to stop them."

Ethan thought about that.

"I guess that makes sense," he admitted, "but I don't like it."

"We'd better get to school," Maria said, "but we'll talk more about it at lunch."

And so we did. We made our plans. Decided what we were going to bring. A rope, Maria had already mentioned, and food. Ethan pointed out if we were bringing food we may as well bring water too. He also said he'd bring a flashlight of his own, along with extra batteries. Ca wondered whether we should have some kind of weapon.

"A weapon?" I said. "You want to *fight* those things?"

"I don't *want* to," Ca said. "But what if we have to?"

"Then we're in serious trouble."

"She's right, though," Maria put in. "It couldn't hurt. At least a stick or something. I guess a stick would be better than a knife, anyway, since they're mostly bone. It probably does more damage to hit bones than stab them."

"I think my dad keeps a sledgehammer under the sink in the garage."

"Sledgehammers are heavy."

"I can carry it in a backpack."

We decided we'd all set our alarms, and we would meet up around

4:00. The things should have come and gone by then, the portal should be open, and it would still be early enough that the neighborhood wouldn't be awake yet to see us going into Mrs. Puri's backyard (which people might think was a little weird). Ca and I couldn't take our parents' car this time, of course, since we didn't know how long we'd be gone and they'd notice it missing, but of course it wasn't too far to walk to Ethan's house—the main reason we'd taken the car before was just so we had somewhere safe to sit and watch the house from where the things wouldn't see us.

It's light outside. Sunrise. I can see the light coming through the attic window. That makes me feel better somehow. I'm not sure why. I mean, the sun coming up doesn't change anything. My tongue still fell out, my finger's flesh is gone, and now one ear feels like it's coming loose. Still—I guess it's still just good to see that the sun still comes up, that life goes on. I mean, not for *me*, obviously. But for the world in general. I don't know. There's the symbolism, too. A sunrise is a new beginning. I guess I'm having a new beginning in a way, after all. Right? Ha ha ha. Oh god.

Ca and I left a note for our parents saying we were going to be out that day. We didn't tell them any details; they'd be worried, but we weren't sure what to say, and anyway they'd be less worried than if we just weren't there without leaving a note. We met up at 4:00 at Ethan's house like we planned.

Ethan came out of the house to meet us. He looked pale.

"I went in there yesterday," he said. "I wanted to see."

"Oh, god... you went down there alone?"

He looked at me and nodded. "I had to see what was there. It was... it was bad."

"We told you that," Ca said.

"You didn't tell me the details. You didn't tell me about the *legs*."

"Are you still coming?" Maria asked. I guess she'd kind of taken charge of the expedition. Personally, I was happy to let her.

Ethan nodded again. "I'm still coming. Maybe it's better I did go down there before. Now I know what to expect."

He didn't have to know what to expect, really, since to get to the portal we wouldn't have had to pass by the legs at all. But I didn't point that out.

Anyway, despite Ethan's queasiness, we were all pretty much ready to go. So we went around to the gate to Mrs. Puri's backyard, and then we went through her yard to the cellar.

Nothing had changed since last night, not that we noticed. The

rotting smell was maybe a little stronger, but that could have been just my imagination. I led the way with my flashlight, though Ethan had his out too and used it to look around as we walked while I kept mine pointing straight ahead at our path. I made one wrong turn on the way to the circle—Mrs. Puri’s cellar really *was* a maze—but eventually we got there.

I shone my flashlight at the ground in the circle. Dark purple, like last night.

“So what do we do?” Ethan asked.

“You just press on the ground there and concentrate on going through,” Maria said.

“That’s it?”

“It worked before.”

“So who goes first?” I broke in.

“I’ll go,” Maria answered. “But first, let’s set up the rope.”

She’d brought a thick hemp rope that, she explained, she’d borrowed from her father’s workshop. She tied it firmly around one of the heavy barrels by the mushroom circle; it was still long enough for there to be plenty left, and the other end she tied around her waist. She’d also brought a baseball bat; she had it in her backpack, but it was too big to fit in there completely, and the end stuck out. It hadn’t been her idea to bring a weapon, but I guess she thought it was a good idea after all.

She took a few deep breaths, slowly inhaling and exhaling, I guess to kind of psych herself up. And then she said “Here goes” and she knelt down on the ground again and pressed her hands to the purple earth.

Just like last time, after a few seconds she started sinking into the ground, hands first. This time, though, it didn’t take her by surprise like it did then, and though she still jumped a little when it started, she didn’t struggle. She let herself keep sinking, and soon all her arms were inside, and then her shoulders started. She leaned forward, held her breath—I don’t know if that was necessary, but she did it—and then her head touched the ground, and *it* started sinking. Then all we could see was a torso with legs, and then her torso went through, and it was just her legs left. By this time, with the way she had gone in, her legs were sticking out like she was diving into water. It might have been funny, under different circumstances. As it was, none of us felt like laughing.

Her legs slowly sunk into the ground. Other than that, they didn’t move. I thought she might be dead, suffocated. Ca must have been

thinking the same thing, because touched Maria's shin, and Maria kicked a little, so she was still alive. She was enveloped up the knees now. Then her ankles. And then she was gone.

The rope was still there. The rope went into the ground. Like someone had buried it, put it into a hole and then filled in with dirt around it. Except that the dirt was purple.

The rest of us looked at each other. Ethan sighed. "I guess I'm next."

Ethan didn't kneel down outside the circle and touch the purple dirt with his hands like Maria did. He knelt *inside* the circle, with his bare knees touching the ground. And then he closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, but as he let it out he shivered, and it came out in a staccato series of small exhalations. He inhaled again.

He jerked, and looked down. His knees had sunk slightly into the ground.

He looked up, his eyebrows high on his forehead. He licked his lips, and started breathing quickly. He was staring straight ahead, not at anything in particular.

He kept sinking, slowly. His feet rose, his heels against the back of his shorts; he was going in knees first. But soon the dirt was up to the hem of his cargo shorts, and still rising. Then he was in it up to the waist.

"Do you feel anything?" Ca asked.

"Not yet," Ethan said. He was whispering, but I don't think it was because he didn't want to be overheard—what was there to hear us down there, except the rats and the worms and a one-eared cat? I think he just didn't have enough breath in him to talk louder.

He kept sinking; it was up to his navel now.

"I can feel it," he said when it was up to the base of his ribs.

"Feel what?" I asked

"An open space. My knees are out of the dirt. It opens up on the other side." He was still sinking; it was almost at his shoulders now. He gave a sigh. "My feet are free. I can kick my legs."

Ca stepped forward. "What does it feel like?"

"I don't know. Cold. I mean, not ice cold, but pretty cold. You should have brought a jacket." He smiled when he said this last sentence, but it was a ghastly smile, with no real mirth in it. He was trying to make a joke, to keep all our spirits up, but this wasn't a time when it was possible to joke.

"I don't know what else to say," he said. "I'll know more once I'm in there."

It was up to his shoulders now.

“I guess this is it,” he said as it reached his chin. “I’ll see what’s down there pretty soon.”

Then he shut his mouth as the earth closed over it. His eyes were still looking at us, until they were swallowed up too, then the top of his head, his honey-blond hair, and then that was gone too. He still wasn’t all the way in, though, because he’d raised his arms up, and so they were the last to go. It was the reverse of Maria, whose arms had gone first; all that we saw of Ethan now was his forearms and hands, from the elbow up, slowly sinking, then the dirt was around his wrists, and then the last we saw of him was the fingertip of his right middle finger, just for a moment before there was nothing there but dirt.

Two people had passed through that purple circle now, but the earth still looked undisturbed. Then again, there hadn’t been any signs of disturbance after the skilevaks had passed through the portal in Ethan’s yard, either.

I steeled myself to step forward, but Ca beat me to it, and he let her go ahead. She paused for a moment, as if to decide which way to go—like Maria, arms first, or like Ethan, legs first. She finally kind of did both, getting down on her hands and knees. She was wearing a skirt, so her knees were bare, like Ethan’s in his cargo shorts, so she had both hands and knees touching the ground.

And they both started to sink simultaneously.

It seemed that Ca went quicker than the other two had. I mean, since she was going on horizontal, so to speak, it was going to take less time anyway—I think maybe that’s why she did it the way she did, to get it over with as soon as possible—but even aside from that, she seemed to sink more rapidly into the ground. Maybe it’s that she was in contact with it in more places, and that hurried the process along. Maybe the two who had gone before had, I don’t know, primed the portal somehow, so it would do further transfers more efficiently. Maybe it was just my imagination. I’d already seen two people go through it, so it didn’t seem quite as unreal anymore, and my mind was processing it more quickly.

Actually, that was probably it. I don’t think she was really going through any faster; I think it was just my imagination. Like the face on my ceiling. Imagination can do a lot. We weren’t imagining the skilevaks, though. I wish we were.

Anyway, Ca bowed her head as the dirt rose to meet it—I mean, obviously, it was really Ca lowering to meet the dirt, but that’s sort of the way it looked—and so the last of her to go under, they way she was

doing it, was her back. It reminded me of a submarine diving, or maybe a whale, which was kind of a weird thing to think about right then, but I couldn't help it.

And she was gone.

It was my turn; I was the only one left. I looked at the circle. I pictured for the moment getting through and falling hard on the others beneath the portal, after Ethan had fallen on Maria and Ca on Ethan, all of us lying in a pile, injured and easy prey for the skilevaks. But no; they would have been smart enough to get out from under the portal.

If there *was* an out from under the portal. If it wasn't just a narrow shaft leading straight downward.

We didn't know how far down it went, after all. What if through the portal was just a pit, going down hundreds of feet into the Earth, miles maybe, to its center, or to Hell. I mean, I didn't really believe in Hell, certainly not as a literal place inside the Earth... but at that moment, I couldn't help but think of it. I couldn't help but visualize me, us, the four of us, plummeting down a shaft that opened into a huge cavern filled with everburning fires and slime and tortured souls. Slaving demons, not just red men with pitchforks but things altogether more terrible and unearthly, would fly around us, laughing, as we fell into a lake of boiling brimstone, where we would spend eternity in unending torture.

I mean, I didn't really *believe* that was going to happen. But I couldn't help but picture it.

Anyway, it didn't really *matter* what was down there, if the pit was deep enough. We'd be dead when we hit the bottom.

Then I glanced at the rope. That's right. Maria had the other end of the rope around her waist. So there was only so far she could fall. And Ethan and Ca... well, the portal wasn't *that* big. They'd have to pass near her; they could easily grab onto her as they fell by. Or she onto them.

Would the rope *hold* all three of them, though? How would I tell if the rope was broken?

I shook my head. I couldn't just stand here all night dithering. Not that it had been that long, I don't think, really—actually, this whole thing is taking a lot longer to write about than it actually took to happen. I say the passage through the portal was slow, but that's only relatively speaking. I mean, it was a lot slower than walking or falling, but actually going all the way through took about a minute or two. Even counting the time we spent hesitating in between, it can't really have been more than ten minutes, tops, between Maria starting to go

through the portal, and me. It felt like forever, though.

Anyway, it was my turn. I wanted to go Ethan's way, except without raising my arms like he did. I wanted my arms to go through before my head. I wanted my head to be last. I couldn't go that way, though, because I was wearing jeans, so the actual skin of my knees wouldn't be touching the ground. (I guess we just took it for granted for some reason that direct skin-to-earth contact was necessary. I'm not sure why; we didn't have any real reason to think that.) After considering for a moment, I knelt down in the circle anyway, and pressed my hands to the ground alongside my legs. I figured once my hands started to sink into the ground, it would bring along my legs too even if they hadn't been touching the ground at first.

It worked. I felt the ground seem to give beneath me, and then as my hands sank into it I felt my lower legs start to shift a little and descend as well. It was strange; it was kind of like riding a slow elevator, at first, except that my hands had a headstart so they and my legs were going down at different rates.

Reflexively, I tried pulling my hands up as the earth closed around them. It was too late, of course; they were embedded in the earth by then, and wouldn't come out so easily. They were still buried shallow enough that maybe I could have pulled them out at that point if I'd really tried, but I reminded myself that I *wanted* to go down there, and I forced myself to relax and let myself sink in. Or to let myself sink in, anyway.

I managed to keep myself under control until it was around my waist. Then I felt like panicking. My lower body was surrounded by dirt. I was being *buried alive*.

I told myself there was open space under there. Ethan had said so. I'd get through. I'd be fine. Of course, telling myself that didn't really make me feel better.

I closed my eyes, which was kind of stupid. I mean, it wasn't what I was *seeing* that was the problem. It was what I was *feeling*. Clammy earth pressing in on my whole lower body. My legs encased in the ground, unable to move, except for the slowly downward sink.

Then I remembered what else was in the cellar and I opened my eyes again. If that feral cat or the rats came along, I'd want to see them coming. Not that I could do anything about them, though, with my hands and legs both trapped in the ground.

It was up to my chest before finally I felt the tips of my fingers come free of the dirt. The lower surfaces of my legs followed, and in another few inches I could straighten my legs.

Then I felt something touch my lower leg.

I kicked out, hard, and whatever it was went away. There was something down there. There was something down there *waiting for me*.

Then I felt dumb; of course there was something down there. Ca, and Ethan, and Maria. I'd probably just kicked one of them. I hoped I hadn't hurt them too badly.

I *hoped* it was one of them.

