



AXIS OF DAMAGE

A THRILLER

NOT A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PARTH SHIRALKAR

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Edition one. First published as an e-book, 2021.

Contains depictions of violence and colorful language.

METEOROLOGICAL NOTE:

Although partly inspired by the 2020 derecho, the events of this story take place in present day.

PREFACE

Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination (mine) or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All typos and notions of grandeur in this work of fiction are solely my burden to bear. With the inevitable pushing and kneading at the fabric of possibility comes the opportunity for fresh conceptions. To you, the reader, I extend my gratitude for giving this story a try.

Finally, special thanks to everyone who showed the slightest bit of interest when I told them I was writing something new. It means more than you will know.

Enjoy.

Parth
December 2021

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Prologue: After the Storm...

Monday, 9:32 AM

“What the hell is this?” the shift manager turned her nose up at the little paper slip with the order for table seven. Her name was Shania Smith, and she was in no mood for any nonsense. The diner was one of the two in town, both on opposite ends geographically, and this one had a direct line of sight for people to view some newly crumpled corn silos on the skyline. Shania muttered a string of curses to herself and glanced out of the cracked kitchen window. The sky was nice and bright, almost as if this weekend’s incident had been months ago. But she knew it wouldn’t last. *Not even noon yet, and we’re already getting the drunkards.*

She looked at the paper slip again. The server had been Damien, one of the new boys. He was chatting up a customer when she beckoned to him. He sauntered over leisurely, and it took an amount of self-restraint on her part to not snap at him. She held up the paper. “What the hell is this?” she said again, and it was not her second time that day. Not even close.

Damien was chewing something, and did not bother stopping. “Chable seven-” he gulped suddenly, and continued more clearly, “I mean table seven. Excuse me. It’s the order for table seven.”

“I can see that. What did they order again?”

Damien peered at the paper she was holding up. “It’s just some guy. Okay, that’s definitely my handwriting, and here’s what it says- *A bottle of Jameson and the nearest shrink,*” he proclaimed. And that’s what it said.

“You understand we’re a diner and not a bar, right?”

“Oh, right. Right, totally. I’ll go talk to him.” There was a pause, and the wind howled outside.

“What about the shrink?”

“Tch!” said Shania, and shoved the piece of paper in his hands. “Oh, for heaven’s sake. Go take ten,” she told him, and wiped her hands on the apron. Then she mentally readied herself for another unpleasant morning with a drunken patron and strode into the dining area. Next to the far booth was table seven.

The man sitting at table seven was Mr. Dennis...

Not poor Mr. Dennis, she said to herself. The derecho had been hard on everyone in town. It had passed through a major gas station and taken apart a lot of infrastructure all over the place. Mr. Dennis owned a small lumberyard near the outskirts, just a mile from said gas station. It had been obliterated completely. A full day’s hard work and a lot of help from the locals had made it better, and things were looking up for the yard. But maybe progress was a little slow.

It was only Monday, after all. She expected that Mr. Dennis had been a little careless with the bottle again. As she made her way to him, a quick glance at the parking lot told her that he had driven here in his own station wagon. Hopefully, he was yet to start today's drinking binge, or it would be another trip to the station for him...

"Mr. Dennis," she began, and then stopped. "Ooh, are you holding up good, Mr. Dennis?"

Mr. Dennis was an old-ish man. A snooty professor-like guy, Shania had always thought of him. He had graying hair and a generally steady gaze. Today, his gaze was all over the place. It occurred to Shania that he was not, in fact, inebriated.

Mr. Dennis, face covered in creases and an odd expression, was seated with his back to the window. There was a paper napkin in front of him that had been torn to tatters. His teeth were clattering somewhat, and his eyes seemed to be focusing on nothing at all. *He's not drunk*, thought Shania. "Mr. Dennis, what's going on?" *He's in shock!*

Mr. Dennis looked up at her like a lost waif, wrinkles and all. "It was *horrible*..." he said. "So *dreadful*. They have to be careful. Oh god..."

Then he tried to stand up. Although in a bit of a shock herself, Shania was already dialing 911, and while Mr. Dennis made his way to his feet – too shakily, she thought – she had explained the situation on the phone, asking for emergency medical assistance if possible. Having conveyed the message, her attention finally turned to the old man.

"Could you hold on for a second, Mr. Denn-"

But Mr. Dennis had already taken a step toward the exit. He was still in shock, and his disorientation was apparent. Turning, he croaked to her, "The vile creature is in the woods!" He seemed to gain a bit of clarity just then and then began to mumble. "Such an *impossibly* tall apparition..."

Shania huffed at him. "Say what now?"

Mr. Dennis had lost it again, and his eyes glossed over a little. He turned yet again, took a huge step and smacked his head on the wall he hadn't noticed was in his way. There was a soft *thud* as he slithered down the wall, prompting Shania to rush forward and grab him. The wall had a little bloody spot where the man had banged his head.

In the distance, there was the sound of the town hospital's singular ambulance siren starting up. Holding unconscious Mr. Dennis in her lap, Shania sighed. It was only Monday.

Business as Usual

Monday, 10:53 AM

The town of Merriwald, Iowa was about as average a town in Iowa as you could get. With no colleges or tourist attractions, the people enjoyed a seemingly idyllic life. It was a pretty little place with a lot of farms and even more barns, and it was covered on three sides by thick, dense woods. The fourth side let inward and outward from the town, and you could drive a few hours straight out to Des Moines, the state capital.

The town council met every Sunday to discuss this and that and other business. The Merriwald Police Department was a rather rough-and-tumble affair, and the state funding came and went like the wind. It was fine, though, because Merriwald wasn't known for its crime rates. In fact, Merriwald wasn't known much at all. Which was fine with the people who lived there, because all they wanted was to be left alone.

Petty crime was definitely a thing in Merriwald, but there had been virtually no homicides for years, decades even. And so, when the derecho ravaged the Midwest, and when Merriwald was caught in its wave, the freak deaths caused by the hurricanes threw the entire town off its equilibrium.

People all over town would be taking a break from work all week, trying their best to help reconstruct the damaged parts of Merriwald. There were many, many of them.

On Monday, fifty-one-year-old private eye Thomas Tungsten was rifling through a file full of mugshots in his office. The recent bout of hurricanes aside, business was already slow these days, and he had to busy himself with whatever new scoop was going around town, which was mainly scavengers and thieves looking for easy loot in the destroyed remains of some neighborhoods. Sifting through the various photographs, Ungsten found himself reminiscing about his cop days. Though it had been a harrowing job, he'd felt a certain consistency and stability in those days. His life had had a rhythm to it, unlike now. But all that was ancient history.

After retiring early from his position as an accomplished homicide detective, Ungsten had spent the past few years travelling all over the Midwest, finding trouble and B&Bs like his life depended on it. Finally, he'd decided it was time to settle down in a nice little town, like Merriwald. All while he still had his full head of wavy salt-and-pepper hair. In about a month, Ungsten would complete a full year in the place. His first year as a private eye, too.

"Hmph," he said, and put away the file. The natural calamity was barely two days old and the local youth was already engaging in thievery at any stores with busted doors. His own building compound had suffered heavy damage, leaving debris and mangled steel fencing strewn about the premises. Ungsten's office doubled as his abode, and there was a back room twice the size of his front office, with partitions for living/sleeping areas and a workstation with several whiteboards all over the walls. A full-service shower had cost him a pretty penny to install, but

its utility to him now was priceless. Most of which, thankfully, had survived without much harm done.

Taking a stroll around the building, Ungsten walked into his front office and quickly tidied up. Clearing out an old ashtray and managing to arrange the mess of archive files on his desk in a somewhat coherent pile, Ungsten decisively peered at today's entry in his diary. "Eva Marsh, 11:00 AM," it said, bright and big. Ungsten put the diary away into the folds of his jacket and rubbed his palms to warm them up. The notorious Iowa winds were already whooshing in and out of the temporarily plugged holes in his walls. He needed a permanent solution and few more wooden planks soon – an endeavor for the evening, he told himself.

When he was a cop, every now and then, they handed him a green-faced recruit fresh out of high school. He'd tended to go hard on them, mainly because that was the only way he knew how. Now, over a decade and many adventures later, perhaps knowing that he was a changed man, fate had dealt him a familiar card.

Thomas Ungsten was not a commercially popular private eye, but he was well known in certain circles. He lived in Merriwald, but took cases all over the state, and traveled in his trusty Chevy Impala. Upon starting his practice as an independent investigator, he'd landed a couple of high-profile city cases (an infidelity case and an attempted kidnapping), and had managed to solve them both for a very nice payout. Ungsten was a bit more tech-savvy than most of his peers, and advertised his practice on certain niche online forums, where he knew people were looking for the kind of services he could provide.

Two weeks ago, he'd received a rather strange request from a woman with the online username NeonJenesis42. One Eva Marsh, in her late 20s, wanted to be his apprentice for six months.

Of course, Ungsten had dived right into her background and made sure there was nothing funny going on behind the scenes. She would be his first apprentice as a private eye. Solid education with a graduate degree in some specialized neuroscience; and a decent family history, with a few months of experience as a forensic aide at various medical institutions. He'd even made sure to have two casual interviews with her, one over the phone and one with video. It all seemed to check out fine, and his life two weeks ago had been blander than ever. Exactly thirteen days ago, he'd agreed to her request.

Ungsten glanced at his wristwatch. 10:57 AM. He settled down behind the front office desk. A minute passed by. A heavy gust of wind shook the walls a little. Another minute gone. Ungsten's watch blinked to display the number 11-

There was a knock. "Come on in!" said Ungsten, getting to his feet and around the desk to greet his visitor. The door opened softly, and another gust of wind snuck through the gap, and then Eva Marsh walked in.

Like a wandering goat, the woman seemed to drift into the premises. Her eyes ran swiftly over his office. They shook hands, and Ungsten used the moment to get a clear read on her. This was the first time they were meeting face-to-face.

Marsh was just about as tall as his chin, which put her at about 5'6" or thereabouts. Her hair was short, and she looked younger in person than he had imagined. For a surreal moment, she reminded him of a niece he never had, and it was an odd sensation. Marsh was dressed in some style he hadn't seen before, but it was eloquent. There was something eerie about her presence that made his skin tingle. For half a second, he found himself wondering if she really was right there, in front of him, and he glanced at the hand gripping his own. It was an extremely unnerving feeling, and Ungsten had to blink voluntarily to break the spell.

"Eva Marsh, yes? Welcome to Merriwald," he said, smiling warmly.

"Thank you, Mr. Tungsten." Her smile was not nearly as warm as his.

"You can call me Thomas."

"Thank you, Thomas. Please, call me Eva."

"Wonderful. Have a seat."

On paper, Marsh was from somewhere in Iowa, but there seemed some disparity over where she was actually from. Ungsten had gathered enough information to place her into the non-threat column, at least initially. Now that he'd met her, she seemed... kind of cold. But if it was simply her natural state of being, Ungsten did not mind. He'd grown past his innate urge to bully a recruit or pick a fight with the nearest supervisor, and was looking forward to building a professional relationship with Marsh. He was also looking forward to finally having a partner to drive around with, but he kept that bit to himself.

"You mind if I..." Ungsten produced a pack of cigarettes from somewhere and gestured at it. Marsh shrugged, and Ungsten placed one between his lips and put the pack away. For the next several minutes, there was no sign of a lighter.

"Aren't you going to smoke it?"

"Trying to quit," said the man, and she nodded.

"Ah. I'm really sorry about the derecho," said Marsh. There was a level of sincerity in her voice that Ungsten was appreciative of. He'd seen some of the subtle accusations against the state's hurricane-readiness being thrown about in some factions of national media.

"Thank you," he said, keeping his tone neutral. "We should've expected it, you know? Prepped better. But these things happen."

"You're right," Marsh replied. They exchanged further pleasantries about the weather before there was a lull in the conversation.

Ungsten cleared his throat. "So, you want to get some experience in the investigation business?"

Marsh nodded, and launched into her opening salvo. "This is all a bit odd, and since we're finally meeting in person, I can explain better."

Ungsten sat back in his chair and looked at her, his expression earnest.

She continued. “We spoke about this over the phone, but in the very recent past, I’ve had to ask myself a lot of tough questions. It has been a period of immense personal growth for me, and I’ve made the decision to separate myself from who I was a month ago. What this means is, I’ve decided to stop working on myself as a project, and focus that energy into something else. It is a theory of mine that by engaging in investigative pursuits, I can convince my mind to resolve its mess.”

Ungsten said nothing.

“Now this may seem a bit farfetched to you, but I needed the break, you see. And I really, *really* appreciate you doing this.”

There was silence for a few moments.

Then, Ungsten spoke. “It doesn’t sound all that farfetched to me. You were seeking some answers, yes? And you found an occupation that involves some of that, yes? And you chose to travel and live here because you believe this will be of some help, yes? Well, as long as you pay your end of the gas and don’t go off in my ear like a depth charge at the first sign of trouble, we’ll be fine.”

Marsh smiled. “Thank you for understanding. As far as logistics are concerned, I’m staying at the Roman Inn, and you already have my contact information.”

Ungsten nodded. Marsh adjusted herself in her seat and looked at him, her eyes slightly wide open. “So, what’s on the schedule for today?” There was a pause while Ungsten digested this.

Wow, he thought, and coughed. “Today? Well...”

“The Chevy’s yours, right? Why don’t we take a ride around town? I took the bus here and there’s a few groups of volunteers helping rebuild some of the buildings on the way. Maybe we can go help them out? I dunno.”

Ungsten couldn’t believe she’d said all that with a straight face. Who wants to go work and volunteer on their first day? With such gusto? And wasn’t he technically her boss? Maybe she did need that break, after all. And he sure needed the physical activity. “Ahem, why the hell not. Let’s do it.”

“Great, I’ll wait for you outside.” said Marsh, and got up and turned to go. Her dark cloak-like dress fluttered behind her as she stepped out, letting in another quick gust of cold air. Ungsten pulled his own jacket tight around himself and donned his beanie before following her into the icy morning weather.

The Various Shapes of Danger

Monday, 11:29 AM

Mr. Dennis had owned the lumber yard for about six years. He'd purchased the plot from a rather indignant old lady, right next to the best black oaks, where he set up a small mill to harvest the wood. In fairness, the town didn't even use a lot of wood, and exports from the yard were minimal. However, there was a definite market for the right kind of product, and Mr. Dennis tapped into it. Over the months, it became a self-sustaining business with a small but consistent profit margin. All before the derecho came through.

To avoid massive overhead costs, lumber yards are sometimes located in the vicinity of a forested area. There's usually a constructed warehouse with some kind of a sales floor and lots of products for sale, with a bunch of machinery to move the heavy wood around. Mr. Dennis had a couple of forklifts in the yard, which were currently lying about, unmanned.

The first boy did a backflip next to one of the forklifts and kicked at its glass window.

"Dave! Stop that!"

The second boy was looking around nervously. The last kid, Kurt, was fidgeting with some sort of smoking apparatus, hoping to take the edge off before they did what they were about to.

"Shut the *fuck* up, Ro," said Dave, kicking at the forklift again. The glass cracked.

Ro cursed softly. "Kurt, will you tell him to stop, man?"

Kurt, meanwhile, had successfully smoked whatever he'd been attempting to smoke, and looked at Ro with an odd glaze over his eyes. Ro shook his head in exasperation.

"Guys, can we just check go for the safe? Come on-"

"Like I just said, Ro. Shut the fuck up for a bit, will you? Jeez."

Dave dusted himself off and looked around the yard. The place was deserted. Mr. Dennis was at the hospital, as the grapevine had told them just half an hour ago. Since he was recovering from a rumored "drunken mishap", the crew helping out with the yard rebuilding had decided to take a break. Merriwald wasn't a huge town, and there was just one big lumber yard around. Dave thought that they were lucky to get here first.

The kids were in their late teens, and Dave was about to turn nineteen in a month. "Let's go," he said.

The lumber business was doing rather well, apparently. Mr. Dennis kept all his money in his safe, and they'd all seen him talk about it very casually when they were hanging around the place, much to the annoyance of the other, much older patrons. Well, on account of his prescribed rest, Mr. Dennis wasn't needing the safe right now, and they could use the extra cash for their own little enterprises.

The three of them made their way across the adjoining mill, hoping to take the straight path to Mr. Dennis's office. To their dismay, there was a little wooded area that had caved right in the middle of the path. Dave and Ro took one look at it and cursed loudly. Kurt giggled, and Dave slapped the back of his head. "Kurt, why'd you have to bring that fucking thing with you? Idiot." Another *smack*. Maybe with all the harassment complaints at school against Kurt, he needed a bit of calming down for sure, but this was not the time or place for him to do it. Dave was slowly sobering up to their situation.

"We're gonna have to cut through the woods," said Ro.

"Yeeeaap," said Dave, glancing up and ahead at their treacherous path. "Not really looking forward to that." He shook his arms as if to restore blood flow, and pushed forward.

They cleared the pathway with their hands and feet, kick and pushing at debris till they could walk through it. Finally, they came to the edge of the woods, where they would have to angle slightly inwards for a few meters and then come out the other end. There was a large branch hanging about, and Ro motioned to Dave to be careful. The air was tense.

"Yeah, yeah," said Dave. "Follow me."

At that moment, the sun seemed to shy away from the sky, and dark clouds gathered over it. "Ah, damnit, is it gonna rain right now?"

Ro peered up through the dense foliage. "No, the clouds are just passing over the sun."

An unhurried gust of wind forced its way into the woods and seemed to pass through them. All three of them shuddered.

Ro sniffed at the cold air, his breath turning to a light vapor in front of him. "Hey Dave, you smell that?"

"What?" snapped Dave. "It's probably Kurt and whatever's in his damned pipe today. Keep walking."

Ro wasn't convinced. He'd caught a whiff of something *dense* and dark, and he didn't know what it was. Reaching for his phone, he peeped around, inhaling the air around them. It reminded him of one of those chemicals you can smell on someone after they've been discharged from a-

"Dave! What's *that*?" cried out Ro, nearly losing his footing. Diagonally behind them, a few yards away, a tall, dark shape seemed to be hovering behind the trees. The shrubbery was thick around them, and Ro had the sudden urge to burst into a sprint. With trembling hands, he clicked open the camera app and turned his to look at Dave, who had stopped to look at the thing also. His face was pale, his eyes wide.

"What the fuck is that?" Dave shrieked. "*Ro!* Man, what the hell?" Then he turned and bolted for the office. With his phone in his hand, Ro was frozen in place.

The thing moved. It seemed to slither in the darkness as it made its way to them. And then it seemed to *unfold* somehow, growing taller, and taller, and taller...

“KURT!” screamed Ro, and rushed to grab Kurt’s arm, but it was too late.

The stench of chemical was almost overwhelming now, and Ro could swear it reminded him of Sulphur or something similar. His fingertips grazed the sleeve of Kurt’s shirt, who was grinning ear-to-ear wildly, when suddenly-

There was the sound of leaves rustling, and the dark, terribly tall apparition bore down on Kurt’s tiny frame. Ro thought he saw two arm-like appendages shoot out at a breakneck speed from the figure’s shadow, and Kurt was yanked from the ground! And then he simply disappeared from Ro’s field of vision. Dave was nowhere to be seen, and Ro fell to the ground, shrieking crazily. His fingers had slipped, and the camera flash going off in the shadows like a second, blinking sun had appeared suddenly in the thicket.

An even darker cloud swept over the sun, and Ro stopped screaming. Meanwhile, Kurt’s eyes seemed to focus, even as he continued to be carried into the forest. A moment passed, and then, to Ro’s astonishment, Kurt’s scream reverberated through the thick foliage, as if he was only a couple meters away in the bushes, moving away at a slow pace. *Was he really moving?*

Kurt wailed on as Ro began to scramble over the bushes and torn branches, hoping to-

“Aaargh!” Like someone accidentally hitting mute on a television playing loud music, Kurt’s scream was cut short. To Ro’s horror, he thought he heard wet, squelching noises coming closer from the foliage. On his hands and feet, he tried desperately to scramble backwards and out into the clearing, but-

“FUCK! *FUCK!*” screamed Ro as a slimy, vine-like thing wrapped itself around his foot. He felt like a claw-like appendage had grabbed him. And the unbearably tight vice grip on his ankle sent up such a sharp pain up his leg, all he could do was gasp for air. *Crack!* His leg jerked to the side, and he realized suddenly that something in his foot was broken.

Ro’s sobs turned to whimpers as the sun finally came out again, and he was dragged away into the woods. Eventually, the last of the forest sounds died away, and silence returned to the lumber yard.

When in Rome

Monday, 12:03 PM

Eva Marsh took in the large swathes of cropped land around her as Ungsten drove them through town. Strips of the cropped area were levelled horribly, the plants beheaded by the derecho's scythe.

