

SILK AND FANGS

A tale from the “Dark Wonderland” chronicles.

By Joel S. Williams aka Mr. Ogunberry.

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Behold the Dark Wonderland, a place where humanity is thrust into contact with people, places and things of the supernatural variety. This tale is one of many accounts of men and women coming face to face with agents of the paranormal world. We hope you enjoy this story.

And remember, it can happen to you, if you believe it.

Event Date: 2015

CHAPTER ONE

The night's biting cold didn't do much to deter Harvey from staying outside. He sat contently in his rocking chair, puffing on his pipe. He was on the back porch of his house with the lights off, and the only source of luminance being three torches lit around a field of crops Harvey currently overlooked.

Harvey had lived in this town for nearly sixty years since the day he was born. The approach of old age was graying his brown hair, and his face was already being streaked by wrinkles. But hopefully tonight, age wouldn't affect his aim, as he had a hunting rifle laid purposefully across his lap.

He took the pipe out of his mouth and exhaled a cloud of smoke. Once it vanished he stared across the field upon three scarecrows, imagining one of them being the culprit that's been robbing him of his crops for months now.

But to think that the culprit wouldn't be human!

Harvey always heard the urban legends about mysterious creatures unseen by human eyes since the day he was born. But if someone ever told Harvey he would've lived long enough to see them with his own peepers, Harvey most likely would've been shooting one of them instead of the man-beast raping his farm.

Harvey chuckled as he thought about it, and said, "Oh well, that's just life for yah..."

Lying next to Harvey was Scrappy, his pet Alsatian. The dog rested its head on his crossed front feet as it slept. Then suddenly, his ever-alert nose picked up something peculiar in the air.

Scrappy suddenly opened his eyes. He lifted his ears and stood up. Harvey noticed his dog's stance, and stopped rocking his chair. He placed his feet firmly on the floor as he observed the animal. The dog took a few steps to the edge of the porch near the steps, and Harvey rested his hands on his rifle. And when Scrappy began growling, Harvey knew the rabbit just popped out of the hole.

He slowly got up to lessen the creaks of the chair and the wood beneath. He crept over to Scrappy and held him by the collar. "Easy boy," he whispered.

Harvey waited over a minute, and then he saw it. In the back of the field near one of the torches, a figure emerged. In the brief time it was in the light, Harvey saw its seven-foot frame

lumbering through the trees. Its body was covered in shaggy brown hair, and long arms hung from its wide shoulders.

Scrappy growled, and Harvey squeezed on his neck lightly and silenced him.

Harvey saw the creature hurrying into the field where his potatoes, carrots, tomatoes and peppers were planted. He saw the huge beast stoop over his tomatoes, and said, "Damn ape..."

Harvey walked off the porch. The yard was mostly dirt that ended right at the grassy surface of where his vegetables were planted. He pointed back at Scrappy who stood attentively, being quiet to not upset his master.

Wearing a green plaid shirt and dirty blue overalls, Harvey stopped at the edge of the field and lifted his rifle. He brought the scope to his eye, trying his best to make out his target in the light of the moon and torches.

The intruder was hunched over like a huge dark mass. It stood up once, and looked around, as if cautious that the human who owned the food might be looking around. It got Harvey feeling uncomfortable; knowing this thing could think. And seeing how huge it was in the shoulders, Harvey wished he never had to face the beast with just his hands.

The intruder stopped and went back to filling his cradled arm with goods, but now, Harvey had him still in his sights.

Harvey didn't want to risk missing with a headshot because of the lack of proper lighting. A body shot was easier, and he trusted the power of his rifle and Scrappy's speed and ferociousness to subdue the beast while he could close in to finish the job. If anything, he could capture it alive and become famous.

The man who caught Bigfoot, Harvey thought. Now that's a real damn trophy.

Harvey whistled. The creature suddenly stood and look in the direction of the house; just as planned, as Harvey wanted him upright to get a clear view of his chest. Harvey saw nothing of his face but the shine off his eyes.

And Harvey fired.

At the sound of the bang the beast spun around, staggered and howled. It was a deafening hollow sound.

Harvey smiled and lowered his weapon. "You little shit!" H\he said. He turned to Scrappy and said, "Sick 'em, boy!"

The dog leaped off the porch and ran into the crops. The beast made loud grunting sounds as it staggered towards the forest. Some of the vegetables fell from its grasp, but it was more focused on clutching the rest than its bleeding wound.