Soon the earth was up to my neck, and then it slowly started closing around my head. This was the worst part. I couldn't see, I couldn't *breathe*... but at the rate it was going, I'd be through before I suffocated. Most of my body was in the empty space now, but my feet still weren't touching the ground. As my head was swallowed by the earth, I could feel the part of my body hanging free down below shivering. I wanted to be through, I wanted my head free of the ground so I could breathe again, but at the same time I dreaded what I'd see there.

Enough for now. More in the next post.

Posted 7:42 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

I can feel something loose, underneath my shirt. I think it's my skin. The skin of my torso, I mean. Well, that and I guess probably muscle and subcutaneous fat and stuff. I can feel it sort of sitting there, not a part of me anymore, just held in place by my shirt. I'm pretty sure if I took my shirt off now, a big slab of flesh would just slip off and fall on the ground. Maybe *all* my flesh. No, I don't think so. My back is still there. Just my right front. If I lift my shirt right now, most of the front of the right side of my torso will just slough off and slide onto the ground.

I'm not going to do that, though. I need to finish writing this. I'll have time to watch my flesh fall off later.

It wasn't a sewer. Where the portal led, I mean. We weren't in a sewer. Or any other sort of tunnel that should have been there, under the town. We were in a tunnel with walls that at first looked like they were made of some mixture of dirt and mucus. They weren't, though. It was all one substance.

I didn't have far to fall, when my head came free of the ground above. The passage was only about six feet high, maybe a little more but I'm pretty sure less than seven. Maria had untied the rope from her waist, but it was still there, dangling from the purple spot in the ceiling. So we'd be able to climb back out, after we were done here. Whatever it was we were going to do.

Ca and Ethan and Maria were all there, and they all looked fine. Ethan was kind of rubbing his side like he was hurt—I think he was the one I'd accidentally kicked, but I didn't ask about it and he didn't say anything. Besides that, they all looked okay. So far so good.

I'd brought a flashlight, and Ethan had said he was going to bring one too, but as it turns out we didn't need them. There was light in the passageway. It wasn't bright, but it was bright enough. It came from these glowing spots on the walls, kind of scattered at random. They reminded me of eyes. They weren't eyes, of course, but that's what they reminded me of. They were all slightly different colors, and they gave everything in the passage some kind of unhealthy tint, red or yellow or green depending on which ones you were nearest. But anyway, I realized it was a good thing we didn't need the flashlights, because the skilevaks would have seen the light a long way away and seen us coming.

Not that it would have made any difference in the long run, I guess.

The passageway just continued on in two directions. The light was

too dim to see very far, but as far as we could see there was no change either way, except that one way it went slightly up and the other way it went slightly down. We decided to go up; that was the most likely to lead somewhere familiar, and maybe it would let us find another way in here so if we had to come here again we wouldn't have to use the portal. We weren't that far underground; the passage couldn't go up very far. Down, though, there was no telling how far it would go.

So we started along the passage. There wasn't much else we could do. It did split after a while, left and right. The left hand passage looked like it went downward at a slight angle, and the right passage looked level, so we went right.

Ethan took his notepad and pencil out of his pocket; I wasn't sure what he was doing at first—sometimes he would just write random things in his notebook, ideas he'd just had and wanted to remember—but then I realized he was trying to draw a map. Which was a good idea. I mean, the last thing we would want would be to get lost in here.

The further we went along the passage, the more I got the feeling the walls were somehow *alive*. I don't know if it was any one thing that gave that impression. I mean, I guess the most obvious thing was the places we saw where the wall seemed to be pulsing. And where there kind of seemed to be worms embedded in it, sticking out and wriggling. Not really worms, because they seemed like part of the wall. More like villi. That's something we just learned about last week in biology. Villi are like these things that stick out of the insides of your intestines. I didn't want to think about that right now, though, because it wasn't reassuring to think we were inside something like a giant intestine. Besides, after what we'd seen in the cellar, I didn't really want to think about intestines at all, let alone being inside one.

So yeah. Those were maybe the more obvious things that made the tunnels seem alive, but there were other things, too. Just their texture, their shape—they weren't perfectly round and smooth; they were all irregular with lots of protrusions and jags and alcoves and cavities. Which was good, because it meant we'd have plenty of places to hide if we saw any of those skeleton things coming. But it also furthered the impression that the tunnels were living things.

Of course, we didn't see all of that right at the entrance. I'm getting a little ahead of things again.

Oh, also, the inside of the tunnels smelled like nutmeg. Of course they did. Not *just* nutmeg; there was kind of a stale sweat smell too—I mean, it obviously wasn't really sweat, because there was nothing down there sweating except for maybe us, but that was what it smelled

like. But above the other smells, there was the smell of nutmeg. The smell of the skilevaks.

I don't want to give the impression that this was just a simple network of uniform tunnels, no. I mean, I guess we started in a single tunnel, but all of this was much more complicated than that. There were tunnels that intersected at weird angles, and open spaces, and pits and ledges and weird irregular chambers. We tried the best we could to keep going *up*, though sometimes that wasn't an option.

We came to a place where there was kind of a hole in the wall of the tunnel we were in where it overlooked another, broader tunnel below. I glanced down there as we passed, and I saw one of them. One of the skeleton things.

I couldn't help but stop and look. This was the first really clear look we'd gotten at one of them. It was still about maybe ten feet below us, and the light in the tunnels was dim and discolored, but it was still a lot clearer view than we'd gotten from the webcams, or of the things climbing the wall in the distance at night. This thing was wearing bracelets on its arms and a kind of a porkpie hat, but it wasn't wearing anything on its torso, and I could see all the eyes inside there. I could see its face-bat, the wings in front of its orbits, extending out past the sides of its heads. But I saw something else I hadn't seen on the things that came to Ethan's house. This one was cradling something in its arms. Something small, transparent, and vaguely humanoid, like the ghost of a baby. I couldn't read emotions on the thing's fleshless face, but from the cock of its head and the way it gently swung the ghost back and forth it seemed like the thing really cared for it, doted on it, like it was treating the little ghost like it *was* a baby.

I stood there staring for a while. I guess the others did too; at least, none of them tried to pull me away. The thing wasn't looking at us, and if it did start to raise its head we ought to have time to get away from the hole so it didn't spot us. But I wanted to see what these things were. I wanted to see what we were up against.

For a long while the thing just kept sitting there, leaning up against the passage wall, gently rocking its ghost baby. And soon I realized there was sound, too, some sort of weird crooning. Not like the sounds that the things had been making in Ethan's room—well, there were some similarities, but it wasn't the same. That had seemed like some sort of ritualistic, chanting canticle. This was softer, more sentimental. It was like the thing was singing its ghost baby its version of a lullaby.

I keep calling what it had in its arms a ghost baby, because that's

kind of what it looked like, and at first it was kind of what I assumed it was. The ghost of a dead baby. I wish that *was* what it was. At the time, I thought nothing could be worse, nothing could be sadder, nothing more evil to harvest, than the ghost of a dead baby. I was wrong. But I guess I'll keep calling it a ghost baby, even though technically that's not exactly what it is. I just wanted to make it clear it wasn't literally the ghost of a baby. It turned out in the end it was something much more horrible.

Anyway, the thing stopped rocking the ghost baby, and it lifted one hand and slowly stroked its head. And then it got up. Not onto its hands—for the first time we got a good look at what these things' legs really were.

It was the eyes. The eyes that were inside its ribcage. When the thing decided to rise up, the eyes suddenly flowed down and out of its torso, and formed into legs, legs just made of ribbons of disconnected eyes. Now the thing was fully standing, and it started to move away, to walk on those impossible eye-legs, its ghost baby still cradled lovingly in its arms.

Before it was out of our field of view, though, the thing stopped. And it started turning toward us.

I knew we had to get out of sight, to get away from the hole where it couldn't spot us, but I couldn't move. I was still looking at its eye-legs. I couldn't tear my gaze away from them.

"Come on!" I heard Maria hiss, and she pulled me away from the hole. I fell on the ground, but I was away from the thing's view.

"What were you doing?" Maria whispered. "It almost saw us!"

"I'm sorry... I couldn't take my eyes off its... eyes. Those legs. I just couldn't stop looking at them."

"Well, it almost looked at *us*!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"It was the same for me," Ethan admitted; he and Ca were on the opposite side of the hole, and from the looks of things Ca must have pulled him away just like Maria had pulled me. "I couldn't look away."

"It's a good thing we women were around to save you men," Ca said, half-jokingly.

Maria was frowning. "Let's keep going," she said, and led the way further down the passage.

So we did. We kept going. Ethan kept mapping our way, so we wouldn't get lost (I hoped), and we kept going more or less upward. A few times we saw more of the skeleton things, and had to duck out of sight, but we managed to avoid them. A couple of the others we saw

also had ghost babies, so that wasn't just one isolated thing. Actually, I think we more of them with ghost babies than without; maybe the ones that were sent to Ethan were sent specifically because they didn't have ghost babies yet.

Here down in the tunnels, the things didn't pull themselves by their arms, but strode along on their eye-legs. I was careful not to look at those.

Anyway, we managed to avoid being seen by any of the skeleton things, but Maria's frown deepened as we continued. I was pretty sure I knew what was bothering her, but Ca was the first to actually say it.

"Shouldn't we be at the surface by now?"

"Was there a hill or something nearby?" Ethan asked tentatively, but I'm pretty sure he knew the answer. There wasn't. We'd gone up far enough that we should have reached the surface. It didn't make any sense that we hadn't.

"Let's just keep going," Maria said. "We'll find something eventually."

The tunnel itself stayed pretty much the same as we went up there. It still was irregular, twisting, yielding; it still gave the impression of a living thing.

The tunnels *are* living, by the way. I mean, we didn't know that at the time, but I know now. I know all about them, and where they came from, and what they are. If I have time, I'll put in the explanation later. Right now it's more important to get through the story, and tell what the skilevaks are really up to. I mean, the origin of the tunnels is weird and creepy and all, but it's not really that important. The ghost babies are much more important. They're the important part. But I'll get to them.

At one point as we passed an alcove Ca stopped in her tracks. I didn't notice until Ethan put a hand on my shoulder and, when I looked back at him, motioned toward her.

Ca was looking at a pocket in the side of the tunnel, where the tunnel wall made kind of a pouch. I went over to see what she was looking at.

It was a mummy. I mean, not an Egyptian mummy, all bandaged and white; this was a naked mummy, withered and dried out but without any bandages or clothing. Aside from the desiccation, or I guess because of it, it was perfectly preserved. It was a girl, about our age, who might have been Native American, or maybe Hispanic like Maria, I'm not sure. Not that she wasn't well preserved enough; I just wasn't sure I could tell the difference. She wasn't moving. She wasn't alive, or undead, or whatever. It was just a dead mummy. But still,

even aside from the weirdness of the tunnels in general, this wasn't something I'd expected to see here.

"Come on," said Maria, and we left the mummy and followed her. There was nothing to be done about the mummy, anyway. We didn't know why it was there, but it didn't seem that important.

Maria was leading the way now, and I think all the rest of us were perfectly okay with that. None of the rest of us really knew what we were doing. We knew she didn't really know what she was doing, either, but it was easier not to think of that. She carried the baseball bat in her hand now. I guess she thought she might need it.

"Do we know what we're looking for?" Ethan asked.

"No," Maria said, "but we'll know it when we find it." I hoped she was as confident as she sounded. I was pretty sure she wasn't.

I'm not sure how long we were down there. Maybe an hour or two, maybe three. We were going really slow; we didn't want to be taken by surprise. And we were looking around carefully. But anyway, we gradually made our way through the weird, impossible tunnels.

Then we came to another hole in the tunnel wall, but this was kind of the opposite way as the one where we'd seen the first skeleton thing. There we could look down through the hole into a tunnel below us; this time the hole was high in the wall, and we could see a tunnel above us. I wondered for a moment whether we *were* actually in the place where the first skeleton thing had been, whether the tunnels wrapped around and somehow by going up we ended up below where we started. But I didn't have much time to think about it, because there were other things to worry about.

Two of the skeleton things stood up there. Stood, on their eye-legs. They both had ghost babies, and they seemed to be talking to each other, though in a low, murmuring tone we could only hear as an indistinct susurrus. I was careful not to look at the legs, after my experience last time, but unfortunately Maria didn't notice them in time, or didn't recognize the danger, and she stopped and stared right at them.

I didn't want to say her name, because the skeleton-things would hear us, but I tried to pull her away. She moved a little, but her gaze stayed fixed on the eye-legs. I grabbed her arm and pulled her harder, but that might have been a bit of a mistake. When I jerked her arm, she dropped her baseball bat.

The floor wasn't as hard as stone or concrete, and the thump that the bat made when it hit the ground wasn't that loud. But it was loud enough. Both the skeleton things in the passage above turned in our

direction.

They pointed and opened their mouths and made kind of a hissing noise. It really reminded me for a moment of the end of—I think it was *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Where that guy points and screams. I've never seen the movie, but I've seen that clip on YouTube; I think it's become kind of a meme. But anyway, it wasn't really like that, because in the movie I think the whole point was that the guy seemed normal until he started pointing and making that sound, and here, yeah, it wasn't like we weren't already scared of the skeleton-things. So, yeah, not the same thing, but I guess the sound they made was kind of similar.