They had helped at some of the local restructuring efforts, where Marsh had met up with some contractors who were leading the massive project. They all seemed a bit glum to her, but maybe it was just the seemingly sunless sky. While helping haul furniture and equipment around, she didn't get to chat one-on-one with her new boss. Now, thankfully, Ungsten was driving around town to help her get a feel for the place. There weren't a lot of building clusters in Merriwald, and people tended to stay near their farms for most of the time. Marsh considered the weather in Merriwald and decided that it was just fine by her if it wanted to get severely misty and gloomy. It was fall, after all.

The dark green Impala cruised along a large cornfield that had been flattened halfway through. A few birds could be seen circling in the faraway sky. *Crows*, thought Marsh.

"You ever done any investigating before?" asked Ungsten, glancing at her.

Marsh thought about her professional history. "Not really," she said. "I like reading mysteries, though."

Ungsten laughed. "Of course you do. Merriwald's got basically two mysteries. One, who keeps stealing the street sign from 42nd Ave? And two, what kind of battery acid does the mayor's wife use in her recipes?"

Marsh did not laugh. "Would you like me to find out?"

"Um, I don't. I was making a joke." Ungsten coughed and looked at her.

"Oh," she said. "Sorry." They drove by a rather ugly scarecrow. "It's kind of important for me to try and solve something, you know."

"I don't know," said Ungsten. They were at a traffic light with no other vehicles visible in the distance. Despite the sunlight, the town was covered in a layer of fog that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

Marsh appeared hesitant. "Well, like I told you earlier. I've realized that I spend a lot of time thinking about nothing."

"And?"

"*And*?" said Marsh. "Why would I think about nothing when I can be thinking about something?"

"What's the difference?" said Ungsten, and the light turned green.

“The difference is that I’ll have *something* to work with. It’s simple, isn’t it? How do you make a clay pot without the clay? You don’t. The case – hypothetical, whatever I can pour my energy into – is the clay, and the resolution of the case is the pot. You knead and push and prod the clay into the pot. With no clay, all you’re left with is a pair of wringing hands.”

Ungsten considered this, conjuring up the image of impatient, restless hands in his mind. He seemed to half-shrug in his seat, and then nodded. “Ehh, sure,” he said. “But what if you run out of clay?”

“I dunno, take up a new hobby, I guess?”

Ungsten gazed at her. “So, is all this just a hobby to you?”

Marsh felt like she’d walked herself into a gotcha. “Sorry. I’ll be honest, Thomas. I really don’t know.”

Ungsten shrugged properly this time. “That’s fair. Try not to treat it less seriously than most things.”

They entered a series of city blocks with small businesses. One of the few popular local coffee shops had suffered heavy damage. The drive-through was gone entirely, and the front and back of the structure had caved sideways, leaving the business temporarily inoperable.

The Impala slowed down as they passed the building. A few people were milling about, and a couple of flatbed trucks were hauling equipment nearby. Ungsten rolled his window down and waved. The people waved back, and Marsh heard a couple of them yell out casual greetings. “How’s it going?”

“How’s it going?” said Ungsten, simultaneously.

The people went back to work, and Ungsten sped up, bringing the Impala back to speed.

“What’s the timeline for the recovery look like? About a few weeks, right? Months?” asked Marsh. “I’ve never been through a derecho.”

“Electricity-wise, we’ll be back at full power in a few days, max. The basic services are already running, like two of the bus routes. The depot was spared the destruction. Overall, the construction work should take a few weeks, but for the most part, we’ll be okay.” He frowned and glanced at her. “Never been through a derecho, you said?”

Marsh nodded. “I was born in Iowa, but I’ve always been traveling. The coast and back. Then the other coast and back. I guess I was too far away when the last big hurricanes were here.” She looked at him. “I was a twitchy teen with money to spare.”

“Of course.”

They chatted for a little bit, and then the car was silent for the next few turns. They were passing through another large patch of farmland when Ungsten’s gaze in the rearview mirror hardened.

“I think we might have a tail,” he said. His tone had lost its friendly nature. “The silver Mustang has been keeping on the same roads as we have.”

“It’s a peaceful drive, you know. Not a bad view, either. Some people like that.”

Ungsten shot her a sideways glance. “You’re *my* apprentice, and not the other way around.” Marsh held up her hands in mock surrender. “Be a little more observant,” he said. “You’re supposed to be smart, right? Try and list all the details in that memory of yours. As many as you can.”

“I’m on it,” said Marsh, and looked at him. There was a neutral, focused look on his face as he drove straight ahead.

Hmm, she thought, and peered at the vehicle behind them.

The silver Mustang was at a little distance behind them, maybe the length of a couple large heavy-duty trucks. She considered her next possible actions. From her vantage point, all she could do was look and report, since all the maneuvering would be left to Ungsten.

She’d read about evasive driving and all kinds of fun tactics to employ in these situations. The Mustang was keeping pace with them, and had been for the last few miles at least.

She began to note how the driver was driving it. No erratic movement, and the Mustang looked very calm and deliberate on the gravelly road they were on. *Okay*.

“Can you take the next left?”

“But-”

“Trust me,” said Marsh. They turned left, and entered another bustling town area with lots of buildings and a lot of visible infrastructural damage. At the last moment when the Impala turned, they slowed down, and Marsh caught a glimpse of the other car’s number plates.

The Mustang *also turned*. “A-ha!”

Ungsten remained silent. They sped up the road, and the Mustang kept speed. To Marsh, this was an obvious sign that they were being tailed. But something was nagging at her...

She looked at the Mustang more closely. The plates weren’t out-of-state, and the car seemed in no hurry to chase them down. But there was something else... Why would a car be following them in broad daylight with barely any cover in the open? They wouldn’t be doing this unless their followers were extremely amateurish, or-

“We’re *not* being followed!”

“Voila!” Ungsten chuckled. “Good job. Sorry about that. We were both going to turn left, because the right leads to nowhere.” The Impala slowed down.

The Mustang passed them without incident, and Marsh frowned. “Why’d you do that?”

“I just had to make sure I didn’t have to babysit you through this whole thing.”

“And? Did I pass your little test?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Maybe a little warning, next time? Thanks.”

“Maybe.”

There was silence in the car as they approached downtown. They could see pieces of infrastructure – all sizes of wood and brick and metal and other dense material – strewn about haphazardly. Most of these were too big for them to move with just two pairs of hands, so they kept driving, hoping to join up with other volunteer teams.

Eva Marsh considered her situation. She thought about Thomas Ungsten, her new boss for the time being. He was tall and wide and had an agreeable laugh, and he reminded her of a boisterous sitcom dad. A clever sitcom dad with several years of fierce, sleuthing experience, and definite weapons practice. She liked his nonchalant, neutral demeanor. The little bouts of excitement were already keeping her mind on high alert, and she could feel some of the brain fog lifting. Would this side gig really help her out? Would she really manage to find a bit of fulfilment from a bit of mystery-solving?

The Impala swerved. “Whoops, sorry. Roadkill.” Ungsten patted his jacket lightly, as though checking for something. “Are you hungry? We can grab some pancakes at this diner up ahead. I’m friends with some of the staff.”

“Sure, yep.”

The sky was a shade of light blue, not the happy kind. It was as though the artist had angrily drawn a series of overarching cracks in the atmosphere and filled them up with especially shapeless clouds. In most states in the Midwest, like other parts of the world, fall season is a bit of a drama queen. Even in Merriwald, there were trees still holding on to the beautiful shades of brown and orange that looked fantastic on social media, but the rest of nature had moved on to drearier hues. As the Impala made its way into less smooth roads, Marsh gazed outside the window. Trees and clearings and barns and buildings whooshed past. The general atmosphere in Merriwald was a bit whimsical, currently like her own state of mind, thought Marsh, as she tried to organize her thoughts regarding her new job. In a fit of eagerness mixed with some anxiety, she had asked her new boss to start scouting for work on day one! What horror. She decided to ask good questions about the enterprise and work her way from there.

The Impala slowed down, and they drove into the parking lot of a diner that said “Over Easy” on the large yellow-and-pink banner outside.

“Can you tell me a bit about your older cases?”

“Sure. I can’t get into details, obviously-”

“Of course.”

“-but I’ve done a lot of, umm, *passive* investigation in the past. This involves following individuals from a distance, tracking down their contacts, mostly just reconnaissance and reporting from a distance, sometimes engaging with persons of interest...”

“Does that mean shooting them?”

Ungsten chuckled. “Not if I can help it.”

“Any fun stories?”

“Sure, dozens.”

There was silence in the car.

“Well? Aren’t you going to share?” said Marsh.

“Maybe later. Let’s get some food first.”

They took a booth near the windows, from where the parking lot was visible. A hearty meal full of warm pancakes and hash browns and hot coffee would provide more than enough nourishment for the next few hours, and they ordered accordingly.

“You do a lot of street photography, then?” asked Marsh.

“Hmm?”

“Of people, I mean. Do you photograph them a lot? For your reports and such.”

“It depends. Usually the client needs only proof of something they suspect is going on.”

“Like a cheating spouse?”

“Like a cheating spouse.”

“You retired as a detective, right? Were you ever in the army?”

“I’d rather not talk about all that.”

“Okay. How about some cool stuff you can do?”

“Like a parlor trick?” Ungsten smiled. “I’m really good on the Internet for my age, and I’m a quick study at most things. Being a P.I. is more or less about patience and remembering things. That’s really about it.”

“Sounds boring,” said Marsh, half joking.

“Welcome to the club.” Ungsten grinned and spread his arms. “I can pick locks super fast, though.”

“I can do that already.”

The grin disappeared. “Oh, fine. We’ll have something to do sooner or later.”

After their delicious meals, the pair got up and Ungsten called to the server. “Hey, Emily. How’s it going? Everything okay?”

Emily was taking a semester off from junior year, living back in her hometown. She liked talking to Ungsten about aliens, and was the type of bubbly person who would launch into a long, passionate charade about her latest BTS obsession without notice. She wasn’t smiling like her usual self. Wrinkles of tension lined her forehead. “Um, hey, Mr. Ungsten. I’m kinda stressed, actually. You know the other diner, yeah? Well, one of my friends texted me earlier about some weird stuff going down there, uh, today morning.”

“Oh?”

And Emily relayed – at length and with ample embellishment – what she’d heard. Marsh was listening intently, feeling a slight rush of adrenaline at the details of her story. Ungsten frowned and peered at Emily. “That’s what he said? Strange.”

“I thought so, too! What do you think Mr. Dennis really saw in the woods?”

“Probably just a trick of the light. You know how those silhouettes can get when the sun’s playing hide-and-seek.”

Emily smiled nervously. “Sure, sure. Hey, Mr. Ungsten, do you think you might look into it at all? Don’t you go around asking questions?”

He laughed. “Only when I’m working. And I avoid going around when I’m asking questions. Best to keep it discreet.” Emily giggled, finally, and the tension broke a little.

Ungsten cleared the bill and waved to the other staff. “It’s all probably fine. You have a good one.”

And they were back on the road.

In the Impala’s passenger seat, Marsh was fiddling with her phone. She asked, “Do you really think it was a trick of the light?”

Ungsten cleared his throat. “I don’t even know enough to think. We know some hearsay passed down through, what, two people? No point in letting that hold water. It’s like that old game you play at parties. One person whispers something to the second. The message gets passed along in the same fashion. Who knows what’s being mixed into the original message?”

It made sense to Marsh, and she nodded. “But look, the local news line is already doing a story on the man’s statement. Mr. Dennis is a local, right? Owns a hardware store closer to downtown, too. A creature sighting. ‘Devil in the woods’, it says.”

“Yeah, that’s him.” Ungsten paused. “Well, maybe it’s true.”

“What if it’s Bigfoot?”

“It’s not Bigfoot.”

“Oh? How do you know that?”

“Turf wars with the werewolves. The usual stuff.”

She looked at him, and they chuckled.

“I can drop you off somewhere in the afternoon and go do some maintenance at my office later.”

“Okay. I’d like to do more sightseeing. Are there any fairgrounds nearby?”

“Hmm. We can drive around and see,” said Ungsten. Marsh nodded. The conversation had shifted from the topic of the strange sighting in the woods, and would it stay that way for the rest of the day. But neither of them voiced what they were really thinking – *what the hell’s going on?*

Tall Tales, Tall Grass

Monday, 12:11 PM

The Commissioner of the MPD, Merriwald's police department, one Alice Conrad, was looking at a local community-effort TikTok her daughter had sent her when she realized something was going on outside. Nudging her glasses in place over her nose, she made her way from her personal office into the police station's reception area.

"Whoa, y'all," she said, clearing a path to the commotion. "Coming through. What's all this?"

One of the sergeants, a timid mustached man by the name Wilkins, was holding a boy down. "Chief, *umph*" he said, struggling to keep the boy's flailing arms and legs in check. "His name's Dave. Says he ran all the way from across town." The boy was sobbing. "He's got quite the story for you."

"Alright Wilkins, that's enough. Let him go." The boy, Dave, was trembling visibly, too. Commissioner Conrad grabbed his arm and, for a moment, imagined it was her own son in her grasp. She shook him, not savagely, but firmly, and held him by the other shoulder. His eyes were bleary, and he was mumbling something. "Dave! Look at me. Look at me! I think he's in shock."

Dave's eyes focused on hers, and he began to cry again. "It got him. It got him!" he cried. "It was *horrible*. It got them both!" With this, he almost collapsed into Conrad's arms. She held him up straight and made sure he could stand. The little hubbub was attracting a lot of attention. "Okay, everyone, we're taking this to my office. Back to work!"

MPD wasn't a terrible police outfit. Enough people were employed there to warrant some form of hierarchy, and they were all generally competent at resolving conflicts. With Merriwald's almost boring criminal history, though, the police force had grown to, in a sense, take it easy. Gone were the days when one officer would show up at work with great gusto, hoping to get their daily dose of adrenaline via a car chase or two. Now, as far as the cops were concerned, it was mostly just vandalism, tagging, and destruction of property, with a few burglaries in the mix.

In fact, thought Conrad, shutting the door behind her, this Dave character was not much farther in age from some of the misfits who were already monthly regulars in the overnight holding cells. "So, Dave."

"I- I'm sorry. We've got to find them! Please, you *have* to help them. *Please!*"

"Dave, look at me. I want to help you, I really do. I need you to calm down a little, okay?" She produced a spherical sponge out of a desk drawer. "Here," she said, handing it to him.

Dave squeezed the stress ball and looked at her. "The woods," he said. His tone was clearer, more succinct; his breathing had slowed down.

"Okay, Dave. Nice and slow, please. What happened at the woods?"

“We were at the lumber yard place. Mr. Dennis owns the thing. About uh, like what, twenty minutes ago. Maybe more.”

“Yes,” said Conrad, not batting an eyelid at the fast-traveling news. She knew about the grapevine that swerved in and out of the community’s youthful haunts in Merriwald. One of the other sergeants was at the hospital right now, getting a statement from Mr. Dennis. Some suspicious behavior, the diner people had told them. “And what were you doing over there?”

A pause. “Um. Well, it was me, Ro, and Kurt. *Kurt*... oh my g-”

“You’ll have time to cry later, Dave! Tell me what happened next.”

“Okay. We were crossing to Mr. Dennis’s office through woods nearby, you know? And this *creature*, my goodness, it was *horrible*! It was *walking* through the fucking trees or something! The sun blots out, right? And this creature starts lunging towards Kurt, and then I dunno what happened it all went to shit!”

“Watch the language. Where are Ro and Kurt right now?”

“In the *woods*! I’m telling you!”

Conrad was already halfway to the door and yanking him with her. “Wilkins,” she called to the sergeant, rushing through the lobby. “Follow us in your car.”

The police cruiser tore up some gravel as the Commissioner maneuvered them through a hilly area where all the fields seem to come to a collective stop. “What was this thing you were telling me about, again?” she said to Dave, who was clutching at the car door’s handle.

“I couldn’t see it! It was kinda dark, and the thing... it was like a wraith...” he said.

“How do you know what the hell a wraith looks like?”

Dave gave her a sheepish look, and stared straight ahead at the fast-approaching woods. “Some books at the library have pictures. They’ve got descriptions and stuff, too. Fascinating shi- I mean, fascinating stuff.”

Conrad shook her head and allowed herself a moment of sadness. “The library, huh?” *All these promising young kids...*

Even though she was speeding along the tight roads, Conrad’s concern was far less for this so-called “creature” than it was for the well-being of the two other kids. The derecho’s carnage was still fresh, and Iowa wasn’t known for its supernatural affairs. Apart from a very thinly backed urban legend here and there, most of the horrors in towns like Merriwald were either political, or, more often – sociological. For example, in many cases, there was no saying how long it would take for a certain Thanksgiving dinner to end. You had all kinds of characters at the table in various stages of sobriety, along with a senseless inability for anyone to wrap up their final goodbyes in under forty minutes. By the time the whole thing concluded, it was a safe bet that someone had already undergone several nervous breakdowns. As far as most generally horrifying things go, it can get pretty horrific.

So no, Conrad was only asking for details so she could note down the facts, all while Dave's memory was still fresh. The consideration of such a Bigfoot-like entity was far from her list of priorities. The Smith & Wesson handgun in her holster was assurance enough to keep her mind focused on the task at hand.

"Were either of them injured?"

"Dunno."

"What about any sort of weapons you boys might've had with you?"

"Not that I know of." Conrad didn't like this.

"Was there anything else weird going on? Apart from this creature?"

"I don't *know*! Wait, stop!" said Dave. "There's the spot." The car pulled over to a stop.

They got out of the car, Conrad crouching next to the car and covering Dave. The compact M&P40 gun was already snug in her palm. She fingered the radio, and the cool, rustling midday air broke with the sound of static. "Wilkins, hang a left at the Dennis lumber yard and pull into the clearing."

Dave tried to look up and over the vehicle at the woods, but Conrad yanked him down and shushed him. They didn't know if the area was clear. The atmosphere had a vaguely bleak quality to it. The season had progressed past the days when leaves were bright and crunchy, finally leaving behind large mounds of moist mulch and a feeling of quiet desolation. Any day now, it would begin to pour. All telltale signs of the incoming – ongoing, even – winter.

Commissioner Conrad let out a quick breath and slowly peered up over the cruiser's hood, gun at the ready. It was quiet. Her gaze swept up and down and left and right, looking for bright colors, abnormalities in the middle of all the dark greens and darker browns. Nothing. She crouched again, and made her way to the other end of the vehicle.

Again, she got up slightly from her crouch and gazed into the woods. The wind slowed down. Conrad's neck stopped mid-turn, and an icy chill ran up her arms. There was nothing extraordinary in front of her except a dense, thick foliage, moving naturally in the wind. But what had startled her wasn't something she saw; it was something she'd *felt*. The glasses almost slipped from her nose.

Her eyes darted from tree to tree, bush to bush, frantically looking for a glimpse of *something*... anything! *What the hell's looking at me?* A dreadful, primal feeling came over her-

WHEEE-OOO! WHEEE-OOO!

The screeching police siren shattered the eerie mood, and Commissioner Conrad scrambled to her feet. Pointing her gun in the direction of the woods, she made sure the scene was clear before letting her arm hang loose. Wilkins, in his own cruiser, skidded to a halt nearby. Her heart was pounding. "Wilkins!" she said, through the dissipating adrenaline rush. "No sign of the boys in the clearing. We'll have to go in."

“Copy that,” he said. “Others are on their way.”

Conrad nodded, and turned her attention to the wall of trees ahead of them. The feeling was gone now. She clicked the safety off her gun, and took a step forward.

* * *

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

The woods were particularly creepy around these parts, thought Alice Conrad quietly. She’d grown up in a neighboring town, and a few memories trickled through the new adrenaline flooding her system every few steps. When she was a kid, her friends had once played a long game of hide-and-seek in a similar area of the woods. They’d invited her late, and then left her in there when it was her turn to seek them out. They were all home in bed while she spent the evening screaming their names into the darkness.

Another time, she was at a campfire with some of her cousins. A few old barns and makeshift corn silos usually lie hidden in some places deep inside the woods, near isolated water bodies. Nobody really knows who they belong to, but they make for nice hangout spots for the average vagabond. One of her cousins had accidentally set fire to an entire wall of such a building. Party plans gone up in flames, they’d all spent the rest of the night in a huddle for shared warmth. Fun times for teenagers.

Young adulthood is just a period of cerebral whiplash, she thought. *These boys are idiots*. It had been a while since they’d started looking. She could feel the muscles in the back of her neck bunching up. She was sure that the boys were safe. *Obviously*, she told herself. *They’re all right. Probably just fell into a ditch or something*.

