

When the Town Wakes

Dekken Krause had spent seventeen years wondering what it would feel like to come home.

He never imagined there would be nothing left to welcome him.

His truck crawled along the narrow road as the forest closed in around him. Branches scraped against the doors like fingernails, while dead leaves scattered beneath the tires. Dekken remembered this road being wider. He remembered sunlight breaking through the trees and houses appearing long before the town itself did.

Now, there was only fog.

He tightened his hands around the steering wheel.

At fifty-seven years old, Dekken had survived things most people only hear about on the news. There had been a time when strangers recognized his face. A time when newspapers called him a hero. He hated that word now. Heroes were supposed to save people.

Dekken had spent seventeen years believing he'd return to everyone he loved.

The ground shook.
The town rumbled and...

growled.

The trees began to separate.
Dekken's foot pressed against the brake.
There it was.
Or what remained of it.
He stared through the windshield at his hometown.

Buildings leaned against one another like rotting bodies. Roofs had collapsed beneath years of rain and neglect. Streetlights stood crooked along the road, their glass shattered and their metal consumed by rust. Weeds pushed through cracks in the pavement. An overturned car rested outside what used to be a grocery store, half swallowed by vines.

Nothing moved.
No people.
No animals.
Not even birds.

Above everything stood the old church.

Its stone walls had blackened extraordinarily, and a violent crack split the steeple nearly in half as something purple and organic was pulsing through it. Dekken could see straight through the opening where the church bell had once hung.

He remembered when that bell could be heard from anywhere in town.

Dekken swallowed.
“The Darkians... they never left. This isn’t good, this isn’t good at all.”

He drove forward.
Every street brought back another memory. The barber shop where his father took him as a boy. The diner where he had his first date. The alley where he broke his wrist when he was twelve.

All of them were dead now.

Yet the deeper he traveled, the stronger a strange feeling became.
The town wasn’t empty.

Prairie Valley simply **awaited** his arrival.

Dekken stopped the truck near the town square and stepped outside. Cold air immediately slipped beneath his coat. Somewhere nearby, loose metal creaked in the wind.
He looked toward the old clock above town hall.
Its hands had stopped.

6:17 AM.

Dekken stared at it for several seconds before looking at his watch.

6:49 AM.

“This isn’t right... that **Future Guy** mother fucker I ran into can’t be the one causing this, right? Oh hell...”

He grabbed his flashlight and started toward the square.

That was when he saw the house.
The Simmons Residence.
Except it was more than a house.
More than a mansion.
More than a college.

It was its original state.
A castle of damnation.
Thousands of screams wasn't even what immediately screamed evil to Dekken either.
He just knew from the vibe change as soon as he approached it.
This was the first real anomaly.
And Dekken was nowhere near ready for it.

He froze.
And soiled himself.
The breeze of the winter felt as if it was biting at his skin.
His blood boiled to unnatural degrees.
And apart of his skin was already starting to turn black while the other half was beginning to turn red.
Something was already planned before he knew it.

The possibility of a fourth Project X host.

Dekken stared at the spreading colors on his arm.
The black had reached his wrist.
The red had climbed toward his elbow.

"No. No, no, no..."

The castle answered him.
A light flickered to life in the highest window.

Dekken froze.
Someone stood behind the glass.

He could not see the face, but he knew the posture. The slight tilt of the head. The way the figure rested
one hand against the frame.
Seventeen years vanished in an instant.

“That’s not possible.”

The figure lifted one hand.
And waved.
Then the front doors of the Simmons Residence slowly opened by themselves.
Warm yellow light poured across the dead grass.

From somewhere deep inside the castle, a woman’s voice whispered:
“Dekken... you come home to me, at last.”

“Mellie...? No—”

The walls dripped oozing Plastrome. A black liquid that burns and rots you away.
Though, in some cases?
You can turn into a Darkian from having enough absorbed — not very likely chances however.

Walking into the entrance, he immediately noticed a familiar figure on the grand staircase in front of him.
His wife.
The one who died with the rest of the town.
Except now she was alive, but not the same one.
A version of her from a different world.

“Oh no, Dekkie babes. Damn my irresponsible ass for not realizing what’s going on around the world right now. Oh God, this is so problematic future Dekken... which now that I think about it, wow you’re much hotter than Future Guy said you’d be.”

Dekken stared at her.

Seventeen years.
Seventeen years of imagining what he would say if he ever saw Mellie again.
Somehow, none of those imagined conversations had begun with her calling him hot.

“What now?! I know my wife’s capabilities so whatever you’re...”

Mellie’s smile widened.

“Aw, is my husband from this world scared of me? Well, ya should be. I once accidentally devoured someone I was in love with by simply turning into a monstrosity... isn’t that just lovely baby?”

She glanced toward the walls.
The Plastrome had stopped dripping.
It was moving upward.

“...so what is this place exactly?”

Whispers and screams of pure torture were heard deep within and underneath the home.
If home was even the right definition at all for this place.
In between the castle crusts were power infusers built by ancient historians to supposedly keep away “bad energy”. But if that were ever the case, then that plan went catastrophically wrong.

“They call it the Mansion of Despair from where I’m from so I’m assuming people who’re hearing the fifty missing people incident here are saying the same.”

Dekken looked back toward the wall.
The Plastrome was gone.
Every drop of it.

“Mellie.”

“Hm?”

“Where did it go?”

Her expression changed.
For the first time since Dekken had seen her, she wasn’t smiling.
A wet sound came from somewhere above them.

Drip.

Drop.

Drip.

Within the darkness of the upstairs hallway, a smile appeared in it.
The worst smile they'd ever seen.
Except they both knew it.
And so whatever would happen next...

