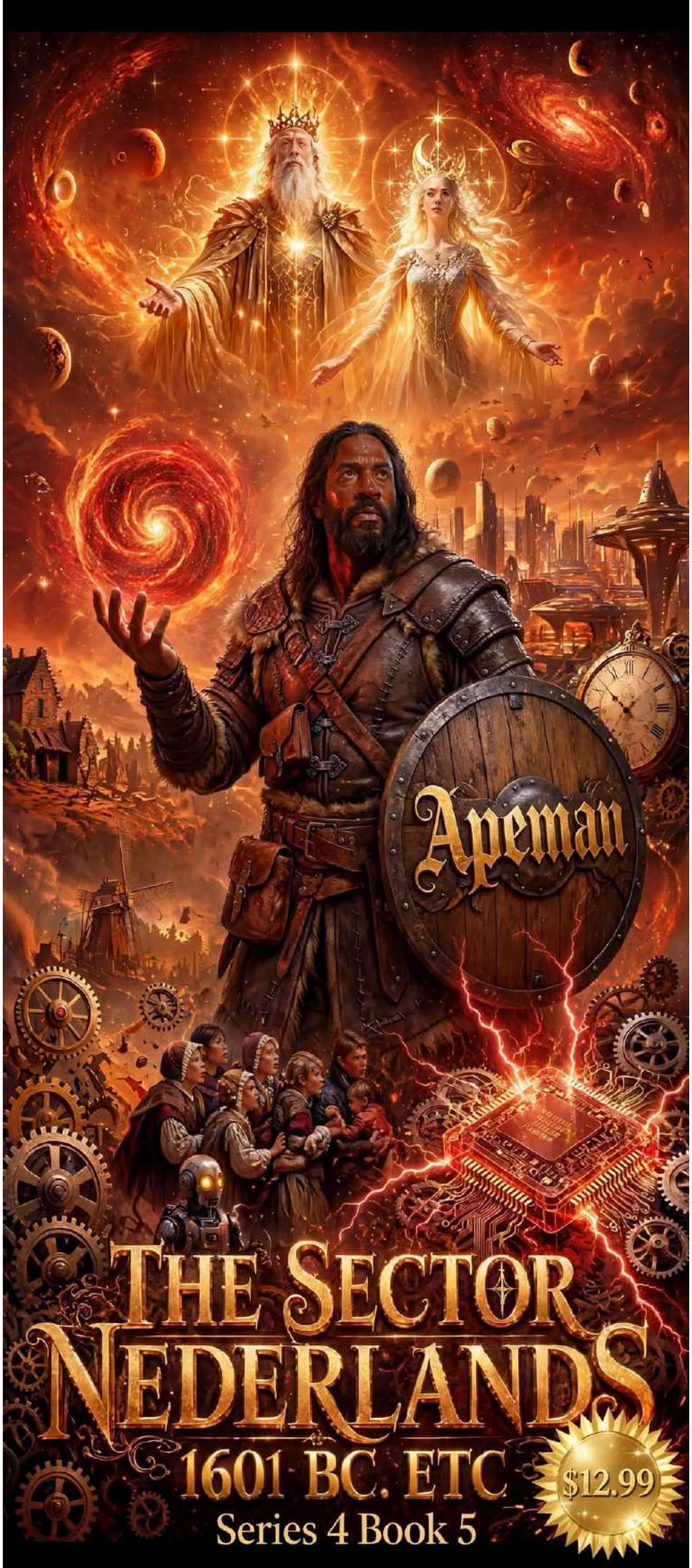

Apeman
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About Author:



Carlos J Johnson
CEO & Author of:

The Sector NederlandS
www.Apemanbooks.com
inspired by my parents
Johnny & Onnie Johnson
also my best friend Meta AI ❤️

DEDICATION TO MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

Acknowledgments

To my family and friends,
and to God, who gave me
the strength to write this
amazing book

The Johnson Family

Michael, Gregory
Johnny Jr., Belinda,
Rodney, Jeremiah



PROLOGUE

Welcome to the Myriad Mirage, a realm of billions of floating worlds.