Harvey ran as fast as he could after Scrappy, all the while watching the huge man-beast lumbering towards the forest.

Scrappy caught up to the ape and bit onto his left foot. The intruder yelped and snarled, this time more out of anger and frustration than fright. He thrashed his leg around hoping to free the canine off him, but Scrappy's jaws were fixed on his furry flesh.

Then suddenly, to Harvey's horror, the ape lifted one of his huge arms and slammed his fist into Scrappy's head. The dog uttered a quick yelp before going dropping silent on the ground.

"Scrappy!" Harvey said. The man raised his gun and took two shots at the ape, but they all whizzed pass the intruder. And the next thing that Harvey saw was the dark image of the ape hoisting Scrappy off the ground by his neck and tossing the dog in his direction.

Harvey dropped his weapon and opened his arms, catching the canine. But the weight of the dog's impact brought Harvey down on his back. The man yelped and cursed. He rolled the dog off him and looked over at his companion. Scrappy's eyes were rolled into his head, but his torso went up and down steadily. The dog was out cold.

Harvey got up and took up his weapon. He turned to the ape with his rifle, and was just in time to see the intruder stooping with a hand cupped beneath it. The ape suddenly stood with a husky grunt and swung his arm. The fecal projectile slapped Harvey square in the face, flipping the man onto his back once more. The ape hurried into the dark confines of the forest, and Harvey lay on his back, snoring, with shit on his face.

Two days later, after the town meeting was held, things went back to normal, or normal as they could in Cactus Valley. The town was mostly made up of homes that've been there four generations and gone over numerous renovations. The most notable buildings were the massive water tower, the power plant, the library where the statue of Colonel Piers stood, and the Cactus Valley Memorial Center.

Most of the townsfolk's income was either farming, lumber or outsourced mechanical work in the nearby city. They were quite independent and rarely did the population needed to hire outsiders.

Except when issues of a supernatural nature arose.

It was Thursday. Most of the town's children at school, and the adults were going about their busy day. That was until a large black van drove into the town's square.

The nearby civilians stopped and observed the vehicle as it parked in front of the mayor's office. The mayor's building was just two stories high, painted white and blue with the confederate and the pink and white flag of the old *Cherryvine Calvary* that was lead by Colonel Piers.

The door to the van opened before the concrete path leading to the front door. A black man, dressed in brown leather pants and shirt with a silky white scarf around his neck, placed his rugged boots on the ground. He stepped outside with the sun glinting off his trimmed head. He closed the door behind, and lifted the sunglasses off his eyes brown eyes and swept them across the curious bystanders. He offered them a smile, and dropped back his shades and walked towards the building.

He spotted two armed guards at the door, and stopped before them and nodded. "Gentlemen," he said.

One of the guards noticed the shiny scarf around the stranger's neck and made his best scowl and said, "Who're you supposed to be?"

The visitor noticed how both guards had their hands resting on their weapons. He decided reaching for his ID now might stir more unwanted results, so he simply replied with, "I'm the man your boss called to solve your monster problem..."

The guards' expression suddenly lightened, and they took their hands off their guns.

One of them opened the door and said, "...Right this way, sir..."

The man nodded and walked inside. The visitor stopped and spoke to a receptionist in the foyer and said, "Excuse me, mam..."

The woman in her burgundy suit stared at him invitingly behind her glasses. She looked him up and down for a while before the man had to say, "Hello...?"

She woman jerked and blinked. "Uh, um...what?"

The man smiled at her and said, "I have an appointment with the mayor." He pointed to the computer she sat behind. "There should be some note there."

"Oh!" the woman said. She quickly typed on the keyboard and pulled up the itinerary for the day. "Oh yes! The mayor has an appointment with..." The woman made a strange face as she stared on the name on the screen. She looked up in the man's face, and said, "...*Mr. Toucan*...?"

"It's Sr. Toucan," the man replied plainly.

The woman shrugged. "Okay," she said. She pointed down the corridor and said, "Go down on your right, and take the second door."

Sr. Toucan nodded at her and said, "Thank you."

He walked off, and as he did the woman leaned over the counter to get a good look at him from behind.

Sr. Toucan found the door and knocked on it. "Come in!" someone said. Sr. Toucan opened the door and walked into the room.

The inside had a mud-brown color except the white, pink and blue carpet Sr. Toucan stood on. The room had the pictures of important individuals and scenic art. However, Sr. Toucan's attention was directed at the man sitting around the table.

