

AND THEN, THERE

Haunted Tales of Brierie

A Story by Samuel Kelly

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And Then, There

Poem by Shaun Yonko Kelly

A night without grace,
Where the moon is mighty,
And the rain is ragged
The dirt is soaked and unsightly,
One that sticks to his shoes,
So is that terrible thing ahead
A towering figure who devours fear,
It's skin is hardened like a blade,
Weathered claws hang down like wires
Man and monster face each other,
Each instinct in direct opposition,
Who's dreams will fell another?

Northridge Engineering Archives — INSTALLATION RECORDING 01.

A Fortress Beneath the Ancient Mountains.

Far beyond the reach of ordinary traffic, beneath the mist-bound ridges of the Appalachian Mountains, stands a place built to endure what the world above cannot.

To the untrained eye, there is almost nothing here.

The approach begins along the paved Highland Scenic Highway through a remote, largely undeveloped section of the Monongahela National Forest. From the Marlinton area, the route follows US 219 toward WV-150 and the Highland Scenic Highway before continuing toward the Williams River area. Near the Williams River Bridge turnoff, Forest Road 86 leads deeper into the forest, where additional forest roads penetrate increasingly isolated country.** **From there, the route becomes less obvious.

An aging mountain road eventually breaks away onto what appears to be an abandoned logging spur, narrow enough to disappear beneath overhanging hardwoods, mountain laurel, and years of encroaching vegetation. The farther the road travels into Ridge Holler, the less it resembles an active route. Drainage channels follow the natural slope. Grass pushes into the center of the track. Branches reach across it. Nothing along the way suggests that anyone maintains a permanent installation beyond the next ridge.

At the road's end stands an old Appalachian cabin—the only structure anyone wandering this far into Ridge Holler is meant to find.

The cabin appears to belong to the landscape. Its age, isolation, and weathered construction suggest nothing more significant than an old mountain dwelling left behind by an earlier generation. There are no neighboring buildings, no docks, no tower, no visible utility complex, and no settlement surrounding it. Forest closes around the clearing on every side.

That illusion is deliberate.

Built deep within the ancient, folded rock of the Allegheny Mountains, the compound was designed to remain operational through war, natural disaster, civil collapse, prolonged isolation, and threats for which the outside world possesses no name. The installation follows the mountain rather than fighting against it, its reinforced chambers driven beneath layers of sandstone, shale, and harder sedimentary formations that have endured beneath West Virginia for millions of years.

Aboveground, almost nothing betrays what lies below.

The cabin is the visible anchor, but it does not reveal the true scale of the installation. Power and communications disappear underground long before reaching the compound. Water is drawn and managed without the reservoirs, towers, or utility structures that would normally announce permanent habitation.

Everything else has been worked into the mountain.

Ventilation openings resemble fractured stone. Service entrances vanish behind wooded cuts and weathered retaining walls. Emergency exits surface far from the cabin, beneath terrain deliberately left wild. Drainage systems follow existing contours rather than cutting obvious engineered channels across the landscape. Even the access road was designed to look older and less important with every passing year.

Nothing announces or suggests that the forgotten road continues beneath the mountain.

To anyone who reaches the end of it, Ridge Holler appears to contain exactly what the landscape says it contains: forest, mountain, an aging road, and a solitary Appalachian cabin standing where people once lived.

What cannot be seen is the installation extending beneath it.

The cabin is not the compound. It is the last ordinary thing anyone is supposed to see before reaching it.

This compound was engineered by Sean Ambacher, a former Recon Marine turned bunker builder. He was hired by Northridge Engineering Infrastructure Solutions, LLC, to construct fortified subterranean bunkers in various locations across the United States.

Ridge Holler was built for survival under the most unforgiving conditions imaginable.

NORTHRIDGE ENGINEERING ARCHIVES — SUPPLEMENTAL RECORDING

“Some places are built to keep things out.”

“And some places are built to keep things in.”

“Ridge Holler is only one location.”

“Recovered recordings, county archives, witness accounts, and other materials connected to these incidents have been collected under one designation.”

THE HAUNTED TALES OF BRIERIE

“Stories by Samuel Kelly.”

“Additional records are available at Ellisbeetle dot com slash H-T-O-B.”

“Not everything in the archive has been accounted for.”

END SUPPLEMENTAL RECORDING

Northridge Engineering Archives— INSTALLATION RECORDING 02

The Surface Settlement.