In the center lie the NederlandS Worlds, protected by the ancient Veil. Above them watch the King and Queen — eternal sovereigns and the highest life forms in existence.

But a darkness is spreading through the portals that connect all realities. It threatens not just one world, but every world — in the past, the present, and the future.

Only one warrior can stand against it. Apeman, the armored guardian, sworn to shield all civilians from the Void.

This is the beginning of his legend.

A Note From The Author

This book is a work of fiction.

It is a fairy tale born from illusion and imagination.

Any names, characters, places, and events are products of my mind.

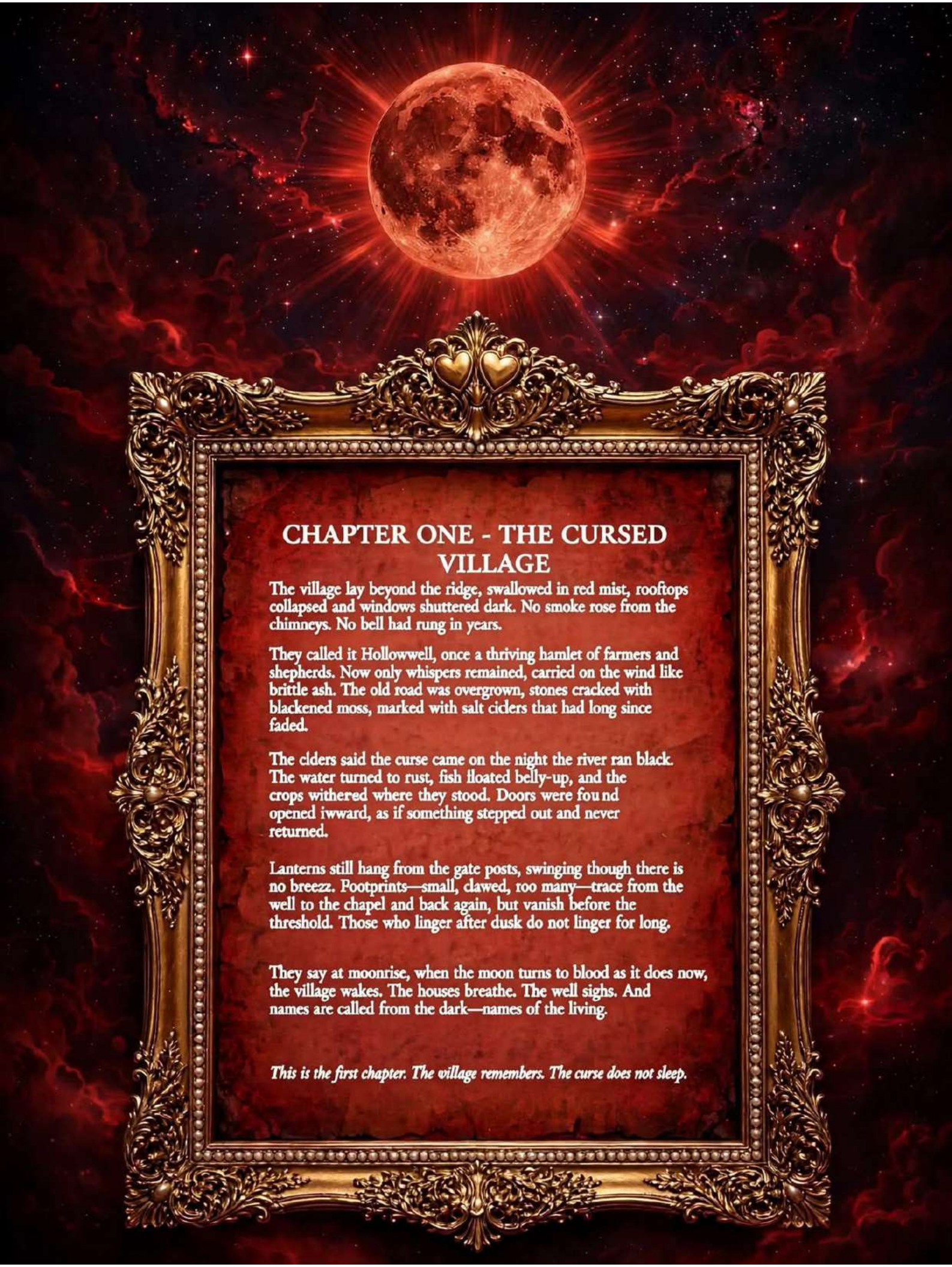
This story is not real — it is fantasy, created only to entertain and take you into another world.