I pulled Maria away; she didn't really resist, but she didn't help, either. She was still looking at the skilevaks' eye-legs. I was more concerned with their faces. But then something happened that stopped me in my tracks, too—at least for a moment, before I became more frantic than ever.

The face-bat of one of the skeleton-things *detached*. It just came off the thing's face and started flying free, just a disembodied pair of wings with eyes.

I'd assumed till then, I guess, that underneath the face-bats the things just had normal skulls, but they didn't. What had been hidden by the face-bat was... well, it was like one giant cyclopean socket, only not exactly; it wasn't round like an eye. It didn't make any sense, actually. It was some weird bone shape that didn't belong on a skull, didn't belong on anything. I don't know if I can describe it, and I guess it's probably best that I don't try.

I shouldn't have been paying attention to the skilevak's batless face anyway. What I *should* have been paying attention to was the face-bat.

More in the next post.

Posted 9:12 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

I went ahead and unwrapped all my fingers. Took the toilet paper off, I mean. Well, not just the toilet paper. It was getting a little hard to type with it on; they all seemed a little squishy and awkward. So I took the toilet paper off to see if they were all like my right index finger had been. Some of them were; they were just bare bone, though bare bone I could still feel with. Most of them still had some flesh on them, though; it was softening and putrefying, but it hadn't fallen off yet. So I just took it off. I figured I might as well. I thought it might hurt, but it didn't. Not even a little, like picking a scab or peeling a sunburn. It just felt... I don't know, it's hard to describe. I guess it felt like I was taking off gloves, but no, not really. It felt like there was dried glue covering my skin, and I was peeling it off. Except instead of peeling glue off my skin, I was peeling skin off my bones.

So anyway, all my fingers are bones now. Now I don't have to worry about them oozing any liquids onto the keyboard, and the flesh won't get in the way when I type.

I have to get back to the story. The face-bat. I was staring at the skilevak's horrible batless face, but only for a moment. I mean, it was awful to look at, but we had more pressing concerns. I pulled at Maria again. I was able to slowly get her to come along, though she was still looking at the eye-legs.

But I hadn't been watching the face-bat.

The face-bat was flying after us, much quicker than I was able to drag Maria along. And in the weird lighting of the tunnels I didn't see it until just before it attached to her face.

She screamed. I think I may have screamed too.

That at least broke her free from the influence of the eye-legs, and she followed along more than willingly now as we ran from the skeleton things. I admit I hadn't really been paying much attention to Ethan and Ca during all that—it had seemed to be Maria who was in the most immediate danger—but fortunately they had apparently not been hypnotized or whatever by the eye-legs like she had, or if one of them had the other one had pulled them free, and they were following along with us.

But that shrieking sound the skilevaks in the upper passage had made had apparently alerted its fellows. We saw skeleton things everywhere now, coming out of crossways, trying to block our path. We just kept running, dodging down side passages and doing our best to evade them. Before, we'd seen the skeleton things here and there,

but it never seemed to hard to keep out of their sight; now that they were alerted, they seemed to be everywhere.

We didn't know where we were going now. Ethan couldn't keep mapping while we were running. I guess he'd put the notepad and the pencil back in his pocket at some point. Maria tried to pull the bat off her face. I tried to guide her at first, but I stopped when it became clear she didn't need it, that she could see where she was going even with the bat over her eyes. I knew that should have worried me, but with the skeleton things chasing us we had enough to worry about.

We passed another mummy at one point. This one was a boy with pale blond hair. Like the first mummy we'd passed, it was nude and perfectly preserved. But of course we didn't stop for a closer look.

It was about then that I realized we hadn't seen any skeleton things for a while. Maybe we'd managed to get away from them somehow. But we were still in their tunnels, and we were now hopelessly lost. We kept running. We wanted to get as far as possible. We wanted to find a way out.

As usual, it was Ca who first spotted it. A purple spot in the side of the tunnel. We had no idea where it led, of course, but it didn't matter, as long as it led out of the tunnels. Ca went first, since she had seen it. I guess it was probably easier to go through a sideways portal than to sink down into one on the ground, but it was still slow, and it was agonizing waiting for her to finish passing through, knowing that the skeleton things could be upon us at any moment. She was through soon, though, and Maria went next. The bat was still on her face; we'd worry about that after we got away.

Ethan told me to go ahead; I didn't know why, but I didn't want to be left in the tunnels any longer than I had to. I feel bad about that now. Even if he told me to go ahead of him, I shouldn't have been so eager to take him up on it. But I did, and I pressed my hands against the tunnel wall.

For a second, nothing. Then it seemed to start to give. It was like pushing through clay; my hands gradually sunk into the purple wall. I slowly made my way forward, dreading when it came to my face and I'd have my head surrounded by earth, but also kind of looking forward to it because it would mean I'd be out of the tunnels. Anyway, eventually I got through.

I'm not sure where I expected us to end up, going through a horizontal portal. In someone else's basement, maybe. Where we were, though, was in a cave. That made sense. I didn't know any caves near the town, but there was a lot of forest outside town I'd never

really explored; there was no reason there couldn't be caves there. I could see light coming from the cave entrance, but I didn't go out yet; I was waiting with Ca and Maria for Ethan to come through.

The cave was full of mushrooms, of course. I mean, those specific mushrooms, the thistle ones. They formed a circle around the purple spot on the wall.

It seemed like way too much time had passed, and I was sure the skeleton things had gotten him, and hated myself for leaving him behind, even though it's not like I wanted them to catch me instead. But I think, again, it was my mind playing tricks on me, making the time seem longer than it actually was. Anyway, we saw his fingers start to poke through the stone of the cave wall. The rest of him followed, and he was soon through, and he collapsed on the cave floor. I didn't blame him. After what we'd just been through, I felt like collapsing too.

He recovered quickly, though, and stood up. "Is everyone okay?"

"I think so," I said. "At least we're away from those things."

"Where are we?"

"In a cave, I guess."

"Yeah, but where?"

"I don't know. We haven't gone outside yet."

"Well, let's go," said Maria, and started toward the entrance.

"Wait," Ca called after her. "The mushrooms. Should we pull them out?"

"What? Why?"

"To close the portal. So they can't follow us."

"But that would close off our way back, too," Ethan said.

"Do we really *want* to go back that way?"

"No, but still... I'd rather leave our options open."

"But we're also leaving *their* options open."

"When we picked the mushrooms in Ethan's yard, they somehow managed to put more in Mrs. Puri's basement," Maria pointed out.

"Besides, the first one Ethan saw was before the mushrooms were there. So they must have *some* way of leaving the tunnels where there aren't mushrooms, even if maybe it's not as easy for them."

"Maria," I said. "That thing's still on your face."

It was. The face-bat was still there, in front of Maria's eyes. It had attached itself with its own eyes facing outward, in the same orientation as it had been on the face of the skilevak.

Maria's hand went to her face, and she touched a wing. "Shit. I forgot about that."

“You *forgot* about it? Can’t you feel it?”

“I can now, when I’m thinking about it.”

“Wait,” Ethan said. “Can you *see*? It’s in front of your eyes.”

“I can... I can see okay,” Maria said, but even as she said it she seemed to realize how wrong that was.

“We’ve got to get that thing off you,” Ca said.

Maria grabbed the wings and pulled, but nothing happened. “It’s really stuck on there.”

Whoops. I guess I didn’t even need to pull my shirt up. There goes a bit of flesh, out from under my shirt and onto the ground. It’s not as big as I expected.

Ca and I came up to Maria to help. We each took a wing and pulled, hard. Maria screamed, and batted our hands away.

“It’s no good; it’s like it’s attached,” she said when she had caught her breath. “I felt like you were pulling my face off.”

Ethan took a closer look, moving a wing to look underneath it. “Is it biting into you, or...”

“I don’t know. I just know it’s not coming off. Look. We’ll deal with it later. We have to get away from here; if they do follow us through we don’t want to be sitting right outside the portal.”

She went toward the cave entrance, and the rest of us followed. And we all stopped when we saw what was outside.

The cave was on a tall hill, overlooking some kind of field or moor, or at least what I associate with the word “moor”, though I’d never really seen one before. Below was nothing more than reedy wetland with the occasionally rocky hill poking out, and here and there a scraggly tree. The only manmade structure I could see was some big tumbledown pile some distance away that looked clearly deserted.

There was nothing wrong with the landscape itself, nothing that seemed strange or supernatural aside from the portal in the cave. What was wrong was that it didn’t make sense for this landscape to be here. I knew there was nothing like this anywhere near where we lived, and while we’d gone some way through the tunnels, we hadn’t gone *that* far. We should still be in the city limits, or not far outside them. We shouldn’t be near anything like *this*.

“Is that a castle?” Ethan said.

It kind of looked like it was, the structure I’d seen. A ruined castle, but a castle. Even in its heyday, it never would have been a really big castle, nothing like the fancy castles you see in pictures. But even though it was now not much more than a pile of rocks, I could see where the towers had been, and the keep, and even some traces of an

outer wall.

“Where the hell are we?” Ca asked, but none of us knew.

Maria started walking down the hill.

“Where are you going?” I called after her.

“Away from here.”

Ethan went after Maria, and Ca and I finally followed.

“I’m going to the castle,” she said. “At least it’ll give us some shelter while we figure out where we are and what to do next.”

It wasn’t easy going. The hill was steep and stony and uneven, and several times my feet would slide out from under me and I’d have to catch myself as best I could. It wasn’t just me with that problem, though; it happened to all of us. When we got to the bottom of the hill, things weren’t much better; the moor was an expanse of squelchy mud and waist-high water. We tried to find firm ground—Maria broke off one of the tallest of the reeds we passed and used it to poke ahead of us to see where the going was best—but even so we had to wade in places, and we all got covered in mud up to our knees or higher.

“I still don’t understand where we are,” Ca said as we made our way across the moor

“I guess maybe when we go through the tunnels we cover more ground outside than inside.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Maybe those tunnels are just like warped space or something. Or maybe they’re in some kind of parallel dimension.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know. But *this* doesn’t make any sense. We can’t have gotten here normally.”

“Are we even still on Earth?” I asked. I knew as soon as I said it that it was a stupid question. I didn’t recognize this place, but the plants here looked ordinary enough. Of course we were still on Earth.

None of the others answered, though. Maybe they had their doubts too. We kept slogging through the mire toward the castle.

“Why would those skeleton things even have a portal to here?” Ca asked. “Why would they need to come here?”

“Who knows?” Maria said. “We don’t know anything about them. Maybe there’s something they need from here. Maybe it’s a vacation spot.”

“The sun’s going down,” Ethan said. It was, of course; the eastern horizon was turning shades of pink and purple that would have been beautiful if the purple hadn’t made me think of the skeleton things and their portals.

“What?” Ca said. “We weren’t in the tunnels nearly that long.” That was true, too. Our progress through the tunnels had been slow before the things saw us, since we were trying to be quiet and careful and Ethan was mapping our way, but it hadn’t been *that* slow. We couldn’t have been in there more than a couple of hours. And as sluggish as our progress had been down the hill and across the moor, that had so far taken maybe an hour at most.

“Maybe the tunnels warp time too,” I suggested.

“Or maybe we’re in a different time zone,” Maria said. “Maybe the tunnels took us all the way to Europe, or something.”

That explanation seemed better than mine, though neither was really comforting.

Anyway, it was dark by the time we made it to the castle, but here on the open moor there was enough moonlight to see by. The castle itself was on an elevated mound that was clear of the water level and relatively dry. Seeing it up close didn’t give much different an impression from what we saw from far away. It was a ruin, probably abandoned for hundreds of years. There was no sign that anyone else had been here for a very long time.

But it wasn’t *all* collapsed. There were a couple of intact rooms. Ca even found stairs leading down into the mound, though I’d had enough of cellars, and, based on the fact that nobody else seemed to want to go down there either, I think everyone else agreed.

So we huddled in one of the cold stone rooms that still stood in that ancient castle, and we tried to decide what to do next.

More in the next post.

Posted 10:20 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

For a long while all we did was sit there and talk. We talked about school, about our families, about everything that came to mind. We opened up to each other like we never had before. There was nothing else to do there, and we didn't know how much longer we'd be alive anyway.

Maria told us how she got a thrill from breaking the law, in little ways that nobody would ever find out about. Not like shoplifting or vandalism, but walking on the grass when there were signs saying not to, going out of her way to touch things she wasn't supposed to touch. It was something I never would have suspected about her. Ethan told us he thought he might be gay. He guessed deep down he was pretty sure he was, but it was hard to admit it to himself. He wanted to have kids someday, so he wanted to suppress it, part of him thought he could someday marry and have a family without telling his wife about how he really felt, but he didn't think he could actually do that; it wouldn't be fair to his hypothetical wife. Ca told us she sometimes fantasized about having mind control powers, and using them to make other people do totally perverted things. She said that if she ever did have mind control powers, she probably wouldn't actually use them for that. But it was fun to fantasize. I told the others that I sometimes felt like I was two people, like there was another me in the back of my mind. I was worried sometimes that I was crazy, that maybe I was developing multiple personalities or something. But other times I thought that maybe this was just how people normally felt, maybe everyone just had different parts of their mind doing different things and I was just being ridiculous.

None of us judged the others. By now we were too far in this for that.

