

A Beast Set Loose

—A day began as they always did. Pate woke with a start, sweating and glancing around the room, panicked by nightmares he could no longer remember. As the chocolate-brown kodiak bear's breathing slowed, he turned to the side and stared at the rough grey wall. Staring at the blank surface, he closed his eyes and pressed his paw against the rough plaster; it calmed him, reminding him where he was. With a groan, he pulled up his legs, which hung over the side of his bed. Slate light streamed through the windows, meeting him with a subtle warmth as he stretched and yawned.

Almost as a greeting, his cat, Tse-ni, meowed to him, unwilling to move from her spot in the sun. "You know, I got you for some companionship. Least you could do is make an effort," he said to the cat, picking out an outfit. As if replying, the cat whined and rolled onto her stomach, looking his way expectantly. "Fine," he resigned, scratching under the tortoiseshell calico's chin as he looked out the window.

A thin layer of grey clouds rolled over the sky, heather blankets of a coming storm. Air carried the smell of rain, causing a scar on his right side to ache. The sky looked just as it did months ago. Even so, he reminisced, almost able to feel the cold breeze and hear the rattling of a fence behind him.

—April 20th, the only date he made any effort to remember. Time passed strangely in prison, creeping by like the hands had fallen from the clocks. At the same time, the rigid routine caused the days to blur together and fade from memory. However, after he received word from the parole board, each day became another crossed off.

His interactions in those days were surreal. Acquaintances treating him like a dead man, his few possessions forfeit, people emerged from the woodwork and asking for his books, food, and trinkets as if vying for a place in his will. He gave them to his cellmate, the ermine: Ish, on his last day.

Three times in those weeks, he called his family to tell them the news; each time met only with an answering machine. Ish, more than anyone talked to him about the outside; what changed, what they would do on that day. They promised one another a spot on each other's couch if they ever needed it.

In return for his things, Ish gave him a tattoo on his upper shoulder. An artist in his old life, he skillfully applied the image of a sharp-toothed fish's bones to Pate's shoulder, the symbol of a man who proved his mettle while still in a fresh orange suit. Pate protected his friend through much of his stay, and now had a mark to prove it. Though he detested shaving off a patch of fur to receive the tattoo, it soon grew back, now colored black where the needle had worked at him.

One of the guards wished him well as he was led out, Jaimie, a friendly man who would bring in newspapers for the inmates.

Wearing the same baggy clothes he was sent with years ago, he stepped out of the facility, met with an angry grey sky, and snowy mountains towering above him. None met him beyond the gate, the wild winds howling from the south, carrying ocean-salt, and the chill from the high peaks.

In the quiet hours as he waited for the bus, he rubbed his bus voucher between two fingers like a genie lamp. Turning his attention to a map, he thought of the blank check in his hand. There was nothing for him at his old home. With fifty dollars of gate money in his pocket, he decided to ride the bus as far as he could from Spring Creek.

The coming rains caused his scar to ache and tighten. Usually, left so alone and directionless, he would feel the chaotic stirring of the beast somewhere within him. However, more than ever, it felt quiet and passive. When he saw the approaching bus down the long road, he looked back at the prison which held him for years.

Taking a slow breath, he made two vows for himself. He would not return, no matter what. He served his time, and his life in prison was over. His fingers shivered as he ran them over the scar on his side. He vowed not to obey that beast he had followed for so many years, to starve it, and not to hurt anyone else.

—Some might claim the similar sky a sign or omen of some sort, but Pate did not like to think about such things, merely noting to take an umbrella with him. He took care of his morning rituals, making sure he was presentable. Beside the bathroom door, he placed a carefully folded set of clothes. A white, short, a faded suit, and matching pants, all still smelling like mouthwash and mothballs from whatever old man sold them to the thrift store below him. Made for a black bear, they were proportioned properly, but several sizes too small.

Once showered, combed, dressed, and his fur trimmed and groomed, he checked himself over in the mirror one last time. Doing so was harder than it first seemed, the top of the mirror

below his eye-level. It wasn't much of a surprise; few things were built for an eight-foot-two bear. "Dammit," he hissed, bleeding from the chin in two places. His hand was too swift, it having been years since he used a decent razor. While an old scar on his cheek might make him look better for the job, shaving cuts hardly added to his intimidation.