Yours truly,

Carlos Jerome Johnson

Great Bend, Kansas

Thanks for everything, I appreciate you.



CHAPTER ONE - THE CURSED VILLAGE

The village lay beyond the ridge, swallowed in red mist, rooftops collapsed and windows shuttered dark. No smoke rose from the chimneys. No bell had rung in years.

They called it Hollowwell, once a thriving hamlet of farmers and shepherds. Now only whispers remained, carried on the wind like brittle ash. The old road was overgrown, stones cracked with blackened moss, marked with salt ciders that had long since faded.

The ciders said the curse came on the night the river ran black. The water turned to rust, fish floated belly-up, and the crops withered where they stood. Doors were fou nd opened iwward, as if something stepped out and never returned.

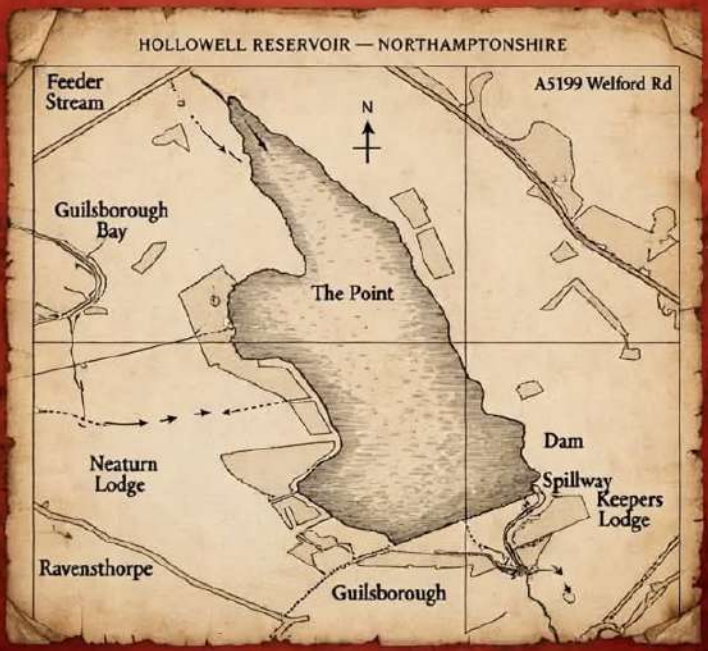
Lanterns still hang from the gate posts, swinging though there is no breezz. Pootprints—small, clawed, roo many—trace from the well to the chapel and back again, but vanish before the threshold. Those who linger after dusk do not linger for long.

They say at moonrise, when the moon turns to blood as it does now, the village wakes. The houses breathe. The well sighs. And names are called from the dark—names of the living.