Sorry if it seems like I'm just skipping over this too briefly; I've written out everyone's full dialogue before, and it might seem like this is a time that I really ought to write down exactly what everyone was saying. I do remember everyone's exact words—I remember everything now, crystal clear. But I'm trying to condense down a lot of conversation into a little space; we just talked like that for probably an hour or two. Besides, honestly, this part of the conversation isn't really too important for the overall story, and I have to get the overall story down. I have to tell people what happened, and especially tell everyone about the ghost babies, so I don't have much time to waste on fully transcribing long conversations that in the long run weren't really

all that relevant.

At least I don't get hungry now, or thirsty, or tired. So I can just sit here and write this all down, and I don't have to take any breaks.

Every once in a while Maria tried to pull the bat off her face. It still didn't come off, and I think by then she didn't really expect it to. It was weird for her to just be sitting there with this bat on her face, but then I mean this whole thing had been weird; I don't know if it was that much weirder than anything else we'd been through. There was one point when she cried out; she felt like it was digging into her face, or that something was *rearranging* her face, behind the face-bat. (The latter turned out to be closer to the truth, of course.) Then she did really struggle again to get the face-bat off. But it still wouldn't come off, and the pain of trying to pull it off was worse than whatever it was doing to her face, so after a while she gave in. Whatever it was doing to her face, she said, the damage had been done by then. She might as well just wait till the face-bat thing finally had whatever it was it wanted and dropped off.

I don't want to give the impression we were just planning on sitting there in the castle talking forever, and weren't trying to come up with any sort of plan. We had a plan, sort of, or at least we had a vague idea what we were going to do. It was night now, so we'd spend the night there, get some rest, and then in the morning we'd set off and try to find some civilization, find out where we were. Once we knew that, we'd worry about how to get home. Or *if* we should get home, if the things were still there waiting for us. Finding civilization and finding out where we were first.

Ca brought up the possibility that maybe the tunnels had taken us not just through space, but through time—not by hours, but by years. Maybe we were centuries in the past, before this land, wherever it was, was fully settled. Or maybe centuries in the future, after our current cities were all ruined.

None of us took that very seriously, but I don't know if it was really because we thought it was that dumb an idea, or just because we didn't want to let ourselves take it too seriously. Anyway, she soon dropped it.

Since we'd have the foresight to bring food and water, we weren't going to go hungry or thirsty that night, at least. It was cold, and we didn't have blankets, but we could live with that, especially if we all huddled together for warmth. We thought we'd get at least one good night's rest before setting off in the morning.

It wasn't easy to sleep with all we'd been through, though,

especially since we'd only been up for a few hours and if we were in a different time zone it was probably still late morning where we came from, so despite all our exertion we weren't all that tired. So we lay there and tried to rest.

At one point Maria got up and went outside the castle, or at least outside the part that still had a roof. I hesitated, but then I followed her out.

She was just standing there, looking up at the stars.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"I was just checking."

"Checking what?"

"There's Cassiopeia. And there's Orion. I don't know the constellations as well as I wish I did, but those two I recognize."

"You're looking at the stars?"

"Oh, and there's the Big Dipper. Which means the Little Dipper should be right... there. There it is."

I looked where she was pointing. I'd never really been great at astronomy, but I know more or less what the Little Dipper was supposed to look like, and though I didn't see it right away after a while I think I made it out.

"So we're on Earth," she said.

"What?"

"We are on Earth. Or another planet with the same constellations, but that doesn't seem likely."

"That's why you came out here to look at the stars? To make sure we were on Earth?"

"I never really thought we weren't. But I thought this was one way we could find out for sure."

I didn't have anything to say to that, so I just looked up at the stars, trying to see any I recognized. Like I said, though, I was never very good at constellations. So I tried sort of seeing my own patterns in the stars and making up my own. But the first pattern I saw was one that reminded me of the face in my ceiling as a kid, so I stopped doing that.

"Actually, we can narrow it down further," Maria said. "We know we're in the northern hemisphere. I think you can see Orion from anywhere on Earth, but not Cassiopeia, and definitely not the Little Dipper."

"There are a lot of stars," I said. It was a dumb thing to say, but it just came out.

"Yeah. That's one advantage of being far from the cities, I guess. You can see a lot of the dim stars you can't see from there. The sky

looks so *full* here. Look. The Milky Way's so clear, there, smeared across the sky."

We stayed out there a while, looking at the stars. Ethan came out after some time to see what was going on, and then Ca followed. But as Maria was pointing out the Pleiades, which she'd just remembered how to find, Ca sniffed.

"Do you smell something?"

I hadn't noticed it before, but now that she pointed it out there *was* something. A sort of sweetish smell. Like something rotting.

Ethan and Maria were sniffing around now, too, trying to locate the source of the smell, but of course it was Maria who found it.

"Oh my god. I think it's me."

"What do you mean you think it's you?" Ca said.

Maria had her arm up to her nose. She lowered it and turned to me. "Jesse... do you still have that flashlight?"

I handed the flashlight to her, and she shone it on her arm. It was livid, even greenish in places, and looked like there was mold growing on it in places. "Oh my god."

She looked at her other arm, pulled up her shirt and looked at her stomach. Her eyes were wide, the whites standing out brightly against her tan skin.

"What's wrong with you?" Ca asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I caught something from the bog-water."

"It looks like you're *rotting!*"

"I know."

"How do you feel?" Ethan asked.

"I *feel* okay. But... my god. My skin."

"We've got to get you to a doctor."

"We're not getting through the bog at night. Let's go back in the castle."

None of us felt much like looking at the stars after that, so we all went back in. Despite the cold, Maria sat apart from us; whatever it was that she had, if it was contagious she didn't want any of the rest of us catching it. As much as we felt bad for her sitting by herself, none of us really objected too much; the smell was getting worse, so it was kind of for the best that she didn't sit too close.

We kept talking, trying to keep our spirits up, but we couldn't really take our minds off Maria, and what was going on with her. She was getting worse. Not just the smell; there was some kind of secretion running down her face now, and there were crevices opening in her

arms. It was like she was going through some kind of slow-motion putrefaction while she was still alive.

Ethan stood up. “We *have* to get you to a doctor as soon as we can. We can’t wait around till morning.”

“We can’t go through the bog in the darkness.”

“Come on.” He reached out his hand to help her up. I don’t think he thought about the possible contagion right then. But she did, and after looking at him she got to her feet, with some difficulty, and staggered out of the castle.

So Ethan and I got out our flashlights, and we started off through the moor. We headed south (that’s the direction Maria said it was, based on the fact we were going away from the North Star), mostly just because from what we could see from the castle the moor seemed to maybe have it end closer in that direction.

Maria leaned on my shoulder as we went. She didn’t want to at first, because she didn’t want me to catch whatever it was she had, but I insisted, and when her legs started stiffening she finally gave in so she wouldn’t slow us down. The stench was getting pretty bad, though. It reminded me of the smell in the cellar. The same rotting meat smell, and, I realized, the same hint of nutmeg.

It wasn’t just the smell. Parts of her hair fell off. Even bits of skin. It was pretty clear she didn’t have long left, but nobody pointed it out. We just tried to keep going, hoping we could make it in time.

“I can see the edge of the bog,” Ethan said, when we’d been trudging through it for maybe an hour. He affected a cheerful tone, but I could hear the strain. “We’re getting through.”

“It’s no good,” Maria said. “The doctors won’t be able to do anything.”

“If it’s some sort of infection, they’ll have antibiotics. They can stop it. Besides, if they know the area, they’ll know what’s in the water, so they’ll know what it is they have to cure.”

“It’s not the water. It’s this.” She raised a hand and pointed up at the face-bat. “It’s turning me into one of them.”

We all stopped.

“You don’t know that,” Ca said.

“I do know that. I didn’t before, but I know it now. I know it because it’s affecting my mind too. I’m starting to think like they do. I’m starting to know what they know.”

There was silence then, except for the cries of some waterbirds in the distance, the calls of some hidden frogs, and the buzzing of some flies and midges that were taking an interest in Maria’s putrescent flesh.

“I,” Ethan started to say, but didn’t know what to follow it with.

“Take me back to the castle,” Maria said, and then when no one moved immediately she repeated it more forcefully. “Take me back to the castle!”

It got worse as we headed back. Larger pieces starting falling off of her. An ear dropped off partway there. By the time we made it back to the mound that the castle was built on, bone was showing in her arm and her ribs.

I set her down against the wall. She couldn’t move her legs on her own by now, or barely. She looked up at me, and what made it worse was that it wasn’t *her* eyes looking at me, but the face-bat’s, which seemed to have become a permanent part of her face.

“They’re called skilevaks,” she said. Her voice now was only a hoarse croak.

“What?”

“Skilevaks. It’s what they’re called. I know about them now. I know all about them. I know because I’m becoming one of them.”

“That’s crazy,” Ca said, but Maria shook her head, vigorously enough that tiny bits of skin flew off of it.

“It’s true. I *know* it now. I know what they are, and I know what they want.”

“What do they want?” Ethan asked.

Maria turned her head toward him. “They want *you*.”

“Me? What do they want to do to me?”

She twitched, and trembled, and lowered her head. “It’s better you don’t know.”

“What? Do they want to kill me?”

She looked up at him again. “Yes.”

That left him nonplussed. I don’t think he expected an answer so blunt.

“But if all they want is to kill me, why were they doing all that weird singing thing? If they could come into my room any time they wanted, why didn’t they just snap my neck?”

She shook her head, more slowly this time. “I didn’t say *all* they wanted was to kill you.”

“There’s got to be something we can do,” I said. “There’s got to be a cure.”

“For me?” She shook her head again. “There’s no cure. You have to leave me.”

“We can’t just *leave* you here.”

“*I’m turning into one of them.*” There was a sickening slurpy sound

as she spoke, as a part of her shoulder slid off underneath her shirt and fell to the ground. “It’s not done yet. I’m starting to get their knowledge, but I’m still thinking like myself. But soon I’m going to start wanting what they want. I’m going to be as much a danger as the rest of them. You have to leave me here.”

“We can’t *leave* you here,” I said again.

“Go back the way you came. Through the tunnels. It’s been long enough they won’t be searching for you there now. You can get back home that way.”

“But we don’t know the way back,” Ethan objected.

She turned toward him—when she turned her head now, it looked unnatural, like it wasn’t really her, like there was a bad puppeteer turning her head on a string. She held out a hand. Ethan looked at it, confused, until she croaked out two more words.

“Your notepad.”

Ethan hesitated, then reached into the pocket of his cargo shorts and took his notepad out. He put it into Maria’s hand, and then, when she still left her hand out there and kept looking at him expectantly, he put his pencil in her hand too. She brought her hand back in then, and holding the notepad with one hand and her pencil with the other she started to draw.

I watched as she drew. At first it looked like just a network of lines, but then I saw it was a map, a map of the tunnels. It was too big for one page of the notebook, so she spread it across multiple pages, numbering the connections between pages to show which joined up with which. The tunnels crossed over and under each other in places, and it got a little confusing, but I was pretty sure we could follow it if we had to.

She did a careful job drawing, and it took a lot of time. She was falling apart as she drew; by the time she was done the flesh had dropped off her chin, leaving just the bone of her mandible, and her remaining ear had fallen off like the first one had earlier. But finally she was done, and she handed the notepad and pencil back to Ethan.

Ethan flipped through it.

“The arrow is where the portal is that leads here,” she said. “The star is the portal back to the cellar. That’s where you need to go.”

Ethan kept looking through the notebook, tracing out the route they would need to take.

“What’s the X?” he asked.

“That’s a place you *don’t* want to go. That’s the Cathedral.”

“The Cathedral?”

“It’s not really a cathedral, but that’s a name for it. That’s where they want to take you. You don’t want to go there.”

“What’s there?”

“*You*, if they finish with you. Now go!”

We tried to argue a little more, but she was determined. She was becoming a skilevak, she insisted, and she would be a danger to them when the change was done. We had to leave her. And in the end, we didn’t have much choice but to give in.

We started the trek back through the moor. I looked back a few times as we went. The second time I looked back, I could see her, in the distance, at the edge of the mound where the castle was, looking out after us. She seemed about half her normal height. Maybe her legs were already gone. The next time I looked back, she wasn’t there.

I think it took us longer to get back through the moor to the hill than it had taken us to get to the castle in the first place. Probably because we were all feeling kind of down, and we were moving even slower than before. But we got there eventually. And then there was the climb up the hill. That took a while. At least on the way down, when we lost our footing and slipped, it just took us farther along the way we were going. On the way up, when we slipped, it meant it erased some of our progress, and we had to climb that part over again. For a while it almost seemed like we were sliding down more than we were climbing up, though of course we weren’t really. I thought we were never going to make it to the cave. I was afraid we’d never find it again, though Ca insisted she knew where it was. But we did find it, and I was so relieved when I saw it in front of us.

As we got to the ledge just outside the cave entrance, Ca turned around and looked over the moor. I started to go into the cave, but Ca grabbed my arm. “Look!”

I looked at the moor, but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Ethan had noticed us stop, and he was looking too, but I don’t think he saw anything either.

“Down there,” Ca said, pointing. “She’s coming!”

Finally I saw it. A small figure, splashing through the waters of the moor. It was still far enough off that I couldn’t make it out well from here, but there was only one thing it could be. It was Maria, swimming through the bog, coming to us.

The change must be complete, I thought. She’s a skilevak, and she’s coming to get us.