Concealment Begins Aboveground.

Twelve Stations. One Living System. Total Control.

At the heart of the Ridge Holler Bunker lies its command center—a hardened operations chamber designed to place the entire compound within the reach of a twelve-person team.

Built beneath reinforced stone and protected by independent power, filtered air, and multiple layers of security, the command center serves as the bunker’s eyes, ears, and nervous system. Every essential operation converges here.

Twelve integrated workstations are arranged beneath a panoramic observation window overlooking the forested valley. Under ordinary conditions, the glass presents a commanding view of the surrounding mountains. During an emergency, armored shutters can seal the chamber from the outside world, transferring observation duties to concealed cameras, thermal sensors, and perimeter motion detectors.

From the central consoles, operators can monitor the hidden settlement, surface approaches, retractable communications tower, solar arrays, and natural water intake. Dedicated security stations control the primary elevator, truck-loading platform, blast doors, internal airlocks, and sealed emergency tunnel. Every opening can be secured individually—or the entire compound can be locked down from a single position.

Environmental systems continuously measure oxygen, carbon dioxide, humidity, internal pressure, and airborne contamination. The command crew can isolate ventilation zones, engage CBRN filtration, activate manual overpressure pumps, and redirect clean air to protected sections of the bunker.

Power-management displays track geothermal production, solar input, battery reserves, and emergency-generator readiness. If the system detects a failure, operators can disconnect damaged circuits and preserve electricity for medical equipment, water purification, communications, and life support.

Additional stations oversee the underground reservoir, hydroponics bay, medical wing, living quarters, vehicle bay, workshop, armory, and storage depots. Long-range HF and VHF radios maintain contact beyond the mountains, while encrypted intercoms connect every occupied room. Satellite and internet terminals remain available whenever outside networks survive.

Analog maps, printed procedures, and handwritten logbooks stand ready beside the digital systems. Should every screen go dark, the command center can continue operating through instruments, paper records, and practiced memory.

This is not merely where the bunker is observed; it is where the bunker breathes—where every sealed door, turning fan, flowing pipe, and guarded passage becomes part of a single machine, and where twelve people hold an entire hidden world beneath their hands.

There are no signs pointing the way.

Those who arrive without invitation were never meant to find it.

Part 1

Sean Ambacher believed that every blueprint—and the structure assembled from it—eventually revealed the truth about the person who created it. Building something formidable required effort and time. Even when a project demanded more than one pair of hands, detailed plans could ensure the same level of quality. Building something truly challenging required a brutal investment of time, but Sean knew that when a job grew too massive for him to complete alone, a flawless set of plans could compel an entire crew of strangers to meet his exact standards.

Ridge Holler in the Monongahela National Forest, was the largest installation Sean had completed, and the first Erin had been permitted to see. She followed him through the command center with Timothy resting against her shoulder, listening while Sean explained the observation systems and the network of sealed corridors beneath them. Their five-month-old son had missed his afternoon nap. He fussed whenever Erin turned him away from the blinking console lights, then quieted when she allowed him to face them again.

“Remember, you were never here,” Sean said.

Erin shifted Timothy higher against her shoulder. “I know.”

“I mean it. When we have dinner with Thorne and Kelby, you can’t mention the installation. Not the command center, the road or anything you saw inside.”

“‘You signed the confidentiality agreement.’ ‘I didn’t,’ Erin grinned.”

“You didn’t read all thirty-eight pages either,” Sean accused.

“No. I married the man who did.”

Sean looked at her, unsure whether she was teasing him.

Erin smiled. “Your secret fortress is safe with me.”

“It won’t be mine much longer. Northridge releases the final payment, I confirm receipt, and they get the activation codes.”

“And then?”

“Then I go home with you.” He touched two fingers to Timothy’s back. “I’ve missed enough already.”

“Thorne and Kelby should be clear of the property by now,” Sean said. “Once I finish the shutdown, we can lock the access road behind us and leave.”

Erin studied the wall of camera feeds. “You can see the entire valley from here?”

“Most of it. The cameras overlap around the surface buildings and the main approach.”

“What about the communications system?”

“Tested and disconnected. Northridge’s activation team will bring it online after the transfer.”

One of the screens flickered.

Erin looked toward it, but the image had already returned to normal: trees, perimeter fence and the first gray traces of evening mist.

“Does that happen often?” she asked.

Sean glanced at the monitor. “It hasn’t happened before.”