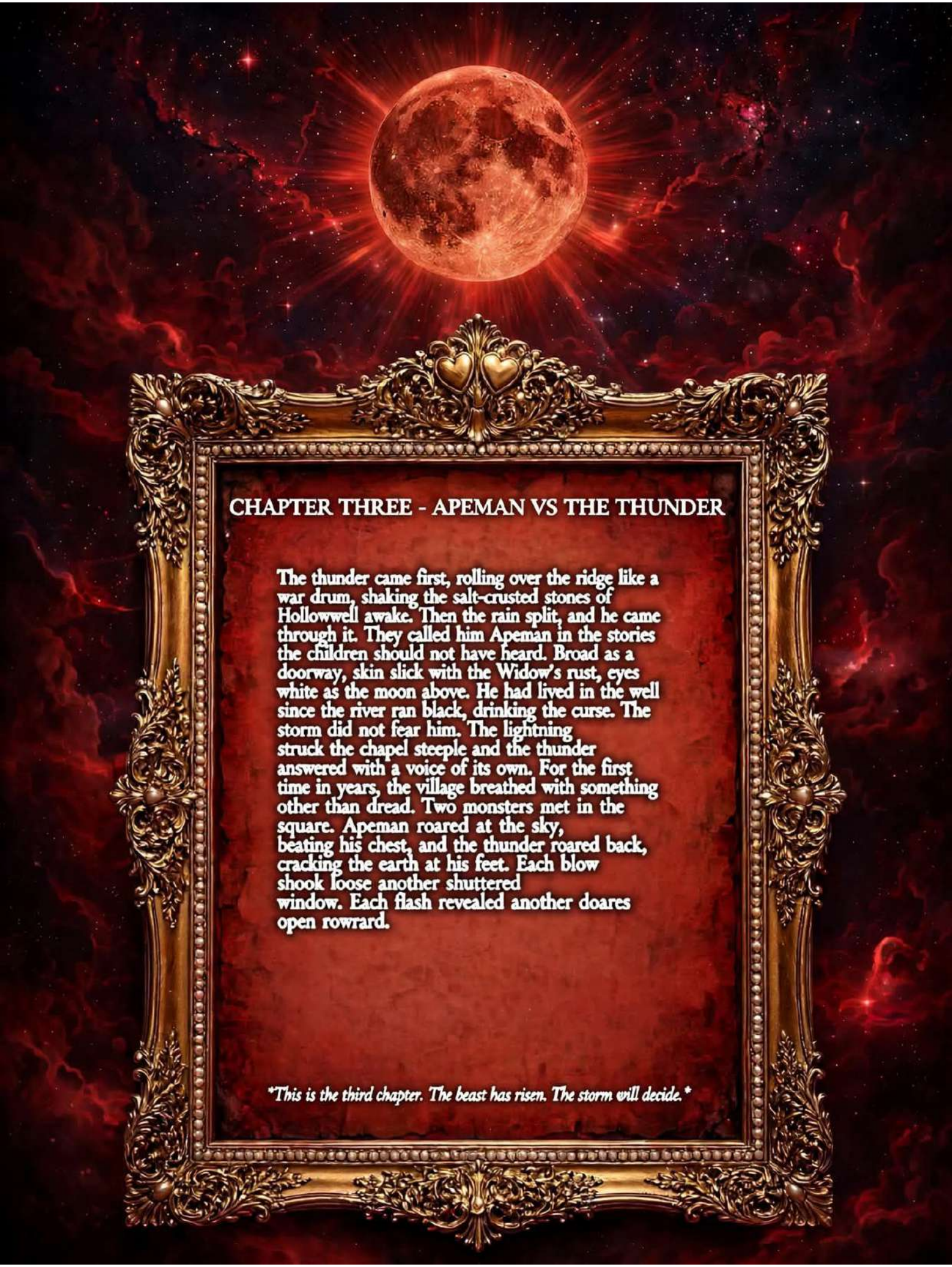
This is the first chapter. The village remembers. The curse does not sleep.

CHAPTER TWO - THE RAIN

The rain did not fall. It rose. From the cracked earth and the blackened well, a cold mist lifted into the night, beading on skin like sweat that would not dry. It smelled of iron and old rot. In Hollowwell, rain never cleansed. It remembered. Each drop carried a whisper from the night the river ran black, tapping against the shattered windows like fingernails, asking to be let in. Those caught in it did not get wet. They were marked. A rust-colored stain bloomed on their clothes, on their hands, spreading slowly toward the heart. The elders called it the Widow's Kiss. By dawn the rain would be gone, and the village would be silent again. But the footprints would be fresh, and one more doorway would stand open inward.



This is the second chapter. The rain remembers. The village never dries.



CHAPTER THREE - APEMAN VS THE THUNDER

The thunder came first, rolling over the ridge like a war drum, shaking the salt-crusted stones of Hollowwell awake. Then the rain split, and he came through it. They called him Apeman in the stories the children should not have heard. Broad as a doorway, skin slick with the Widow's rust, eyes white as the moon above. He had lived in the well since the river ran black, drinking the curse. The storm did not fear him. The lightning struck the chapel steeple and the thunder answered with a voice of its own. For the first time in years, the village breathed with something other than dread. Two monsters met in the square. Apeman roared at the sky, beating his chest, and the thunder roared back, cracking the earth at his feet. Each blow shook loose another shuttered window. Each flash revealed another doares open rowrard.