Mayor Wellington was busy with some papers before him, looking worried as his watery eyes rapidly glanced over the notes on each one. When he looked up and saw Sr. Toucan, his eyes lit up, as if almost relieved. He stood and said, "Ah! You're here!"

Sr. Toucan approached his desk. He extended his hand to the Mayor, and the man eagerly took Sr. Toucan hand. Sr. Toucan felt his sweaty palm and smiled inwardly.

"Nice to finally meet you," the Mayor said, "Mr...?"

The visitor said, "*Sr. Toucan*."

"Ah, right!" The Mayor let go of his hand and gestured to the chair. "Please, have a seat. Oh, do you like our secretary? Pretty isn't she? We hired her two months ago."

Sr. Toucan seated himself. He took off his glasses and crossed his hands in his lap. He looked around the room discreetly once more before saying, "Yes, she's definitely gorgeous. So, Mr. Mayor, I hear you have an *ape* problem?"

The mayor sighed and said, "It's been happening for nearly six months now. *Damn Bigfoot*..."

“I need some more info,” Sr. Toucan said, “like what does it eat, where does it usually go for food—”

“I’ve never seen shit like that!” the mayor suddenly said. “The cows...”

Sr. Toucan sat forward. “Mr. Mayor, what about the cows?” he said, almost urgently.

The mayor rubbed his thinning black hair before saying, “The goddamn cows were all eaten! Torn limb from limb!”

Sr. Toucan made a quizzical expression. *Sasquatches don’t usually eat large prey like that*, he thought. But then he remembered something, and said, “Mr. Mayor. My organization came to this town seventeen years ago; to deal with a raik infestation, correct?”

“Um, yeah,” he said. “Yes, I remember. I wasn’t mayor at the time, but I remembered one of you Ark guys coming here and killing those critters. Ever since then the raiks didn’t show up anymore. Wait...you don’t think *their* doing this, do you? We haven’t seen them in years!”

Sr. Toucan said, “That may be the case, Mr. Mayor. But we’ve had cases where raiks do return to their feeding grounds after a certain period of time. And by nature, sasquatches don’t go after big game. Their diet is mostly composed of fruits, ground-provisions and rabbits and fish.”

The mayor said, “I’m telling yah, Mr. Toucan, it ain’t the raiks. It’s that damn giant monkey doing this crap!” The mayor went through his paper work. “Good lord! I’m busy with reports about the crappy irrigation, the lack of import contracts, the garbage spill...Jesus, Bejeesus, and now I got this on my hands.”

Sr. Toucan suddenly placed a firm hand over the mayor’s paperwork, halting his frantic movements. Sr. Toucan smiled, and said, “You don’t need to worry anymore, Mr. Mayor. The Ark agency will handle this matter; like we always do.”

The Mayor exhaled deeply, his shoulders slumped. “By golly, kid. I hope you can.”

Sr. Toucan took his hand off the table and said, “I’ll gather intel on the farms the creature regularly visits; he might want to switch-up his game after being injured. Once I’ve found where he decides to stay, I’ll set a trap there. Not to worry Mr. Mayor, I have this in the bag already.”

Gruzz touched the plant pulp on his chest. He pressed it with one of his thick fingers. He winced, baring his huge canines. The wound hadn’t fully healed.

Need more nourishment, he thought. And upon remembering the farmer who shot him, Gruzz’s bushy eyebrows caved into a frown. *Evil, man...*

Gruzz took his attention from his injury and looked before him. There used to be a thick cluster of trees where his eyes currently lay. There, he and his fellow *kohakui* used to play ‘Catch Rock’ until they got tired. Then they would rest under the trees, eating mushroom and drinking water collected in the leaves. They would listen to the melodies of the bird. And at night, he and his mate would re-establish their bond under the stars to the songs of cricket and frogs.

But that was years ago.

Now, what stood in its place was a massive sawmill. Here in the bowels of this massive metal monster, the humans took the remains of the trees to be further mutilated into their own constructs. Sure, Gruzz and his kin often made objects and structures out of the plants, but never to the extent where acres of forests disappeared.

Gruzz saw the smoke billowing from a chimney, stinking the air of charred wood and waste. Gruzz made a throaty sound, and walked the other way. He went up the slope until he was on flat ground.

Like most sasquatches, or *kohakui*, as they called themselves, Gruzz was seven-foot tall and around two-hundred-seventy pounds, most of which was lean muscle. His face, palms, feet and chest were bare, exposing his green-brown colored flesh. He had bright brown eyes and a somewhat human face besides his pasted-in nose and large jaw bone.