“Let’s hurry!” Ethan said, and went into the cave. Ca and I went after her. We went to the back of the cave where the portal was—the

cave wasn't very big, so it was pretty easy to find. There was the circle of mushrooms. But the cave wall inside the circle was the same brown-gray color as the outside. The portal was gone, and we were trapped.

More in the next post.

Posted 11:13 a.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

We all just stared at the blank cave wall. Ca stepped forward, pushed her hands against the wall inside the circle, but nothing happened. She didn't sink into the wall. She didn't go anywhere. She just stayed there.

She was in tears. "Where's the portal?"

"It must have faded," Ethan said. "Like the one on my wall. It was always gone by the afternoon."

We'd all forgotten about that.

"We can get through it by willing it," I said. "Let 's see if we can make a portal appear in the circle by willing it."

So yeah, we all just stood there and concentrated on turning the wall purple, which would have sounded really ridiculous in another context. It didn't work, of course. The wall stayed stubbornly brown and impenetrable.

"Should we dig through?" Ca asked.

"With what?" I said. "That's not loose dirt. We'd need shovels or something. It would take forever to dig through it."

"We don't even know for sure we could get to the tunnels that way," Ethan said. "With all the weird space warping or stuff going on, it might not be physically on the other side of the wall at all. And digging a hole in the wall might just damage the portal, prevent it from working."

"The portal's *already gone!*"

"But it might come back..."

"Okay," I said, "maybe it's back to Plan B. You know, go off across the moors, find civilization..."

"Do we have time for that?" Ca said.

"We can't just sit here and do nothing."

"If we wait, maybe a skilevak will come by and open the portal," Ethan said.

"Do we really want to want for a skilevak to come by?"

"Well, no."

"One's coming anyway," Ca said. "Maria. She's on her way across the moor. If we keep waiting here, *she'll* catch up with us, and then... I don't know what she'll do. You heard her. She's one of *them* now."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Well," Ethan said, "I guess we have two choices. We can either head off across the moor, or we can try to get through the portal."

"I think Maria would catch us if we tried crossing the moor," I said.

“She looks like she was swimming pretty fast.”

“There’s a third choice,” Ca broke in. “We could wait for Maria to come and try to... fight her off or something. And *then* cross the moor.”

“You want to fight Maria?”

“I don’t *want* to. She’s my friend. But... you heard her. She’s not *her* anymore. I don’t think she’d *want* to go on like this.”

“No, I mean, you really think we can fight her?”

“I’ve got the sledgehammer...” The doubt in her voice was pretty obvious.

Cal spoke up again. “I guess we could also try... I don’t know... hiding, hoping she doesn’t find us and gives up and goes away?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “For all we know, the things... the skilevaks... have a strong sense of smell, or some other way of finding people.”

“They didn’t seem to smell us in the tunnels.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. Still... I don’t know if she’d give up that easy. Besides, even if we did avoid her and make it to the moor without her seeing us, *she* could go back through the portal and tell the others where we are. Then this place could be swarming with skilevaks.”

“Let’s try to get through the portal,” Ca said. “There has to be some way to open it.”

“Okay,” Ethan said, and I agreed too. Not so much because I was sure it was the best option, but just because it felt better to have made a decision.

So we focused on that portal. We tried poking the mushrooms in various orders—not hard enough to risk their disintegrating, but thinking maybe the portal could be activated that way. We tried pushing different parts of the circle. We tried pushing the wall *outside* of the circle. We tried just sitting there and concentrating. We tried that a lot.

Ca kept going out and looking out of the cave and reporting on Maria’s progress. She kept getting closer. Once Ca said it looked like she was gone, but the next time she was there, and closer than ever, so apparently before she’d just been behind a rock or some reeds or something. Then Maria was out of the mire and on the hill, and we still hadn’t found a way through the portal.

“There’s got to be something we’re missing!” Ethan said, but if there was we kept missing it.

Fortunately, Ca said Maria’s progress up the hill was a lot slower than her progress through the moor. Her legs were missing, and while

she could still swim through the mire without them, it made it a lot harder for her to climb. Still, she was getting closer. Slowly, but inexorably.

“Should I try rolling some rocks down on her, or something?” Ca suggested. “Maybe try to knock her off the hill, and slow her down?”

“We just need to get through the portal.”

So we focused on that. All three of us concentrated together, holding hands, thinking about the portal opening, thinking about purple, thinking about the tunnel, thinking about the mushrooms, thinking about anything that seemed to be possibly connected with getting that portal open. I don’t know if the hand-holding really helped—hell, I know for a fact it didn’t—but I guess it made us feel better.

There was a scraping sound behind us.

We all turned—I think Ca was the first, but I don’t think Ethan and I were too far behind. There, pulling herself in to the cave, was Maria.

She looked terrible. Even more terrible than the last time we saw her, I mean. She was covered in mud, of course, but that was the least of it. Her face was mostly gone, just bloody bone, except for her left temple where a bit of flesh and hair was left that just made it look worse. Most of the meat around her neck was missing too, leaving not much more than just an exposed spine and what I guess was probably her trachea, though even that had holes in it and looked to be in bad shape. Her arms only had a few scraps of torn and rotting muscle and tendon still clinging to the bones. Her legs were gone; her body just ended at the waist, though she still had her shirt on so the broken end, or whatever, wasn’t visible, at least not from our angle. She still had on her fake diamond necklace, too, a bit muddy but still apparently intact and dangling from her nearly fleshless neck. Through the neckline of her dress, I could catch a glimpse of a hollow ribcage. The face-bat was still there, of course, and its eyes rolled to look at us.

Ca dropped her backpack and fumbled for the sledgehammer.

“Wait,” Maria croaked. “I’m not... it’s not finished yet.”

“What’s not finished yet?” I said, not expecting to like the answer.

“The change. I’m not... I’m still part me. I’m not fully one of them.”

“So why are you here?” Ethan asked.

Her speech was labored and slow; it’s clear it was getting hard for her to talk. Though with most of her neck missing and her trachea full of holes (if that was her trachea, and if it wasn’t then her trachea was missing entirely), she shouldn’t have been able to talk at all. “After you left the island, I realized you wouldn’t have a way through the

portal. I tried calling after you, but... I can't... shout too loudly now.”

She started making a hideous, rhythmic wheezing sound. I thought maybe it was a sign of the change, that maybe we were witnessing her final full transformation into a skilevak. Then I realized she was laughing.

I started laughing too. I don't know why, god help me, but I laughed too.

She finally went on. “I... came after you. To get you... through the portal.”

“So how do we open it?” Ethan asked.

“You don't open it. You can't open it. Only a skilevak can open it.” She raised herself up on her arms as she talked and began slowly walking on her hands toward us—she didn't have any spare eyes yet to form eye-legs.

Ca started to say something, but only got out “So—” before Maria interrupted her.

“I'm not... *fully* one of them yet,” Maria said. “I still have my own mind... mostly. But the change is far enough I should be able to open the portal.”

She had reached the back of the cave now, and she lowered herself so the base of her torso was resting on the ground, and then she raised her arms and reached them toward the cave wall. She put both skeletal hands against the wall, moved them around in some kind of circular, spiraloid pattern. And gradually, the part of the cave wall within the circle of mushrooms turned dark purple.

“It should stay open for... about eight hours,” she croaked. “Plenty of time.”

I started to go through, but then Ethan spoke up. “Wait... what about the portal to the cellar? Is that going to be closed too?”

Maria, or the thing that had been Maria, scratched her chin in thought, incidentally dislodging the last remnant of flesh that had still held on there.

“The rope was there... if it's still there, it will have held the portal open.”

“What if it's not still there?” Ca asked.

“Then you'll have to... hide near the portal and wait. Wait until a skilevak comes through to use it.”

“What do we do after we *do* get home?” I asked.

“I don't know. But don't let them finish with you.” The “you” that last part was addressed to was Ethan. “I don't know how you can stop them. Wherever you go, they'll find you. But you have to find a way.

I think... I think by now they may only need one or two more nights.”

“Until what?”

“Until you’re ready for the Cathedral.”

She raised herself up on her hands again and started to lumber away, but then turned.

“One last thing. If you’re transfixed by the eye-legs, there is a way to break free. I didn’t know it before, but I know it now. I know it because they know it.”

“How?” I asked.

“You can break free of the gaze of their eye-legs by saying their name backwards, three times. Skaveliks skaveliks skaveliks.”

“Really? That seems... weird. Saying their name backwards? Why does that work?”

“It wasn’t their name at first. The chant came first. They were named after that. It’s not that it’s their name backwards... it’s that their name is the incantation to escape them, spelled backwards. As for why the incantation works... even the skilevaks don’t know that. Or *I* don’t know that. Maybe some of them do.”

She laughed again, in that horrible wheezing way that sounded more like someone asphyxiating, as she walked on her hands toward the cave entrance.

“Where are you going?” Ca asked.

“I’m going back down the hill. I’m going as far across the moor as I can get. That way, when the change is complete, when I’m fully one of them and I come after you—I’ll have farther to go to catch up.”

She threw herself off the ledge, and we heard her softly tumble down the hillside.

I faced the portal again, but before I went through I noticed Ethan studying his notepad. He was trying to memorize the path through the tunnels, I realized, and that seemed like a pretty good idea. I waited until he put his notepad away.

“Is everybody ready?” I asked. Both Ca and Ethan nodded.

I placed my hand against the portal; this time I was going to be the first one through. Only when my hands were already surrounded by earth did I realize this might not be such a good idea. If there was a skilevak waiting on the other side, I would be the first one to face it. Then again, even if I wasn’t the first one through, there would be no way for the person who went through first to warn the others. So even if I’d gone through last, I’d still be easy prey for anything waiting on the other side... the only difference would be in which of us they got first.

I was so preoccupied with thoughts like those that I almost didn't notice the earth closing around my face this time, and by the time I was fully conscious of it I was already coming out the other side. My heart was still in my stomach until my head was out of the portal and I could look around and see the tunnel on the other side. There were no skilevaks. I was safe, or at least not in immediate danger.

It was agonizing to wait for Ethan and Ca to come through the portal; I was terrified that a skilevak would happen along before they completely emerged. But none did, and we all made it back to the tunnels. We were a complete mess, of course, covered in muck up to our thighs and dirt beyond that, scraped and filthy and sweaty, but we were alive, and we were on our way back home.

The trip back through the tunnels was relatively uneventful. I know it seems weird to call a trek through a labyrinth of living tunnels infested with bat-faced eye-legged skeleton people "uneventful", but I guess that's a measure of just how wrong everything had been lately. We saw more skilevaks, of course, but we managed to keep out of sight. Like before, most of the skilevaks we saw, though not all, were carrying around tiny ghosts, and they were all coddling them like babies. I think in a way seeing these horrific half-skeletons showering affection on their ghost babies was more chilling than it would have been to see them, I don't know, just brandishing claws or doing something menacing. But like I said, none of them saw us.

Oh—there was one time we almost got seen, but that was because we were taken by surprise. Not by the eye-legs—that did happen once or twice, one or more of us accidentally caught a glimpse of a skilevak's eye-legs and were transfixed by it, but we said the incantation Maria had told us, "skaveliks skaveliks skaveliks", under our breaths as quietly as we could, and it worked. We got free. No, the one that almost tripped us up was the skilevak with the red bandana.

It was at a point where we had to cross through a pretty large chamber, so we were already nervous. It was going to be harder to hide from skilevaks there if one came. But we watched the side passages carefully, so if any skilevaks did come we could duck into one of the niches along the walls. And then one did come. Ca touched our arms to alert us, and we got out of sight just in time.

The skilevak that came in had a red bandana. That by itself might not have been that remarkable, but it also was wearing a dress that I remembered having seen Mrs. Puri wear before. I gasped when I saw it, but I caught myself just in time and jumped back into the alcove. Ethan, though, was still out there—he froze when he saw the skilevak.

It wasn't because he saw her eye-legs; she didn't have any—I guess she hadn't collected the eyes for them yet. I guess he'd known Mrs. Puri better than the rest of us—she lived next door to him, after all—so it was more of a shock. Anyway, though, Ca grabbed him and pulled him in, just before the skilevak turned in our direction. We waited, and it eventually left the room, and we came out of the niche and went on along the path Maria had mapped for us.

So that was the closest call we had. Other than that, we were careful and didn't have too much trouble getting past the skilevaks this time. Oh, we did pass by a few more desiccated bodies, in some of the crannies of the passages, but I mean, the bodies didn't do anything; they were just dead, not moving. And anyway we only saw them along a certain part of the path, near the beginning of our trip, just the part near where Maria had drawn the X on the map that she said not to go to. (We didn't go there, of course, but we did have to pass kind of near it.)

So we got back to the portal. I was really hoping the rope would still be there, because I wasn't looking forward to just hiding out for god knows how long and hoping a skilevak wandered by and decided to visit Mrs. Puri's cellar—I'm sure Ca and Ethan felt the same way. Besides, even if a skilevak did happen by and open the portal, I wasn't sure how we'd get *up* to it, since it was in the passage's ceiling. I mean, I guess it was low enough we could have boosted each other up, but I don't know how the last person would have gotten up. Well, maybe the first person up could have brought a rope back down. But anyway, it's all kind of moot, because for once, luck was with us. The rope *was* still there.

More in the next post.

