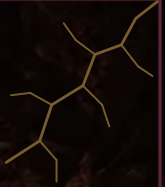




THE SIXTH KEY

FOR PLAYERS WHO KNOW WHERE TO LOOK.
A HOUSE & DESIGN PRODUCTION



DOOR 01 / THE EMBER GUILD

The Bell Beneath Briar Hollow

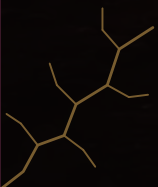


OPENING CHRONICLE

A story to be read aloud at the table

When the bell speaks, we listen.

READING TIME / APPROXIMATELY 10 MINUTES





CHAPTER 01

Before the first toll

READER CUE Warm and unhurried. Let the village feel real before the danger begins.

Briar Hollow was built in a valley where danger arrived quietly.

Spring floods rushed down from clear mountain skies. Winter storms buried the road between one sunset and the next. Forest fires traveled beneath the earth, burning through roots for days before the first flames appeared.

The settlers needed a warning that could reach every home, field, and mine.

On the highest hill, they raised a blackwood tower and hung an enormous bronze bell inside it. Every family placed something into the forge: a wedding ring, a farm tool, a soldier's buckle, a child's first lost tooth wrapped in copper wire.

When the bell cooled, the villagers carved their names into its bronze.

They called it the Warden Bell.

Its voice protected Briar Hollow for generations. When it rang for fire, buckets were filled before smoke reached the rooftops. When it rang for flood, parents carried sleeping children uphill before the river crossed its banks.

Every child learned the same promise:

When the bell speaks, we listen.



CHAPTER 02

The Mercy Tone

READER CUE Lower your voice. This is the first secret the table is being trusted with.

The bell had another voice.

Its ordinary clapper struck the bronze and sent a clear warning across the valley. But beneath the tower floor lay a hidden black-iron counterweight. When raised against the bell's lowest rim, it produced a note so deep that people felt it behind their ribs before they heard it.

The founders called it the Mercy Tone.

It carried one instruction:

Come to safety.



Allow one quiet breath before continuing.

The Mercy Tone was meant for the moment when terror overwhelmed reason: when a parent would not leave a burning home, when a miner refused to abandon a collapsing tunnel, or when a child froze in the path of floodwater.

Three wardens had to operate it together. The bell's guardian had to open the chamber willingly. When the danger passed, the command released its hold.

For generations, no one used it. The mechanism disappeared beneath repairs, and the bell's guardian returned to its sanctuary beneath Briar Chapel.





CHAPTER 03

When warning was no longer enough

READER CUE Build steadily. Do not rush the names of the dead.

Years later, repairs to the Warden Tower uncovered the sealed chamber.

Soon afterward, part of the northern mine collapsed. Twenty-three miners reached the exit, then turned back for six companions trapped below. The wardens sounded the ordinary warning, but the miners would not leave their friends.

The guardian opened the chamber. The Mercy Tone sounded.

All twenty-three miners walked out.

They wept. They fought their own legs. Some clawed at the tunnel walls, begging to go back, but their bodies carried them toward daylight.

Minutes later, the mine collapsed completely.



Pause.

Twenty-three people lived. Six died in the darkness.

Briar Hollow praised the wardens for preventing a greater tragedy. No one wanted to question the power that had returned a husband, father, daughter, or friend.

After that, stories began to spread.

Miners who protested unsafe conditions returned to work without another word. A crowd gathered outside the grain store and dispersed before anyone addressed them. A schoolteacher who claimed to have found the Mercy Tone's original records woke the following morning unable to speak.

The wardens denied everything.

But people began hearing commands spoken in familiar voices. A mother heard herself calling her children home while she stood beside them. A widow heard her dead husband tell her to open the door.

Soon, no one knew whether they were obeying someone they loved... or the bell.





CHAPTER 04

The longest night

READER CUE *Slow down. Let each command fall by itself.*

Seventeen years ago, snow fell over Briar Hollow in heavy, silent sheets.

Lanterns burned along the road to the Warden Tower. One by one, villagers left their homes and walked toward the square. Some arrived barefoot. Some carried sleeping children. Some still clutched spoons or carving knives in their hands.

They did not know why they had come.

Hundreds stood beneath the tower, their breath rising through the torchlight.

High above them, the Warden Bell began to swing.

The first toll shattered every window facing the hill.

BE STILL.

Every person in the square froze. A mother could not reach for the child beside her. A man running down the hill stopped with one foot above the ground. Only their eyes could move as the bell began its second swing.