Up in the trees, a sparrow chirped. It was followed by a murder of crows offering their rebuttal with great vigor. The back and forth went on for a minute, the sparrow won the argument, and then the woods were silent again. Conrad inhaled sharply. This damned weather was enough to put her into a trance.

As the daughter of an old farmhand, she knew the effect this kind of forested area could have on the uninformed individual. It’s extremely easy to lose your way in these parts without the right kind of awareness. So many hikers get lost in the woods just because they were unable to distinguish between the myriad of dense trees and shrub. Why, once you get adept at navigating tall cornfields, it’s only natural to step right into the woods next to the field and learn the same thing. *Tall cornfields*, she thought, thinking about the recent victims of the storm. So much had been trampled and laid to waste...

“Chief, I found something!”

Commissioner Conrad whirled at the sound and rushed through the woods. After another sergeant had shown up, it took them the better part of half an hour to comb through the woods for signs of the two teens. Now, Dave was with Wilkins, and they were currently hovering over what looked like a patchy, purple-colored Patagonia jacket lying amidst some bushes.

The other sergeant, one pudgy fellow named Scott Duress, appeared from the other side of the undergrowth. Wilkins peered at the piece of outerwear. “No blood on the jacket. No signs of struggle anywhere.”

Conrad felt a thin thread of annoyance build up in the back of her mind, the thrill of danger being replaced by a slow burning vessel of irritation. For one thing, she was unusually wired that day because of some issues in her personal life. For another, this whole thing was beginning to feel like a wild goose chase. She’d had enough of gallivanting teenagers wreaking havoc all over town for them to start spreading their menace in the woods, too.

Dedicated to protecting such a close-knit community like Merriwald, Commissioner Conrad was keenly attuned to the delicate herd mentality of a medium-sized town this far from any big cities. Under the watchful eye and owing to the generally boring nature of the town’s populace, the crime rate was held at bay with relative ease. Meanwhile, some of the neighboring towns were seeing a slight, alarming rise in the availability of Schedule II drugs in various sketchy neighborhoods. Conrad shuddered as a gust of wind blew past them.

“All right, get the whistles out.”

After that, with a bit of sweep-searching, it took them less than ten minutes to find two teenagers in a half-conscious state, both of them snoring in a heap not far from the jacket. Conrad huffed quietly to herself.

Dave pointed them out to her. “That one’s Ro,” he said. “And this is Kurt.”

There were no signs of life-threatening harm to either of them. From the way Ro’s left ankle was jutting out, it appeared that it was a deep fracture; it was broken. His face was streaked in mud, and the jacket presumably belonged to him, given his dirt-smeared t-shirt and pants. In his own jacket, with a large red bruise on his forehead, lay Kurt with his glass pipe clutched in one hand.

Conrad didn’t know what to make of this scene. The boys were in no apparent grave danger, and there was the distinct whiff of marijuana, and some other acrid chemicals in the air. *Was the wave of drugs already here, in Merriwald?* It was time to make a decision. She pinched the bridge of her nose and motioned to the sergeants. “Wake them up, get them down to the station after a trip to the hospital. If it gets dicey, get a statement from all of them before letting them go.”

“But the crea-” started Dave.

“Ah, ah, ah,” Conrad told him, and pointed to the way back. Her voice was drained of all congeniality. “You can tell us all about it at the station.”

Agent of Bedlam

Monday, 4:13 PM

While the diligent officers of the MPD were putting together a report of all the things that had happened that Monday morning, a man was driving slowly through the town in a nondescript black Toyota sedan. He was in his mid-to-late 30s, dressed in casual but warm hiking gear and carrying only a couple days' worth change of clothes in a backpack next to him. A pair of golden-red safety sunglasses hung from his neck, and his slicked-back ponytail of dark hair ended in a sharp widow's peak over his otherwise forgettable face.

He'd called to see about a reservation at a Vacation Inn for cheap, the one farthest from Merriwald's shops and civilization, closest to the main roads. He didn't actually make a reservation, having called just to make sure they had rooms available. He'd never been to the state.

Before booking a room and checking in at 2, the man drove around Merriwald in a slow circuit. And he drove in a curious path: the Toyota started out at the far end of town, even past the gas station, and then made its way in a straight-ish path all the way across town to the first local business, a diner that welcomed newcomers from the distant interstate. And then he drove back around, this time sticking close to the outskirts, by the woods, making some notes in a notepad. In the final leg of his winding route, he had a pair of powerful binoculars partly glued to his eyes as he drove, scanning the trees and woodland even more intently. And then more notes and some more reconnoitering, before he drove up to the diner near the woods. He ordered a quick coffee, although it was uncommon for him to caffeinate in the late afternoon.

His server told him that the manager, one Shania Smith, was on break. He asked to see her after. Casually mentioning that he was a freelancer with the local paper, he asked her about what Mr. Dennis had told her. Shania was distinctly wary of him, however (apparently, she'd been interviewed twice already), and he left the place as quickly as he could without escalating the tension. *They already seem on edge*, he thought, and ditched the raincoat and hat he'd been wearing in the lost-and-found booth of a local park.

Next, he drove to the Vacation Inn, which had only two floors like most of the town's taller buildings, parked in a spot close to the exit, and got a room on the lower floor, a cozy chamber just six steps off the ground.

The name under the reservation was Jean Macawi, a pseudonym he had used once in the past. It was close to his actual name, and left enough room to maneuver around lies. A common tactic in his past lines of work. Briskly checking his room, he left his stuff unpacked and headed back out.

Across the street from the inn, a derelict Taco Bell and a small deli fought for the attention of hungry customers, which weren't all that many in the first place. The man calling himself Macawi rubbed his gloved hands together, glanced at the Taco Bell apologetically, and walked into the deli.

Above his head, a little doorbell tinkled and signaled his arrival to the person behind the counter, who waved at him and grinned, wiping away at the counter with their other hand. “Be right with ya!”

Macawi nodded back and looked around the place. It was decorated with some old movie posters and artwork, a *Twilight Zone* still from one of the better episodes, a lot of underwatered plants, and really nice lighting. In a far corner, a lady and her son, it seemed, were trying to get a gumball dispenser to give up its wares. The deli worker had finally finished cleaning up the counter, and looked at Macawi expectantly. “What’ll it be?”

He ran his gaze over the large menu hung on one of the walls. “Right. Could I get a number 6, please? Extra ketchup.”

“You got it. For here or to go? Any sides?”

“To go, and just the sandwich, please. That should be it.” The worker nodded and put on a fresh pair of latex gloves.

Macawi felt slightly out of place in the deli. The town, even. The weather was already disagreeing with him. He came from a very different life, where a lot happened in a short time. Everything was on the clock, and people’s minds were stuffed up tighter than their carry-on bags. In his daily schedule, it was natural to feel breathless even before the day had started. All those administrative cogs at work, going about in a frenzy, like their futures were some powdery snow that would disappear in the blink of an eye. All those flashy buildings, displays of opulence and the overt power dynamics...

There was a slower pulse to towns like this one, he knew. In his mind, he thought of Merriwald like a silent pool of water, cerulean and calm. Peaceful towns, in his experience, made for exceptional breeding grounds for distress. Sometimes, in big cities, everything ends up moving so fast that you don’t get time to make sustainable connections, and you’re left detached from the community. It’s like walking around in a human-sized capsule of vague and fake interactions with real people. In places like these, everyone knew a little bit about everyone else. People had all kinds of inside jokes with their neighbors, friends, even coworkers. A comforting little wave on the way home from a stranger that you only know by their face. The familiar chitchat of running into another family and introducing your kids to theirs. Making plans on the fly because everything is confined to the one place everyone you know calls home.

That kind of collective bond develops over time. A death in a small town sends bigger shockwaves than a death in a large city. Especially now that the wounds were tender from the derecho’s damage. *It all makes sense*, he thought. Even as the worker whipped up the sandwich and packed it into wax paper, he began to gain an understanding of his target’s activities...

“Here you are!”

“Thanks. You can hold on to the change.” Then, steeling his resolve against the winds, Macawi stepped out and began to walk into town.

Merriwald's town hall was mostly empty that day, and Macawi found a cozy spot near one of the canteen's coffee dispensers. As he gulped down the sandwich – really tasty, he thought – he began to browse the local news publications of nearby towns on his phone. Then he switched apps into a custom Discord client, and entered a server that hosted some of the local teens and young adults. The server had been easy to get into, after he'd got hold of an invite, in a thread about illegal handguns for sale in southern Iowa, on a secretive online platform. He knew the server was legitimate because several users on the forum shared the same usernames on a disused submission forum for the town of Merriwald, Iowa. And just like that, he was on the resident grapevine.

Technology was the easiest thing for him to get access to. The tricky part was actually getting things done with boots on the ground.

The man spent a little while browsing the latest online activity among the town's youth, most of which seemed to be free food hauls and new, freshly reshaped walls to tag. Then he picked up a few Merriwald-specific travel brochures (there were only three) from a nearby stand, and left the building.

As he walked back around to the hotel, Macawi pondered the severity of his circumstances. He was already late to this, and-

No, he told himself. *Focus on the details.*

After thoroughly checking and setting up his room, the man calling himself Macawi unpacked a spare handgun magazine from his backpack and let it sit on the bed. Then he produced the handgun itself, a Glock .19 automatic, let the slide rack back and forth a couple of times, and placed it on the nightstand.

The next thing to come out of the backpack was a pair of thermal imaging goggles; a powerful monocular system that went over one eye. He examined it once and stashed it away.

Then he took out a map of the district and pinned it securely to one of the walls. It showed the neighboring towns and a lot of the area surrounding Merriwald's south end, where lay the densest part of the forest around. He placed a red pin directly in the center of that dark green graphic that depicted woodland area. Then he placed the tip of his index finger directly next to the pin, and began tracing invisible lines in various directions away from the pin. *Okay*, he thought. *It's still under control. I can salvage this*, he thought, almost piteously.

"I can do it," he said, aloud.

And as the man went about making more arrangements and notes, the fog thickened in the wintry chill outside.

Out on a Limb

Monday, 5:03 PM

The sun was already on its way back under the horizon when the first tin can clanked into the street. Near the outskirts of the village was a cluster of old ruins with somewhat working plumbing facilities, where part of Merriwald's homeless population was finding solace. A recently constructed structure for low-income housing had been uprooted by the hurricane cluster, and the people living there had fallen back to their old haunts while it was being rebuilt. This cluster of ruins was one of them. More soda cans tumbled and clinked on the asphalt as a large, heavyset man made his way through today's gathering.

Big Jake had grown up into the mindset of a bully not by circumstance, but by choice. A series of horrible financial decisions had landed him on the streets, but he fell back into his natural state of being – a cowardly brute – to make a living amongst his new community. He decided he was too lazy to do anything about his situation, and that he'd rather be king of a tiny hellhole than just a cog in a bigger one. It suited him. "All right," he said, rubbing his grubby palms. Whooshing past the coal braziers, the air was cold, and it smelled like stale bananas and Tylenol.

There were about twenty to thirty people currently huddled up in various states of wear and tear along the ruins. A few coal-driven braziers were placed at some of the corners for heat, and groups were moving along those in short bursts for an equitable, warm experience for everyone. It was a calm scene.

At least till he got there.

"Okay!" Jake's voice boomed. He was clenching and unclenching his fists methodically. "Let me get a sparring partner, quick."

Nobody moved with haste, and kept shuffling along in their usual tired gait. This was normal to them. Big Jake turned to his sidekick; an extremely tall, thin, bearded man named Lorne. Lorne liked to fight, and usually took turns trying to spar with some of the newer people who showed up every other week. Built like a beanstalk, but he could be brutal. "Hey Lorne, wanna go a round or two?"

"Um. Not right now."

Big Jake laughed without much humor and cracked a few knuckles. "Says you! Step up."

A couple of the stray neighborhood dogs were watching from afar, up the clearing that led into the woods. Lorne made a clicking noise with his mouth and spat on the ground nearby. Then he stepped up, arms nice and loose and swinging slightly.

Big Jake was huge. Large, beefy arms, a torso like a refrigerator, with a lot of padded muscle going for him. Lorne was like an iron pole with fast arms compared to him, but he'd done the dance many times, and he'd been on the streets for far longer than Big Jake had. He could keep

up with the big man, easy. As the kindling crackled and the sun began to sink, the two men began to spar.

After about five minutes, the rest of the people at the shelter went about their business. Some of them had started on a fresh nap, while some of the rest had joyously rejoined their various drug-use apparatuses. Others were watching the two men fool around as usual, and the remaining went back to their stale newspapers.

All Lorne was concerned with was tiring Big Jake out. If it were a normal boxing fight, Lorne would follow an almost exact strategy. But this wasn't normal – this was sparring with Big Jake, which meant a lot of dirty fighting and tasteless maneuvers if he was in a bad mood. In their current situation, they didn't have the equipment to do any pad work, but they managed just fine. A break, and after a quick flurry of punches in the air, Lorne made sure his shoulders were rolling smoothly. He motioned to Jake, who had seemingly already warmed up again.

Big Jake moved in like a large tractor, arms swinging and legs thudding forward. Lorne began to bob and weave and took Jake's punches lightly on each of his own arms, acting as a blocker. Jake obviously pulled back on his punches, but only just enough for them to sting a little bit. This went on for a while.

Big Jake usually stopped around this time into the sparring, and Lorne felt a feeling of relief in the pit of his stomach-

"Whoa, whoa, hold on," said Jake, grinning and stepping back. "Lorne, buddy, is that a shiny new watch?"

Lorne's heart raced. They were both dressed in old, tattered North Face jackets of varying color schemes. Their pants were both from some old shop they'd found at the bins a while back, and their boots came from similar backstories. Big Jake, however, always got the clothes with the least holes and with the tamest smells.

A week ago, Lorne had found a Rolex watch in a dumpster closer to Main Street, where some of the nicer local businesses had set up shop. He'd always wanted one, and did not plan on pawning or trading it off, so it made into his stash of personal possessions. One that he kept hidden from Big Jake. Why did he have to have it on that day? *Stupid.*

"It's a dupe, man. Found it off one of the pawn shop streets." He tried to swivel his wrist so the watch would slide up under the patchy jacket sleeve.

"Whew, a fake? No problem. Let me get a peek at it." Jake was standing very still, and his body weight was leaning ahead. Not far away from them, the dogs began to bark.

"It's a fake, man. Like I said. And I'm kinda tired right now, so I might go into town and find something to eat." Lorne then moved to the side, as if to leave the scene.

Big Jake took a large step forward, and it was enough to put him very close to Lorne's face. "Let me see the watch."

"I gotta go, man, come on!"

A hand whipped out from nowhere and fastened onto Lorne's wrist. Lorne began struggling and punching back docilely, but the big man wasn't having any of it. "Did you hear what I said, *man*? Hmm now, let's have a look at this- aha! A Rolex..."

At this point, Lorne yanked his arm away with his full strength. The watch, whose clasp was already being pushed and prodded by Jake, flew away from them both! One of the dogs leaped forward immediately, grabbed the shining object the moment it bounced on the ground, and bounded off into the far side of the ruins.

Lorne cursed, pushed the large man away, and took a step in the dog's direction.

Big Jake chuckled mirthlessly. "I thought it was a fake?"

Lorne paused long enough for a "Yeah, fuck you, too," and then he was off, chasing the dog into the sunset.

Big Jake laughed heartily. All Lorne had to do was find the watch and bring it back. It would make a great addition to his own collection, thought Jake. After all, where was he going to go if not back here? The other camp? *Pfft*. They'd mess him up worse than he usually did. Big Jake cracked his neck and peered at the sun setting. There was a dark bluish hue in the sky. It was kind of beautiful, he thought.

Then he stepped after the soon-to-be-ex-Rolox-owner. He made his way through the ruins, pushing people aside and making room with his large shoulders and back, all borne of a regular diet rich with raw meat and fish oil. He had a small crew that helped him raid pantries at unsecured Hy-Vee warehouses, and they could usually get away with a good haul – good enough, that is, for him. Only in his 30s, Big Jake had managed to make all the bad decisions a man could make in those years. Despite various worldly changes the rough life brought out of him, his bullying streak stayed with him throughout.

Finally, he reached the far backside of the ruins, which led into the woods. Through the thicket, he watched the sun struggling to stay afloat as the horizon coaxed it under. If not for the slight fog, it would've made a lovely upbeat scene.

That fucking dog! He thought. If not for that mangy cur, he'd already be wearing the snazzy watch.

No problem. He almost had it. So, he kept walking into the woods pushing through the shrub and fighting his early exhaustion. After a few good ones, Big Jake finally missed a step over a loose rock and stumbled, his breath caught in his throat. His arms shot out to hold on to something for balance, and the bark of a nearby hickory scraped open his palms. Big Jake cursed loudly and kicked at the offending tree. He had to bend over to catch his breath.

Whoa, he thought to himself, gasping lightly. *They're right*. Lorne may be a shrewd guy, but Big Jake didn't miss how Lorne always tried to tire him out, with long, consistent sparring. Jake was all bent out of shape from months of leisure and getting his meals the easy way. His volatile blood pressure was no help, either.

He rubbed his bleeding palms on his pants and kept pushing forward. *Where was that cursed dog, anyway?* This time, he didn't mean the canine.

Almost reflexively, he pulled out a pair of threadbare fleece gloves and wore them, taking care to not hurt his bruised skin any further. Despite the cool atmosphere, beads of sweat were popping up on his forehead.

The woods had engulfed him completely a few meters back, and he was listening for barking sounds or some yelling from Lorne. Nothing at all, not even a little yelp. This began to bother him. His footsteps were sounding a little loud, he thought, and tried to slow his breathing down without much effect.

"Hey Lorne!" he called out. "Where the hell did you disappear?" Nothing. More walking through the gradual darkness, more calling out.

And then Big Jake stumbled again, this time coming out directly under a clearing of trees where the stars were starting to shine through. There was something lying near the roots of a hideous oak-

"Holy cow!" Big Jake exclaimed, clutching at his chest, heart pumping excitedly, nearly sending him into a full-blown attack. "Lorne, you frigging idiot! You scared the shit outta me, man! Hooooo shit, wow." He panted for breath. Then, his brain finally caught up to the signal his eyes had sent it. *What in the...*

Lorne's hand was lying at the bottom of the tree. It was his hand, Jake knew, because it had the Rolex on, half-clasped. The hand disappeared into the darkness beyond the tree, and Jake had glimpsed it when he stumbled.

But the hand stopped at the *forearm*. Where the rest of Lorne should have been was an empty space full of woods and trees, and the end of the forearm was trailing volumes of blood, almost drenching the soil and flora around it. Big Jake realized that his brain had tripped him up yet again. A fatal mistake.

In absolute horror, Big Jake stepped around the tree to see what was on the other end, and found a jagged, bloody bone jutting out of the cleaved appendage. But wait! The arm hadn't been severed off cleanly, like it would be with an axe or a similar blade. The bloodied muscle around the stump was rough, *raw* and violent, Jake saw, almost animalistic. Unable to inhale, he found himself wondering what could've caused this. Maybe something with a rock? *Jaws?*

Suddenly, near him, the air shifted. Big Jake, towering at his full height, whirled around. At that moment, he was very scared. A deep, dull pain was blooming in his chest, but he couldn't pay attention to it. The final wisps of sunlight began playing tricks with shadows, and the trees rustled forebodingly.

Through the fog's murky depths, a dark figure rose right in front of Big Jake's eyes. To his terror-stricken brain, it looked nasty, shimmering like a pool of black tar. Big Jake's throat constricted suddenly, and his mouth opened in an attempt to scream. Then the figure rustled toward him, and the menacing visage was too much for Big Jake's poor heart. Even before the

figure made any physical contact with him, his heart had seized and stopped completely. A gurgling gasp escaped Big Jake's dying lips, and his hands clutched despairingly at his sternum.

The shadowy figure slipped away without a sound. The large man's body hit the ground with a resounding thud, and after a little while, darkness took over the woods completely.

Conflict and Resolution

Tuesday, 10:26 AM

Commissioner Conrad eyed the far side of the ruins while sergeant Wilkins went about setting up bright “DO NOT CROSS” police tape around the tree where the hand had been found. Something weird was happening in the area, she thought, rubbing her palms for warmth. The motion wasn’t a very good countermeasure against the damp cold, but it felt nice.

Sergeant Duress came back from somewhere behind her, wiping his face. He’d puked immediately after seeing the dead body and the severed hand. Wilkins had seen worse before, apparently, and volunteered to set up the temporary cordon. Merriwald’s only medical examiner was on her way to rendezvous at the hospital, and they had a small audience of adult males from the area who had huddled together to see what was going on.

“Stay back, y’all,” she said, “Thank you.”