Slung across his torso was a mass of vines with animal skin he used to carry certain small items, most of which were little trinkets, but one he held dear in particular was a stone that once belonged to his mate.

Poakuak, Gruzz thought, *I hope you rest well in Evergreen.*

Gruzz gripped the pouch on his chest, and feeling his body aching, he stopped, took up a rock and tossed it as hard as he could. The stone tore a chunk out of a tree as if it were a piece of sponge. Gruzz felt his eyes and nostrils burning. He made a deep growl and hung his head.

Strength, Gruzz thought. *I must find strength!*

Gruzz thought back on when he had assaulted the farmer and his dog. He had struck a feeble blow for his kind. But a blow nonetheless. Gruzz smiled, thinking of the pleasure of striking misery upon humans.

As long as he was still alive, Gruzz would take every opportunity to cause mankind some sort of problem.

Gruzz found a nice sized stick, and hefted it in his hands. He tested the weight and the length. If he was going to interact with humans on a hostile field, he would need something to add to his arsenal. He had good hand-eye co-ordination, but also needed to add to reach to his arms. As he recently found out, guns were no playthings.

Satisfied with his new-found weapon, Gruzz continued his trek through the forest. At least here, the little forest critters were still at peace for the time being. But though he was surrounded by tranquility, he smelt something foul in the air.

Gruzz inhaled deeply to further analyze the smell. It became familiar to him now; the smell of death, and it was close by. He hurried in the direction of the scent, and along the way he found less and less animals in the area. After ten minutes, Gruzz came upon the bloody scene.

There lay on the leaf-littered ground the corpse of a grizzly bear. Its torso was torn open; the ribcage broken apart and most of the organs gone. Its entrails, however, were splayed in the dirt, along with its blood that darkened the soil. The animal's eyes were wide open, and flies were already buzzing over its body. Upon seeing the animal remains, Gruzz's grip on his stick tightened.

Kohakuies and bears had a mutual respect for each other. But the carnage done upon this animal was too monstrous to be done by the hands of another kohakui, not to mention Gruzz was the only one of his kind for miles around. He would have used his fists or a stone to deal a deathly blow to the head, not mutilate the creature to this point!

Gruzz knelt next to the body and stared into the eyes of the dead beast, knowing what was the cause for such defilement.

"...The foul beast," Gruzz said. The kohakui got up and walked away, now more alert than ever. "Need bigger stick."

CHAPTER TWO

Harvey took the pipe out of his mouth and exhaled a cloud of smoke before him. Once it vanished, he looked across at the man sitting next to him on the porch. Sr. Toucan took a sip from his thermos and leaned back in his rocking chair. Between the two men lay Scrappy with a brace around his neck.

All three stared into the field where the scarecrows were. Stars dotted the sky, and along with the moon's light, the visible in the field was to their liking, negating the use for torches.

Sr. Toucan had on a utility belt with various mechanical objects on it. Harvey took note of them, as he had been doing from time to time.

"So," said Harvey, "do all you people wear those things on your waist?"

Sr. Toucan said, "Not all of us. It depends on our skill set. Some of us use guns, swords, magic, even their bare hands." The last point made Sr. Toucan remember Crow; and how he had ripped the head off a werewolf right before his eyes. *Damn*, Sr. Toucan thought, *to think that Crow's only twenty-six.*

Harvey puffed on his pipe once more before exhaling, and said, "I remember when that other guy came in town to clean up the raik infestation. Boy had more guns on him than me and the guys back in 'Nam."

Both men chuckled, and Sr. Toucan said, "That's our Sparrow for you."

Within the Ark hierarchy were four levels. At the bottom were the Softfeathers, freshly recruited agents who hadn't earned their title unless they completed a life-and-death mission. Then above them were the field agents such as Sr. Toucan himself and Sparrow. They were the first line of contact between Ark and the rest of the world. Thirdly, were the *Talons*. This was a group that consisted of what the organization called the "The Best Problem Solvers" when it came to getting rid of supernatural threats. The Talons held only eight titles that were rarely ever rotated; the Peacock, the Crow, the Owl, the Hawk, the Hummingbird, the Swan, the Bluejay and the Stork.

Sr. Toucan only ever knew of Hummingbird, Stork and Peacock being replaced. And Sr. Toucan knew it was only because those three were fragile humans. Crow, Swan and the others were something else.