Posted 12:21 p.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

Ca went first this time. She climbed up the rope and pressed one hand against the dirt at the top while using her other hand to keep holding the rope. It took longer than usual, I think, though like I said before I'm not really confident of my ability to judge times in situations like this, but eventually her hand started sinking through. After that, she continued going up at what seemed to me to be pretty much a constant rate, just climbing up the rope as soon as there was any give.

When the last of Ca's left shoe had disappeared, Ethan went up the rope the same way. I was last, again, but by now I was almost getting used to being in fear of a skilevak showing up at any moment. Going up through the portal was harder than going down had been; I had to keep up the pressure by pulling against the rope; but once my hand was in the rest was easier. It was slower, though, and I was really afraid I was going to run out of breath and suffocate before I reached the top. Obviously I didn't, or I wouldn't be writing this. I got out. My head came free and I could breathe again, and I could see Ca and Ethan up there waiting for me. And then, slowly, I pulled the rest of me after the portal.

After I was out, we pulled the rope up after us. We didn't even discuss it; I guess all three of us just kind of thought of it at the same time. And then we were all in the cellar. Ethan had his flashlight on; it occurred to me that Ca didn't have a flashlight and would have had to come up and be sitting in the dark till Ethan got all the way up and could get his light up and turn it on. I felt sorry for her; it must have been unnerving, sitting in the cellar in the dark, listening to the scratches of the rats, waiting for something to come up through the portal and hoping it was one of us instead of a skilevak. Ca looked okay, though. I mean, as okay as any of us did.

For a moment we just sat there, silent, trying to pull ourselves together. I think it was probably a minute, at least, before Ca spoke up.

"We shouldn't stay by the portal."

"So where should we go?" Ethan said.

"Away from here."

"We could go up into Mrs. Puri's house," I said. "I mean, the door to the cellar from inside the house is probably unlocked."

"We'd have to pass by the body," Ca pointed out.

She meant the legs. It wasn't a whole body, just legs. She was right. I didn't argue.

"Let's at least go outside," Ethan said.

We made our way back through the maze of stored food, around the walls of dried fruit and grains and nuts and whatever else was in all those boxes and barrels, all hoarded up for the time to come that wouldn't come now, or maybe already had. I'd almost forgotten the way out. It seemed like days since we'd last been here—it wasn't, of course, but it seemed like it.

As we came around the last corner, I was surprised to see light ahead. I'd been expecting it to be night. But of course, it had been 4 a.m. when we set out, and we'd been... well, it had been a long time, but I guess not quite long enough for it to have been a full day. It shouldn't have been so surprising; I already knew it was a different time at the castle than it was here. But it took me by surprise anyway.

We all got out of the cellar, and Ethan turned his flashlight off.

"So now what? We just... go home?"

"We can't just go home," Ca said. "You heard Maria. A few more nights, and... well, we can't let them get you again. When you're not in your bed, they don't come, right?"

"They haven't before, but I haven't been away for more than one or two nights in a row. Maria said... Maria said wherever I go, they'll find me."

"She also said we have to try. You can't go home."

"He can't stay at our house," I said. "I mean, not that I have any problem with it; I'd be fine with him staying there. But there's no way we could hide him from our parents, and if they started asking questions..."

"They'd just send him home."

"You could hide out here," I said. It was a dumb idea, but we were desperate.

"Here?"

"In Mrs. Puri's house." I didn't really need to say that; he was looking at the house; obviously he knew what I meant.

"But she's... I don't know."

"Eventually, someone's going to report her missing," Ca said.

"Probably pretty soon, if they haven't already. I'm sure she has family, or *someone* she sees regularly. It's not safe here."

"Besides, they've got the portal in the basement..."

"Ethan's right. That, too. It's way too close to where they were before."

"But we can't just—"

"We'll camp out in the forest."

“What?” I think Ethan and I both said that at almost the same time.

“The forest, outside of town. They won’t be looking for us there.”

“We don’t know that,” I said.

“Well, it’s our best bet.”

“We don’t have the supplies,” Ethan said. “I mean, we have some food and water left, but we’d need sleeping bags or something, and... I don’t know, probably more food.”

“We can get it. Our mom and dad goes out a lot on Saturday; they may not even be home. We can go by and see if the car is there, and if it isn’t, we’ll get together the supplies we need and leave.”

“What if they’re there?” I said.

“Then we’ll hide somewhere and come back at night when they’re not.”

“Should I leave a note for my parents or something?” Ethan said.

“Better not. The skilevaks might be able to read—”

“They’ll be worried.”

“They’ll be worried if the skilevaks drag you off, too.”

“I don’t know,” I started to say, but she cut me off.

“Do you want to save Ethan or not?”

“Of course I want to save Ethan, but—”

She started dragging me away. “Let’s go get the supplies. Ethan, meet us behind the Starbucks at the north edge of town.”

“Should we really be splitting up?” he asked.

That stopped her. “No,” she said finally. “We’d better come along too.”

I protested a little more, and so did Ethan, though I think his protests were more half-hearted (not so much because he was happy with inconveniencing us, but just because Ethan had always been kind of easy to talk into things), but I guess in the end Ca prevailed. We made our way to our parents’ house. Ca insisted on staying behind bushes and trying to keep out of sight as much as possible. I felt kind of silly. Hiding from the skilevaks in the tunnels was one thing. Hiding from our friends and neighbors in town seemed... unnecessary. But again, Ca got her way, and we skulked around the city like some kind of crazy suburban commandos or something.

We got to our parents’ house, and the car wasn’t there. Again we were in luck, I guess. Ca insisted we go around the back and go in through the backyard, so we wouldn’t be seen. I thought that was silly, but I was tired of arguing. Anyway, we went through the house and gathered together all the stuff we thought we would need for... I guess for a sort of a camping trip of indeterminate duration. There were four

sleeping bags in the attic left over from when there were four kids living in the house, before Abe and Zelda went to college. Dad was always saying he was going to take us camping, but he never did; he bought the sleeping bags for us. Though come to think of it I don't know if he was really serious about it anyway, because I don't remember him buying sleeping bags for himself and Mom. There should have been a tent somewhere too; I remember him buying that. But I couldn't find it. Anyway, like I was saying, we took three sleeping bags, some knives, more food and water, soap, a lighter, a first-aid kit, other tools and odds and ends. Ca and I each got some changes of clothing; I got some extra, too, for Ethan—he was a little taller than I am and a little thinner, but it would probably be close enough.

Ha ha, wow. Half my face just sloughed off. The skin and muscle, I mean. Plop! Like a pancake. Sitting on the desk. Ha. Wow. What used to be the inside of my cheek is now face-up next to my keyboard. Face-up, because my face went down. Ha. I guess it's a face-off. Ha. Guess I've got to face facts.

Sorry. Anyway, Ca wanted to grab Dad's fishing pole from the garage, so we could fish for more food if we needed to, but I told her none of us knew how to fish and anyway we didn't have any bait, and she said we could dig up worms, but in the end she gave in and left it. We got together a lot of stuff, though, and we each had full backpacks and duffel bags as we set out.

We were afraid our parents would come home before we got everything together and left. I think a part of me was kind of hoping they would. But they didn't.

So we went toward the edge of town. Commando-style, again, at Ca's insistence. Which was silly; it's not like anyone would have stopped us, and once we got a few blocks from our house it wasn't like we were even likely to run into anyone we knew. But we did it her way anyway.

It was dark by the time we got to the edge of town. But Ethan and I both had our flashlights still, and Ca had even gotten one this time, and we had no trouble finding our way. We set off through the forest. I brought up the idea of following some landmark, a road or something, so we could find our way back and wouldn't get lost, but Ca said that the skilevaks could follow landmarks too, and getting lost was the *least* of our worries. She was kind of right. So anyway, we just went on straight through the forest.

Wow. This is weird. Feeling the air just moving through my mouth

without my cheek there. I wonder what the side of my face feels like, without the skin and muscle? Ooh. I can feel the bone. Well, not quite. There are some scraps of flesh attached still. I can peel those off later.

Ha. You know what it looks like? Half my face, sitting there on my desk? It looks like a pancake. A red pancake.

Okay, I know I shouldn't find that funny. I'm sure I wouldn't have yesterday. But now it's hilarious. I think it's because I'm becoming one of them. Oh god. It's really affecting me. But it *is* funny. Half my face, just slipping off the skull. How is that not funny?

Finally Ca said we'd gone far enough and we set up camp. Such as it was. We laid out our sleeping bags and got some sleep.

And we really did get some sleep. Even Ethan. The skilevaks didn't come that night.

In the morning, Ethan insisted on finding a stream or some water where he could wash off. He had a point; we were all kind of filthy. It turned out to be surprisingly easy to find one; Ethan just walked in the forest a bit and listened, and he heard running water and went toward it. It was a stream, that ran over some pretty little mossy waterfalls, with wildflowers along the sides. A beautiful place, really, especially after the lonely moor and the skilevaks' dank tunnels. Ethan got soap from his bag, stripped off and got in the stream and washed himself. Just like that, right in front of us. I don't think he would have gotten naked in front of Ca normally, especially without warning, but I think we were all so stressed we weren't thinking about it. Besides, maybe he was thinking that we might be living together like this for a while so we might as well get used to some intimacy. Anyway, after a moment I joined him in the stream; I could definitely use a bath too. Ca looked away and waited till we were done, and then told us not to look while she took her turn. I don't think she had to tell us. I certainly didn't want to see my sister naked, and based on what Ethan said at the castle I guess he wouldn't have had much interest in seeing her either.

Ethan insisted we move our camp a little closer to the stream, and we didn't see much reason to disagree; it's not like there was much reason not to.

Anyway, I was afraid that it would be a miserable life, living there in the forest with no shelter but a sleeping bag, but you know what? It really wasn't that bad. I mean, if I'd had to do it for a month I'm sure I'd have gotten tired of and missed my other friends and family and all the stuff I left back home, but for as long as we were there, it actually wasn't bad. The food we'd brought wasn't great, and of course we

rationed it because we didn't know how long it would have to last us, but it wasn't too bad. We supplemented it with some berries Ca found; I warned her they might be poisonous but Ethan said he thought you could test that by just taking a little bite and seeing if you got sick, and before we could really stop him he did that. After a few hours, he didn't get sick, so we ate the berries.

Ethan spent a lot of his time swimming in the stream. (It was *cold* in that stream—it was winter, after all—but I guess he got used to it.) Between that and when he washed out his clothes and left them to dry, which he did probably more often than they really needed, I think he almost spent more time naked than he did clothed. (He never did wear the clothes I brought for him. The jeans probably wouldn't have fit him anyway, but the sweats probably would have. But he said he'd rather just wash out what he had.) Ca I think spent most of her time just looking at the flowers and the other foliage, taking in the forest. She borrowed Ethan's notepad to make some sketches. I guess she had not much else to do. Me, I don't know. I guess I spent most of my time just trying to come up with ways to get more food, by hunting or something, and make a better shelter. I guess I kind of wanted to be a big man and develop survival skills. I kind of built a lean-to out of some branches and stuff that I guess wasn't too bad, though Ethan said he didn't mind just sleeping out under the stars—or under the treetops, anyway, which pretty much hid most of the stars from view.

But anyway, yeah. It wasn't so bad, camping out in the forest. It actually almost was fun. I mean, it probably would have been fun, if it weren't for the skilevaks. They didn't come, though. For I think it was eight days, they didn't come.

More in the next post.

Posted 1:13 p.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

We were almost convinced that we had escaped the skilevaks for good. That the problem was over, that soon we'd be able to go home and the skilevaks would have forgotten about us.

Okay, no. I don't think we were really convinced of that. I think we *tried* to convince ourselves of that, but I don't think we really did it.

Anyway, though, for a while the skilevaks left us alone. I guess for a while they couldn't find us.

But when they did come, oh boy did they come.

Did you know where the word "nightmare" comes from? Ethan told me about this once. It doesn't have anything to do with horses. Not originally. "Mare" was an Old English word for demon; it didn't have anything to do with horses at all. A nightmare was a demon that came in the night and sat on your chest while you slept and gave you bad dreams.

The reason I bring this up is because that's what I was thinking of when I woke up in the middle of the night and felt something sitting on my chest.

It wasn't a nightmare, though. Or, I mean, I guess it was, but it wasn't what they meant by a nightmare in Old English. Or maybe it was. Maybe they know about skilevaks then, and that's what they called them, and we just forgot about them since then. No, I doubt that's really true.

But regardless there was a skilevak sitting on my chest. Another one was on my legs. Another was at each side of my sleeping bag, pinning down my arms.

The one on my chest had a red bandana. It was holding something round in its left hand, but I couldn't make it out well from my current vantage point. It lifted its other hand, raised a finger and made a hissing sound. I thought at first there was just air escaping it for some reason, or it was trying to blow some poisonous gas on me, but then I realized, with its bony finger in front of its mouth, what it was doing. It was hushing me. It was saying "Shhhhh".

I wasn't in a mood to listen, of course. I screamed and yelled and thrashed and looked for Ca. She was there, a little ways away, but the skilevaks were holding her down too. I craned my neck back to see behind me where I knew Ethan was sleeping.

He was out there, but two skilevaks were taking position near him, one at each side. They got in place, and then they started crooning and waving their arms, like I'd seen on the webcam. On the webcam,

though, the sound quality hadn't been good. I hadn't heard just how strange their noises were. I hadn't heard the sound Ethan had described as crystal rain, or wind blowing through curtains of flesh. I heard them now. And yes, I could recognize from the sounds which ones he meant. They were unearthly sounds. They were like nothing else I'd ever heard, and like nothing I ever hoped to hear again.