Alice Conrad realized that she was experiencing a feeling she’d felt only as a younger woman, and rarely. A feeling of immense dread, like a dark and moist sponge, all saggy from squeezing in countless horrors. She told herself that it was all in her head, and plus the weather was getting drearier by the day. If only she could go back to last week, when her worst nightmare had been merely a heart-to-heart talk with her son. This was a completely different kind of terror; a unique beast.

She’d *felt* something, she knew. She hadn’t been seeing things, and this new finding confirmed that something creepy was afoot. What exactly, she didn’t know. Maybe an old survival instinct. But then again, the fear of the unknown pushes one into rooms filled with nonsensical conclusions, and she struggled to not let her imagination get away from her.

The large man’s body had no signs of damage, like the two boys they’d found earlier, also in the woods. What was going on? And the hand? *All that blood...* Conrad knew what a flesh wound caused by a blade looked like. She knew the kind of force it takes to rip apart through muscle and bone like that. *And that thing she’d felt near the lumber yard...* She felt a new pang of fear shoot up through her gut.

One of the most important pieces of evidence they had was as credible as the Loch Ness monster photograph. *Evidence against what?* Said a tiny voice in her head, but she ignored it. They had a picture of the thing, thanks to a series of dark and shaky images that one of the boys had managed to click on his phone. Well, she thought, a picture of *something*. The images had captured a shadowy visage in the trees, all dark and slimy looking. There was absolutely no certainty as to what it could be; the thing in the pictures could be a weirdly shaped branch, the shadow of a tree, a bushy outgrowth from somewhere up a tree trunk maybe, perhaps even the boy’s own shadow. It was too blurry and dim to tell, and she hated it.

The human brain is prone to rely on the absurd during bouts of extreme fear, and hers was conjuring up images of horrific gargoyles and fast Komodo dragons and goblins with bloody maws and-

“..oss! Boss! You still with us?” someone was touching her shoulder.

“Ah, sorry, Wilkins, I’m here. What’s happening?”

“The ambulance is here to take the body up to the hospital. And the han- the arm...”

“It goes with the body. We’ll take a look with the ME.”

“Okay. They’re ready for you now.” Wilkins motioned to some of the men gathered nearby, who’d been asked to wait around and see if they wanted to talk more, outside of their statements.

“Sounds good, thanks.” The sergeants began to clear out their stuff, getting ready to reconvene at the hospital. The commissioner walked over to the people milling about.

“So,” she said, after introducing herself. “Which one of you found the body... and the hand?”

Nobody moved a muscle. One of them had walked into town till he ran into a police cruiser and brought them here. They wouldn’t admit who was the one to find the scene itself, for there would be more questions, and then more questions. Conrad sighed inwardly.

“What about the fellow himself? Did you all know him well? And the missing person? Lorne something?”

A small shake of the head by the men, all dressed in tattered but warm puffer jackets and worn hats. There was no point asking them any of these questions, she knew. They already had the information they were going to get. She’d sent a quick text to one of her contacts with the town council to get the ball rolling on a council meeting or an eventual press release. There were measures in place for nonstandard situations, but Conrad was comprehending slowly that this one might break that mold, too.

She got basically nothing more out of the men, and knew that the rest of the procedure there would have similar bearings. And she wanted nothing more than to let the people get on with their day. As much as she hated to admit it, Merriwald was still lacking in the low-income housing department. While the community organizers typically managed to arrange emergency accommodation on short notice, the current situation was more than sticky. For now, the ruins would have to do.

The faces of the men and women milling about were haggard, exhausted. She wondered if the finding had shaken them up. Death itself was not unnatural to them, and neither was the phenomenon of finding a corpse on a morning walk. The big man whose body they’d found was probably the least of their worries. But... *The fucking arm!* She cringed, recalling the gruesome scene, the hand just lying there like someone had tossed it aside as an afterthought. The fear in their eyes was not for death, but its mysterious application in this case; the broken, roughly severed arm. What thing would do commit such a violent act? Where was the owner of the arm? She hadn’t the faintest clue. And it scared her, like it did them.

Fine. She would just have to go along with the postmortem findings. No sense in leaping to conclusions without more information. But she had another question. “Did anyone take anything from the scene?” No response from the men. “Did anyone take anything from the scene that could be criminal evidence?” At this, there was a shuffling of feet, and a couple of the men shook their heads vaguely, and she guessed that some expensive items would possibly be missing from the body... bodies.

“Okay,” she said. Then she got back in the cruiser and made her way to the hospital.

On the way, Conrad thought about everything that had happened since the diner incident just a day ago. Mr. Dennis had mentioned a similar monster or whatever in his report. Then there were the teens, also with the same kind of report. And now this new finding, an incredible, vicious thorn in the peaceful fall climate. Merriwald is a small town, she thought, without much going on. All of this is surreal, she kept thinking. Maybe the ME could make sense of this nonsense, and hopefully get some clear direction for her to focus her efforts in.

* * *

Merriwald didn’t have a dedicated forensics department, and most of that responsibility rested on the shoulders of an eccentric middle-aged lady named Daphne Webb, a medical examiner with several doctorates and an endless supply of expletives.

Dr. Webb was currently in the morgue of Merriwald West Hospital, leaning against a wall and devouring a tofu wrap next to the corpse of Big Jake. Though her hair was greying in many areas, it was streaked with a youthful black, and the starched white medical lab coat wasn’t doing a great job of covering up her colorful outfit underneath. As she finished the last bite of the wrap, the police commissioner walked in.

“How’s it going, Daphne?”

“Same old, Alice,” said Dr. Webb to her longstanding friend, tossing the wrapper in a nearby trashcan. “Same old.”

It had been a few weeks since they’d caught up. Conrad averted her gaze from the gurneys and looked at the ME. “We just wrapped up the scene near the ruins. So, how’s everything? You, umm, still seeing that-”

“Yeah, uh, let’s not talk about her right now.” Dr. Webb put on a pair of gloves and motioned to the gurneys. “We’ve got better things to discuss right now than my dating life.”

Commissioner Conrad said nothing. She’d been thinking really hard about the bloodied arm on her way, and wasn’t keen on staring at it for extended periods.

“You found the body and the hand in the woods, correct?”

“Yes. They were found by the people taking shelter in the ruins.”

“Hmm,” said Dr. Webb. “Okay. I can smell some bullshit in here already.”

She removed the sheet from the big man's body and gestured to it with a palm. "This one was a classic heart failure. Not a clue as to what caused it, but it must've been quick and piercing."

Conrad nodded and remained silent.

"Notice that this one has no bruising apart from the palms, maybe he fell down or something. No other signs of damage. No fatal injuries."

A thought passed through Conrad's mind swiftly. *Just like those boys.*

She spoke up. "We actually found a couple kids yesterday, teens, in the woods not far away from there. You know how the ruins circle back near the outskirts? Right. Similar things. One of them had a busted ankle and the other one had a forehead shiner." Noticing the look of consternation on Dr. Webb's face, she added, "They're fine now."

"Any foul play?"

Conrad hesitated. "Not that we can deduce at the moment."

Dr. Webb raised an eyebrow. "Yep, definitely smells like some steaming bullshit. Interesting."

"Speaking of smells, did you find anything out of place? The boys mentioned some chemical scent. Ammonia or Sulphur-like."

"If you wanna know whether the big guy shat himself at the time of death, the answer is yes. No chemical smells to speak of, though. Your witness might've been tripping out." Webb frowned half-mockingly. "Don't tell me the MPD is taking an interest in bowel movements again. I thought we were past all that. But yeah, anyway, that's the story with this guy..."

Conrad marveled at the casual, caustic references to the dead body. She'd been friends with the ME for over a decade now, and it still never failed to amuse her how detached the woman could be around corpses. Conrad wondered how her friend had reacted to the other item when she first saw it.

"...and then we have *this*." The severed hand was placed in a sterile tray, and pools of coagulated blood were seen beneath it. Most of the blood had drained out, and the darkened stump seemed slightly squishy now.

Dr. Webb looked at her. "Pretty fucked up, huh. Hey, do you need a bucket or something?"

Conrad waved the offer away. "I'm okay. What do you make of it?"

"Well. It's messed up is what it is." Webb adjusted an overhead light and began to point and prod gently at various parts of the hand. "See this part. Notice how the base of the forearm, where the arm ends, is kind of *pinched*. Ignore the ripped muscle and tissue over here, *oof*, that's nasty," – Conrad nearly gagged at this – "and look at the bone. More pinched breakage."

"Any initial impressions as to what might've caused it?"

“I could not tell you just by looking at it, but my professional verdict is this. This person’s arm was trapped within something like a large pair of pliers. But different materials, obviously. Bigger, I think. Like a sharp rock or something similar. Heavy and tight. Maybe there was an impact of sorts, with great force, and this part was wrenched away.”

“Wow.”

“Mhm. Pretty fucking gnarly. I’m yet to go over the analysis thoroughly, but I haven’t found anything unsavory in the blood.” Over her curved glasses, Dr. Webb looked at the police commissioner. “No alien saliva, or Chupacabra fangs or whatever clusterfuck you’re thinking of.”

“Ahem, I wasn’t thinking of anything like that.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Webb paused. “Look. Is there something that you’re not telling me? Is this one of those come-to-the-same-fucking-conclusion scenarios?”

“No! We’re as much in the dark as you are. I was hoping to get some answers from you.”

A shrug. “Sorry to disappoint.” Webb moved away from the gurneys and yanked the gloves off. “Alice.” Her tone was somber.

“Yes?”

“This is real fucking strange. What’s really going on?” She glanced at the hand. “Do you think the hurricane carried something in?” A long pause. “Even if it turns out this was nothing supernatural, who would do such a thing? In these parts? I don’t think we’ve ever had anything like this before, huh?”

There was silence. Inwardly, Conrad was glad to see that her friend was still sympathetic to the nature of these things. The stoic character of being the resident medical examiner was great for the average stuff one deals with, but this...

“A lot of questions, Daphne. I don’t know, either. I think this one might be beyond us.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“The townsfolk have to know. We’re working on some sort of alert plan. We could hire someone.”

“Wasn’t Mrs. Mendoza’s son in the hunting business? All those taxidermy models in their house. Ugh. Or an investigator like that Ungsten fellow. Now *he’s* not too bad on the e-”

“Ahem, coming back to the case. We’ll have to figure something out later. Maybe a curfew? I don’t know.” The commissioner sighed. “There’s no reference or guidebook for something like this.”

“Eh, well. It’ll resolve itself.”

“You think so?”

“Not really.” Dr. Webb and commissioner Conrad stepped away from the morgue, and the medical examiner glanced at her watch. “You’re still not drinking on the clock?”

“I’m sticking to it.”

Daphne Webb shook her head. “More’s the pity, Alice. As I keep telling you.” The two friends then bid adieu. “Hope you find ways to some answers soon. Let me know what goes on.”

“I hope so, too. Thanks a ton.”

If it Walks like a Duck

Tuesday, 1:58 PM

The council meetings of some remote Midwestern towns take place in a kind of stupor, insofar that very little comes out of them, and the councilmembers can remember very little of what went on in there. Merriwald, thankfully, had an active board of members who were always watching for signs of chaos, and kept any horseplay to a minimum.

Typically, the need for emergency meetings like this one didn't arise frequently. The last time there had been an emergency meeting, the water tower had sprung multiple technical difficulties, and it caused an imbalance in the town's resources that had to be discussed openly in the forum.

Ungsten had only attended a couple of meetings a long time ago, and from members of the board, he barely knew the mayor, who rarely showed up unless there was state media coverage. The rest of the council was made up of a good mix of senior and younger members of the community, most of whom were sipping some hot chocolate right now. He noticed the tension amongst some of the councilmembers who were frowning hard, and pointed it out to Marsh.

"The mood around here is usually much happier," muttered Ungsten. "Hmm."

Marsh, meanwhile, was keeping an eye out for select flavors of donuts that she was partial to, paying no heed to Ungsten's tense demeanor. "Look, they have some kind of caramel-burst thingy, too. You should try it out."

"Sure, sure. Maybe later. Grab a seat, it's starting up now."

The council got on with some quick regular business, and councilmembers provided updates on the rebuilding of structures and the reallocation of various funds. Then there were discussions of a local park, some renaming of a street, and then finally after another five minutes of stalling, the police commissioner took to the podium. She looked weary.

"Good afternoon," she began. "Thank you for joining us on short notice. The Merriwald Police Department has been dealing with some strange goings-on in town for the past 24 hours." Pause. "A dead body was found in the woods today morning." A few gasps went up around the hall, and Conrad held up a hand. "It was one of the men living in the commune at the ruins. We're still working out the details of the death." There were a few more audible mumbles from various corners of the town hall.

"Yesterday, around midday, Mr. Dennis provided a statement in which he claimed to have seen a creature-like thing in the woods. Some hours later, some young adults were reported missing in that area, and we managed to locate them. They're safe now. But they gave similar statements, and two of them claimed to have been mauled by this creature in some way." Conrad looked at the audience. Two of the members were already raising hands, and she knew them as reporters for the town newspaper. Ignoring their outstretched pleas for attention, she continued. "We have been unable to confirm these claims for ourselves."

Loud murmurs were going around the room.

Marsh glanced at Ungsten, whose face bore an expression of deep concentration. *Is he already sifting through information?* She turned her full attention to the commissioner's words.

"The dead body we found today... he died of a chronic heart failure." More sympathetic gasping from the audience. She held up a palm, because the worst was yet to come.

"Alongside the body, we found a... a human hand. It was severed mid-forearm, and it was lying next to the dead body."

The town hall erupted in loud exclamations. "Please, remain calm. We're working on the details right now. The mayor has... retired to other matters, and I will be handling everything."

Before she could get ahead, one of the reporters piped up. "Who did the hand belong to?"

"Another man living in the shelters."

"So where is he? And what's the story behind the hand?"

"It's currently being looked into. We don't know much else. Please, calm down."

But the people of Merriwald would not calm down easily. Marsh could *feel* the undulating unrest in the room, as if it were a tangible object. *They hate this*, she thought. *It's the wrong tempo for this place.*

"What's the plan now?" a sharp voice cut through the din. It was Ungsten. "Can we do anything to help?"

"Thank you. The plan right now is to stay away from the woods as possible, and we're considering a curfew-"

Voices began to yell objections from various corners: "But our workplaces are right there!" "Do you expect us to stop going to work?" "And go where? We don't even know what the hell's going on!" "How do we really know that this creature thing exists?" "We've got enough on our plates with the rebuilding! Stop scaring the townsfolk!" "I can't believe this! Is this some Halloween shit?" and so on.

Marsh was watching the whole thing, fascinated. The mere mention of a creature had been enough to escalate the mood. And perhaps the fact that it was coming from a person of authority lent it more credibility.

"We're considering enlisting specialists to conduct some enquiries on the ground," the commissioner was saying.

Before she realized what her body was doing, Marsh had raised a hand. "We could conduct a private investigation by ourselves." The protests had died down, and commissioner Conrad was gazing at her as one would at a silly child.

"Oh, you could, could you?"

Beside her, Ungsten chuckled. “Actually, yes, commissioner, we would love to *have a conversation* about this-” he shot Marsh a sidelong glance “-in private.” Murmurs began to ripple across the room again, and the commissioner took to the mic and called for some silence once more.

“Sorry!” Marsh whispered. “I got excited.”

Ungsten said nothing for a long moment, then looked at her. “The man could be dead,” he said.

With warnings of caution, the meeting was called to an end, and a hush fell over the place as people left their seats and headed to the exits.

“Are you mad at me?” said Marsh. It occurred to her that ever since Merriwald had accepted her as a temporary citizen, she’d been saying and doing things she normally would not have, at least not so spontaneously. Was something up?

As the rest of the crowd began to disperse, Ungsten shook his head. “I’m not mad at you. It was a good call, actually. I’d have asked to take a look around on my own, but I would’ve used a little more tact. You don’t want to over-commit without seeing the details for yourself.” He stood up, his eyes searching for the commissioner. “Plus, this thing seems more than a little *off* to me. I can’t help feeling like we’re suddenly about to get heaps of new business...”

Fly on the Wall

Tuesday, 3:53 PM

The town hall was empty except for the employees and a few people milling about. In one of the large conference rooms, Thomas Ungsten was peering at a dossier handed to him by the police commissioner, while his apprentice was busying herself with some other medical reports.

In an adjacent chair, Alice Conrad gulped down some scalding black coffee and peeked at her watch.

“Is this all you have right now?” said Ungsten, lifting the dossier to see there was anything underneath.

“Yes.” The commissioner paused. “We’ve been getting reports of a man going around asking questions to the people who claim to have seen it. What do you think? Any thoughts?”

“What kind of reports? And if you’re thinking that was me, you’re wrong.”

“I wasn’t thinking that. I’m guessing someone could’ve recognized you, anyway. The manager from the diner, Shania something, told one of the sergeants that a man she’d never seen before was asking her about the... sighting.”

“Oh? Do we have a description on file?”

“Page 4. No distinguishing features, but he had a large blue raincoat on, with the hood up. Claimed to be with the paper.”

“Sounds like a loony, but that’s no help. Hmm.” Ungsten wondered what the hell that was all about. “Do we have any other visual material? Anything weird?”

“The photos from the phone camera. And the smells.”

“Eh, the forest smells weird by itself. What was the other thing?”

“Several blurry photos in the woods. In the daylight with the flash on, but the sky was clouded over.”

“Right. This set of photos, it came directly from the boy’s phone?”

“Straight from the scene, he told me.”

“They all look like shit,” said the man, and she smiled thinly. He held up a scaled-up printout of one of the photos. “Can’t make out a single thing. Could be the backside of somebody’s pet raccoon, for all I know. Let me go over their statements once more.”

Just before meeting privately with the investigator, Conrad had conferred with the rest of the MPD and seniors of the town council. They’d discussed at length the strange occurrences in town, and then talked about bringing Thomas Ungsten into play. But before that, the police department had opened the case to the table, in-house.

Not a single person on the force was willing to tackle this case. In fact, owing to the finding of the hand, combined with the sightings, the response was overwhelmingly negative.

She wasn't surprised. One of the best street fighting techniques she knew was fleeing from the scene. Not engaging with clear danger can do wonders for one's lifespan, and as an officer of the law, she knew it all too well. If the private eye wanted to step in and take a look, he was more than welcome. The man had a decent reputation around town, and his investigative skills weren't questionable. She *also* knew that he didn't have a family to speak of. Technically, that factor alone made him the best candidate for this kind of risky operation, but she didn't say this out loud. It wasn't his fault that everyone on the police force had a familial relationship to consider.

Commissioner Conrad didn't know exactly how the money aspect of this transaction would work, but the arrangement would be something like this: Ungsten would take over the case as a consultant, and gain access to police reports and other findings, effectively conducting all the necessary investigation. In case of an emergency, the police force would provide logistical assistance and some manpower, but Ungsten would be responsible for finding answers.

Well, she thought, eyeing the third person in the room on the far side of the table. Ungsten and his apprentice, Eva Marsh.

It was rather curious, she realized, how inherently noiseless the other woman was. In fact, Conrad would've completely forgotten about her if Ungsten hadn't introduced them. It was as though her presence was *wavering* somehow, and not solid, like a normal person...

A man wearing cleaning overalls entered the room and halted. "Oh, excuse me, he said. Didn't realize this room was being used."

Conrad waved him in anyway, and neither Ungsten nor Marsh looked up. The cleaner had a Portland Timbers hat on, and he wore safety glasses. Moving as silently as a seasoned librarian, he began to sweep and clean in the corner, making his way swiftly across the room. Efficient, the commissioner thought, and turned her attention back to the investigator.

He was nodding and frowning and making notes.

"Okay," he said, finally. "This is what I make of it. We don't know what is causing all this. As such, I will refrain from making any conclusions about the cause itself. However, it is a safe assumption that the root cause of these incidents lies near the woods somewhere. Maybe it's getting closer to town. There could be patterns. We don't know yet." He paused.

"Merriwald's an otherwise peaceful town. I've never seen anything like this before, and I'm guessing neither has anyone else around. Before the people start going batshit, it's important for the police force to divert its efforts in managing chaos. Eva and I will take over the case and then operate from my office. I will liaison with officer Wilkins...?"

She nodded.

"Right, officer Wilkins shall be my point of contact. I have some experience in tracking down people, even through, uh, forested areas."

Conrad knew of the man's past accomplishments. "Okay," she said. But he didn't have to work on his pitch, because the town council was already backing her on this decision.

Behind them all, the cleaner sneezed. "Excuse me," he said, and moved away.

Ungsten and Conrad glanced at him, and went back to talking.

"I think it would be wise to take a peek around the woods during daytime. If the *perpetrator* is likely to be active at night, somehow, that would be safer. Maybe a couple of the officers could help me do sweeps."