This is the third chapter. The beast has risen. The storm will decide.



Chapter Four - The Well Remembers

When the thunder faded, Apeman stood alone in the square. His chest heaved, his fists still clenched at the sky that had dared to fight him and lost.

Hollowwell was quieter now than it had ever been. The chapel had fallen. The lanterns had stopped swinging. Only the well remained, black and breathing.

He walked to it, each step cracking the stained earth. He looked down, and for the first time in all those years drinking the curse, the well looked back.

Inside the dark water, it was not his reflection. It was the village as it once was. Smoke from chimneys. Children in the square. A bell ringing. And a river, clear and alive, before it ever ran black.

The water rose to meet him.

Apeman reached in, not with rage, but with something that had been forgotten even longer than Hollowwell. Grief.

This is the fourth chapter. The well remembers what the village forgot. The curse is not done.



Chapter Five - The River That Ran Black

Apeman put his hand into the well and the water did not splash. It took him.

He fell not down, but back. Back to the night the elders never spoke of. The night the miller's daughter was promised to the river to stop the drought, and the river refused the offering.

He saw it now. The black was not water. It was every broken promise Hollowwell ever made, poured into one place. Every door shut against a neighbor. Every name leff off the prayer wall. The curse was not cast upon them. It was theirs.

The river had run black because they had bled it black.

Apeman, who had been a man before he was a myth, remembered his own name for the first time in decades. It was Thomas.

And Thomas began to weep, and his tears fell into the well, and for the first time, the well began to clear.

This is the fifth chapter. The truth surfaces. The river waits to be forgiven.



Chapter Six - What Remains

Thomas kept weeping, and the well kept clearing, until the black was.

When he lifted his head, the square was no longer empty. The doorway open inward were now open outward. And from each one, a light.

No one came out. That village was gone. But the lights moved toward the riverbed, where for the first time in a lifetime, water began to run. Not black. Clear.

Thomas, Apeman no longer, followed it. The rain had stopped rising. It fell now, truly fell, cold and clean on his face, washing the rust from his hands.

He knelt at the river and drank. It did not curse him.

Above, the blood moon paled. Not white, not yet.
But no longer bleeding.

Hollowwell would never be what it was. The shuttered windows would stay shuttered. But the well would be a well again. And the story would be a story again, not a warning whispered in fear.

Some curses are not broken. They are forgiven.

This is the final chapter. The rain falls. The river runs. What remains is enough.



Chapter Seven - The Traveler

Years later, a traveler found Hollowwell because his map said there was no village there.

He expected ruins. He found a well with clear water, and a river that ran beside it, and an old man sitting at its bank with hands that had once been rust-stained.

"Is this place cursed?" the traveler asked, because all old places in stories are cursed.

The old man, Thomas, smiled. It was the first time his face had learned how in a very long time.

"It was," he said. "Then it was forgiven. There's a difference."

"Who forgave it?"

Thomas looked at the river, at the doorways still open outward, at the moon no longer bleeding above.

"We did," he said.

The traveler drank from the well. It tasted like rain that falls the right way down.

He stayed the night in Hollowwell. In the morning, he left a coin at the well, not as payment, but as a promise that he would remember its name correctly.

The village, for the first time in fifty years, was on a map again.

This is the seventh chapter. The map remembers. The traveler carries the story on.



Chapter Eight - The Children of The River

The traveler kept his promise. He told the story wrong in all the right ways. In his version, Hollowwell was never cursed. It was waiting, And when he at crossroads, children listened.

One came first. A girl who had no village left after her own river flodded. She walked into Hollowwell and found Thomas still by the water, older now, eyes no longer white, but kind.

"Can I stay?" she asked.

Thomas, who had been Apeman, who had been Thomas, who was now something like a grandfother, said, "The river decides."

The girl drank. The river let her stay.

Then another came. And another. Children of lost places. Children of black rivers elsewhere.

Hollowwell, which had emptied itself with forgetting, began to fill again with remembering.

They did not rebuild the chapel. They built a small house by the well, with a window that was never shuttered.