Crouching in front of his mirror, he practiced a smile, an expression he had little experience with. After an embarrassing attempt, he managed one which looked natural enough. Then, he wondered if a smile was even the best expression for the job. Applying to be a bodyguard, a scowl or cold detachment might serve him better. Maybe he was overthinking things.

He kept his head down as he departed. A laughable attempt to keep a low profile, standing taller and stronger than even most bears. But he did not want to encounter his landlord on the way out, knowing himself weeks late on rent. More worrying, his parole officer was breathing down his neck for employment hours. Even thinking about it made his heart race with anxiety. Ducking through the doorway into the ground floor, he saw his landlord watching him from past the counter, a loon in more ways than one. Subtle scorn marked the man's face as he tried to force Pate out.

He hated the intense, condescending look. Gang members would often wear a similar expression moments before ambushing a rival. He felt his blood boil as he passed. Pate knew he could crack open the man's head before he even realized he was attacked. With a deep breath, he calmed himself and made his way to the bus stop.

His head bumping against the cold glass, he rode uneventfully through the winding streets of Fairbanks. He absentmindedly traced his finger over a drawing on the seat-back before him. A vaguely human shape rendered in sharpie, red eyes almost watching him. He was thankful when

the bus finally screeched to a halt, one mile from his actual destination. With a breath that tasted of diesel and pine, he walked down the road from the city.

The Woodsworth estate was impossible to miss. Better paved than most of the city, the road led through a tall gate and into the woods. The trees seemed strangely pristine and kempt; the forest sculpted as if a landscaper were told to make the ground look natural rather than actually being a part of nature. The manor itself stood tall beside a blue lake, its brick and stone walls as old as the trees themselves.

Pate felt a bead of sweat trailing down his side beneath his too-small shirt. Dusty, grey windows stared out at the manicured trees and brush, an unnatural quiet to the unoccupied forest. Curiously, stone sculptures of deer, foxes, and local wildlife stood nestled among the flora; so detailed, they seemed frozen from the actual animals. As he passed by planted wildflowers and a mossy, stone feral wolf, he wondered how much the faux wilderness cost, his savings a thousand times over, all buried in the dirt.

By the entrance, an uncomfortable-looking ox took his resumé and waved him in, looking him up and down as he wordlessly guided him. The foyer of the mansion was converted into something of a waiting room; other applicants sat around waiting for their turn. Pate found an empty seat directly across from the entryway. He sat below a set of trophy antique arrows mounted to the wall.

Simply staring at his hands in his lap, he tried not to pay attention to the others in the room, but they made it difficult. Such focus instead left him nervous, acutely aware of how his claws were still filed down, and how his fur poked from his small clothes. The most recent to enter the room, they eyed him up and down with a mixture of curiosity and combativeness. They seemed

more a collection of bouncers than actual bodyguards, most moose, bison, or wolves, all large muscular men seemingly in a constant state of showing off their strength. Anyone could apply, and quite a few were drawn in by a job from one of the richest men in the city.

Old survival instincts kicked in, and he sat up straight and loosened his shoulders. When singled out from the herd, he knew it best to prove himself not worth fighting. A spark flared within him, a twinge of anger stirring in his core. Closing his eyes, he strained to stifle himself and ignore the enraging looks towards him.

Some of the men seemed enticed by his show, but none were so foolish as to start a fight in their potential employer's coatroom. They reminded him of his first days in the mess hall. He got into a rough fight during his early days, he knocked out three men, but took a blade to the side and spent a month in solitary afterwards.

Hand on his scar, Pate turned his gaze away from the others in the room. "Mr. Pate Morin," the doorman requested, motioning for the door to an office. He nodded and walked in, met by a wide office backed with a tall window to the forest outside. Silhouetted against the hazy grey of the window, Ronald Woodsworth sat at his large desk, a dark mahogany rectangle which seemed slightly too large, keeping a distance between anyone on either side.

Like a museum, he decorated the shelves and desk with numerous cases holding ancient trinkets from various peoples across time. Closest to Woodsworth himself were his most prized pieces; a golden disk from an Inca amulet, a large pottery shard bearing a faded inscription, and a fur hood with familiar form and craftsmanship.