The second toll rolled across Briar Hollow.

BE SILENT.

Every voice vanished. Cries died inside throats. Prayers became empty breath. Children opened their mouths and made no sound.





CHAPTER 05

The thing in the tower

READER CUE *Hold the silence. Make the table see what the villagers could not hear.*

In the terrible silence, something broke through the floor of Briar Chapel.

A horned creature crossed the square while the villagers remained imprisoned inside their bodies. It climbed the blackwood tower as the wardens pulled the bell toward its final swing.

No one in the square heard the command gathering inside the bronze.

They saw only the creature reach the bell, open its impossible mouth, and swallow the third toll before it could escape.

The Warden Bell split from crown to rim.

Bronze light tore through the tower. The stolen voices bound inside the bell spiraled above the village like sparks in a storm. One after another, the creature swallowed them too.

The tower collapsed.

When the villagers regained control of their bodies, the bell lay broken in the snow. The wardens were dead. The horned creature was dragging itself toward Briar Chapel with every missing voice trapped inside it.

The surviving wardens named the creature before anyone could ask why it had climbed the tower.

The Bell-Eater.

They said a monster had attacked Briar Hollow, devoured the sacred bell, and stolen the voices of the innocent. They chained the chapel doors and sealed the creature beneath the earth.

That is the story the village carried into exile.



CHAPTER 06

The village that faded

READER CUE *Quieter now. Let the horror become grief.*

Briar Hollow survived the night. It did not survive what followed.

Some villagers never spoke again. Others woke with voices that did not belong to them. Children heard missing parents singing beneath floorboards. Familiar laughter drifted from locked rooms.

Silver briars pushed through cracks in the chapel foundation. They climbed garden walls, crossed the road, and wrapped themselves around abandoned doorways. Their glass-clear thorns whispered whenever anyone passed.

Families began to leave.

Within five years, the last residents abandoned Briar Hollow.

The Ember Guild sealed the only road into the valley and built a watchhouse beside the boundary. No one outside the Guild was permitted to enter.

Before departing, the last village elder gave the Guild one warning:

If the bell ever rings again, do not let it finish.

For seventeen years, it remained silent.





CHAPTER 07

Tonight

READER CUE *Bring the players into the room. These details belong to them now.*

Rain drums against the roof of the Ember Guild's watchhouse.

Four Guild members have drawn an ordinary night watch.

Their wet cloaks steam beside the hearth. Pepper stew simmers over the fire, filling the room with the smell of woodsmoke, onions, and singed herbs. A deck of cards lies unfinished on the table.

Beyond the rain-streaked windows stands the iron boundary gate. Behind it, the forbidden road disappears into the trees.

Nothing has happened here in seventeen years.

Then the spoons begin to tremble.

A low vibration moves through the floorboards. It passes up the legs of the table and settles behind every heartbeat.

Mounted above the hearth is a small iron school bell recovered from Briar Hollow. Its clapper was removed before it entered the Guild's possession.

It cannot ring.



Stop. Look around the table.



CHAPTER 08

The bell swings

READER CUE *Begin softly. Let the room disappear around the words.*

The bell swings.

One clear note fills the watchhouse.

Every flame goes out.



Hold the darkness for one breath.

Then the hearth reignites in a deep, smokeless red.

A black envelope lies in the ashes. Silver sap glistens along its edges. The fire bends away from it.

The wax bears the first seal of the Ember Guild: the mark carried by the members who entered Briar Hollow after the disaster and never returned.

Inside are three words:

BEFORE THE THIRD TOLL.

The iron gate outside slams open.





CHAPTER 09

The village wakes

READER CUE *Gather momentum now. The invitation has become impossible to refuse.*

Beyond it, the forbidden road begins to return. Roots withdraw from the mud. Silver briars unwind from one another. One by one, lights appear between the trees.

They are not lanterns.

They are windows.

Briar Hollow is lighting itself.

At the top of the valley, bronze light leaks through the ruins of the Warden Tower. Something enormous moves inside it.

The message changes. A second line writes itself beneath the first:

THEY LIED ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED HERE.

The boundary gate opens only far enough for a hand to pass through.

Four shallow impressions appear in the iron.

One for each of you.





THE CHRONICLE ENDS

The Room Begins



Place your hand upon the gate.

Host: Return to the Room screen and invite every Keyholder to continue.

THE SIXTH KEY / THE BELL BENEATH BRIAR HOLLOW