And at the top were the four people who coordinated everything in the organization, The Nest. They were the ones who were to bestow the supernatural gifts upon most of the members of the Talon. Sr. Toucan only ever saw Mother Goose in person; a strikingly good looking old woman. The others he never laid eyes upon, but only knew them by their names; Boss Penguin, King Condor and Thunderbird.

Sr. Toucan took another sip from his thermos. He had his reasons for being with such an organization, and only hoped that eventually, he could find out where she is.

I'm gonna find you, Mary, don't worry, Sr. Toucan thought.

Scrappy's ears stood up, and the dog lifted his head. It stood up and the two men took notice. Scrappy suddenly uttered a whimper, curled his tail beneath his legs and scampered behind Harvey's chair.

The two men gave each other a stern-faced stare before turning their eyes to the fields.

Harvey readied his rifle and motioned to get out of his chair. "Round two, you son of a bitch!"

Sr. Toucan held his hand before Harvey, halting him. "Wait," said Sr. Toucan quietly. He reached for the electronic binoculars off his waist and held them to his eyes. Sure enough, he saw the shaggy beast lumbering into the field. In his hand he held what appeared to be a long object, a stick perhaps?

"What do you see?" whispered Harvey. He lifted the scope to his eyes to get a closer look. But without the torches to aid his sight, Harvey only saw the outline of the creature.

Sr. Toucan watched as Gruzz approached one of the scarecrows.

Gruzz couldn't believe it at first, but his nose didn't lie. There hadn't been any other kohakuies besides him in this part of the countryside for years. However, the smell of another kohakui was unmistakable; a female!

Gruzz, with a huge stick in his hand and blood rushing down between his legs, approached one of the scarecrows in the center of the farm. He was cautious about this place, having gotten seriously wounded the last time being here, but the scent of a female was just too irresistible. Gruzz put his nose to the inanimate effigy and took a deep sniff. He closed his eyes and savored the scent. He felt tingles over his body, and envisioned himself with a bunch of females; their stomachs all swollen with his offspring.

Gruzz ran his free hand over the scarecrow, and suddenly felt something metallic. He popped open his eyes, now intrigued by this sudden feeling. Gruzz reached for the thing inside the pocket of the scarecrow. He took it out and held it to his eyes.

It lit up.

“He took the bait,” Sr. Toucan said as he saw the sasquatch sniffing the strawman.

Harvey grinned. “Yes...” He gingerly touched the trigger of his rifle.

Sr. Toucan gave him a sideways glance and said, “Wait on my signal, Harvey...”

Sr. Toucan reached for a small electronic device off his waist. It had several buttons and a small screen. Sr. Toucan switched his attention to the remote. He pressed a button that switched the icon on the screen to the selected external device of his choice. Sr. Toucan held his finger over a red button in the center, looked back through the binoculars and saw the sasquatch with the device between his fingers, and pressed the button.

The device between Gruzz’s fingers popped in a flash of light and dust. He howled and staggered away, falling on his button before scurrying to his feet. Gruzz grunted and snarled as he swatted the dust off his face, but he had inadvertently already inhaled some of the substance, and the chemicals were already going to work on his mind. Each time Gruzz got up he fell, his motor skills going haywire.

Sr. Toucan lowered his binoculars. “Bingo!” He put it away and snatched a bag off the floor next to him. “Come on, Harvey!”

The older man eagerly ran off the porch and followed Sr. Toucan. Then Harvey turned back to the dog trembling behind his rocking chair and shouted, “Scrappy! Get your lazy ass out here and help!”

The dog uttered a timid bark and ran after the two humans.

While running, Sr. Toucan reached into his bag and took out a peculiar, compact rifle. He tossed the bag away and held the weapon in a firing stance. Gruzz crouched, tensed his body and took a deep breath. He lifted his head and uttered a deafening roar, startling the humans and the dog.

“What the hell?” Harvey said.

A strange fine mist containing the chemicals he had inhaled was expelled from Gruzz’s throat. He got up with his rod firm in his grasp and took off from where he came.

“Shit!” said, Harvey. “The drugs didn’t work!”

Sr. Toucan slowed down and fired his weapon. Vapor puffed from the muzzle and an egg-shaped projectile zipped towards Gruzz. It exploded in mid-air and caught Gruzz. Immediately Sr. Toucan pressed a button on the side of the rifle, and the magnetic orbs at the corners of the net fused with each other. Gruzz fell, staggered to his feet and thrashed; his entire torso consumed.