Woodsworth himself motioned absentmindedly toward the seat across from him, reading the resumé in his hand. The man was a white-tailed stag with ten-point antlers, clearly from the

south, unfit for the harsh winters of Alaska. Short grey hairs were beginning to poke from his fur, the man seemed bored by the ranks of applicants, his eyes sleepily passing over the page. “Welcome, Mr. Morin. I see you haven’t any experience in law enforcement, protection, or... anything really. And you’re an ex-con, fresh one... wonderful,” he chuckled, causing dismissively, Pate’s lip twitched in frustration at the immediate rejection, replaced on with disheartened quiet as he quelled his anger. “Tell me, why did you come here?” Woodsworth asked, not bothering to raise his eyes.

Pate dug his thumb claw into his palm and smiled through the insults. He ran through programmed responses to interview questions, which he read online. However, the words sounded hollow and false in his head.

“I’m here because I don’t have any other options,” Pate admitted, summoning grave confidence as he spoke.

“Well, at least you’re honest, and you don’t have any bargaining power,” Woodsworth laughed. He raised his eyes for the first time, pausing for a second in surprise. “Wow! You are utterly singular,” he marveled, looking Pate up and down.

“Thank you...” he said, unsure how to take the comment. “I know that I don’t have any professional experience, but I know how to end a fight and protect someone during one.”

“I’m inclined to believe you. However, you are far from the only one in that room with those skills. They at least can legally use a gun.”

“I suppose,” Pate began, searching for any words or argument he could use. If he failed, here, he would return with nothing for either his landlord or his parole officer. He knew better than

to beg, the man before him would not appreciate that, and his pride would hardly allow it in the first place. As he thought, his eyes drifted across the desk, falling on the old hood.

“You know what that is?” Woodsworth asked, noticing the line of sight.

“Dene hood; caribou fur,” Pate said, noticeably distant and distracted.

“Good eye,” he chuckled, turning the display case so both could see it. “It’s South Slavey, over 200 years old. One of my—”

“It’s fake.”

“How do you mean?” Woodsworth asked, his voice taking a harsh note at the assertion. “That came from someone I trust.”

Scolding himself internally, Pate bit his tongue and cursed his impulse. He considered walking back on the statement but decided against it. Woodsworth already looked at him like a rat on the side of the road. Timidity would not serve him here. “Caribou and cow leather look different. The stitching there is feral cow,” he said, pointing to a seam where the slightly smoother and darker hide threads were revealed. “200 years ago, we didn’t have cows.”

Looking suspiciously between he and the artifact, Woodsworth now seemed more confused than annoyed. What mattered most to Pate, was that he was looked at now as if in a conversation rather than a potential tool to be purchased. “You’re—”

“Hardly. My family hasn’t been back in generations.”

Chuckling, Woodsworth carefully turned the display back to its original position. “I suppose this meeting has escaped us. I have made quite a few enemies, both of your status and mine. Do you believe you can defend me from them?”

“I can throw a punch, and I can take one. I know what someone looks like before they start a fight. I can learn fast and will do whatever you need me to do.”

Behind him, the doorman leaned into the room, tapping his watch as if Pate could not see him. With a nod, Woodsworth looked up to Pate and continued. “There are a lot more people I must speak to, good day Pate Morin,” he said, extending a hand to shake. “I have your contact information, so keep an ear up.”

A day began as they always did. Pate woke with a start, sweating and glancing around the room, panicked by nightmares he could no longer remember. As his breathing slowed, he turned to the side and stared at the rough grey wall. The blank surface calmed him, reminding him where he was. With a groan, he pulled up his legs, which hung over the side of his bed. Slate light streamed through the windows, meeting him with a subtle warmth as he stretched and yawned.

He walked over to the window and opened it wide to meet the rising sun. Checking his phone, he made sure he had plenty of time, having woken up before the alarm. “Morning Tse-ni,” he greeted, scratching the cat’s chin as it rubbed against his leg. He filled her bowl and put his oatmeal in the microwave. The cat seemed disappointed to find the usual food there, expecting the fish it received the night before.