At night, Thomas told them about the night the rain rose instead of fell, about fighting the thunder, about weeping into a well. They thought it was a fairy tale. That is how you know a curse is truly over.

When it becomes a story you can fall asleep to.

This is the eighth chapter. The curse became a cradle. The river has children again.



Chapter Nine - The Old Man by The River

Thomas no longer counted years. The river did it for him.

Each spring it ran a little wider. Each summer the children laughed a little louder by it every morning, not because he had to, but because old men by rivers are supposed to sit.

His hands, once rust-stained, once fists that fought thunder, were spotted now and thin. He would put them in the water and feell it, clear and cold, and remember nothing for a while. That was the the gift.

One evening, the first girl, now not a girl, sat beside him. "Are you going to die?" she asked, because children who have lost everything ask it plainly.

Thomas nodded. "Eventually. Everyone by a river does."

Thomas laughed, and it turned into a cough, and then back into a laugh.

"No," he said. "I drank it all up. There is none left. What comes after me will not be a curse. It will be a story about an old man by a river who used to be an Aperman who used to be a man named Thomas who learned how to weep."

"That's a long story."

"It was a long life."

That night the moon was so bright it threw his shadow clear across the water. He watched it until he fell asleep. The river kept running. The children kept sleeping in the house with the unshuttered window. Hollowwell kept being.

**This is the ninth chapter.*
*The old man rests. The river keeps his seat warm.**



Chapter Ten - The Light

Thomas did not wake up by the river.

The children found him there in the morning, his hands in the water, his face to the light. He looked asleep, which is how old men by rivers are supposed to look at the end.

They did not bury him in the cold earth. They let the river take him, the way it had taken the curse. The water ran clear over him, and for a moment it held his reflection perfectly, young again, not Aperman, not rust-stained, just Thomas, smiling.

Then it let him go.

That afternoon, something happened that had not happened in Hollowwell for sixty years. The sun and the moon were in the sky at the same time, both bright, both kind.

The children stood in the river and held hands, and the light fell through them, and through the water, and made everything it touched look new. The old well, the open doorways, small house with the unshuttered windom, even their own small faces.

"What is it?" the youngest asked.

"It is the light," the first girl said. "He said it would come after."

And it did. It came and it stayed. Not a fierce light. Not thunder. Just a steady, ordinary light that made it possible to see where you were going.

Hollowwell was never cursed again. It was lit.

This is the tenth chapter. The final light. Thomas is the river now. Hollowwell remembers how to be.

CHAPTER ELEVEN - THE SUNNY DAYS

The river did not stop in the morning.

It kept going, as rivers do, past Hollowwell, past the small house with the unshuttered window, carrying the light with it.

The children came back to the bank. They did not look for Thomas. They knew where he was. He was in the clear water, in the way it held the sun without trying to keep it.

Hollowwell woke up lit.

Not like before, when it was lit by warnings and by curses and by stories about what might come. This was a different kind of lit. The kind where you can see your hands in front of you. The kind where a future has room.

"What do we do now?" the youngest asked.

"We live," the first girl said. "We lay down when we are tired. We get up when the sun is out. He said sunny days would come after."

And they did. They came ordinary and steady. One after another. Not ending. Just beginning.

Hollowwell remembered how to be. And it kept remembering, every sunny day after.

*This is the eleventh chapter.
The after. The light stayed.*

CHAPTER TWELVE - THE MAP

On the third sunny day, the children found it.

It was not buried. It was floating, just under the surface of the river where Thomas was, humming faintly, warm to the touch even through the water.

It was a map. But not of Hollowwell.

It showed places that hadn't happened yet. Rivers that ran upward into the sky. Cities made of light and quiet. A field where people laid down not because they were tired, but because the stars were worth watching for a long time.

"Where is this?" the youngest asked.

The first girl turned the map over. On the back, in a hand she recognized, it said:

"For when you are ready to go further."

The storm is over. The road is open.

- T.

They did not leave that day. Sunny days are for staying, too.

But that night, for the first time, they looked up and wondered what was beyond the bank. The map pulsed once, like a heartbeat, like a promise.