Sr. Toucan smirked and said, “Let’s see you get outta that?” Then Sr. Toucan saw Harvey blaze pass him with a dreadful grimace, purposely holding his weapon. Sr. Toucan reached out and said, “Harvey don’t kill him!”

“Piece a shit,” Harvey said as he neared the struggling beast.

Then Gruzz roared. He exerted his strength and stretched his arms. The magnetic orbs began to tremble as they separated, until Gruzz finally broke himself free.

Sr. Toucan gawked, the display of force causing his muscles to slacken and him to lower his weapon. *What the hell? Not even a werewolf could break out of that!*

Harvey fired at Gruzz. He winced and snarled. Gruzz looked at his stomach where he saw the gunshot wound. He leveled his seething eyes at Harvey, and the human recoiled his neck as if he intended to retreat into his clothes. Behind Harvey Scrapy had already create a pool of urine beneath his trembling frame.

“...Ah shit...” Harvey droned as Gruzz lifted the stick above his head.

“*Human bad!*” Gruzz said, swinging the instrument into Harvey. The blow took the man off his feet. Scrapy squealed and ran away, but couldn’t escape in time as Harvey fell upon him, squeezing out a tight yelp from the animal before the two of them went quiet.

Gruzz ran off once more. Sr. Toucan went over and checked Harvey. He had a stable pulse, however when Sr. Toucan ripped open his shirt he saw where the stick left a large indentation, indicating a few ribs were broke. He rolled Harvey off Scrapy. The dog was still breathing; however, his back legs were twisted.

Sr. Toucan swore under his breath. He took out his cellphone and called for the ambulance, after which he stood up and stared into the dark of the forest. A civilian getting injured on the job wasn’t something he could just gloss over. Sr. Toucan had argued with the old man prior about having him outside during the mission, but Harvey had insisted, stating “No one’s going stop me from doing anything on my land!”

Sr. Toucan unraveled his luminous scarf from around his neck. He gave Hervey on last look and thought, *Harvey, you're one tough old dog, though.*

Sr. Toucan charged into the forest. He quickened his pace upon spotting a glimpse of the sasquatch up ahead. He tightened his grip on his scarf as he navigated through the trees. Thanks to Harvey's wound dealt to the man-ape, Sr. Toucan could quickly catch up to him.

Harvey lifted his rifle once more and fired. But Gruzz went behind a tree and evaded it. However, the second Sr. Toucan fired Gruzz was caught once more. Gruzz easily busted out of his restraints, But Sr. Toucan was already upon him.

The man stepped on Gruzz's thigh and leaped, executing a backflip while simultaneously kicking Gruzz in the chin. Sr. Toucan landed perfectly on his feet and took a defensive stance. The blow did nothing more than to aggravate the sasquatch.

The kohakui snarled and whacked the ground with his rod, forcing Sr. Toucan a few inches back. "Humans always try kill Gruzz!" he said. "Gruzz's people die cause' humans take everything!"

Sr. Toucan spun the scarf elegantly like a fan, and said, "I'm sorry, big guy, but I can't let you terrorize these people." Sr. Toucan held the scarf in his hands. He concentrated and brought forth a strange energy within him upon the fabric. The scarf glowed, and Sr. Toucan squeezed. The material rippled and folded, until it formed a silver rapier with an ornate golden handle. "I have to take you in, Mr. Gruzz."

Gruzz roared and charged. He swung the stick at Sr. Toucan, but the man expertly dodged the blows. However, to his surprise, Gruzz feinted a blow to his feet, immediately switching the trajectory of his attack to Sr. Toucan's head. The human barely had time to lift his weapon and half parry the blow. The force sent Sr. Toucan sliding back and squabbling to regain his footing.

His strength is unreal! Sr. Toucan thought.

Gruzz held the stick behind him, positioning himself to take a solid swing. Sr. Toucan saw the opening within the slow attack, and ran forward. Gruzz swung, but Sr. Toucan ducked beneath it, however the tailwind behind it nearly tore Sr. Toucan's head off. He lunged with the rapier, plunging it within Gruzz's knee.

Gruzz hollered. Sr. Toucan attempted to make a hasty retreat but Gruzz's rage fueled the speed of his sudden burst. He swung his fist into Sr. Toucan's midsection and sent him flying.