Pate spent much of the day after the interview in a low state. He had no reason to believe the conversation fruitful. Somehow, returning home would make things real; he would lose his home and be sent back to Spring Creek. Instead of thinking about it, he walked until his legs burned. Stopping, if only to collect his thoughts, he leaned against a lamppost and allowed his eyes to wander. Across the road, red light shone from the window of a small bar. For a moment, he

considered crossing into the dark space. With nothing left to lose, he might as well numb the process.

Then, his phone rang.

That night, he returned and celebrated, buying a decent steak for himself and tuna for his cat. In the high and excitement, he almost bought a beer from the store across from him, forgetting his parole. In a few days, he would begin working, given a short time for planning and paperwork.

He was giddy with excitement the whole time. Mostly from relief. The previous nights, his heart seemed in a constant flutter, the stress and fear keeping him up through most nights. Even still, he was happy to receive the work, more so than would be from any other work done just to be signed a check. Protecting one person, a task far from simple, but one he knew. It was something more than mind-numbing busywork.

Dressed in the same clothes he used for the interview, he readied himself and walked out into the hazy dark of dawn. An empty bus brought him to the edge of town, and he walked the rest of the way to the manor. By the time he reached the strange false forest, the blue sky stretched above, and the sun shone in the east.

“Hello, Mr. Wordsworth,” Pate greeted, standing by the door in the foyer. Somehow, the cervine could manage an imposing stare and stance without even trying. It caught Pate off-guard, a small, older, herbivore never the sort to have made him falter.

“Welcome, Mr. Morin. Or do you prefer, Pate?” Wordsworth asked, starting down the stairs towards him. Though dressed and ready, he seemed uncomfortable to be up so early.

“Pate is fine.”

“And you’re aware of what I expect of you?”

“Of course, I’m only your driver, sir,” he said, having read through the man’s emails thoroughly. Unable to wield a firearm, and Woodsworth not wanting to seem intimidated by the threats, they thought the label better. His actual duties were indistinguishable, drive him from place to place, stand beside him in public spaces, and preemptively inspect suspicious areas.

“Perfect. Today should be easy, if boring,” he said, checking his watch. “I suspect you will find this helpful,” he said, handing over a large piece of black cloth.

Unfolding the bullet-proof vest, Pate thanked his employer and put it on underneath his suit. “Is there anyone I should watch for?” Pate asked, holding the door open.

“No, the only enemies whose names I know are not the sorts to get their hands dirty. Not that it matters, just a simple meeting with a branch manager today.”

Pate feared the next part of his job more than any other aspect of it. He hadn’t driven in years, and never been much good at it even when he did. However, once they started down the road in a nondescript but expensive silver car, he found his hands steady and his driving smooth, if slightly slow.

The three-hour-long drive south quickly lost all excitement. Woodsworth sat in the back and answered emails. Thinking the radio would disturb his boss, Pate drove in silence through the flat plains and forests. The vehicle soon proved uncomfortable, as it forced him to tilt his head with his height and the low ceilings. Though bored, he fell into something of a trance, the endless emptiness of Alaska passing immemorably by until they reached the city.

Once they reached the office building, Pate stepped out and opened the door for Woodsworth, and they started in. Overly cautious, he walked close and looked around the building as they entered. Woodsworth scoffed at his inexperience, the discomfort clear as his head twitched like a frightened bird's. Though the setting was different, he knew what to look for. In Spring Creek, he performed a similar task, even if Ish was a very different employer.

What threw him off most was the clothing. Noticing a threat often reduced to finding anyone in the room who did not fit, standing out from the crowd in body language or expression. This was made more difficult outside of prison; the different clothes people wore catching his eye or distracting him.

"Calm down. When someone like you is jumpy as a hare, it makes everyone else nervous," Woodsworth instructed as they entered the elevator. He kept this in mind as they reached the manager's office, relaxing himself as he held open the door. "Wait out here," Woodsworth ordered, stepping into the lavishly decorated room.

Pate stood outside the door, trying to keep from looking bored. The only other person on the floor was a secretary, a young doe typing slowly at her computer. At first, she stole nervous glances at him when she thought him looking away, but she soon became more interested in whatever game she was playing on her computer.