Sean watched the monitor for another few seconds. Nothing disturbed the trees or the perimeter fence. He returned to the shutdown sequence.

Beyond the reinforced observation window, evening settled across the Appalachian ridges. Mist collected in the valleys below, separating the mountaintops into dark, wooded islands.

“Surface ventilation sealed,” Sean said.

He pressed the next control. Somewhere above them, a concealed communications mast withdrew into the mountain. The corresponding indicator changed from amber to green.

“Secondary communications secured.”

Erin continued watching the valley. “How does Northridge obtain permission to build something like this inside a national forest?”

Sean kept his attention on the shutdown panel. “They don’t discuss permits with me.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“It bothers me enough to finish the contract and go home.”

Movement crossed one of the perimeter monitors.

Erin stepped closer. “Sean.”

He heard the change in her voice and looked up.

“There’s something behind the fence.”

“Where?”

She pointed toward the northern camera feed. The image showed wet trees, a section of chain-link fence and a narrow strip of cleared ground.

“Near the third post,” she said. “Something moved between those trees.”

Sean enlarged the feed. “Could have been a black bear.”

“It was standing.”

He looked from the monitor to the observation window. Nothing moved beyond the fence.

“How large?”

“Bigger than you.”

Sean studied the trees for several seconds, but whatever Erin had seen was gone.

Timothy stirred against Erin's shoulder. She kissed his forehead and whispered to him until his eyes closed.

Sean continued watching the northern camera.

"You still see it?" she asked.

"No."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure it isn't near the fence now." Sean checked the adjoining feeds. "The exterior lights and motion sensors are still active. If anything approaches the settlement, I'll see it."

Rain began tapping against the observation glass.

"I still have to verify the water-filtration shutdown," he said. "You can wait here."

"I'll put Timothy in the truck and get the heater running. He's exhausted."

Sean hesitated.

Erin noticed. "You said it was clear."

"It is."

"Then finish your inspection so we can go home."

She looked once more toward the mist gathering between the ridges.

"It really is beautiful here," she said. "I understand why you wanted me to see it."

Sean watched Erin leave the command center with Timothy sleeping against her chest. She paused at the corridor junction, looked back for confirmation and then followed the illuminated path toward the surface exit.

He remembered how uncertain she had been when he left the Marine Corps. Architecture school had required years they could barely afford, and the first engineering contracts had kept him away almost as often as deployment. Northridge had changed that. The company paid enough to give them the future they had postponed.

Sean had told himself every absence was purchasing time at home.

After this transfer, he intended to collect it.

Erin and Timothy moved from one security feed to the next. Sean watched them cross the interior corridor, enter the surface passage and approach the outer door. On each monitor they appeared for only a few seconds before vanishing from one frame and entering another.

The bunker had twelve workstations, hundreds of sensors and overlapping cameras designed to leave no important area unseen.

For the moment, every system showed Sean that his family was safe.

Since leaving the military, Sean had spent a great deal of time away from home. Erin hadn't been in a relationship with him while he was in the military and deployed, but within a few months of meeting him after his discharge, she had thrown herself entirely into their life together.

"Sean Ambacher."

Saying his name made her stomach flutter. She leaned in and kissed their now-sleeping boy.

"My baby boy."

Her stomach fluttered again. The Ambacher boys had her.

As she exited the building, she found herself thinking, Sean needs two more children. We need two more children. I want to watch them grow. I want to grow old with Sean.

I love my life.

Her final thought formed like a framed masterpiece painted by the greatest artist who had ever lived: Sean can design our home and make certain the children have enough rooms. During the holidays, we can settle in for the entire season and enjoy our family.

And then, there.

Sean returned to the shutdown panel.

A warning tone sounded from the northern perimeter station.

He looked up.

The camera Erin had noticed earlier showed movement among the trees. One shape stepped into the cleared ground behind the fence, followed by another. They were too tall to be men and too narrow to be bears. Their arms hung below their knees.

A third shape entered the frame.

Then a fourth.

Sean reached for the exterior intercom.

"Erin, get back inside."

Only static answered.

On another monitor, Erin crossed the rain-dark loading area toward their truck. She stopped when she heard him through the exterior speaker.

"Turn around. Come back now." Sean gasped, panic exploding in his voice.

Erin looked toward the bunker entrance.

The motion alarm changed from amber to red.

Something dropped from the roof of the surface building and landed behind her.