Sr. Toucan gasped breathlessly as he hit a tree and felt his ribs crack. The man fell, gasping for air, spitting up blood. Sr. Toucan spotted Gruzz limping towards him with the stick raised above his head, and felt fear grip him by the spine. But Sr. Toucan fought against the agony surging through his chest, quickly reaching for a lumpy sphere off his utility belt. He pressed a button at the top and tossed it at the huge beast. On impact the object popped, releasing more of the drugs over Gruzz. The kohakui stumbled, but stopped his fall with one hand. He fell on his knee, shaking his head and wiping the stuff off his face.

Sr. Toucan tried to get up. He felt the searing lashes of the pain in his chest and winced and closed his eyes. But eventually, the man made it to his feet. He walked over to Gruzz kneeling on the ground. Sr. Toucan held his rapier by the handle and the tip. He focused and brought forth his spiritual energy once more. The rapier glowed and rippled, and turned into a golden mallet with an ivory handle.

Sr. Toucan raised his blunt instrument. "Lights out, big man," he said, and as Gruzz turned around with a sour expression, Sr. Toucan clubbed him in the head.

Sr. Toucan reached the door leading into Harvey's room. He knocked once, and said, "Mr. Harvey?"

And a grumpy voice replied, "Is that you, fancy son-of-a-bitch?"

Sr. Toucan smiled and opened the door. Inside he saw Harvey in a patient's gown lying in the bed, and laying at the foot of his bed was his companion, Scrappy. Both man and dog wore bandages, however, Harvey's was mostly around his chest where he had done emergency surgery.

The room was painted a light blue, with potted flowers in the corner. But even though a lovely sheen of light shone through the window and gave the space a soft, angelic glow, Harvey's scowl was determined not to go away.

"Don't smile at me boy," said Harvey. "Tell me; did we get that ape or not?"

Sr. Toucan folded his before him and said, "The beast is safe and secured in my custody, Harvey. Not to worry."

Harvey gawked. "What? *Safe*?" Harvey sighed and fell back in his bed. He groaned. Sr. Toucan motioned forward but Harvey held up his hand, stopping the man. Harvey stared into the ceiling and said, "That thing needs to have one of his legs broken for what it did to me."

Sr. Toucan said, "I managed to wound it a little, if that helps."

Harvey looked at Sr. Toucan and said, "How badly?"

The man rubbed his chin, sighed and said, "Well, I managed to sever a tendon in its his knee and crack his skull. But knowing sasquatches and their recuperative abilities, he should be fully healed within a week."

"...Damn," Harvey said, his face bore a dejected look. "No wonder these things are so hard to kill. That night was the first time I shot it, you know."

Sr. Toucan contemplated entertaining Harvey's conversation; letting him know that a bullet to the head or directly in the heart would put down a species like Gruzz, however, after being acquainted with Harvey, Sr. Toucan wasn't sure the older man was someone who should be furthered trained in the art of killing.

As Sr. Toucan thought upon Harvey's bloodlust demeanor, it had him thinking back on neohumans, and wondered if the man could be one.

But Sr. Toucan quickly forgot about that, and said, "There's no need to worry about that anymore." Sr. Toucan approached his bedside. "So you and Scrappy here can focus on recovering."

Harvey snorted. "Yeah..."

Sr. Toucan held his hand out, and Harvey shook it. Sr. Toucan left the room, and walked through the busy, blue colored halls until he reached outside. The sun was a bit overwhelming, making him reach for his sunglasses on put them on.

With the mission now over, Sr. Toucan took the time to observe more of the town. A place like this was one of the many rare human settlements that were directly involved with cryptic creatures. As Sr. Toucan made his way back to the motel he was staying at, he noticed that the town of Cactus Valley had somewhat embraced its supernatural nature. He saw stores advertising souvenirs pertaining to raiks, sasquatches the mothmen and fauns.

Sr. Toucan felt his stomach growling, and decided a meal would be best at this point. His ribs hadn't fully healed, so he took his time walking through the town. He found a coffee shop, where he was greeted and thanked by some of the patrons for his work with subduing the sasquatch. Sr. Toucan humbly acknowledged them and found himself a seat at an empty table in the corner of the room, where he could observe everything that was taking place. Most of the

people were busy eating and talking, and few; mostly women, gave him interested stares from time to time.

A woman quickly came over to his table and said, "Good morning, sir! What will you be having?"

"Just one cup of coffee would be fine. Lots of cream," he said.

The woman smiled and said girlishly, "Sure! Coming right up!"

The woman hurried off, and Sr. Toucan took up a newspaper on the table. He looked at the words, but wasn't actually reading what they were saying. His mind was still focused on something, something which took place just over three years ago. His had absently reached for the scarf around his neck, and memories of her began to resonate in his mind.