Though he tried to conceal it, he attempted to listen through the door but caught nothing. The manager intrigued him; his office building was anything but distinct, the grey cubicles occupied by half-asleep men in white shirts. However, in his glance at the office, he noticed expensive art and fine wooden furniture. Strangest, a frame of noise-canceling foam around the door.

When Woodsworth finally emerged, Pate was standing in the same spot, head rested on the wall behind him, shuffling slowly on his feet as his knees ached. Woodsworth himself was in a huff, clearly angered and waving for him to follow.

The return drive was somehow more awkward, Woodsworth remained sullen and quiet throughout, staring out the window as Pate drove in silence. When they arrived, Pate was sent away without explanation. He returned, rubbing his back now stiff from the drives.

In the days that followed, his job became something closer to what he expected. Given the vague nature of his contract, he realized himself something closer to a servant than a bodyguard. It mattered little if he were sent on mundane errands, he could ask for little else. His protective role was rarely utilized, Woodsworth rarely traveling to public spaces.

Even so, he was happy; they paid him well, and the work required little of him. Although, he feared what would happen if he were forced to fight someone. His second half remained quiet in those days. He liked the peace, able to endure the alien looks he would receive. When he paid off what he owed for his apartment, the landlord watched him scornfully as if his plans were ruined. In earlier months, he would have bit back the urge to kill the man on the spot, but now he could brush it off like snow from his shoulders.

The night began as they rarely do. Pate woke with a start, sweating and glancing around the room, panicked by nightmares he could no longer remember. As his breathing slowed, he turned to the side and stared at the rough grey wall. The blank surface calmed him, reminding him where he was. With a groan, he pulled up his legs, which hung over the side of his bed. Pale light streamed through the windows, meeting him with a chill as he looked around blearily.

His phone blared beside him, Woodsworth calling him in the middle of the night. Groggily he answered and strained his ears through the rushed commands. Outside, Woodsworth was waiting in the car. Throwing on a set of clothes, he hurried out and jumped into the car. They returned to the manor, and Woodsworth described what was needed.

“Your service has proven invaluable to me in these past weeks, and I must thank you for that,” Woodsworth said, sitting with the lights off in his driveway.

“But?”

“But... I need you to perform another favor me, something which falls beyond the purview of our arrangement.”

“Like you said, I don’t have any leverage here,” Pate resigned, his breath wavering with worry as storm-clouds gathered above. In the distance, he could hear thunder rumbling as strong winds shook the leaves.

Hours later, he found himself in the dark and rain. Car off, he listened to the pattering against his windshield, watching the black streams trace down the glass. Across the road, a dark house stood like a looming giant, its black eyes watching him.

Pate sat in turmoil, his thoughts whirling as he stewed in silence. An address and a name, with that, he drove an hour and waited outside a sleeping house. *This man owes me a debt. Give him my name; make sure he knows this is serious. You can hurt him, but don’t kill him. Are you willing to do this for me?*

He could have said *no*. Every second of the drive, he wondered why he did not protest. Yet, here he found himself.

Without a job, he would find himself underwater once more. He was paid well for work he was not qualified for; it made sense Woodsworth would want him only for tasks like this. No matter how he reasoned and justified things to himself, he felt sick and paralyzed.

After weeks of silence, he felt a stirring within him. If he did this, his first vow would break, one of two codes he sought to base his life around. But some part of him wanted to step out, missing the thrill of the fight and the taste of his own blood.

—“It isn’t your fault. You were born with a monster inside you.”

Even from childhood, Pate was unusually violent and large. His mother recognized this in him, claimed an evil spirit possessed him. No matter what he did, good or bad, it remained shrouded and incited by the beast within him.

She tried several times to cure him using old practices, performing archaic rituals or feeding him tonics which left him curled up in pain. Too young to understand, he endured the tortures, every time emerging to hear that he was still a monster. He tried with all he could to force out the demon he was told resided at his core but was told every time that he failed, unable to sense what she sensed.

They gave up together. No matter how he battled the beast, it always won, so Pate followed it, getting into constant fights up until he was finally sent away.

This way, they continued for years. On a night he hardly remembered, Pate found himself in a bar, taking two shots at each round. One for himself, a second for a departed friend.