Conrad shook her head. "Sure, we'll give that a try, but we did sweep several sectors already. There's no trace of the thing. And it's... well, uh, the perp is not necessarily active only during the nighttime. We found the boys in the daytime, see? We barely know anything about the creature the perp." Ungsten was nodding.

Marsh chimed in, finally. "Why would the creature do this?"

The room fell silent.

As the cleaner finally wrapped up his equipment and exited the conference room, Marsh pushed on with one question. "*Why* now? *Why* in this way? It makes no sense. There's no pattern to these vicious incidents. Did it just want to scare the boys off? And did it scare the big man into a heart attack? *Why* leave just the hand behind? Wild animals don't do this. This is crazy. It doesn't add up." She looked at them. "We're blind in the waters here."

* * *

The cleaner left the room and walked straight up to the maintenance closet, where he ditched the cleaner's vest and equipment he'd "borrowed". Under the Timbers hat, his dark ponytail was coiled up like a snake. He smiled quietly to himself. *That woman Eva*, he thought. *She could be a problem.*

Earlier, from an inconspicuous vantage point among the audience, Jean Macawi had followed the proceedings of the council meeting closely. He knew there wasn't much radio chatter regarding creatures and whatnot, but he also knew that the mysterious presence in the woods was causing huge ripples in other social pools. Afterwards, mingling with the dispersing crowds as though he was with the building staff, he'd seen Ungsten and Marsh enter the conference room, and then the commissioner had gone in after them with a bunch of files. If Macawi was planning on getting to the target first, he needed to know what their game plan was.

According to what he'd overheard in the conference room, he still had a lot of hours in his lead time, and they hadn't made him yet. Good. He made his way out of the town hall and gazed up at the sky. It was only the afternoon, but the clouds had withered away into grey wisps against a dark blue backdrop. Far away in the distance, he could see the silhouettes of a dying tornado. One could almost feel the tingle of fear on the northbound wind.

Then the man went out to the rear, where he'd parked his Toyota, and drove back to the Vacation Inn for further preparations.

Back in the conference room, Marsh was thinking hard. “Why?” she said again, as though in a daze.

Ungsten coughed and got to his feet. He collected the files in his arms and nodded to the commissioner. She was a competent figurehead, but her eagerness to change hands with this case was ostensible. And justified, in many ways. He didn’t care. “I’ll let you know the specifics of my billing later. Don’t worry about it.”

Before their private meeting concluded, the commissioner bade them a somber good luck, which Marsh thought was amusing. As they left the building, Ungsten contemplated the weight of his new responsibility. By nature, people despise every aspect of change. It’s natural to be attached to things, to lean into the comfort of familiar cycles. When the local bar stops serving your favorite spirit for lack of production, it is bound to cause a slight bit of anguish. Losing a random keychain you’ve carried around for even a few months, building an unconscious attachment to it, is painful.

The same extends to one’s general circumstances, even isolated events in someone’s life. On days that have been longer than usual, families with kids at the park tend to keep within their little circle of laughs to avoid interacting with new people. Running into a single unsavory character in the street on a night out with your friends can dismantle the whole evening. The addition of unknown variables to an otherwise calm equation can quickly turn into a recipe for disaster. His responsibility, simple but enormous, was akin to that of a student in math class. There was a new variable on the scene, and he had to figure out what it was.

On the way to his office, Ungsten asked Marsh what she was feeling about the case. “I think it’s creepy, honestly.” She was poring over the photos of the severed hand. “Do you think it was some kind of-”

“Once again, I’m not thinking anything. Wait till we have more.”

“Fine, fine. What do we do now?”

“We’ll have to set up a little operation and get things rolling. We can do that later, and work out of my office. But I have a detour in mind first, while we’re on the road. Can you take a look at the other monster sighting news report from Saturday? Which lake was that near?”

“Lake Alencour, about 20 miles from here. I’ll pull it up on Google Maps.”

Commissioner Conrad had slipped into the dossier a new report from a few days ago. This last-minute addition was particularly interesting, because there were mentions of some blurry camera footage in the mix. There was also a disappearance involved, and an intriguing eyewitness account, which Ungsten wanted to confirm firsthand.

“Thanks. Let’s see if we can’t tease out some more information in the next couple hours. I’ll call ahead.”

“I don’t like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“This case, it’s very intriguing. But the old man said something about an evil presence...”

“Did he? Okay. Let me tell you something. All the cases I’ve taken on, they got resolved. I haven’t solved many cases, but they all had an explanation. Like I said, being a P.I. sometimes is a lot about patient, diligent work. We keep chipping away at the shell of this investigation, something will crack sooner or later.”

She remained silent, but nodded.

He glanced at her. “I want to talk to you about something else, but this lead takes priority right now, I think.”

Marsh glanced back at him and then put the files away, wondering if was feeling reservations about bringing her on. Trying to clear her mind, she leaned back in the car seat and peered out of the window from the corner of her eye. Luxurious pastures with a scattering of healthy-looking cattle sped past, alternating in fast-moving frames. She closed her eyes and angled her face to the car window, letting the weakening sunrays fall onto her face directly. “This place is lovely when it’s not all miserable.”

“It’s true,” said Ungsten, nodding with passion. As the Impala cruised past an abandoned cornfield, the wind howled its approval.

Still Life

Tuesday, 4:44 PM

Lake Alencour was located twenty-two miles northeast of Merriwald. By the time the green Impala got to the place, the sun was ready to clock out for the day. The golden orb was perched a short distance above the horizon, casting a warm glow across the pasture.

The lake was situated a short walk from an overlooking cottage, with a little wind turbine at the gates. The structure looked disheveled in some way. In the natural yellowish-orange lighting, it looked like a cozy place, but Marsh had her reservations about faraway hideouts like this one. The cottage, she saw as they got closer, was rustic, with brickwork visible all throughout. At the top, a crooked chimney was devoid of any smoke, but the windows of the cottage showed that the indoor lights were on. It was owned by a retired farmer named Graham.

Ungsten had parked outside the gates, and they were walking into the premises, when a low growl startled them both. “Did you hear that?” said Marsh.

“Yes.”

They were almost on the porch, when from the far side of the pasture, something low and fast began to bound closer and closer to them.

“Is that... is that a *wolf*?” said an incredulous Marsh.

“It might be.”

As Marsh shrieked and leaped onto the porch, Ungsten calmly reached into his jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, placed one in his mouth, and did not bother lighting it. The houndlike-creature woofed and sped down towards them, leaping and bounding over the pasture.

Right before it was on top of Ungsten, who hadn’t moved, a distant booming voice called, “*Down, Shadow!*”

And the snarling hellhound immediately skidded to a polite halt and sat down near the porch. It wagged its tail, and made puppy eyes at Ungsten. He winked at the large dog-like animal and peered in the direction of the voice. A limping fellow was walking toward them from the side of the cottage.

“Sorry about that, y’all,” said the man with the limp. Visibly old, he had a sweatshirt on with the design of some obscure symbols. His wrinkled face grinned at Marsh, gaps in his smile where teeth would’ve been. “Miss, come on in, he won’t bother you now. Sir, you can head on inside.”

“What breed is he?” said Ungsten, eyeing the fierce haunches of the canine.

“You don’t wanna know, trust me.”

Ungsten nodded and smiled at the man as they stepped into the cottage. “Mr. Graham? We spoke on the phone earlier. I’m Thomas Ungsten. This is Eva Marsh, my apprentice.”

“Shadow, let’s go in, come on, there’s a good boy.”

The inside of the cottage was as bucolic as Marsh had imagined. As the wizened old man known only as Graham poked at the fireplace, she pointed out the various knick-knacks arranged across the mantles and shelves to Ungsten. It was really pleasing to the eyes, and she let her imagination wander.

The old man, probably in his late seventies – if not late hundreds, thought Marsh – offered them both coffees, and when they both declined, poured himself a large mug and sat across from the private investigator. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Graham,” said Ungsten. “Can you tell us about what happened on Saturday?”

“You folks with the state department? No, right? You won’t be asking questions about any farming going around here?”

Ungsten chuckled. “No, we’re from Merriwald, like I said. Not with the authorities. Just following up on some leads. Did you get any visits from police officers yet?”

“Just the one guy who made the missing person report out for Simeon. My friend, who disappeared on Saturday.”

Ungsten was already confirming notes and making new ones. “Of course.”

“The first hurricane on Saturday came out of nowhere. The one on Sunday was the worst, but on Saturday it caught us unawares. A mile to either side and I wouldn’t be here today, a talking to you. You see my wind turbine outside? Would’ve been ripped to shreds.” The old man shrugged. “Mother nature doesn’t mess around. We should be thankful.”

“Were you close with Simeon?” said Ungsten, planning to segue into the details of the disappearance.

“It’s in the police report already,” said Graham. “Ask what you want to ask me directly, mister. I’m an old guy, see? Not much patience for theatrics.” The man’s tone wasn’t hostile at all, realized Marsh, watching from a distance. He was simply prompting clearer communication.

“Right,” said Ungsten. “How did he... go? What happened? Did you see the creature?”

For half a second, Graham smiled. Then he nodded gravely. “I lay my eyes on the thing, for sure.”

“Could you describe it?”

“I can do you one better. I have it on video. I realized that the cameras got it on video only after the policeman had left on Saturday. And then, well, the full derecho ate up every resource around, so no one but me has seen it. Although,” he said, getting to his feet. “I have to show you something else later.”

“Did you hear any sounds from the... creature?” said Ungsten, as they walked over to an adjacent room.

“Nope, no sounds. No sounds, no signals, no warning. The thing could’ve been playing dead the whole time, for all I knew then. Hell, it took me about a minute to realize what fresh horror this was, but Simeon was gone already.”

Though old-fashioned, the cottage had CCTV coverage on all four sides. On a weathered television screen with a CD/DVD player attached, the man let them view the footage. To the south of the cottage lay the lake, and two of the corner cameras covered an overlapping area. Graham, limping in his pajamas, moved about. “You’ll see that the creature is a biped of some kind.”

As the two investigators watched the blurry, sepia-colored footage, they saw the scene from Saturday unfold. The lake could be seen halfway through, and at one edge, there was movement. Right at the edge of the woods, a man, perhaps even older than Graham, was carrying a pair of dead rabbits out from the thicket. A tree lay uprooted nearby, where a gust of wind had knocked it over. As the man, Simeon, stepped over the fallen trunk of the tree, he was *yanked* downward and sideways into the woods.

A figure was dragging at the older man, and they couldn’t make out any details in the footage. After a moment, however, Simeon stopped resisting, and the figure dragged it into the forest. “Look!” said Marsh. “The lower half of its shape! Could those be legs?”

Sure enough, even though the upper half of the shape was obscured in the dark foliage, two oblong shapes were seen moving underneath, going deeper into the forest. “Hmm,” said Ungsten. “Thank you for letting us see this.”

“No problem. You folks seeing the same thing over in the south?”

“Town called Merriwald,” said Ungsten, nodding. “Maybe it’s the same thing.”

“Storms, creatures, horror! I feel like I’m in college again.” said Graham, running a hand over his ancient scalp. “Okay. Let’s go outside, I wanna show you both something.”

“Is it okay if I stay here and burn a copy of the footage?” said Ungsten, hanging back.

“Sure, be my guest. Miss Marsh? Shadow, come on, boy!”

The two people and canine stepped out into the setting sun’s glow again. “The lake is called Alencour because of some old fairy tale, I think. Bought the place in my thirties, lived here with my best bud Simeon for the last decade.” Graham pointed across the lake, at the still water. “Those woods right there,” he said. “That’s where I lost Simeon. And that’s where I saw it.”

“Strange,” said Marsh.

To her surprise, Graham shook his head. “It’s *evil*, not strange. The manifestation of it may not be clear to you, but trust me when I say this. It’s a thing of deep evil.” He kept shaking his head. “Don’t try to understand it. When I was at the lake on Saturday, waiting for Simeon, I felt it. You’ll feel it too. Of all people,” he said, glancing at her curiously. “You should know.”

Even as she tried to process what he'd said, Shadow licked at her hands. Disregarding how much he looked like a feral wolf, she petted him gently.

"I should know?" she said. "What do you mean?"

Graham, with the look of a man who had lived lifetime over lifetime, looked at the faraway sun. "You've got the look."

"What look?"

"Being out of place."

She froze. "*What...*"

"I'm going to die within the next year or so," said Graham, not bothering to wait for her. His voice, though croaky with age, wasn't speculative. He was saying these things matter-of-fact. "Shadow will go to a granddaughter of mine. He knows it's coming." Graham looked at her. "I can sense the turmoil within you," he said. "I can't read it very well these days." He pointed to his face. "See the wrinkles?" Then he looked away. "Are you afraid of the creature?"

She stared across the lush fields. The sun was right above the skyline, and the sky was a pale tint of orange streaked with a light reddish hue. It was unbelievably pretty.

"I'm really scared," she said. "Not just of the creature, but other things." A tear welled up in the corner of her right eye. "So much that I don't know," she said. Her brain felt heavy. "How did you live so long? How have you maintained this attitude?"

"Who says I've lived long?" laughed Graham. "Simeon was old, maybe. He was like a hundred years old! His joints creaked, for heaven's sake. What shoddy luck, I say! And now that he's gone, I can't really do much about it, can I? The evil that I sensed on Saturday hasn't appeared since. And it doesn't really matter, does it? Everything is just stuff, you know? You, me, Mr. Ungsten over there. This lake. My cottage. Shadow, too, even though I don't think about it. It's all like camphor on hot asphalt. Here now and gone later." He made a *poof* gesture with his frail fingers. "You may feel like you're too young to be thinking about this," he said. "But you're just human."

If only you knew, thought Marsh, and then said with conviction, "All that destruction... all this carnage... I don't know how, but I'm going to find the creature."

"Of course you are," said the old man. He sighed. "No matter what line of work you're in, you'll come face-to-face with mortality. Little kids sometime witness car accidents, freak deaths. Opens them up to the reality of it all sooner. Good for them, I say. They're going to see it when they grow up anyway. Sometimes, it's your own mortality, and your dance with death begins. It's this creature now, it could become something else entirely eventually."

A gust of pleasant wind blew past them. Shadow was silent, staring at the sky balefully, as though he grasped the conversation's somber tone.

As they watched the sky, the lighter shades of orange shifted into darker maroons. “Isn’t it beautiful?” said Graham.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I’m not surprised.” The old man crouched and sat down next to Shadow. “There’s a mythical shade of purple that people claim to have seen in the sky. A magical, ethereal magenta. On a rare sunset, when your fortune is ripe, you’ll see it. Just before nightfall. Look at it right now. It’s a dark brown, mostly red.” Graham chuckled, ruffling the wolf-dog’s hair. “If you think this is pretty, wait till the pink hues show up. But really,” he added with a glint in his eye, “You’ll know when you see it.”

These words, spoken in the future tense, and the presence of the picturesque sky, collectively triggered an old memory in Marsh’s brain, and she was struck by a sudden wave of déjà vu. Like a distant dream had lent her reality a scene or two, she felt weightless, floating between worlds. For the next few minutes, they remained still, thinking, existing in the moment, like grains of sand on a gigantic, lifeless beach.

She was still standing and gazing outward, when Ungsten left the cottage and walked up to them. “Nice view. We should get going while the sun’s still up,” he said. “It’ll get dark soon. Graham, thank you for the details and the footage.”

The old man didn’t get up, and grinned at them with his checkerboard smile. “You’re welcome. Safe travels.” Then they waved their goodbyes and set off toward the car.

Still thinking about the curious talk she’d had with the old man, Marsh peered at Ungsten’s notes, which were succinct and without fluff. She flipped through the pages; it was some impressive literature. *More pieces of the puzzle are falling in place...*

Before the sun had fully set, they got into the Impala, and then Ungsten and Marsh were cruising down the roads, back to Merriwald.

The Best-Laid Plans

Tuesday, 7:51 PM

While the investigation was picking up speed, the town of Merriwald slunk gently into uncertain waters. The man known as Jean Macawi was hard at work in his room at the Vacation Inn.

Walls were covered with notes and markings and post-its and maps. There were cuttings of news reports of missing people from nearby towns. Books and long editorials about storms and hurricane patterns lay strewn about.

Macawi was poring over an encyclopedia entry for different types of storms and their lasting damages. In another browser tab, weather forecasts and storm warnings took up space. The man tried to think through the full timeline of the past week. After going over it twice, he decided that he was on the right track. The hurricane complex was at the crux of this trail.

Generally, a derecho is a long-lived series of thunderstorms that ends up producing powerful wind gusts over a large area. To be called a “derecho,” the storm complex must check certain boxes:

- I. The swath of wind damage must extend more than 250 miles, producing wind gusts of 58 mph or greater along most of its length
- II. It must also include several, well-separated 75 mph or greater wind gusts
- III. The damage path also needs to be greater than 50 miles wide

On Saturday and then Sunday, for a short span of time, some of the conditions had been met. On Saturday, right before the sun set, a series of hurricanes on the lower end of the speed requirement had passed through unpopulated areas. Before the people could orient themselves, in less than a day, the full derecho hit. Straight-line winds at over 90 miles per hour, pummeling through commercial and residential infrastructure like a battering ram meeting Styrofoam.

The storm complex had carved out a near-perfect line of damage along the southern towns. Merriwald had caught some of the destruction in several corners. The death toll from the storm itself was as follows: the loss of livestock numbered in the dozens, due to the collapse of a heavy metal silo directly into a few barns. Two men had been caught up in the maelstrom and one of them had succumbed to injuries. A woman from the far side was in intensive care, and several hospital beds at the town’s only hospital were occupied by senior citizens who were struggling to recover from grievances caused by the power outages. And then there were other unreported losses of buildings and structures that had been long abandoned on the outskirts.

Macawi knew all about this. The right kind of derecho can flatten entire urban landscapes in the span of an hour. This newest one had wrought considerable damage upon the area. It had originated in a neighboring state and then passed through more than forty counties and districts of Iowa, dissipating in the ocean a few hours later.

Some of the fallout from the derecho was even more chaotic. The forested areas had taken damage in various patterns, for example. All kinds of rodents were probably displaced at the moment, searching for shelter in undamaged areas with sufficient foliage. Unrest in the woods had scared off the deer and other big game, and after the storm, there was no telling when the fauna would find its way back.

And then there was the consideration of Merriwald itself. The town boasted of no more large institutions than five, and two of them were schools. Without a college or even a large stadium to boost tourism money, Merriwald's medium-sized economy relied on its share of the farming industry and small businesses. Some of the citizens worked in the wind-power industry to stay local while also venturing off the beaten path.

Geographically, Merriwald was one of the most stable towns in the district cluster, with one of the lowest seismic vibrations in history. Although it wasn't immune to the wrath of the wind gods, the hidden settlement had successfully weathered many a storm in the past. Alas, those hadn't prepared them for the record-breaking complex that had shown up at their doorstep.

The town is incredibly fragile right now, he thought. What timing! Macawi tidied the room and then took a quick nap.

At exactly a quarter past eight, he put on some outdoor gear, some of it covered in camouflage patterns. Sticking the Glock in a concealed hip holster, he began to pace around the room.

He didn't have a plan yet. Sure, he'd shown up here, hot-headed and passionate, but what next? Because of the target's inherently chaotic nature, there was nothing he could map out to help. It would all be pointless. He had to mimic disordered patterns; be random, start at random points and end up at random ones. *Too risky*, he thought. Although his own life was voluntarily on the line, he couldn't go about wasting his opportunities for engagement.

So, what now? He knew that the investigators were in possession of some kind of photographic material. Things would start escalating fast now. It would not matter. It had already begun, and it was up to him to put an end to it all.

Macawi, still dressed in outdoor gear, set off into town under the moonlight.

The scenic parts of Iowa were a little up North, and Merriwald had long ago accepted its gorgeous drift plains as the only striking features after its luxurious farmland. Closer to Illinois, the rolling hillsides offered a beautiful backdrop for the neighboring state's own rustic meadows. Though Merriwald's meadows were no less prominent, the occasional grim sky left something to be desired. That was Macawi's opinion.

As he trudged through over the drizzly sidewalks, he began to move farther and farther from the residential areas. Smoke from faraway chimneys drifted upward and away from him as his steps took him along the main roads. He made sure to stay wary of car headlights, which weren't all that many at this time of the night.

His belly rumbled softly, and he looked up. A short walk ahead in the foggy darkness was a gas station. It was a strange scene. Darkness all around, and a small dome of soft light cast by the

several bulbs hovering above a set of gas pumps. The attached convenience store stood by stoically like a concrete guard.

Macawi shuffled into the store and turned immediately into the aisles. Collecting a fistful of beef jerky packets and a bottle of Gatorade, he made his way to the cashier's.

The cashier was a balding man in his thirties with inconsistent facial hair. He looked detached from the moment, and Macawi was glad he didn't have to interact with the person. He almost thanked his stars, but it was not to be.