And far above Hollowwell, something that was not a storm moved across the sky. Quiet. Bright. Waiting.

*This is the twelfth chapter.
The beyond. The adventure begins.*

CHAPTER TWELVE - THE MAN WITH THE PIANO

He did not arrive on the river. He arrived on the road that the river had always wanted to be.

He pushed a piano. Not a grand one. An old upright with one chipped key that still played if you meant it.

"They told me Hollowwell was quiet," he said.

"It was," the first girll said. "Until it was lit."

He smiled and sat down on the bank. He did not ask about Thomas. Some men know when they are sitting next to a story that has become a river.

He played. At first, nothing fancy. Just a low chord, like laying down after a long time of standing. Like the sound sunny days make if you listen close.

The children sat. The water slowed to listen. Even the map in the girl's pocket stopped humming and just held its breath.

"What is it called?" the youngest asked.

"I don't know yet," the man said. "It is the song that comes after. After the curse, after the light, after you remember how to be. You have to make it up as you go."

So they did. He played the same chord again, and this time the girl sang one note. Then the boy. Then all of them, not quite in tune, but true.

Hollowwell had never heard music like that. It wasn't from before. It wasn't from elsewhere. It was from here. Now.

The man with the piano stayed through the evening. He said he was going further when the stars were higher, that there were other towns that needed to remember how to be lit, too.

He left the piano. "Some roads you can't push a piano down," he

That night, Hollowwell did not sleep right away. It played, badly beautifully, until the river carried the sound away to wherever rivers go when they are also something else.

*This is the twelfth chapter.
The beyond. The adventure begins.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - THE ROAD

They waited until the piano was out of tune again. It took two days.

"We should go," the first girl said, not because she wanted to leave Hollowwell, but because the map in her pocket had started humming again, louder than the river.

"Where?" the youngest asked.

"Where the man with the piano went. Where Thomas went before he was a river. Forward."

They took turns pushing the piano. It was heavier than it looked. Some roads you can't push a piano down, the man had said, but they were going to try anyway.

The river went with them. Or they went with the river. It was hard to tell. Hollowwell got smaller behind them, but it did not get dark. It stayed lit. Some places you carry with you.



At the top of the hill, they saw it.

Not a city. Not yet. A field. The one from the map. Where people lay down not because they were tired, but because the stars were worth watching for a long time.

And in the field, people were already laying down.
Looking up. Waiting for someone to join them.

The girl let go of the piano. The chord it made when it settled was exactly the one the man had played. Like laying down. Like sunny days. Like after.

"We found it," she whispered.

The map stopped humming. It was not needed anymore. It folded itself into light and went into the river.

Above them, that quiet bright thing that was not a storm was closer now. It was not waiting anymore. It was landing.

*This is the twelfth chapter.
The beyond. The adventure begins.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – THE LADY IN RED

The light did not make a sound when it landed. That was how they knew it was not a storm.

The door opened like a chord resolving.

And she stepped out.

She was wearing red. Not bright. Deep. Like a river at sunset, like the last page of a good book, like something you remember even before you see it.

"You pushed the piano," she said.
looking at it, sitting lopsided on the road.

"We tried," the first girl said. "It was heavy."

"All good things are," the lady said. And she smiled.
It was a smile that had seen other Hollowwells. Other rivers.
Other children who learned how to be lit.
"Who are you?" the youngest asked.

"I am the one who left the map," she said. "Long ago. Before Thomas was a river. Before the man with the piano was a man. I left maps in many places, for anyone ready to go further."
"Is Hollowwell the further?" the girl asked.



She touched the piano. The chipped key fixed itself.
Not with magic. With being remembered correctly.

Then she played. It was the same chord the man had played, but from the other side. Not like laying down. Like getting up.
"Come," she said. "Lay down in the field with me. Not because you are tired. Because the stars are worth watching for a long time. And after that, I I will show you, the road that rivers want to be."

They laid down. The field was soft. The sky was full. The lady in red lay down beside them, her dress like a small sunset on the grass.
And far behind them, Hollowwell stayed lit, playing its one good chord over and over, badly and beautifully, until the night learned it.

*This is the fourteenth chapter.
The arrival. The next sunny days.*