

CHOPHOUSE

HORNS

Chophouse
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PROLOGUE

Circa 1970s

Headlights suddenly flashed from behind, and they heard a vehicle creeping along the ruts they were following through the woods at dusk. Dalton looked back for a second then scurried into the underbrush.

“Why you splitting, man?” the fellow Woodrow University freshman called after him. “Pansy.”

Within the darker protection of thickets, Dalton waited.

Less than a minute later, he heard the shrill woop of a police car siren.

It was brief.

Crouching closer to the ground, he dropped the satchel of books he was carrying because they were heavy and because he knew he wasn't going to be going anywhere for a while. He couldn't let anyone, or anything, keep him from the fellowship tonight. So as he hid out, now, he worried the guy he'd brought along from his chemistry class was going to turn into a nark.

He listened intently.

One good thing was he hadn't told him anything specific about the others, especially not about the one they called Mind Walker. He just hoped the dude wouldn't hand him over to the fuzz. Though, it's not like they were doing anything wrong, but... ..how would they explain being out here at this time of night?

A subterranean cold crawled out over the vastness of the dark earth surrounding him. The various smells of vegetation commingled into a strong, fusty sweetness that was neither repugnant nor pleasant smelling.

He jerked his head reacting to the nearby fleeting sounds of crunching foliage. His wandering eyes blankly stared at the blackness. Low voices drew his attention back to where the tracks were. He heard someone tell somebody they would give them a ride back, and then someone else's indistinct response.

Wishing they would leave, he thought about the foxy girl Julie and of having her again tonight. She was the reason he'd found the others. He'd first met her on campus, though she wasn't a student at Woodrow or any other secular educational institution, for that matter. And she wasn't a hippie in the normal sense of the word. She was everything he wasn't but wanted, and he was amazed she wanted him.

He heard the clap of doors shutting and then the car making noise as it backed up and steered around to drive away in the same direction from where it'd come.

He waited longer just to be sure.

When he stumbled back out into the clearing skirting the old tracks, the sun had fallen below the horizon. He could barely see the ground ahead of him, but he knew he was alone. Bringing up his arm, he checked the time by pressing the button on the digital wristwatch his parents had given him as a graduation gift. He realized he needed to get moving.

Walking at a quick pace for minutes, it suddenly dawned on him he'd forgotten the satchel. He stopped for a moment and considered going back for it. Nothing in those textbooks could ever teach him what the group had opened his mind up to. And he didn't think he wanted to go back to school anymore. The incalculable mysteries of the universe shimmered before his impatient eyes, and he longed to unveil them all with Julie. Feeling confident in his decision to leave them behind, he marched on.

Insects seethed in the brushes as darkness settled in.

For a long time his feet guided him along one of the furrows. Weeds grazed his pant legs.

As he stared up at the twinkling stars breaking through the tangled treetops, someone whispered his name.

A flickering light appeared off to the side.

He strayed over to it.

She was smiling at him — her pretty face enchantingly lucent in candlelight.

Standing a few feet inside the wild vegetation, on a barely noticeable trail, he saw her holding a burning candle.

“You came alone?” she asked. Her face flashed disappointment.

Remembering he'd been asked to bring somebody new with him, he began to worry. Not so much about coming up short in front of the others, but about letting her down.

“Well—we—the guy I was—”

“Groovy shirt,” she stopped him.

He felt the firmness of her breasts press up against him as she came forward and fingered his wide collar, fondling its rhinestones. Heat flushed through him. She smelled like gingerbread.

He was happy she liked the shirt — he'd spent the school money his parent's had recently sent on it.

He felt the unexpected warm press of her lips on his neck, and his knees weakened.

“Come now,” she said softly, backing away. “We have to go to him.”

The frilly pink nightdress she was wearing captured his eyes and guided him on the close path. He imagined her beneath him, their bodies joined in lust as they'd been before. A thirsty smile parted his lips.

The ground rose swiftly, and he was impressed by the way she ascended with ease when the muscles in his own legs began to burn.

When the land leveled off, and the trees spread out, he saw the house.

Its derelict form was a shadowy secret revealed by the concentrating glow of the moon. Flickering light beamed from one of its damaged windows.

She stopped and turned around. “Mind Walker's chosen you tonight,” she said with a queer union of happiness and sadness in her voice. She gave him a hard hug then held his hand and led him to the place.

As they entered the creaky dwelling, he carefully avoided the splintered boards that had once blocked the doorway. Chatter drifted from unseen rooms. The soft shine of candlelights disclosed the decayed condition of the building, and the moldy odor left nothing to question.

He watched her set down her candle among many others.

“First, we must cerebrate.” She grabbed his hands and pulled him as she walked backward until she reached an old couch with a dingy linen covering.

“We are one,” she whispered, taking him down with her onto the shabby piece of furniture.

He felt her tongue slipping a tablet into his mouth when they kissed, but he didn't refuse it. They'd shared one before, and the euphoria it generated was a welcomed out-of-body experience. As their bodies impatiently embraced, they undressed themselves while still swapping fervid kisses. He arched his back when he entered her, aroused by the sensuous warmth, barely aware she was opening the buttons on his shirt as he began to thrust more wildly. For an instant, he wondered if they were being watched and felt uneasy, but then brilliant colors exploded all around him, and where there was darkness before, his eyes saw blinding light that forced him to look away. She had transformed into a goddess; and he a god. Physical reality became intangible.

He began to spasm in an elevating rush of pleasure.

Sharp pain struck his stomach all of a sudden, but the hurt was dulled by the chemical acting on his body. His eyes widened with terror as her face altered into something not so human. A demonic visage flaked with slimy scales and ugly barbs, freakish red balls lacking pupils for eyes.

He jumped up when her mouth opened and a bristly, black tongue speared up. As he climbed off her, something heavy smashed him over the head, instantly breaking his neck.

The weight of her newest lover tipped and fell off her. His breathless body smacked the floor. She lowered her blood-soaked hands and let the knife slide out of them as she sat up. She pushed the knife back under the couch with her heel.

A tall naked male tossed a thick board into the dark corner from where he'd stood and watched unnoticed the whole time. Then, he squatted over the body and grabbed it under the shoulders, lifted, and began to drag it away.

Watching him take the body through a doorway, going deeper into the decrepit house where the others forgathered, she stood up and blithely licked warm blood off her fingers. The coppery taste thrilled her for what was to come.