Having apparently discovered a newfangled enthusiasm for small talk, the cashier eyed Macawi and let his gaze run over the outfit. Then he let out a long, rumbling *hummmmm*, as though contemplating the cradles and graves of civilization. "Doing some serious hunting tonight?"

Taken aback by this comment, Macawi managed to chuckle curtly. "Unfortunately, no," he said. "Just out for a walk."

The cashier nodded as though he'd heard something else entirely. "Bad time to be hunting right now. Crazy stuff going around. Not much game in the woods at this time, anyway. Try when the season's-"

"That'll be all, thanks," said Macawi hurriedly, shoved a bunch of crumpled notes under the cashier's window, and strode back out into the night. Everyone's got suggestions, he thought. But nobody's got a moment of peace. If he didn't act fast, it would get worse soon.

But I can't risk engaging in the night! The night vision goggles could help... *But it's still too dicey!* However much the waiting was killing him, the hazard of darkness compelled him in the other direction. Daylight was the obvious call of action in this case. Silencing the alarm bells his lizard brain was throwing at him, he turned his back to the woods and stepped away. It wouldn't be done today.

Chewing away at the beef jerky on the way back to the hotel, Macawi reflected on his next actions. The next day would be the harbinger of truth, he knew it in his heart. It had to happen tomorrow, or everything would grow beyond his sphere of control. He could not carry many more deaths with him. The thought of what was to come made his adrenaline spike, but he calmed himself down and got to his room.

For what he needed to do, his body had to be well-rested and at its most nimble. Closing down all the files, discarding the last shreds of his exploratory pursuits, and finally setting a phone alarm for the sunrise, Jean Macawi fell into a sound, restful sleep.

Behind the 8-Ball

Tuesday, 9:20 PM

“Commissioner shmomissioner! Screw that bitch,” said the woman, slurring the sentence while slamming a half-empty beer mug onto the hardwood table. The golden liquid sloshed about, but the woman paid it no heed, and neither did anyone else. The dive bar was filled with other drunken patrons, and loud rock music muffled all the nearby conversations.

Jojo’s Tavern was located half a mile away from anything in the area. There was a large parking lot behind the small, boxlike building with the stickiest dance floor in the zip code. Nobody knew who Jojo was, but the beer in there was tasty, the pool tables were still a shade of green, and the ambience was welcoming to the right audience.

“Yeah, fuck her!” came a gruff voice out of nowhere, and someone else poured another shot.

A group of men and women was gathered at the bar, guzzling away all kinds of alcoholic fluids. Despite the curfew, small businesses were allowed to remain open at their discretion. The tavern had a healthy crowd on most weekdays when it closed at 10pm, and the bartender would confirm that it was at about half of its weekend bustle.

“Alright, Billy, rack them up.”

Ex-sportsmen-turned-landowners, Billy and Stewy were brothers, both sturdy working men with a comparable whiskey tolerance. Stewy’s girlfriend, Quinn, was already completely inebriated. Right before slumping down in her chair in a relaxed position, she’d cursed the police commissioner for her scary statement earlier that day.

Billy and Stewy ignored her. This was a typical, normal weeknight for Quinn, and it was fine. They had things on their mind.

Stewy picked up a cue and circled the pool table. Billy, meanwhile, went about setting up the balls. Momentarily, the wooden spheres clacked together in a triangle, and Billy stepped away to obtain a cue for himself.

Although they were nearing their drinking limits, they were both only slightly unsteady on their feet.

“Frigging scaredy-cat! I don’t need this creature-monster bullshit right now. You know how these fucking combine salesmen are gouging out my savings? Motherf-”

“Yeah, yeah, Billy, I know.” Stewy leaned into his shot, and cracked open the set with a nice flick of his wrist. Though buzzed hard, the brothers could remain alert for the sake of the game. “It’s not very fair of the council to scare us.”

“Wish I could go a week back in time, man. Shit.”

“You’re telling me. The fucken idea might give me nightmares for days. Probably going to start thinking up pictures of that creature from *The Thing*, you know?”

“Whatever,” added in another voice from the fray, and the rest of the conversation got lost in intoxicated murmurs. The private chat the three people were having vanished in the wind. Eventually, the song playing changed to a popular local anthem, and groups of people across the bar cheered in tune to it.

Billy moved around the table and lined up his shot. *Crack!*

While the game progressed, the moon shone brightly in the night sky. Stewy was very close to beating Billy, whose shots were surprisingly solid even while his speech remained incoherent.

Finally, the cue ball slid next to one of the corner pockets, aligned right next to the 8 ball and the orange 3. The older sibling chuckled. “All right! Look at how it’s turned out, Billy. All I have to do is chase down this, then the 8-ball, and it’s game set.” But Billy wasn’t listening. Somewhere through the fog in his brain, one little thought latched on to what Stewy had just said. *Chase down...*

“Um, hey Stewy. Why don’t we chase down this creature ourselves? Get a little mileage on the Winchesters, if nothing else?”

While Stewy’s own alcohol-laden brain tried to process this, his arm slipped a little early and the cue ball went wide, clacking across the far side of the table and rolling to a stop near both their noses.

“Huh!” he said, and cursed loudly, a haphazard plan forming in his head. “I should’ve thought of that myself. Good lord, this beer’s good. Hey Quinn, wake up! Billy, get us some waters to chug. No fucking ice, thanks.”

Fifteen minutes later, the trio left the parking lot in a battered old Jeep, skirting up all the one and a half mile to the densest spot in the woods. The music died down behind them as they pulled up near the thicket.

Stewy and Billy each carried a Winchester rifle. Stewy’s girlfriend, Quinn, had a bent up crowbar, which she was waving about like a poker. “Careful with that, Quinn.”

Each of the three people also carried a powerful Maglite torch with them. The moonlight offered sufficient visibility that night, so none of them turned theirs on.

“Alright,” said Stewy, his foggy brain clearing up temporarily. “Here’s the plan. Quinn, stay near the jeep with your phone on. Bill, hey, you listening?”

Billy was staring at the trees beyond them, almost entranced. He muttered something, and Stewy leaned forward. “What did you say, Bill?”

His brother’s voice was heavy with awe. “How did the *trees* survive the thunderstorms? Isn’t it amazing?”

“Uh, you idiot, the storm passed through the other end. Remember there used to be a series of abandoned silos on the opposite side? They were all torn open. And a preservation shed that we used to smoke pot out of, remember? Holy shit, buddy, you’re so drunk-”

And then Billy started swaying and giggling and pointing at the moon. Stewy cursed. “Screw this,” he said. Gently pushing his younger brother back against the jeep, he shoved the hunting rifle away from his face. “Okay. Here’s the plan. If it’s a creature, I’m gonna go in and shoot the fucker. It’s not gonna outsmart me, okay? Billy, keep your finger off the trigger. Quinn, stay sharp.” But she had no visible inclination to stay sharp, and Stewy sighed. “Holler if anything goes down, okay?” Then, racking up his well-oiled rifle once more, Stewy set off into the brush.

A few steps in, the darkness slipped over him like a gossamer blanket. His senses had finally come back to him after much emergency hydration. The rifle felt cozy in his palms, and he felt his feet fall back into a methodic hunter’s stride he’d perfected over the years. Pause, listen, sweep, step. Repeat.

As a veteran of this category of areas, Stewy realized that he wasn’t really anxious about the forest itself. Normally, what with all the eerie sounds and whispers on the air, the cooing of birds of prey adding to the ambience, the woods could turn one’s kneecaps to jelly at the mere crack of a twig.

But Stewy had come to know these sounds as well as the back of his hand. *Fucking creature?* He thought. It had been on his mind since the first post in the group chat about Mr. Dennis and his story. *Fine*, he thought. *I’ll do it myself.*

Leaves rustled around him as his boots stepped softly through the trees. Nothing out of place. Not a branch. He was unruffled; waiting was part of the game. One part of his brain was busy tracking noticeable landmarks in the scenery, a rotten oak here and a burned down set of bushes there. These would help him find his way back to-

C-RACK!

A loud gunshot rang out in the night. Stewy stumbled and made sure he hadn’t misfired in some sort of daze. But his gun’s barrel was still cool. *Billy!*

Stewy bolted in the other direction, pounding through prickly shrubs towards the parked jeep just a little distance away. As he ran, the cold wind entered his lungs and he felt like coughing. But he kept running, and-

“Aah-!”

From somewhere in front, a yelp cut short! *What’s going on?* Stewy was already screaming Billy and Quinn’s name. Tightening his grip on the Winchester, he skidded out near the Jeep.

No sign of either Billy or Quinn! He screamed their names again and began waving his gun around. “I should’ve warned you not to wander off!” he hissed. “Billy! QUINN!” The only response from the woods was a lazy crackle of the branches.

And then he felt it.

In moments of heightened awareness, a kind of sixth sense has been reported to show itself in the human brain. During these moments, one can instinctively get the overwhelming feeling of *being watched*. Soldiers sometimes tell stories of times when they received a vague, shapeless intuition that told them of a sniper's scope watching them. This saved some of their lives during combat, and this same sense had saved Stewy and Billy's lives numerous times while hunting game.

Tonight, it would betray them.

Once the feeling of being observed came over Stewy, he lost his composure. Before the panic set in, he had to regroup and get the hell out of here! He whirled back into the woods, turned on his bright torch with one hand and aimed the Winchester with other. Sweeping this way and that, frantically searching for any signs of movement, he failed to notice a towering presence not far from one of his blind spots. If he'd just taken the Jeep and driven off by himself, he would've made it through the night.

A twig creaked behind him, and Stewy spun around, the flashlight beam bouncing wildly through the trees. It cast all kinds of shadows near him, and he missed one that was moving on its own.

The wet, earthy smell of moist leaves filled the air, along with the scent of a chemical that seemed alien to the man. Before Stewy could squeeze the trigger, an overbearing presence loomed near his shoulder, and a fresh wave of terror struck him. The rifle tumbled to the damp and leafy ground from his fingers, and he realized that there was an immense pressure on his neck. His arms flailed helplessly. So tight! What was going on?

"Ungh-" he gasped while his head was jammed in a vice grip. And then his everything above his neck began to turn by an unseen force! "No- *NO!*" he tried to scream, but with an abrupt jerk, his chin suddenly tilted far too much to one side, and there was a dull cracking sound. Under the blanket of foliage, his body fell limp to the ground.

In the distant sky, a single bolt of lightning streaked down, like a spell was being cast over the lush landscape, and then it began to rain.

Some Things Against Others

Wednesday, 8:11 AM

The rain had stopped right before sunrise, converting the dry and cold dreary gloom across town into a wet and cold dreary gloom. The sun was hiding like the in-laws were driving in, and the town seemed to have lost the energy it had exhibited just days ago, when people rallied to recover from the hurricanes.

In the span of less than a week, everything had slowed down beyond a normal pace. Popular small businesses had shuttered up and people had started to reconvene indoors. Part of it was the weather, but most of it was the inexplicable incidences of the past few days.

Ungsten found himself in more and more agitated moods as the early morning proceeded into a late breakfast. Still at the office, he and Marsh had come up with umpteen theories regarding the cause of these occurrences, but they were nowhere close to finding answers.

“More people missing? What the...?” Ungsten glared at the text he’d received from sergeant Wilkins. Then he turned to his apprentice, who was hunched over in a chair. He went through the text and read the contents out to her. The gist was that three more individuals, two men and a woman, were last seen telling a bartender that they were going out to collect the head of the devil. Disappeared, again, off the face of the earth. As he relayed the message, he noticed that the woman wasn’t responding to him. As he watched her, still hunched over a stack of newspaper cuttings and books, he realized that she wasn’t moving at all. He tried to remember if she’d eaten the takeout properly last night.

Marsh had been very quiet through the evening. While he had crashed on the couch, she’d stayed up all night, going over news reports and sightings.

“Hey, Eva, did you hear what I said?” He received a half-hearted nod from her, and stepped forward. “Did you get any sleep at all last night?”

“Hmm?” said the woman, preoccupied.

“I said, did you get any rest? How about the day before?”

“No, I didn’t. Is that gonna be a problem?”

For the first time since waking up, Ungsten noticed the edge to her voice. “Is everything okay?”

There was silence.

Then, Marsh shoved off from the desk she was working at and threw up her hands. “No! Nothing’s okay. It doesn’t make sense!”

“Okay.”

“Look here. Look at these notes. This creature, perpetrator, whatever, is acting all erratic. No wild animal hunts like this. I know. I read the entire goddamned book, for god’s sake. I even wrote a few chapters! This is not typical behavior. It simply doesn’t make sense!”

Ungsten observed her eyes. They had a slightly distraught look, and her fingers appeared to be trembling... from rage? “Um,” he began. “How about this? You can get some rest right now, and we can go look in the woods later. Or I’ll go by myself-”

“Why won’t you let me *do this?!* ” she exploded. Her voice was hoarse with frustration. Ungsten took half a step back and reassessed the situation.

Here they both were. The creature situation was escalating fast. He had to make further inquiries and check out the woods while it was daytime. Ungsten inhaled and exhaled, knowing that it was inevitable that she would get over her outburst, whether it was now or in a few hours. It was already a non-issue. This knowledge set upon him a tranquil air, and he smiled gently at her.

“There’s no pressure for you to do this,” he said. His tone was neutral. “Listen to me. I don’t know what you’re thinking about right now, but you can tell me anything. Would you like some water?”

Marsh nodded. “Thank you.”

“How are you feeling?”

“You know,” she began, raising her eyebrows in defiance. “I’m not really dumb. My degrees weren’t flukes, okay? I can solve this. I’m missing something, I can feel it.”

“I don’t think you’re dumb.”

Inwardly, Marsh seethed with a different frustration. There was his calm tone again, without inflection. He believed what he was saying. His calmness made it difficult for her to reach full catharsis, and she hated it. Her anger began to subside, and she courteously accepted the glass of water he’d produced.

Marsh looked at him, a veil of tears forming over her eyes. “I’m losing it, Thomas. I think I may have dementia, or something like that. An anomaly showed up in a routine checkup last month. They made me get an EEG.”

He said nothing.

“For a few months now, I’ve been having these... lapses in memory. Nothing problematic, mind you, but I tend to remember things for long periods. I mean, I used to do all that work in neuroscience. It all slips away from me randomly. And... it’s so *painful* sometimes.”

He stills said nothing. It dawned on her that he wasn’t showing the reaction she’d expected of him. Maybe he was already thinking up solutions for this crisis instead of getting riled up like she had. Maybe he was silently judging her sudden breakdown. But she deserved to be angry. “Do you know how exhausting it is? I feel like throwing up every minute of the day.”

He nodded gently, and his gaze softened. She began to feel better. It had been weighing on her mind for weeks, and the emotions were pouring out of her.

“My family took it well,” she said. “But they didn’t let me be angry. Isn’t that crazy? My parents, my brothers – *cousins*, even – all a big happy family telling me it was okay. They made me a shiny new showcase for my fucking medals. They began to preemptively mourn my intelligence, for some damn reason. That’s like the worst coping mechanism! I mean, why?” Her voice cracked. “When would I get the chance to be mad? I don’t even know what’s going on with me. I chose to do this because I wanted to see if I still had anything left in me. But I feel like such an idiot. This is a great case! I would *love* to tackle something like this without the onus of proving myself in a hundred different contexts. I mean, I know we’re missing something simple here. The creature, the deaths, the missing people, the solution’s right there! And I cannot *see* it, because I’m so blinded by rage right now.” She sighed. A moment went by.

“Would you like to break something? Uh, something not important?”

She looked at Ungsten. He wasn’t smiling, and his hands were gesturing to the paraphernalia of investigation lying about. Stationery, electronics, books, even a couple security tape CDs from the farmhouse near Lake Alencour. Welcoming this opportunity, Marsh reached for various objects. In the next few moments, the office/apartment was filled with the noise of hard plastic cracking and breaking.

“I’ll buy you a new set of disposable forks. God, you should think about getting some decent cutlery. And was that your only T.V. remote? I’m sorry.”

The man waved dismissively. “It was a universal. How are you feeling now?”

“I’m feeling okay now.” As her face lost some of the heat from her angry outburst, she paused and composed herself. “There’s something I have to tell you. I feel lost... somehow. I’ve been feeling this after they told me about anomaly in the report. Like I know I’m in the moment, sometimes. The medical term for it is *dissociation*. Even when I’m *doing* something actively, I feel like I’m outside my own body. When we drive across the fields, I feel like I’m looking at your Impala through the eyes of a scarecrow across the field. The wind is in my face... but’s also not. I feel like a leaf in the middle of a heavy book, left to rot for decades. All the substance gone, leaving a shell behind.”

She looked up. To her astonishment, Ungsten was shaking his head and smiling, like the answers to one of life’s mysteries had suddenly been revealed to him.

“So *that’s* what it was this whole time.”

There was silence.

“Listen,” Ungsten said, looking at her. “I’m not really caught up on most of the mental health industrial complex lingo. In that matter, I can’t really help but listen to what you have to say. But I’ve gone through immense periods of mental anguish myself. If you think it’ll help, let me tell you about what I’ve learned from my experiences.”

She sat down in the chair, and he paused. "Sometimes we have these little things in our heads. I know I did. Odd thoughts. Weird stuff, really, some of it is altogether unhinged. Old army friends of mine found some solace through group therapy. Stuff like that is manageable. Mostly, it's harmless. But there's a threshold to some of them, I think, that you should watch out for, on high alert. If your mind's full of too many of these thoughts, it sometimes..." he gestured with his hands, "... starts spilling out into the real world. You start to lose yourself inside your own head at a deeper level, and the people around you might begin to unconsciously catch up on it. Your feelings of not being seen are suddenly just a feedback loop of invisibility from everyone around you."

His expression became serious. "As people, we're more perceptive than we sometimes think. In your case, you might want to ease up on yourself a little bit, actually. What with this new, *wild* bit of knowledge about yourself, in a new place where you're being seen with new eyes... I'm not sure what your original plan was, even with the investigation business, but... I want you know that it's okay. What you're feeling is completely normal," he added, a note of sympathy to his voice. "In any case, I'm not your father, not your therapist, not a friend you can confide in so easily. However, I *am* your boss."

Listening intently but not wanting to break his flow, Marsh raised an indignant index finger. "I'm not even getting paid."

Ungsten ignored the jab, "-and a mentor figure. I don't exactly know what's going on with you, but I'm sure you'll get through it just fine. These feelings of uncertainty are necessary for us to adapt and evolve as humans. It's hard, believe me. I've been alive five decades and counting, and trust me when I say this: everything you're feeling now will come and go. Me? I'm going to be dead in a few years, maybe *sooner* if the world is lucky enough, and I'm terrified of it. Every moment, sometimes. Try not to fight it. Let yourself feel the agony, and then let yourself feel the resolve, when it comes. And it will come," he said. "You'll figure it out. The ebb and flow of every single thing is... just life. And hey," he added, grinning widely. "This damned weather's not gonna help, right?"

She felt the tension melting away, and chuckled. "Thought you said you weren't my therapist?" But she was collecting his words like they were rare diamonds, valuable wisdom for later.

He grinned. "I wanted to talk to you about this before, but I didn't get the chance. Remember when I told you yesterday. The solution to the case always comes sooner or later. We just have to keep chipping away it. And if it's okay with you," he glanced at her. "I'd like to hear more about this... potential diagnosis."

"I'd like that too," she said. "Thank you. Thanks a lot." And she meant it. Her mind had cleared now, and a new determination rose within her. Here was a chance to fulfil the expectations of her superior. This was someone she'd grown to respect and admire in a short time, and she wanted to deliver her best.

"So tell me," Ungsten leveled his gaze at her. "Do you feel confident in applying yourself to this investigation, and in seeing it through?"

There was no hesitation in her answer. “Yes.”

“Great,” he said. His demeanor shifted slightly, and she could see that he was already thinking of other things. “Back to work for the time being, then. I’m going to go around town once again, and maybe take a peek in the woods. Apparently, some of the people know of a second series of ruins or shacks beyond the woods. We can catch up in the afternoon, grab some tacos.”

“Alright. I’m going to take a quick nap and follow up on this lead. Hiker from two cities away claims to have ‘physically assaulted by a shadowy beast’. Details to follow. And thanks again,” she said. “I’m feeling better now.”

“Alright, sounds like a plan. I’m heading into town, and I’ll text you any updates.”

“Okay, be careful. See you in a bit.”

Ambush Hour

Wednesday, 10:00 AM

The morning had graciously provided a much-needed rain cover to Jean Macawi. Rain meant that even fewer people would be inclined to head out. *Good.*

He'd showered and donned his outdoor gear. Making sure he had packed the thermal imaging lens, he slid the Glock back into the hip holster. It was go time.