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Something warm struck Mellie's cheek.
She wiped it away.

Black.
Mellie looked toward the ceiling while Dekken was focused on the smile.

"Oh."

She tightened her grip around the flashlight she had been holding onto.

"For the love of—what possibly else...?"

"Babes, the house knows you're here as well as everything that's attached to it. And for that... I can't stay much longer. Like I said, this isn't my home."

Dekken looked at her.

“What the hell does that mean?”

Mellie opened her mouth.

BANG.

The front doors slammed shut behind them.

Dekken spun around.

Then another door slammed.

BANG.

Another.

BANG.

Another.

The sound traveled throughout the Mansion of Despair until it seemed as if every door within the castle had shut at once.

Then came silence.

Dekken slowly turned back toward Mellie.

She was staring at the staircase.

“Mellie?”

Her flashlight trembled slightly in her hand.

“Yeahhh... I really don't like that.”

The darkness above the staircase had changed.

The smile was gone.
So was the Plastrone.
Dekken stepped closer to her.

“What did you mean when you said you couldn’t stay?”

“The Mansion knows I don’t belong here... and I’m afraid that if I stay, I’ll end up doing something unforgivable.”

Dekken stared at her.
“So it can control our abilities? We don’t even have control over ourselves while we’re here...?”

“We kind of do, but it’s very limited. Listen, we don’t have very much time and I’m already starting to look at you differently so please—”
Mellie groaned.

“Get us the **FUCK** out of here.” and then shook him.

Dekken grabbed her wrists.
“I will! Just tell me how and we’ll find the way out together.”

Mellie stared at him.
Her grip tightened.
She couldn’t let go.

“Mellie?”

She didn’t respond.
Caught in a daze, she had a crazy look in her eye.
Not to mention, the rapid amount of saliva beginning to form from her mouth as she focused on Dekken’s face.

“Mellie...?”
He took a step back.

She took a step forward.
“I... don’t know.”

Dekken’s expression dropped.
“W—what do you mean you don’t know?”

She got even closer.
Too close.
Mellie caressed his cheek with her palm.
“Never tasted an old fart like you before, let’s give you a try!”

Before she even got a chance, Dekken fell backward into a few crates immediately crushing them all.
She watched as he squirmed away with no hope left.

“The Fighters fell in this world because of the insignificance of heroes like yourself, Dekken. That’s the very reason why getting rid of someone like you would actually not even benefit the Dark Revolution at all. We just want to enjoy you... through Mellie.”

Dekken’s fear disappeared.
Not because he wasn’t afraid.
Because something older had taken its place.

Instinct.

Seventeen years retired didn’t erase a lifetime of surviving things that should’ve killed him.
He kicked the shattered crate toward Mellie.
She stumbled backward.
Dekken ran.

“OH, COME ON, DEKKIE! This is only enticing me after all...”
Mellie was running at him on all fours, slowly transforming into the monstrous form she was speaking of.

He entered the nearest hallway and slammed the door.
Immediately—

BANG.

Something struck the other side.
Dekken backed away.

BANG.

The wood cracked.

“Baby, don’t make this difficult! Come on, isn’t it a husband’s duty to serve his wife anyway.”

Tears formed in Dekken’s eyes.
He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.
To leave for so long, just to return to a distorted version of his past.
But ten times worse.
He was stuck in a nightmare The Dragon had personally installed for him many years ago.

Dekken tried to calm down his breathing, but it was rapid.
Unable to be stopped, so he turned off all the lights in the room, and barricaded the door as much as possible.

In this moment, he couldn’t even feel like a hero anymore.
He was being chased by a version of his dead wife who could apparently turn into a full monster.

“Dekken, please open the door.”

Another tear streamed down Dekken’s face.
And that quickly caused a rumble in Mellie's stomach strangely enough.
She could sense his fear right outside the door.

“Whatever, I don’t want you anyway...”

Mellie left off on that and proceeded to walk completely away from the room.

Yet, Dekken still didn’t feel safe.

Not at all.

In fact, he was ready any moment now for the unspeakable to happen.

But nothing did.

Ten seconds passed.

Then thirty.

Then a minute.

Dekken remained completely still.

His breathing was the loudest thing in the room.

“Mellie... Uhm, baby? You don’t want to hurt me... you don’t want to hurt me.”

Nothing.

He immediately regretted saying anything at all and he didn’t even know why.

Dekken slowly approached the barricaded door.

He placed one ear against it.

Silence.

No footsteps.

No breathing.

No scratching.

Nothing.

The Mansion of Despair somehow seemed even more dead than when he first entered.

Dekken reached toward the barricade—

CREAK.

He froze.

Not from the hallway.

Behind him.
Dekken slowly turned.
The room was still completely dark.
His eyes hadn't adjusted enough to see anything beyond the vague outlines of furniture.
Then he remembered something.

He hadn't checked the room.
He had simply run inside.
Dekken raised his flashlight.

Click.

Nothing.
So he clicks again.

Click.

Dead.

“Of course, just my luck...”

Something shifted in the darkness.
Dekken stopped breathing.

“Mellie?”

A voice whispered directly beside his ear.
“I told you—”

He was lifted up with tremendous force and was immediately brought downward and even further down
as all he heard was his wife's muffled voice as she continued to eat him.

“That you'd have a reason to—”
she gulped.

“Ah fuck, what was I gonna say again? Wait... where’s Dekken?”

A gurgle answered.

“Eh, whatever. I’m sure he found his way out just fine.”

Mellie had an abnormal feeling to check the time as it now said **6:50 AM** while Dekken’s on the table said

6:17.

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