Someone said something to him, though the murmurs remained inaudible whispers in his mind. Perhaps the polar bear beside him said nothing, merely looked at him strangely. It hardly mattered what the man did. He remembered the way his flesh burned and blood boiled, the way his instincts roiled, and the way his vision narrowed to only the man beside him.

One punch to the man's gut crumpled him. Pate swung his cup into the man's temple before either could recover. The man fell to the ground, bleeding and unconscious.

Pate stood tall as a clamor rose around him as he delivered kicks to his chest. Several hurried over to restrain him or join the fight. One caught Pate with his back turned, landing a swift punch to his kidney. Grunting in pain, he turned and caught the next blow, tightening his grip on the man's paw.

Pate surprised even himself as his claws pierced flesh and he crushed the man's fist, fingers breaking under his grip. Another man charged in, punch connecting with his muzzle. His vision blurred, and he moved on instinct, puppeted by a vicious force. Vision tinged red; he threw one man like a child into the cement wall, glass shattering as he landed. Another faltered with surprise, pausing just long enough for Pate to slash his face and send him to the ground.

As the police were called, most in the bar fled, several staying as onlookers. The barkeeper swung a bat for his head, the blow blocked by his arm. Grunting in pain as his arm fractured, he gripped the bat and wrestled it from him. They fell to the ground grappling, but the small man was no match. When the police entered, they found him punching a bloody, unconscious man in his face, cheekbone and hand broken. They used a taser to pull him off. He plead guilty, sent off only days later without a word to anyone he had ever known.

—As he opened the car door and started towards the house, Pate realized why he waited so long in the car. It was not to debate the beast inside him but to delay for a moment of weakness so it could seize control. Perhaps his mother was right, no matter how he distanced himself from his bestial nature, it always remained.

Steeling his resolve, he pounded on the door. Shutting out all worry or dissent in his mind, he beat the wood until the hinges creaked. Some small part of him believed he would not need to feed the spirit, that he could intimidate the man without a blow. Yet, even he knew it an excuse.

“What the fuck do you want!?!” a small, scraggly wolf shouted, face red, and wearing nothing but underwear and a t-shirt. He knew the man’s name to be Jacob Willis, though Woodsworth’s commands were lost on him.

“Ro— Ronald Woods— Woodsworth wants his—” Pate began, surprised by the weakness in his voice.

“Do you have any idea what fucking time it is!?!” Jacob demanded, moving to slam the door.

“Ronald Woodsworth wants his money,” Pate managed, stopping the door with his hand.

Jacob froze at the name, waking from his enraged stupor. “So, what, you’re his lapdog?”

“Call me what you want, just get what you owe,” Pate commanded, ruthless coldness gripping his voice.

“Oh, don’t you worry. Master will get his money when I have it,” he assured in a mocking tone, trying fruitlessly to close the door.

“Mr. Woodsworth will get his money by the end of the week.”

The man smirked, stepping back from the door with a self-important swagger. “Are you proud of what you do, dog?”

“No, but I don’t have any other choice,” Pate said, ducking through the short doorframe and standing tall in the house.

“I suppose we can agree there,” Jacob chuckled, lip twitching with spite as his home was invaded. *Don’t!* Pate shouted internally, noticing the man reach for something behind the door. *Please don’t!* He all but cried, recognizing the action from Spring Creek, the same used when men would draw a concealed blade. Jacob pulled a gun in a swift, sloppy motion. On instinct, Pate lunged and grabbed for the weapon.

Like thunder, the pistol went off, splitting his ears as a blinding pain shocked his leg. Yelling out, he wrestled the gun away, his leg burning where the bullet grazed it. Before Jacob could swing for him, he grabbed his face, his large paw covering it effectively. With all his weight and strength, he shoved the man into the wall, his head crashing through the wood with a wet crunch.

Stumbling away, Pate pressed at his wound and cursed under his breath. The man hung unconscious, blood dripping down the wall. Jacob's head struck with enough force to break through the wall, snapping wood and creating a sizable hole.