Just a few minutes after ten, Macawi reached the woods. He had taken a long, winding route and hiked up the path, leaving his Toyota in the Inn's parking lot. And he was traveling light. A tiny part of him wished he had some sort of backup. *No!* He fought against the voice in his head, which kept telling him to turn back and return with more-

What's that smell? An acrid stench reached him at the edge of the woods, and he almost cowered in fear. But it wasn't what he was expecting. Just the carcass of two crows lying next to each other. He stepped through the dense foliage extremely slowly, making no sudden moves, taking the utmost care to not make a single sound. Placing himself in a little nook, he put the thermal imaging monocular to his eye and began to sweep the woods around him.

He was done thinking. Everything was catching up to him, and his psyche was holding on, barely. *Wait!* Movement in the woods! Through the green haze of the monocular, a soft, reddish glow was moving through the trees. It was tall, hunched over maybe. Only a little distance from him.

Okay, thought Macawi. *Here goes nothing.* Gripping the Glock in a practiced hold, he took a careful step through the bush.

* * *

After almost two hours of questioning and photographing, Thomas Ungsten had made absolutely zero progress on the case. The creature's appearance had struck a shapeless fear in the hearts of Merriwald's people. Driving along the woodside roads, he let his mind drift back to his earlier conversation with his new mentee.

It concerned him that she was flailing about in the dark so much. He hoped that this case, and others, would offer her chances of keeping her outlook fresh, even if it didn't help all that much.

Anyway, he had found a lead on the ruins on the far side. There were four or five old barnlike buildings scattered in the hilly areas. The people he had talked to claimed they were cabins for hunters. Others said they were druggie hangouts. Even others told him that aliens had colonies in two of the shed-like structure. At that point, he stopped asking questions and headed to the woods.

He parked the Impala a little distance from the closest thicket, far enough that it wouldn't be obtrusive, but close enough to make a quick getaway, in case the need arose. Before exiting his

vehicle, he reached into the glove compartment. Taped to the upper side of the compartment was a compact gun, an early retirement gift he'd never used in his new profession. He tucked it in the back of his waistband, and sent two texts from his phone before entering the woods.

The first text was to Marsh, a detailed account of what he'd found. He said he would be back in an hour or so after checking out the ruins on the far side of the woods. Even though he was going to traverse through the woods, there was enough carrier coverage for him to reach out if need be.

The second text was an exact copy of the first one, but to sergeant Wilkins.

The moment Ungsten entered the woods, alone, a thin veil of clouds shifted over the sun. Ungsten made an exasperated sound and began to step through the trees gingerly. He didn't want to get his gun out, and there wasn't a way some hooligan was going to get the jump on him-

Behind him, leaves rustled, his head whipped around to look, and something clamped over his mouth-

"Shh!" hissed a voice in his ear, the barrel of a handgun poking at his ribs. Ungsten peered around at the ponytailed man grabbing his face, and raised his hands in a placating gesture. The hand disappeared, and Ungsten wiped his mouth. He reached into his memories of the past two days and searched for a familiar face.

"You!" said Ungsten. "Weren't you at the town hall? No hat this time, huh?"

Holy shit, thought Macawi, struggling to keep his surprise from showing on his face. *What an observant guy!* "Keep your voice down, you fucking idiot!" he hissed at the private investigator.

"Okay, okay!" whispered Ungsten. "What's going on?"

"Did you drive here?"

"Yes. I parked a little distance away."

A wave of weakness came over Macawi. Everything was falling apart already. He felt like spilling his guts to this man with the honest look in his eyes. It would be so easy, he thought, to share the load. "The car still makes a sound, doesn't it?" He shook his head morosely. "My name's Macawi," he said. "Jean Macawi. We're both looking for the same-"

"You're the raincoat guy from the diner, too, then?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead, then. Tell me the secrets of this creature. What are you doing?"

Jean Macawi felt his heart racing. "Okay. But my name's not really Macawi, it's-"

The putrid chemical odor of Ammonia filled the air. Before either of the men had a chance to gather their wits, a massive presence had taken up the space in front of them. With a smack from the heavy, dense figure, the Glock from Macawi's hand fell away into the bushes.

And then, with a sickening crunch, Ungsten felt himself fall onto his phone. Nearby, Macawi was limp on the ground. His own phone was lying next to him. Ungsten made the split-second decision of lunging for the phone instead of reaching for his gun. The decision saved his life. In what could've been a fatal injury, he dove ahead of the incoming blow. But he didn't make it to the phone in time. The large, dark shape struck him just beneath the neck, and his world went black.

What Expensive Questions Cost

Wednesday, 10:21 AM

Eva Marsh had no intention of falling asleep that easily. After Ungsten left, she raided his mini fridge for foods of sustenance. Eventually, she realized that a few Clif bars and a bunch of beer were the only things seemingly keeping this man going. The man has an outlandish metabolism, she thought, munching on a granola bar.

She then organized her own notes on the case, and went through every single eyewitness account from Merriwald. Then she went through newspaper cuttings. Of the three other sightings that had been reported in neighboring towns, only one source had something interesting to say. As luck would have it, no contact information was provided. No matter. She pulled notes from the other two news reports, which didn't really have much of importance. Maybe she would get lucky with the third one. Then she wrote down all the facts in a neat, concise list. The bullet points added up as follows:

- Physical attributes of the entity:
 - Height: over six feet, easily. Even seven feet.
 - Color: Dark brown/dark green. Difficult to see in the dark, even in soft daylight.
 - Words and phrases used by most eyewitnesses to describe the entity: “blurry”, “shapeless”, “like a moving tree”, “bushy and hairy”, “menacing”
- Patterns of behavior:
 - Erratic
 - Violent
 - Aggressive
- Method of harm (from reported cases):
 - Violent physical maiming
 - Brute force
 - Usage of sharp or heavy rocks to inflict damage to the body

She then put the papers away and picked up her phone. From the news report, it appeared that a hiker on the hills not more than forty-five miles north of Merriwald had seen such a creature. This was the third news report they'd come across. It was interesting, because the source claimed to have seen clear, moving shape. But since there was no callback info, she couldn't confirm details.

The Facebook app was one of her most hated, but she opened it now with enthusiasm. Typing in the source's full name, she searched for profiles in the area. The first one was a false alarm, but the second one was her source. She sent a message to the person, asking if they would be OK to chat on a quick call.

After five minutes, her phone pinged.

“It'll cost ya,” said the text.

“How much?” she texted back.

After a spot of bargaining, Marsh sent the person \$50. She didn’t have time to mess about, and had even less time to worry about the hiker’s mindset in persuading her for money. She needed answers.

Her phone pinged again, but it was just Ungsten letting her know about his plans. He was going to the other side of the woods to check out some abandoned sheds. Okay. She waited a few more minutes, and the call finally came through. She picked up the phone, made quick introductions and confirmed all the details already in the news report. Then she began to tease out other details.

“Did you get any sort of smells? Sounds from the creature?”

“It smelled kinda funny,” came the hiker’s voice through the phone. “But no sounds from the creature. Nothing like, wild, or anything, anyway.”

“Okay. It says in the report that you were carried through the woods before freeing yourself from the creature’s grasp. Would you say that this thing had any strength.”

“Whoo, oh man. That shit was strong as hell.”

“Thanks. One last question. If you had to describe to a friend how you felt when you were carried, how would you do it?”

There was silence. “That’s actually a pretty good question. I don’t think they asked me this one. Okay. The first time I was picked up by this creature, it was super dark. But I distinctly remember thinking, ‘oh, someone must’ve showed this thing an old fireman’s carry manual.’”

“Could you say that again?” said Marsh, her brain switching gears at a breakneck speed. “I think you broke off a little at the end.”

“Sure. The way I was being carried was familiar to a fireman’s carry.”

But Marsh wasn’t listening. “Great, thanks,” she said, hurriedly, and switched immediately to the dialer app. *Oh my god... the missing piece?* She called Ungsten once, twice. Thrice.

No answer. A panic began to set in her. If she hurried, she could make it to the woods under fifteen minutes. Commissioner Conrad had left the station in sergeant Wilkin’s care, and was out of town this morning, on personal business.

She sent an emergency text to sergeant Wilkins, hoping that the commissioner would be back in town in time. *Holy shit!* Her mind raced, and she went about in a rush, searching-

There! Hidden next to the hardware toolbox, she found what she was looking for. She tightened her shoelaces and breathed in and out. Then, locking the office behind her, Eva Marsh began to run.

Full Disclosure

Wednesday, 10:44 AM

“Hmm?” mumbled Ungsten, coming to his senses. Then he realized he didn’t have an audience, and shifted into a more comfortable position. Macawi was lying nearby, hair unkempt and loose and caked with dried blood. They’d been dragged through the forest by the hulking figure, and the other guy was unconscious.

Looking around him, Ungsten could see that they were still in the woods, but on the inside of a dilapidated structure. Like a small barn, or a little forest maintenance shed. From the mangled walls, he could still look outside, and saw that the trees were lit up by a soft sun. It was still midday, and he imagined it couldn’t have been more than a few minutes that he and the other man had run into each other, finally getting picked off by the... creature.

Other than the unconscious Macawi, there was no other sign of life in the shed, but he could see shapes huddled together, neatly arranged in the far end. *Bodies?*

Then he took stock of his situation. First, the phone he’d carried with him was smashed, its screen gone. The other phone was lost in the woods somewhere. Second, his gun was still lodged in his belt at the back. Held in place, unseen, by his heavy puffy jacket. His arms hurt, as though they’d been twisted this way and that, as though someone had been hoping for breakage. In fact, his left arm was broken fully, and through the jacket, blood was seeping from an open wound at his elbow. His feet felt like lead, pain spiking from even a small movement. It felt like a rock had been dropped on his legs repeatedly...

The man called Macawi stirred. “Ow! *OW!*” he groaned, unable to move from his position at all. He was a medium-sized fellow, thought Ungsten. Not much taller than Marsh. “Where the *fuck* are we?” his voice was squeaky from the pain.

“We’re in the woods,” said Ungsten. “In a shed, of some sort. Probably one of the abandoned ones. Are you okay?”

“NO!” said Macawi. “My arms... my legs... I can’t move them! Holy shit!”

“Don’t get alarmed,” said Ungsten. “I can’t move my legs either. There’s no sign of the creature. We can get out of here if I can get a signal out. Do you know anything about the thing?”

“Oh?” said Macawi, his tone mocking. He ignored Ungsten’s question. “Tell me how you’re going to get past the ‘creature’?”

Ungsten pondered this. “I’m not really sure,” he said. “From the information we have, a direct confrontation must be avoided, I think. Whatever this thing is, if someone manages to hurt it, shoot at it long enough with a-”

“There’s no way you’re going to win this with a conventional approach.”

“Do you know how to kill it?”

“No, but that’s your problem right there.”

“What is? What do you mean?”

Macawi closed his eyes and lay there, helpless. “It’s not an *it*, it’s a *him*.”

* * *

The Domino Effect

“It's like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”

— Patrick Rothfuss, [The Name of the Wind](#)

“Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everyone I've ever known.”

— Chuck Palahniuk, [Invisible Monsters](#)

“Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle.”

— Lewis Carroll, [Alice in Wonderland](#)

* * *

Amid the painful and life-threatening situation Thomas Ungsten found himself in, a tiny spark of excitement flared up. His phone was out of commission, he had lost track of time, his body ached, but this new bit of knowledge had stirred something within him. Feeling like he had stumbled across an otherwise mundane clue that suddenly offered a fresh perspective on many things, a wave of clarity washed over him.

My goodness! He thought. People in situations like this, on the brink of death, rarely have reason to lie. If what this Macawi character was saying was true, it confirmed many doubts Ungsten, and even Marsh, had since the beginning. *It couldn't have been an animal!*

He was still missing so much! “What? Tell me more,” he said, almost pleadingly. There was still time to get out-

“Okay,” said Macawi, struggling to shove the pain away. Then he smiled, and his bloodied teeth showed. “But first, let me rid you of the notion of safety.” Ungsten frowned.

“Simply put,” continued Macawi. “Neither of us is likely to leave this place alive. Don’t panic.”

“I’m really not panicking. Please, keep talking.” Shifting his good arm to make sure the small of his back was still secure, Ungsten kept his nervousness to himself.

Macawi chuckled and then went on. “Okay, then. A year ago, I was working with a group of security contractors in Utah. You even been to Utah?”

Ungsten shook his head.

“Yeah, that figures,” said Macawi. “It’s a weird fucking place. This team of people I was working with, we provided security to bankers, celebrity missionaries, CEOs of shady

companies, all that jazz. But we were playing *defense*, right? Not *offense*. But my friend here didn't get that." A pause. "His name used to be Demetrius. No last name. Never knew one."

"Really?" said Ungsten, half-wryly.

"You think this is funny?"

"Given that I'm still in the dark? A little bit, yes. What's the deal with this Demetrius fellow?"

"He's the creature."

There was silence for a few seconds, before Macawi continued. "I knew him in a different life. A long time ago, we trained together in various paramilitary exercises. Then we served for a little bit-" Ungsten was nodding sagely, but Macawi interjected.

"No no, it's not like that. I haven't killed anyone outside of my missions. I'm in cybersecurity now, and I've been seeking psychological help for my own deeds. We, I mean, others with me, we didn't do the kind of shit he was doing. Never the kind of stuff he's... We were only training for medic assistance, evac drills, that kind of stuff. Never any targeted killing. Not... not like this."

"Why's he doing this?"

"I couldn't tell you exactly what's going on in his head. But he's always yearned for a specific kind of violence. We used to have exercises on stalking people and reporting back. He got really good at it. Like, scary good. Then he sped through the other trainings and then came back to the stalk training. Asked to run drills again."

Macawi looked at the private eye. "And then people started disappearing."

Outside, gusts of wind roared through the loose metal hanging about.

"He stopped referring to himself as Demetrius. He forgot all about who he was. I mean, we all knew that he was kind of crooked in the head, but then again, we were too. He was the one whose thoughts manifested into reality. I don't even think he counts as a human being anymore, you know?"

Ungsten tried to move his other arm, but it was all bent out of shape. And his feet hurt so much, he wanted nothing more but a warm bath.

"People keep asking me that. So, what you call this guy?"

"I don't. He fell off the grid a few months ago. I don't know how else to explain this to you, so please just bear with me. I'm very tired."

"The floor is all yours."

"Okay. Do you ever think about how we communicate, live in a society? And how we view ourselves in the context of the world? It's all very arbitrary in the beginning, like when you're a toddler, and then it solidifies as you grow older. Hopes and dreams, heartbreak and apathy. Take

a job, for example. You start work in a new place, and you're attached to the context of your team, and then a bigger team, and you eventually find a place in the hierarchy. And people *know of you* as a certain kind of person. You exist in their minds as an individual. Demetrius was obsessed with the concept."

"The concept of identity?"

"Something like that. He was somehow highly aware of how he was being seen by us. All of us at the security outfit, I mean. And he made sure to portray his best, most violent moves, during training and sparring. And then his prowess began to grow." Macawi shook his head. "Snakes in a shitstorm. It was the epitome of chaos, I mean, the man had no *modus operandi*! He would just randomly start doing things to people. And it wasn't even as though it was premediated, but he was so good at it that nobody could figure out how he was doing it!"

"What kinds of things?"

"On some of the reconnaissance missions, he would slink away and simply start picking off the opposition's bodyguards at a casual rendezvous point. It was worse if it was a natural setting, like a forested area or an abandoned warehouse. Bodies were appearing all around the place and we had no clue. At other times, we would be assigned to safeguard a certain overseas shipment, and there were always shady characters around the piers, and he would disappear for a few hours and then show up back at camp. The next day, a dozen young hooligans last seen fooling around at the beach were reported missing."

"A dozen? Holy crap." Ungsten felt a slim layer of panic wrap itself around him again.

"Yes. It took us two weeks to figure out it was him."

"How's that even possible? Wouldn't he be bunking with you people?"

"I'm telling you, the guy has a creepy grasp of his surroundings, and he's so sharp, you could get a paper cut from shaking his hand. When we found out about the strange disappearances linking back to him, he was booted from the place and police reports were filed. But there was no proof anywhere!"

"And then what happened?"

"Like I said, he dropped completely off the grid. You know what a survivalist is? Those apocalypse apologist people. They live in camper vans in canyons or whatnot, and shun modern society and all that."

Ungsten nodded.

"Yeah, this guy became one of those. About a month ago, I was in Utah on a... business trip." Ungsten coughed. "One of the people we'd worked with before, a woman that I was really good friends with..." said Macawi, his voice cracking. "...she turned up dead in the desert. It was violent and random, and somehow I just knew it was him."

“In the early months that I knew this individual,” continued Macawi, “It became increasingly obvious that his obsession was a freak show of some kind. And then when he finally snapped, it all went to hell. The cops wouldn’t help because they couldn’t do jack shit without proof.”

“And then his obsession somehow *evolved*. He began to target other members from the same outfit. Other operators from my old crew disappeared under mysterious circumstances. And then he began to go out of the way, into the wild. In civilian society, where he would find an infinite sample set. Unsuspecting hikers and even grizzled truck drivers fell victim to his frenzy. I’ve been following his trail across two states.”

“But how? He’s so huge...” as part of the six-feet-and-taller group himself, Ungsten recalled the lofty visage he’d glimpsed through the foliage.

Macawi nodded. “He’s almost seven feet tall. A natural aberration, even still at his age. Has a swimmer’s physique, near-peak athletic condition. And he can survive in the wild. A week ago, I finally caught up to him and managed to figure out his next goal. But he gave me the slip.”

“What’s his goal?”

“To become an urban legend.”

* * *

The structure was silent. “Are you joking?”

Jean Macawi shook his head. “I’m as solemn as I can be. Don’t try to make sense of these things; I’m just telling you what’s going on. Demetrius wants to become an urban legend.”

“How...? Why?”

“Before giving me the slip, Demetrius unknowingly let his guard down. I won’t bore you with the details, but I found this... uh, manifesto of sorts. Demetrius, he’s... I don’t think he’s just human anymore. The idea has consumed him whole.”

“What idea?”

“Demetrius... doesn’t realize that *he is Demetrius*. The man who used to run security for shady deals and... and was a friend of mine. It’s no longer him. In his head, he’s become this beast, this abomination. You know the photos they took in the woods?”

“Yes?”

Macawi watched the investigator. “It’s a makeshift ghillie suit.”

And just like that, the final piece of the puzzle fell into place. An expression of abject understanding came over his face, and Ungsten let go of the breath he’d been holding in. “Oh my god,” he whispered hoarsely. “So that’s why everyone reported strange, tall shapes in the dark. And that’s why it looked so terrifying!”

Macawi nodded, letting Ungsten work it all out.

A ghillie suit, or a “yowie suit”, as the Australians call it, is a camouflage outfit used by military personnel, nature photographers, hunters and such to blend in with their environment. It comes from the word *gille*, which is Gaelic for “lad” or “servant”, initially popular with deer hunting expeditions in the Scottish Highlands. Having retained its usefulness into modern times, a very popular use case for ghillie suits is still found in the sniper community, and some professionals swear by its extreme efficacy in the wilderness.

Typically, ghillie suits are made of cloth and mesh covered in strips of burlap and twine. Also used are loose branches, dry leaves, and any other foliage that would allow one to blur the distinction between them and the background. They can be very heavy with the burlap holding it together, and tend to trap heat. When describing one of these, images of fun characters like Chewbacca can come to mind. But in reality, these ghillie suits make for a menacing figure, and can appear extremely sinister in the shadows. Old colleagues of Ungsten’s had actually been traumatized by nightmares of such shadowy silhouettes from their days in the armed forces.

“He’s insane!” said Ungsten. “What kind of sick, demented plan is this?”

“You’re understanding it, finally.”

Ungsten’s head hurt suddenly, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep the migraine at bay. It felt like he was losing blood slowly, but steadily, and his mind felt like it was about to float away. He blinked rapidly to return to the moment.

“...the way we carry ourselves in a community,” Macawi was saying, “Makes up a lot of our identity. When we spend time holed up at home, we begin to lose little bits of what makes us whole. The way people see us, the things that people know about us, you know? You have a certain hoodie you wear to the gym every day. You become a regular, a natural presence. Characteristic jokes that you’re expected to make. Conversational topics that are specific to your hobbies, and people assume you’ll discuss them in group settings. Stuff like that. Demetrius wanted to use this concept to become a scary fable, something to tell your kids.”

“Wait. Before you proceed, is there something about him that has to do with chemical smells? Something in the reports...”

Macawi nodded. “Yes. He carries a pouch of potent smelling salts with him for constant stimulation. I think it’s partly how he conserves energy while dealing with so many people physically. Or it’s the illusion of endurance that keeps him going. I don’t know.”