Ethan woke up when they started, but like before, he was paralyzed. He just laid there, stock still, in his sleeping bag, his eyes wide in terror.

We had to sit through twenty minutes of that. I struggled, but there was nothing I could do. The skilevaks were too strong. They couldn't paralyze Ca and me too; they could only do that to the one they were preparing; so they had to hold us down physically... but they were perfectly capable of doing that. We could turn our heads, we could try to wriggle free, but they held us firmly in place. At least we could move a little; Ethan, of course, couldn't move at all. So for twenty minutes, we had to listen to that uncanny crooning, before finally they were done. The two skilevaks who had been singing left first, while the others still held Ca and me down. The skilevak with the red bandana set down next to me the round thing it had been holding, pointed at it and flapped its face-bat in what I guess is the skilevak's version of a smile, and then the two skilevaks that had been holding its arms down stuck out their eye-legs and picked her up—she still didn't have the eyes to make eye-legs herself—and carried her off. The skilevak at my legs left at the same time, and so did the one holding Ca.

We both rushed over to Ethan. By the time we got there, his eyes were closed, and we'd feared the worst. But he was only sleeping; they'd put him to sleep in the aftermath of the ritual. Ca shook him awake, and he shivered and said blearily, "They came again."

"They came again," Ca affirmed.

He sat up, scratched himself. "Damn it. Now what?"

"Tomorrow night we set watches," Ca said. "We make sure we're not all asleep at the same time. They won't come then."

It was only after that that I thought to look back at the object the skilevak in the red bandana had put down.

It was a plate of cookies.

They were round and brown and they looked perfectly good, but I don't think any of us really felt safe eating them.

Needless to say, the next day was gloomier than our previous days in the forest. We'd almost allowed us to think we wouldn't see the skilevaks again; at least, we'd been in a position where we could

pretend we didn't think we'd see them again. But they'd come again anyway. We hadn't escaped.

Ethan went down to the stream again that day, but he just kind of sat there in the water, brooding. Ca had the notepad out, but she wasn't really drawing anything, just kind of sketching lines at random. At one point she tore out a page and threw it away. When she wasn't looking, I found the crumpled page and unfolded it to see what it was she'd drawn. It was a skilevak. I tried to think of plans for weapons, ways we could fight them off. I gathered together big sticks. I built a fire, using plenty of dead pine needles as kindling. I tried to prepare in every way possible, even though I knew there was no way we could prepare.

I wasn't at all confident that Ca's plan would work. I don't think she was either. But we didn't have a better plan.

So that was it. We decided to set watches. We decided that we were going to make sure at least one of us was awake at any given time. We kept the fire burning, too.

They came during my watch.

I called out as soon as I saw them, but it did no good. They were too many. They were coming out in force this time; they wanted nothing to go wrong.

The skilevak in the red bandana wasn't there this time. All these skilevaks had eye-legs. Some of them even had *shoes* on their eye-legs, as anomalous as that looked; one was even wearing boots, the string of eyes disappearing into them. I think I recognized one of the skilevaks we'd seen in Ethan's room, or at least there was one with a similar dress.

Most of these skilevaks were carrying ghost babies—the first time we'd seen those outside the tunnels. As they came toward us, though, they let go of the ghosts, which drifted away from them and hovered in the air nearby, clearly wanting to stay near their skilevak guardians.

I grabbed a big stick I'd left nearby as a weapon. I didn't know if we could fight them, but I was determined to try. My shouting woke the others up, and Ca got out of her sleeping bag and grabbed a stick, too, and so did Ethan, even though he wasn't wearing anything, his clothes piled at the side of his bag. We all were going to go down fighting, if we were going to go down.

It was no good. The skilevaks overwhelmed us.

I swung at one of the skilevaks, but it didn't do any good. The stick hit it in the shoulder, but the stick cracked and the skilevak was fine. I tried stabbing it, hoping to break the sternum, but again, no luck. The

skilevak was unharmed. I swung another stick at one of the ghost babies, hoping maybe that they would prove to be some kind of weakness of the skilevaks—unsurprisingly, the stick just passed right through it, though it flinched a little. I even tried grabbing a burning log from the fire, whacking a skilevak with it as hard as I could. That just made things worse. The skilevak's clothes caught fire—this one was wearing a loose polo shirt—but the skilevak seemed undeterred, and now I was facing a flaming skilevak that looked more hellish than before.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Ca and Ethan trying to fight off the skilevaks, too, but they were having no more luck than I was.

One of the skilevaks seemed to be clearly in charge, one we hadn't seen before. It was staying far back from the fighting itself, but seemed to be directing its fellows, with hissed and groaned commands that I couldn't understand but which were apparently perfectly intelligible to the skilevaks. This skilevak leader was anomalously finely dressed, even garishly, with a patterned purple pullover that completely hid its excarnated torso, and green gloves over its skeletal hands; the only bones that were visible were those in its skull, the rest concealed by clothing. Its eye-legs were exposed, except at the ends where they disappeared into almost whimsical black pointed shoes that wouldn't have been out of place on the Wicked Witch of the West. Around its neck, or its cervical vertebrae, it wore an orange bow tie, and on its head was a *top hat*, of all things, with a lavender band. This was the only skilevak there to still retain its hold on its ghost baby, since it was only giving commands to the others and didn't need its hands free.

I think we all fought as well as we could, but there were too many skilevaks, and they were too strong—and apparently invulnerable, at least to any force we were capable of applying. It wasn't long before it had all three of us pinned to the ground.

And then two of them flanked Ethan. And the chanting began.

Ethan had been struggling, but once the chanting started he froze. The paralysis had kicked in.

Once again there was nothing we could do. We were held down by the skilevaks while they finished what they were doing. We were forced to listen to their eerie crooning, for the full twenty minutes or so that it went on. We couldn't get free before the ritual, whatever it was, was over.

Finally it was, and the skilevaks dispersed. The top-hatted leader was the first to leave, stroking its ghost baby lovingly as it backed away on its gangly eye-legs. The two that had performed the ritual were

next. Then the other skilevaks let us go, extended their eye-legs, and strode away, bundling their ghost babies—those that had them—back into their arms.

I thought about running after them, but they moved surprisingly quickly. Besides, even if I caught up with them, what the hell would I *do*?

We went over to Ethan. This time *I* shook him awake. He just lay there for a moment and didn't say anything.

"We've got to do something," Ca said. I think it was just something to say.

Ethan kept lying there for a moment longer, and then crawled back into his sleeping bag.

"Well, I don't think they're coming again tonight. We may as well get some sleep and talk in the morning."

I can feel my pelvis disengaging.

I don't know if "disengaging" is the right word, but I can't think of a better one offhand. It's coming off from my spine. My legs are going to fall off. Ha.

It's about time.

So anyway, though it was kind of hard to get back to sleep after that, I guess we figured there really *was* nothing we could do right then, and we might as well just let Ethan sleep and talk in the morning. But in the morning, we were going to have to figure something out.

This time, it was Ethan who had the idea.

"Let's *all* stay up tonight. They always come about the same time, right? If we're *all* awake, maybe we can take them."

"I don't know," I said. "I mean, both of you woke up pretty quick yesterday, and... we still couldn't beat them."

"Yeah, but if we're all up and armed and ready... I don't know. It's worth a try."

"I guess," Ca said. "We've got to try something." I think that was as good an explanation as any as to why we agreed to it even though we knew it wasn't going to work.

"Let's all take a nap this afternoon, then," he said. "That way we can stay up at night and won't be tired."

"Well, it's not like we have anything else to do."

I think all of us at that point were burned out. I think we all were feeling pretty much defeated. I said before that it had always been pretty easy to talk Ethan into doing things, but I think right then that was true of Ca and me, too. So when Ethan suggested we take a nap that afternoon so we'd be wide awake that night, I guess we both just

sort of thought yeah, sure, whatever. Neither of us ever thought at all that he might have some ulterior reason for suggesting that.

So, yeah. All three of us bedded down that afternoon to get some sleep. Or Ca and I did, and Ethan pretended to. So we were totally surprised when we got up in the evening and Ethan was gone. We noticed first, of course, that his sleeping bag wasn't there, but the rest of his stuff was gone, too, including his share of the food and water.

It was Ca who found the note he left, of course. It was Ca who found everything. It was written on a sheet torn out from his notepad, left under a small rock so it wouldn't blow away, where his sleeping bag had been.

"Sorry to trick you, but I don't know if there's any way to escape, and if they get me you don't need to go down with me. Thanks for everything you've done for me. If I don't see you again..."

The last sentence just ended like that. I guess Ethan didn't know what to write there.

"Damn it!" Ca said. "That idiot! We've got to find him!"

"How?"

She didn't answer; she was busy looking around our camp. Then she jumped excitedly and motioned me over. When I came to where she was, she pointed at the ground. There was a footprint there. I'm not an expert in tracking, but it looked fresh.

"Come on! I'm going to try to follow his trail."

Ca had never tried something like this before, but the forest floor was soft and with plenty of fallen leaves and needles and stuff, so I guess the tracks were pretty easy to see. There were a few times she lost the trail for a moment, but she always found it again.

"Should I go back for our stuff?" I asked at one point.

"We can go back for it later. Let's find him first. He can't have gone too far."

I wasn't sure we were ever going to find him. Trying to follow someone's trail through a forest when we had no experience or training in that sort of thing seemed kind of hopeless. But I guess Ca had a natural talent for it, or something. Anyway, she was right. He hadn't gone too far. He was further down the stream, which honestly if we'd thought about it beforehand we probably would have guessed anyway.

Well, I say *he* was further down the stream, but we didn't find *him*, exactly. We found his sleeping bag, and his stuff.

"He must have gone off to gather berries or something. He'll be back."

This time it was finally my turn to notice something. "Uh, Ca. I

don't think he went off on his own. His clothes are still there, right by the sleeping bag. It's not like he would be wandering around the forest naked."

Actually, under other circumstances, I'm not sure I would have put that past him, knowing Ethan. But right now, that didn't seem the most likely explanation.

Ca frowned, and then examined the spot around the sleeping bag more closely. I guess she hadn't actually looked at it before; after she'd seen his stuff, she'd stopped worrying about the trail.

"You're right. I can see... other prints here. Some of them look like—like bony handprints. He must have been taking a nap, and the skilevaks took him."

"They always came at about three a.m. before."

"They never dragged him off before. Maybe it was... maybe they were done. Maybe they're taking him to the Cathedral."

That spurred me into motion. I helped her look for the trail, or at least I tried, though I don't know that I was much help. She found it without me, though.

"They took him that way!" she said, and started off through the forest, away from the stream.

I followed her; this time she wasn't losing the trail—I guess a bunch of skilevaks carrying a person make a clearer trail than one person alone, which makes sense. Eventually we came out to a sort of an incline in the forest, where there was a bit of a hill, and there were more of those thistle mushrooms scattered around everywhere. We didn't need the trail now; we just searched around that area till we found the circle of mushrooms. It was there, on the hillside, and the ground within it was dark purple.

"So now what?" I said.

Ca looked at me like the answer was obvious. "We go in after him."

More in the next post.

Unfortunately, the entire thread was deleted while I was copying and pasting the fourteenth post. I had already managed to copy and save all the posts until then, but the posts were deleted before I could copy the last two.

I searched the web hoping to find another copy of the posts somewhere, searching for both the text of the posts and for the username “ThreeOfCups”. To my relief, I found another forum where he was registered, and I found another copy of the thread there. However, it turned out I’d found it just in time; I only managed to copy and paste one more post before that thread was deleted too.

I searched again, but couldn’t find any other copies of the thread, so I was unable to copy the final post. In retrospect, I should have just saved the whole webpages instead of copying and pasting the text from each post into a Word document; it would have been a lot faster. I didn’t expect the threads to be deleted that quickly. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty.

Sorry about missing the final post, but here’s the last one I was able to copy:

Posted 2:09 p.m., Wednesday December 12 by ThreeOfCups:

“Wait a second,” I said, and started running back to Ethan’s camp.

“What are you doing?” Ca asked, but I didn’t stop.

“I’ll be right back!” I called after her.

I got back to where his sleeping bag and his other things were, and I picked up his cargo shorts that had been left on the ground by the sleeping bag. I rummaged through the pocket until I found what I was looking for.

I held up the notepad to Ca when I returned to the portal. “I went back for this.”

“His notepad?”

I opened it and flipped through it until I found the map of the tunnels. It was still there.

“We don’t know where this portal leads,” Ca said. “We don’t know where it matches up to on the map.”

“No,” I agreed, “but if we find some place we *do* recognize, then we’ll know how to get from there to the Cathedral.”

I pointed to the X Maria had drawn on one part of the map.

“Let’s go,” Ca just said. She was already pressing her hand against the portal.

I was worried again about skilevak guards on the other side, but really at this point there wasn’t anything we could do about it. If we were going to rescue Ethan we had to go through.

“I can’t believe that idiot ran off by himself,” she muttered. I think just for the sake of saying something to pass the time as she slowly passed through the portal. At the time, I kind of agreed with her, but in retrospect I guess maybe he was right to try to leave us. I mean, things definitely would have turned out better if we hadn’t tracked him down. Except that I don’t think I would have been able to live with myself, knowing I didn’t try to save them. But then, I guess now I’m not really *living* with myself anyway, am I? Heh.