Shuddering, Pate looked at the hot blood on his hands, listened to the man's uneven breathing, and felt his heart gradually slowing. The fight ended so quickly, he barely noticed himself possessed, the evil spirit hardly able to enjoy the bout. He could almost hear sirens in the distance, all vows to himself and his employer broken.

Sprinting as if to escape the crime, he dashed into the car and started it. Unwilling to drive back, he watched the rain falling in the two beams of light. The cold water clung to his skin, hot blood soaking his pant leg. Instinct shouted that he flee, a pressing drive commanding him take the car and flee north until the road ended.

"I didn't want to. Why did you force me?" he shouted, slamming the wheel before him. He pulled out his phone and fumbled with the keys, his shivering fingers impossible to control. Eventually, he managed Woodsworth's number, the ringing impossibly quiet beside his pounding heart.

"Pate, how did things turn out?" Woodsworth asked, calm and collected over the line.

"I messed up. Oh God, I fucked up," he muttered, taking all his will to speak coherently through panicked breaths.

"Wait, wait... calm down!" he shouted, managing a commanding tone despite his evident worry. "Is he still alive?"

“Yes, I think,” Pate said, slowing his breath as he recalled the aftermath. “But he pulled a gun on me. I didn’t mean to, but he’s hurt, I took him out.”

“Alright. We can work with that. Did you leave anything behind, anything they can trace back to you?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Good. Now listen, Pate, take the car back home. Act normal. I’ll work everything out.”

“But I—”

“Just go back to your home. Allow me to handle things from here. Everything will be fine.”

Before Pate could reply, the call cut short. No matter what Woodsworth said, he knew things were wrong. He hated his old self, a sullen animal lashing out at everything around him. He made two vows to keep himself from ever becoming that person again. However, in one night, he shattered them both. Shocked and dazed, he went numb and followed the command blindly, driving down the long, dark road.

—One day, after a particularly vicious spat with a classmate, Pate’s mother decided on a final ritual to exorcise the spirit from him. An animal spirit, it would be drawn to the wild, possibly fleeing him. She drove him deep into the woods, walking him far further. Once he was weary, confused, and afraid, she left him, leaving a twelve-year-old, miles lost in the wilderness.

Crying, he followed her trail as long as he could, eventually growing lost and stumbling through the night. After two days, he

found his way to a road, hitchhiked his way back home, alive against all odds. Though alive, it seemed she expected him to die out there. She treated him as though he died there all but ignoring him for the rest of his life. Rather than expelling the animalistic spirit from him, it seemed only to drive it deeper. He learned to trust it, survived only because of it.

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Disrupting him, his phone rang again, a familiar number displayed on the screen. “Mr. Woodsworth?” he asked, still sweating with stress as he waited for the police to come for him.

“He’s alive, but you did a number on him. Are you sure you left nothing behind?” Woodsworth asked, his voice stern and business-like.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, rubbing his wounded leg.

“Well, we can work things out as they come. I’ve spoken with our friend; he won’t be telling anyone,” he reassured, prompting a relieved sigh from Pate. “It worked; I suspect our relations will continue to prove quite profitable. Just, don’t grow a conscience on me,” he ordered, a note of warning in his voice.

Pate hung up, dropping the phone onto the floor. Numbly, he fell to seat on his bed, looking at the rough, cracked paint on the ceiling. As if to retreat, he closed his eyes and brought his mind elsewhere. Hiding in memories and fantasy felt childish, yet had nowhere else to flee.

He remembered a small lake he found, lost in the woods as a child. The crystalline waters reflected the night like another sky, fireflies lighting all around him. "You always were a monster," his mother's voice said to him.

"No. That was your excuse; if I'm a monster, neither you or I am to blame. We can hide behind that excuse and never take responsibility. I'm here because I fucked up. Good and bad, it was me."

With a breath, he tried to banish the illusion. Glancing at his phone, he considered his vows. He was Woodsworth's dog, little more. A beast on a leash to be wielded like a blade. However, if he refused to fight, to be that animal, he had no doubt he would be thrown to the law. One vow would die, and both clawed ceaselessly at him.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself standing by the lake, a sea of stars all around him. Reflected in its surface, he saw himself as a monster, blood dripping from his fangs. He lowered a hand, unsure if he would strike and scatter the reflection, or offer himself to it.