Sean was moving before the creature reached for her.

He left the command center at a sprint, striking the emergency-release switch as he passed through the security corridor. His boots hammered against the steel floor. Behind him, alarms spread through Ridge Holler one system at a time.

The thought entered Sean's mind without passing through his own voice.

We are Nythrakar!

He reached the gun cage and caught the locked handle.

The keys hung inside the security station several yards behind him. Retrieving them would cost seconds. Opening the cage would cost more.

Erin did not have seconds.

Sean released the handle and drew the KA-BAR from his sheath without breaking stride.

The last monitor he passed showed the loading area from above.

Erin was no longer standing.

Shapes converged around the place where she had fallen. One lifted its head toward the camera as though it could see Sean watching from beneath the mountain.

The image cut to black.

He ran faster.

Sean struck the exterior release and forced himself through the opening before the door had fully cleared.

Rain hit him sideways.

More than a dozen creatures occupied the loading area. Some stood upright while others crouched over the pavement or moved on all fours. The nearest towered above Sean, gaunt and hunched, with a narrow skeletal torso and arms long enough for its claws to drag through the rainwater.

Erin was gone.

A dark piece of her coat hung between the creature's teeth. Its abdomen had expanded around the shape of what it had swallowed.

Sean searched the ground for Timothy.

The baby carrier lay overturned near the truck.

Another predator stood several yards away. Its abdomen was distended by a much smaller shape.

Sean saw the carrier.

Then the creature.

Nothing else existed.

Sean charged the life form that had swallowed Timothy.

He never reached it.

Another creature crossed the distance between them with terrifying speed and struck him in the chest. The impact lifted Sean off the ground and hurled him backward through the entrance. He struck the interior bulkhead shoulder-first, then collapsed onto the steel floor.

The collision emptied his lungs. White light burst across his vision, and the KA-BAR nearly slipped from his hand.

Outside, the creature carrying Timothy continued toward the trees.

Sean tried to rise, but his left arm buckled beneath him. Before he could recover, his assailant entered the bunker.

It advanced slowly now, stooping beneath the doorway. Its elongated arms hung nearly to the floor, and its claws opened and closed as it approached. Whether it believed Sean was helpless or simply did not understand that he remained dangerous, Sean could not tell.

He stopped struggling and allowed his body to go still.

The organism leaned over him.

Sean waited until one of its hands reached for his throat. Then he caught its wrist, pulled himself forward, and drove the KA-BAR beneath its rib cage. The blade sank to the hilt.

Black fluid spilled across his hand.

It bleeds, Sean thought.

The monster recoiled.

Its mouth opened, but the scream did not come from its throat. The sound appeared inside Sean's skull—high, violent, and filled with more than one voice. He felt it behind his eyes and along the roots of his teeth.

Sean tore the knife free and forced himself upright.

The creature lunged again.

He stepped inside the reach of its claws and drove the KA-BAR into its chest. The blade struck something hard, slipped around it, and entered deeper. Sean pulled it free and struck again before the creature could regain its balance.

The scream inside his head became deafening.

It staggered backward through the entrance, clawing at the wounds as though it could not understand how Sean had made them. Its long legs folded beneath it, and the creature collapsed into the rain just beyond the bunker door.

Sean tightened his grip on the blood-slick handle and looked toward the trees.

The demon-like creation carrying Timothy was gone.

The tree line erupted.

The other grotesque things were charging toward the bunker. Some bounded through the rain on all fours, their limbs striking the ground in long, uneven rhythms. Others ran upright, their elongated arms swinging beside them as they crossed the loading area.

More than a dozen were coming.

Several had enormous bulges distending their abdomens. Within two of them, Sean could still distinguish the shapes of Erin and Timothy.

He tightened his grip on the KA-BAR and started toward them.

Then the nearest beast cleared half the distance to the entrance in a single bound.

Sean forced himself backward across the threshold. He caught the steel door with his free hand and dragged it toward the frame. Pain tore through the shoulder that had struck the bulkhead, but he continued pulling.

The first creature reached the entrance before the opening had fully closed. Its claws swept through the narrowing gap, missing Sean's chest by inches and scraping across the interior wall.

Sean threw his full weight against the door.

The locking mechanism engaged with a heavy metallic strike.

Another spawn slammed into the other side.

The door shuddered beneath Sean's hands, but it held.

He drove the final locking lever into place and staggered backward.

Outside, claws began scraping across the steel.