Ungsten had stopped thinking entirely, and was listening with rapt attention.

“A fresh frenzy borne of absolute chaos.” Macawi inhaled and exhaled agonizingly. “He wants to become the next horror, the next story that would be passed down to generations. He hopes that people will talk about him, about this anonymous, shapeless horror, with fearful awe. The slow escalation from just terrorizing a few kids, then the hand, cleaved away violently with a sharp rock or something, and then direct engagement. Attacking people out of nowhere. Did you hear the gossip going around the place? Are you following the discussions taking place on the local Facebook groups? The activity in the handguns channel on Discord? If there were a talk

show on the local radio, they would be going on and on about this thing, with experts and specialists as guests. Holy shit. The “creature” is already the talk of the town. Soon, he would start broadening his horizons, to other, bigger towns and then cities, and... you get the picture. That was his goal. And his method of achieving this? It was simple. Start out in a tiny, remote place with a... manageable population.”

“A place like Merriwald.”

“Exactly.” Macawi was shaking his head, almost in disbelief. “On paper, his plan shouldn’t make sense. But it works, somehow.”

Ungsten was also shaking his head slowly, his expression confused.

“I know,” said Macawi. “It didn’t make sense to me at first. But I realized that he meant to do establish a presence, to be talked about, to be feared. And he didn’t care that his identity as Demetrius was lost, because he suddenly had something else to fall back on.”

“The idea of living forever in the woods, terrorizing small towns.”

“Once the whispers of a lurking monster had mutated into hushed, fearful conversations, he would remove himself from the scene, and go search for other places. Right before the police force – or any authorities, for that matter – were mobilized, he had a getaway plan with multiple contingencies accounted for.”

Macawi nodded, and then coughed. “What drives him... it’s not something we can understand. But,” he said looking pointedly at the other man. “It is up to us to make it stop.”

“Why didn’t you go to the cops? We could’ve attacked him togeth-”

“Nope. It wouldn’t work. He had planned for everything. You cannot enter the woods without driving there. He probably always knows about the cars coming near here, and none of them are silent enough. That’s how he caught us. He’s probably out there now, checking for vehicles before finishing us off. Even if someone hiked in, without bringing a vehicle, they would still have to go one-on-one with him. Or ten-on-one, whatever. It wouldn’t matter regardless. By establishing himself in the woods before any other players, he already has a home turf advantage.”

“So why did you-”

“I felt like I was responsible,” said Macawi. His voice was heavy with guilt. “I feel like I’m always a step behind this... this evil force that I can’t understand anymore. I wanted to take him by surprise, somehow. In the daytime, when he wouldn’t expect it. Like an odd time, around midday.”

“I don’t think you’re responsible. Even if we don’t make it out, this guy is nuts! You did everything you could, I’m sure.” Ungsten’s face was blank, and his tone was without pity or admiration.

“Thank you,” said Macawi, appreciatively. He wasn’t fond of histrionics in the face of death. “Not that it matters now. Look at what we have. I’m basically useless with only my mouth working. You can move only one arm. My gun is lost in the woods, and I’m sure yours is somewhere up the crack of nature’s ass, too. Not that it would matter anyway, given how silently this guy moves. We can only hope to keep him distracted long enough, and get a signal out so the cops might jump him-”

“Um,” said Ungsten, raising his eyebrows. “Thank you for that very unusual imagery, but I actually still am in possession of my handgun.”

A hush fell over the structure. One beat passed. Another one. Macawi’s expression morphed into that of someone deserted on an island being told that a boat had been available at the beach the whole time. “What do you mean, you’re *still in possession of your handgun?*”

Ungsten grinned. “My legs are broken and my phone might be crushed, but my handgun was still in the back of my belt. It’s pretty small, just a 9mm Ruger.”

“The fuck? Why didn’t you tell me that? And that’s not gonna stop him unless we get the jump on him while he’s occupied. And that’s not likely to happen, remember?”

The Ruger EC9 is a subcompact concealed carry pistol that carries seven 9mm rounds. Letting the polymer grip fit naturally into the palm of his good hand, Ungsten said, “I didn’t know if I trusted you. And all I need is one chance. I’m a pretty good shot.”

“I wish it didn’t have to come to this.”

“It doesn’t matter what you wish. You need to stop hopping on that train of thought. All your guilt can be processed later, when we’re out.”

Macawi smiled a sad smile. “I wish I could’ve helped him, somehow. My fate is sealed now.”

Ungsten was getting tired of the other man’s defeatist attitude. He decided to keep him talking about other things. “Do you know the origin of his violent inclinations? His evil streak, if you will.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like you said earlier. We’re born, and then we grow into the world with ideas and concepts that we learn as we grow. I don’t think any of us just pops out with forceful dispositions such as, you see, homicide. Was there a catalyst event that made him snap?”

“His psych eval file was clean. There’s no record of his lineage, though. He was found as a baby on the doorstep of an opulent orphanage. They turned him away to a... different institution, and let him grow up in the foster system. Maybe you’re wrong.” Macawi was staring at the ground. “But he was something else, man. It was like the notion of humanity was a mystery to him. Calmer than a dead frog in the fields. Creepy.”

A fresh gust of wind entered the structure, and Ungsten’s body tensed. *That smell!*

Before either man could react, the tall presence had emerged from the shadows without a sound. The living being formerly known as Demetrius stood between them, silhouetted against the walls like a mythological creature from ancient Greek horrors. Ungsten's arm swerved to the side and up, hoping to aim at the killer's midsection, but his exhaustion slowed down his movements. The ghillie suit rushed at him-

Thwack!

-and the gun clattered away from his inert body as his arm was swatted away. The overpowering physique of the killer shoved him into the back wall and shrubbery. Ungsten had felt the forceful blow in his bones. *Such raw power!*

Before he could reach again for the gun, a large, swarthy arm caught hold of Macawi's shirt. The larger man *threw* him across the structure, and Macawi hit the ground with an awful thud.

Ungsten, whose extremities were finally beginning to respond to his commands, was struggling to grab the gun. The ghillie suit, dark and murky, moved towards him. Two meters away. One meter away. And then stopped.

The private investigator, one arm outstretched for the gun only a meter away from him, paused and turned to look up behind him. Framed against the bleak midday sun, the killer cast an ominous figure. *He's waiting*, thought Ungsten. Maybe he hadn't managed to kill them both at the same time out in the woods, and that was the only thing keeping Ungsten alive. Even with the astounding physical prowess of the mid-40s body, the one-track brain set to "murder" and "terrorize" had lost any hint of humanity. The visage seemed to taunt him. *He's waiting for me to give in! To see the last shreds of hope get replaced by horror in my eyes! Well, fuck that.*

Coming of age as much younger man, Thomas Ungsten had vowed to himself to stay in touch with his inner child till the moment he died. It lent him the strength to stay composed in hairy situations. Reaching into the core of this infantile moxie, Ungsten took a deep breath, and let out a hearty guffaw. The killer stared down at him through his faceless camouflage, focused and uncaring. And then, out of the corner of Ungsten's eye, something strange took place. Even though the sun was at his back, and the shadows were directly in front of him, something was *moving* behind the killer and he did not notice. The glare was pointed at Ungsten, and whatever was behind was unnaturally silent.

From his position on the ground, Ungsten saw a smaller, dark shape slink up behind the killer. But none of the shadows stirred unnaturally. She wasn't giving away her presence! *Eva!*

Several things happened at once. A hissing sound filled the quiet air, and a bright red liquid streaked out into the killer's neck and facial area, a spicy, searing pain entering his nostrils and eyes. The killer turned immediately, and through the barrage of the heavy-duty pepper spray, two sinewy arms leaped towards Marsh, who was crouched on the ground behind him. "Thomas!" she yelped, holding down the dispenser tab till she had exhausted the can entirely. Two iron hands clamped down on her neck, and she squirmed, unable to breathe. The ghillie suit, dirty from the foliage mixed with the hot, red pepper spray, loomed in her face. She felt the last threads of her resolve crumble-

CRACK!

Behind the killer, Ungsten fell to the ground, panting for breath. The Ruger EC9, carrying six bullets now, slipped from his tired fingers, and the killer dropped forward. To Marsh's horror, a warm liquid was dripping over her from a hole in the top of the killer's head. *Blood! Human blood!* The bullet wound was caused by Ungsten shooting a single shot upward through the base of the killer's skull. The huge ghillie-suit-covered body lay there, crumpled in a large heap.

Ungsten dragged himself up excruciatingly and began to call Macawi's name. His only response was a terrible groan. Then, with trembling hands, he drew out a fresh cigarette. From the folds of his jacket, a lighter appeared. Softly, as sparks appeared in the darkness, the lighter's flint went *snick! Snick!*

The sounds reached Marsh in a daze, a series of delicate echoes, and the scene seemed to deflate before her eyes. She collapsed back onto the ground, and reached for her phone.

Epilogue: ...Before the Next One

Wednesday, 4:44 PM

The rescue operation took place like a whirlwind, and Commissioner Conrad was neck deep in it. She was in town immediately after Marsh had gone into the woods. The commissioner found them a little while after the final showdown, and got everyone to the hospital. With local news of the killer's death, the town forces rallied forth and a new energy seemed to be going around.

The victims' bodies were also being moved to the hospital for last rites and further procedures. Elsewhere, construction efforts were proceeding at double-time. The town was saturated in a mixture of bereavement and jubilation, and the odd combination of feelings across town was only offset by the sudden appearance of a bright sun at the peak of noon.

Macawi had made it by the skin of his teeth. Still alive, he was recuperating from his broken limbs and a head injury. He was put in a bed near the ICU, and he'd managed to stave off questions for the time being. Before the weekend, he would make a smooth getaway from Merriwald, having recovered sufficiently to hitch a ride out of town. His part of the story was over, and Ungsten felt like it was appropriate to let the matter die. He could track him down sooner or later, if need be. Somehow Ungsten doubted that even the police got to hear his real name. He was confident that nobody would ever hear from a person named Jean Macawi again.

When Eva Marsh, who hadn't suffered serious physical injuries, went to see her boss in one of the wards, she found him chatting to a woman she hadn't met.

"Hi," said the older woman, getting up from her seat and offering it to Marsh. Though dressed like a medical professional, she had a regal, stately air about her. *Maybe she's both*, thought Marsh, liking her instantly. "You must be Eva Marsh."

"That is me, yes," she replied, extending a hand. "Hi, Thomas." The latter waved at her meekly.

The woman shook her hand. "I'm Daphne Webb, the resident medical examiner. I was just thanking Mr. Ungsten here." For a swift moment, she eyed him – rather like a hungry fox, thought Marsh. The private investigator was propped up by a pillow, bedridden and dressed in a faded blue gown. "Thanking him for his brave actions, that have saved the town from a serial killer's rampage. And I'd like to extend my gratitude to you, Miss Marsh. I heard you were crucial to the resolution of this case. Thank you."

Marsh blushed at the woman's words. "Oh, right, right. Of course." she blurted. "It was nothing."

Dr. Webb laughed. "It was nothing? Why not, honey. Why not."

Between smiles, Marsh frowned. "Did I hear you refer to the perpetrator as a serial killer?"

"Why yes, I did. Are you surprised? I heard all about his grand plans for his version of Aesop's fucked-up fables. Real fascinating, sure, sure. Doesn't matter if his story makes the news for a

day or two. I don't give a shit, really. He was killing people and hurting them. That's a piece-of-shit serial killer right there. He wouldn't deserve my grace anyway." The ME brushed off a piece of lint from her lab coat and took a step away from the bed. "Actually, I'm forgetting about him even as we speak."

Marsh nodded in awe, inspired. "Right."

Dr. Webb turned back to Ungsten and said, "We should catch up again, sometime. Get well soon." Then with a final smile at Marsh, she was gone.

"Interesting lady," said Marsh, taking the seat next to Ungsten's bed.

"You can say that again," huffed Ungsten.

She placed a paper bag on the side table. "Hot soup from the place on West Street, like you told me. Extra croutons and all that."

"Bless you," said Ungsten. "Thanks. How're you feeling?"

"I should be asking you that."

"Ah, you know, it comes, it goes." Then he looked at her. "Thank you for saving my life."

"And thank you," she said, "for saving mine."

"What's next for you, then?"

Marsh considered this. The past few days had dropped truckloads of excitement into her lap. Her brain didn't feel as foggy as before, but her nerves were fried from all the stress she'd been feeling. "Let's see," she said. "There's a bit too much on my mind to start scouting for new work. Maybe I'll try doing crosswords for a week or so instead. I'd like a short break between heart attacks."

Ungsten grinned. "You know where to find me."

"Yep." She opened and closed her mouth a few times, as if deciding whether to say something. "Listen, about the whole diagnosis thing--"

"Oh, please," he said, gesturing at his prone form in mock agony. "Will you let me recover? We'll have ample time to talk about all that. And like I told you the last time, I'm sure you're figure it all out regardless."

"Okay. Thanks again," she said, and hugged him. Before the rescue, she and Ungsten had been extremely close to death. Even as she'd Then she said her goodbyes and left the hospital. Looking this way and that, she began to walk. After the previous day's downpour, today was a stark contrast. A full morning of bright sun, with only a few clouds in the afternoon. *Strange place*, she thought, for the thousandth time.

Her legs took her to the edge of the woods again. It was peaceful now, and the chirping of birds added to the late afternoon's ambience. Marsh passed by the diner where it had all started in

Merriwald. She went in and ordered pancakes. The manager was in a lively mood, and whipped up a delicious platter for Marsh personally. As she devoured the food, they shared a few laughs, chatted about the pleasant weather. Marsh felt a certain warmth begin to spread inside her. It felt nice. She left a hefty tip for the staff and rose to leave. The diner's sound system began to play "Hunted by a Freak" by Mogwai, and she chuckled.

Then she was back out on the roads, exploring unfamiliar turns and open streets. Eventually, her legs grew tired and she ended up at the edge of a large meadow. When she looked back, she could see the town laid out like something from a quaint little board game. Peace, it seemed, had returned to Merriwald.

What was to come? She took a deep breath. Did it matter right now? Turning back to face the setting sun, she sat down on the ground.

Clouds had gathered like lines of ether in front of the glowing orb in the sky. Like the previous day's visual delight, a shade of orange was plastered across the canvas. Marsh could not help but let her imagination wander again. As she watched, the oranges and reds morphed into cooler colors. A dash of blue converted the warm palette to an ambiguous blend of deep violets and purples. As the previously, burning red sun cooled down into a dark maroon, the sky around it shimmered. The sun hovered right at the edge of the world. It was a wild scene, and Marsh felt her jaw drop. Colors seemed to swirl above her head, and the clouds disappeared steadily, in wisps of an endless purple.

And then, with one last, almost bashful glimpse of a wonderful, magical shade of magenta in the sky, the sun slipped away beneath the horizon.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the far end! Thank you for accompanying me on this journey. This book was originally planned for NaNoWriMo (“complete a book in November”), but I started writing it in the third week of November, and it leaked over into December. As such, it became a Christmas/holiday season project. Please leave a review on Goodreads if you can! As the creator of this story, I can’t enjoy it the way an unsuspecting reader does, so I love hearing from people about it. Thank you so much. And now for some exciting breakdowns!

FACT V. FICTION

- Merriwald is not a real place in Iowa. It is partly modelled after my own college town, Ames, which is and gorgeous and stunning on its own. Lake Alencour does not exist.
- Many small towns in Iowa have the same sort of eerie (but not unpleasant) energy to them, like Merriwald.
 - I like to think that Merriwald is located between a few edges of reality (like Ames).
- The hurricane complex depicted in the beginning of the story is a real occurrence, and is directly inspired by the 2020 derecho, which occurred in August. It caught a lot of Iowans off-guard, and has made for many a valuable lesson. Around mid-December of 2021, another series of thunderstorms hit Iowa and neighboring states.
- Ghillie suits are very real. An actual ghillie suit – especially worn by a six-and-a-half-feet tall giant – looks extremely scary in the dark.
- Magenta sunsets may or may not be magical/fortune dependent. They’re definitely rare, though.

SOME TRIVIA

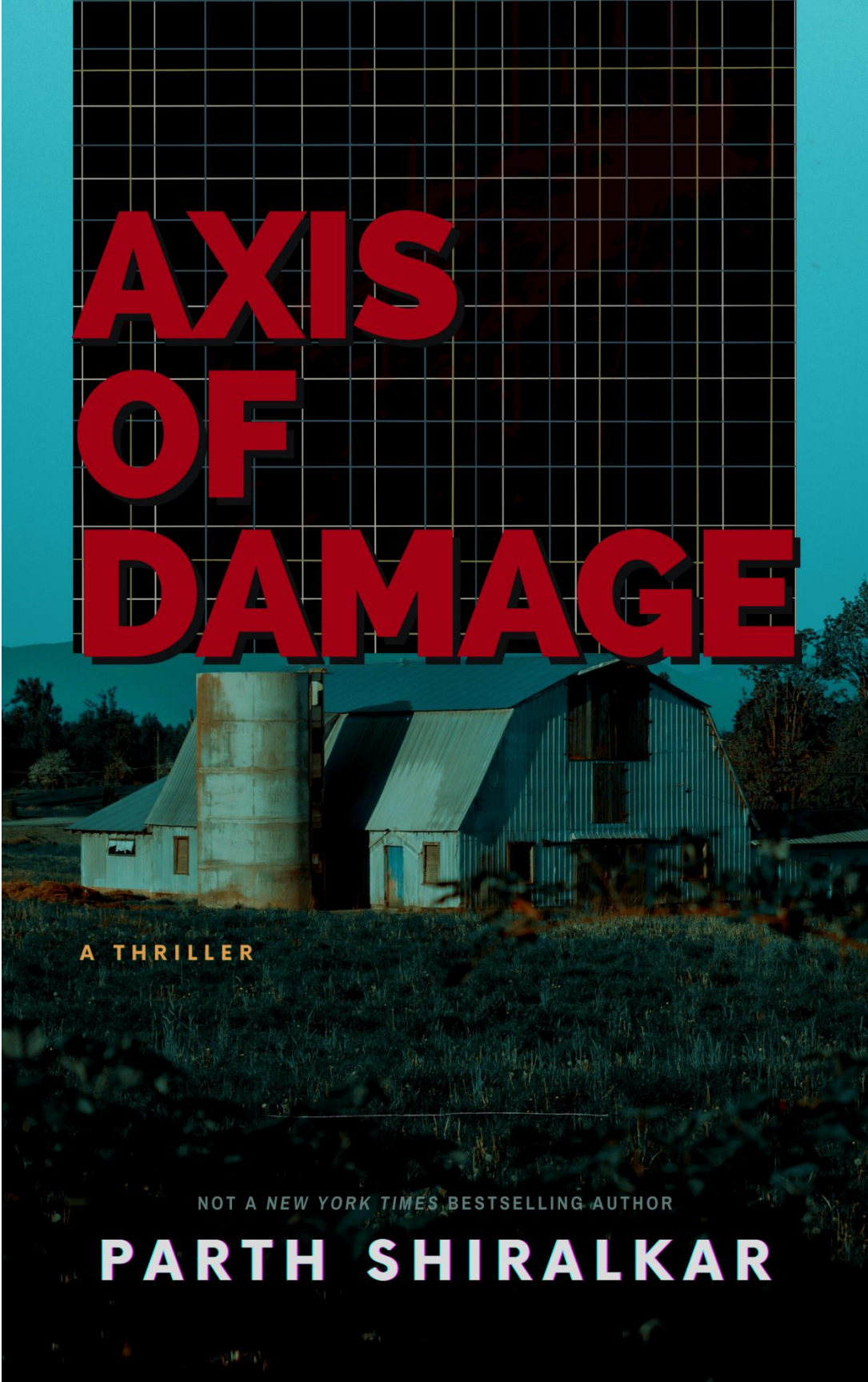
- The song “Hunted by a Freak,” by Scottish band Mogwai, is a wonderful bit of music. I came across it on YouTube while writing. It was playing while I wrote the lake scene.
- “The place on West Street” refers to a deli in Ames, one of my favorite spots. The place has weathered many heartbreaks but keeps going strong.
- The name “Eva Marsh” is a recurring motif in my writing. She appeared as a dear old psychiatrist in an earlier work, and (depending on how well this book does!) she will continue making guest appearances every now and then, as various characters, in unrelated universes.
- Also stated at the beginning, but an alternate cover is present on the next (and last) page.

That’s about it.

If you’d like, in lieu of paying me for the book, please telepathically wish me a good day. The more of those I have, the more I can write in peace and refine my craft, and that’s always nice.

This has been a fun project! Thank you for reading.

Parth



AXIS OF DAMAGE

A THRILLER

NOT A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PARTH SHIRALKAR