So she got through the portal, and I followed. This was my... let me see, my fifth time passing through one of these portals now. I was almost getting used to it.

I got through the portal to the other side. It was a place where three passages met, two of them kind of going downward and one upward. On the basis that we’d gone upward before so going upward again was likely to take us to a similar place, we followed the upward passage. Admittedly, that’s kind of shaky reasoning, but it was the best we had.

We wandered around the passages for quite a while. I wondered if I

should be drawing a map so we could compare it with the one Maria had drawn, or at least so I could keep track of where we were going, but then I realized I didn't have anything to draw it with. I'd taken Ethan's notepad from his pocket, but not his pencil. So we just kept going as best we could, hoping eventually we'd run into something familiar. We were going kind of fast, because we didn't want to be too late to save Ethan, but not *too* fast, because we didn't want to be taken by surprise by any skilevaks.

Not that that turned out to be much of an issue. Our previous times in the tunnel, we'd always seen a lot of skilevaks, or, well, at least a few of them, even if mostly we managed to avoid their seeing us. This time, though, the tunnels seemed deserted. We didn't see any skilevaks at all. Of course, that was because they were all in the Cathedral. (Not all the skilevaks in existence, I mean, but all the ones in this area.)

The only thing we saw at all was a mummy, and then I realized the mummy looked familiar. It was that first mummy we'd seen, the possibly-Native-American girl. Which meant that either the mummy had moved or we'd been here before. I was pretty sure the mummy hadn't moved—I mean, obviously the mummy couldn't have moved on its own, being dead and all, but one of the skilevaks could have moved it, except that its surroundings looked the same as I remembered them before. Which meant we were finally back on familiar territory. I racked my brain to try to remember what the passages were near here, to try to place it on the map.

"What are you doing?" Ca asked.

"I'm trying to figure out where we are. On the map, I mean. We passed through this area before."

She looked over my shoulder at the map. "I think it was about halfway through, and we went around this way... so it would have been either here or here..."

"We didn't pass by a side passage back there, though."

"You're right, so I guess it has to be here..."

"If that's true, then after the turn in that passage there should be another turn to the right."

We went down the passage, and there was.

"So we know where we are now," Ca said. "So how do we get to the cathedral?"

"It looks like we're pretty close," I said. "We just have to go up here—"

And then suddenly, the whole passage shook.

I thought at first it was an earthquake, but of course it wasn't. We'd

seen parts of the passage throb before; we'd seen the villi wiggle. We'd seen small scale movement. But we hadn't seen the whole passage move; we hadn't seen the whole passage thrash and squirm. But that was happening now.

Both Ca and I were knocked off our feet. It was hard to get back up with the passage still moving, but we managed, holding on to some of the knobs and ridges in the passageway to stabilize ourselves.

The thought crossed my mind that this might have something to do with whatever was going on in the Cathedral. It did, of course, though I didn't know that for sure at the time.

I consulted the map again, and we kept going. There wasn't much else we could do. We each kept one hand on the wall, which wasn't pleasant because the wall felt kind of like beef that had been left out of the refrigerator too long, but it helped us keep our feet. Even so sometimes a particularly hard thrash of the passages would knock us off our feet. It wasn't just the thrashing now, either. There was a rumbling sound coming from deep within the walls. And the smells that had been there before, the smells of sweat and nutmeg, were joined now by a new smell, one kind of like a cross between mint and ammonia. It wasn't a strong smell, it was just barely there, but it was noticeable.

Then, at one point, to get to the cathedral, we had to circle around a big hole in the ground. It wasn't just a pit leading nowhere; it was actually, according the map, a passageway that I guess where it intersected this one was nearly vertical. But it looked like it was a long way down. The ledge edging the pit wasn't very wide, either, and we had to go single file. We both did our best to keep a grip on the wall as the tunnel shook; we didn't want to fall down there. I thought this would be a particularly bad time for the passage to have one of its big jolts.

So, of course, that's exactly what happened. I mean, we'd had a few lucky breaks lately, so obviously our luck was due to run out sooner or later.

I lost my balance but managed to throw myself forward, so when I fell my front fell against the front of the ledge, and I managed to grab hold of some kind of vein or something on the floor.

Ca wasn't so lucky. She screamed as she fell into the pit, and slid out of sight.

I called after her, even though I realized immediately afterward how dangerous it was if the skilevaks heard us. But there was no answer.

I considered letting go, just falling into the pit afterward. But that

wouldn't do any good. If she was alive, then after I rescued Ethan we could find her. And if she was dead... well, then nothing would be accomplished by my falling in the pit too.

I pulled myself back up onto the ledge and went on.

It wasn't much farther; just a few more turns and I was there. But as soon as I saw the Cathedral I ducked back around the corner.

The passage I had been following led to a big opening, and behind it was a vast room. I guess it could be called a cathedral, if a cathedral could be made out of twisted human organs. I mean, it wasn't actually made of twisted human organs; it was made of the same stuff as the rest of the passages. But that was what it looked like. There were pillars and balconies and all sorts of architectural flourishes, kind of, but all organic and irregular and curvilinear. It was kind of like someone had taken a regular cathedral and *melted* it, and then tossed on a bunch of spleens and intestines or whatever to decorate the mess.

And the place was full of skilevaks. That was why I had backed away. There were even more skilevaks there than there had been that last night in the forest. Dozens of them, at least.

I looked at the map again, and I looked at the passages around me. It looked like there was another way in, that might lead to a different area where I could see in without being observed.

Luck was with me again; the second passage I tried came out to a balcony overlooking the main floor of the Cathedral. And from here I could get a good look at what was going on below.

The skilevaks were arranged in concentric circles. There were probably around thirty of them. Most of them had ghost babies, but a few of them didn't. I saw the skilevak with the red bandana, and another familiar skilevak with a fake diamond necklace, all covered in mud. I saw a skilevak with a spotted dress, and a skilevak with a logoed T-shirt, and a skilevak with a dress shirt and tie, and one wearing the burned remains of a polo shirt. And I saw lots of other skilevaks, too. Standing on a small dais slightly elevated over the rest of them was the skilevak leader, the one with the top hat and the bow tie.

One of the skilevaks on the far side of the circle didn't have a full face-bat, just a small back patch in the front of its face. From its clothing, I thought this was the skilevak that had sent its face-bat at Maria. Apparently having expended its face-bat to turn a victim, it was growing a new one.

In the center of the dais was Ethan. He was naked, and he wasn't moving. He wasn't dead—his eyes were open, and glancing around in

panic, and I could see his chest rise and fall with his rapid breaths. But I guess he was paralyzed again. The skilevaks around him were crooning again, not just two of them but the whole lot of them this time. It wasn't the same "song" as before (I say "song" for lack of a better word), but it had the same kinds of sounds.

The ghost babies were flitting around the room, circling just outside the circles of skilevaks. They almost seemed to be playing. There weren't quite as many ghost babies as skilevaks, which fit what I saw before about not all the skilevaks having them.

Their song, or ritual, or whatever it was, continued. I tried to think of a way to save Ethan, but there were far too many of them. I had no idea what to do. I considered throwing something to distract them, but... then what? I thought of just jumping down there and attacking, trying to take a few of them down, but that seemed futile. I thought for a moment that maybe if I just jumped into the middle of them and grabbed Ethan and ran, I could maybe take them by surprise and we could get away before they reacted, but I knew that wouldn't really work.

And then, still crooning, the skilevaks reached forward. The ghost babies kept circling in their perimeter as the skilevaks each reached in and put a hand on Ethan's body.

Ethan was apparently released from his paralysis now, and he screamed, loud and long. But it was too late. As I watched, helpless to do anything from where I was, his body dried and shriveled, and soon it was just a withered mummy.

But even as his body dried out, something rose out of it, a transparent form that at first seemed amorphous but then firmed up until it became a colorless duplicate of Ethan, floating above what was left of his body. Ethan's ghost.

I felt myself almost gasp, and held in my breath to prevent it.

That wasn't the worst of it, though. What happened next I could never have dreamed.

Ethan's ghost, looking confused, started to rise away from his body. But the skilevaks *grabbed hold of it*—they *grabbed the ghost*—and they *ripped it to pieces*.

The ghost's mouth opened as if it was screaming as they tore it apart, but no sound came out. They kept shredding it to bits, and the bits *kept moving*. I thought at first they were actually killing his ghost, if that was possible, but no, they were tearing the ghost to bits, and the *bits were still conscious*, or at least still had some vestige of consciousness.

As they did this, the ghost babies swirling about the room returned to their guardians. And then the skilevaks who did the tearing passed around the pieces, the shredded shards of Ethan's ghost, to the skilevaks who didn't have ghost babies. The skilevak in the T-shirt got one. The skilevak in the dress shirt and tie got another. The skilevak in the spotted dress. A skilevak without clothing. The skilevak in the red bandana. The skilevak in the fake diamond necklace.

And then they started—I guess there's no better word for it than that they started *cuddling* the ragged, torn-up remnants of Ethan's ghost. They held them up to their bony cheeks, or against their fleshless breasts, like you might do to a baby or a puppy. And then they gently started *kneading* them, kneading those mangled pieces of a sundered soul, molding them into their new form.

There was nothing I could do for Ethan now. Actually, that had been obvious a while ago. I guess the only reason I was still there watching was partly out of a horrified morbid fascination and partly because I was afraid they would see me if I moved. But now I thought it was time to get out of there. The passage had stopped moving. I had to get home. It was over. It had turned out badly; we had lost; it had all ended in the worst way possible; but it was over.

So I turned to leave, but as I did I made a fatal mistake. I lowered my eyes slightly. And for a split second, I happened to be looking directly at the legs of one of the skilevaks that was facing away from me.

I was transfixed.

I had to get out of there. I knew what to do. I whispered, as quietly as I could: "Skaveliks skaveliks skaveliks..."

I was free of the gaze, and I raised my eyes from the creature's legs... just in time to see its upper body turn toward me.

It had heard me. I had whispered as quietly as I could, but it hadn't been quietly enough.

That wasn't the worst of it.

When it turned toward me, I didn't see a face-bat. I saw instead the horrible cavity and twisted mass of bone that the face-bats hid.

That meant its face-bat was somewhere else.

And that somewhere else, as it turned out, happened to be just above the balcony, almost right in front of me.

Again, this is taking a lot longer to write than it did to happen. All this basically flashed through my mind in a fraction of a second. Before I saw the face-bat swooping toward me.

I turned and ran; at least I'd broken free. I ran down the passage

and through the corridor...

And there, standing in front of me, was the skilevak leader.

I only hesitated for a second, before I determined to push past it and keep going. But then it suddenly did a backflip and stood on its head, its top hat falling to the ground beside it.

This seemed like a monumentally strange thing to do, and I wondered for a split second why it was doing it. I realized too late that when it stood on its head it brought its legs directly into my field of view.

I was transfixed again.

“Skaveliks skaveliks—”

The face-bat that had been pursuing me caught up.

That broke me free of the transfixation again, of course, though it meant... well, you know what it meant. But anyway, I kept running, as far from the Cathedral as I could.

I'm not sure how I found my way back to the portal in the forest. I guess maybe already it was affecting my mind enough to direct me around the tunnels. Or maybe I just got lucky. But anyway, I got back out through the portal, and then ran back home. I knew I couldn't just go back to my life. With the face-bat on me, I didn't have a life to go back to. But maybe I could at least leave a warning to others before I changed.

I had one final stroke of luck when my parent's weren't home when I got there. I slipped into the house, got up to my room, got out my laptop, and you know the rest.

Well, not all the rest. I haven't told the most important part. This is something *I* didn't know, until today. Until after I started to become one of them, after I started sharing their thoughts. And it's what all this story was leading up to.

See, the thing is, the skilevaks themselves aren't the real threat at all. I mean, yes, they'll steal a few eyes, turn some people into skilevaks, but that's not important, on the large scale. The real threat is what the skilevaks are trying to create. What they're raising those ghost-shreds to become. Because oh, yes, they have a plan for them. They're very picky about the ghosts they harvest. That's why they were here to begin with. Like Maria said, they were after Ethan, specifically. Me, Ca, Maria, we were all just collateral damage. Remember I said he was the smartest guy in his class? And artistic, too? That's why the skilevaks wanted him. Well, that's part of it. He was just the type of person they needed, whose torn-apart ghost would provide high-quality raw material for their plans.

Oh. God. Their plans. Okay. I've got to tell you. The only possible hope for anyone to stop the skilevaks is for everyone to know exactly what they plan to do.

This post is getting really long, though, and this is important enough that I can't risk the forum choking on it because it's too long for it to handle. I think I'd better post what I've written so far, and *then* explain the skilevaks' plan.

More in the next post.

Acknowledgments and disclaimer:

Skilevaks are the creation of Jonathan Wojcik, who gave them their name and invented some of the details presented in this story, specifically their manner of turning other people into skilevaks by merging their face-bat with a new host, their hypnotic eye-legs, and the method of resisting that hypnosis by reciting their name backward three times. He based their physical appearance on a Halloween decoration he had seen at a discount department store. Wojcik's original description of skilevaks, along with a picture of the Halloween decoration that inspired it, can at the time of this writing be found on the web at <http://www.bogleech.com/halloween/hall12-things.html> .

This is, of course, a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any real persons, living, dead, or undead, is purely coincidental.