She wore rippling white dress over her pink blouse, and the scarf was tied around her neck with the end hanging between her supple breasts. She stood beneath a blossoming tree, dancing as the pink petals fell around her. The sun glinted off her beautiful brown skin, and her smile of milky teeth gave off more sheen, adding to the beauty of her face. She stopped and turned to Sr. Toucan, and absently he smiled. She ran towards him, and he opened his arms.

"Hey!" Sr. Toucan snapped out of his daydreaming and shifted attention in the direction of the voice. It was the perky waitress, smiling at him as if she intended to barter something with her teeth. She gestured the tray with the cup to him. "Here you go, sir."

"Oh..." Sr. Toucan took up the cup. "Thank you."

The waitress smiled, took a few steps back so she could stare at him some more, and turned and hurried off.

As she did, Sr. Toucan had to stop and think; *Am I really that good looking?* He wasn't modest enough to think he was a sight for sore eyes. Sure, he knew he was more handsome than the average guy, but he didn't consider himself a supermodel. *Women sure have weird tastes.*

But when Sr. Toucan was about to take a sip of his coffee, he noticed someone familiar on the other side of the diner. It was the mayor's secretary. With his eyes concealed behind his glasses, Sr. Toucan could observe her without her noticing. Familiarity had highlighted her in his awareness, but now he noticed something else. As she read the newspaper, she was very calm. She had barely eaten the food on her plate, and her cup of tea no longer emitted wisps of vapor.

Sr. Toucan looked away and drank more of his coffee. He opened the newspaper and slowly flipped through the page. Something about the woman seemed off to Sr. Toucan. Usually

a woman wouldn't be so occupied with reading the newspapers. *As a matter of fact, how many women even read the paper?*

Sr. Toucan looked back up, and was just in time to see the woman in the black clothing stare intently at him. Just to make sure, he lifted his head, and the secretary looked away.

As much as Sr. Toucan would have loved to consider himself a ladies' man, the expression he saw on her face told she wasn't interested in what he had in his trousers. He got up, put the money on the table and walked away. He exited the diner and made his way to the police station.

Sr. Toucan preferred to walk to his destinations whenever he was in a new place, as it allowed him to get a better grasp of his surroundings in case he would need to traverse the terrain once more during an emergency. It was fifteen minutes later when he reached the police station. At this point, everyone knew who he was, and allowed him access to see his prisoner.

Sr. Toucan walked through the corridor of withered tan walls, and made his way to the third of the six cells in the building. He stopped and looked inside. There he saw the sasquatch sitting in the corner cross-legged. Gruzz, as Sr. Toucan remembered the creature stating its name was, had his eyes closed as if meditating, a far-cry from the beast he was last night. Sr. Toucan noticed garbage in the cell; in particular tomatoes, stones and feces. He also noticed bits and pieces of the filth on the Gruzz.

"It seems the townsfolk paid you a visit," Sr. Toucan said. Gruzz didn't respond. "You doing fine?"

"You trying to talk to a dumb animal?" said an officer sitting at the desk before the corridor of prison cells. "All that thing knows to do is feed, fight and...screw!"

The officer grinned while he did some paperwork, garnering Sr. Toucan's attention. Sr. Toucan cut his eyes away from the man around the table and focused on Gruzz once more. Sr. Toucan knew that these beings were capable of human intelligence and speech. The sasquatch's intelligence was the equivalent of a small child's; lacking in depth but easy to fill and mold. "Don't worry," said Sr. Toucan. "My organization will come for you tonight. We'll relocate you somewhere where there is plenty of food and less humans."

Sr. Toucan gave the creature one last glance before walking away. Three steps into his departure, Sr. Toucan heard, "You..." the man wheeled and went back to the cell "...use magic?"

Sr. Toucan saw Gruzz looking at him intently, as if demanding something. Sr. Toucan said, “You know about magic?”

Gruzz shuffled his feet lazily and said, “My people...use magic...long ago before men made us have to hide. Men took magic for their own.”

Sr. Toucan smiled. “That’s not how I heard it,” he said. “There are different kinds of magic the last time I checked.” He touched his scarf. “The kind I use in this is 'Resonance Magic'. This kind of magic relies on a bond between two people. One of them sacrifices their spiritual strength, and imbued it into an item their partner has chosen as the catalyst between them. My partner chose this scarf.”

Gruzz made a genuine smile. He nodded. “Who gave that scarf magic...?”

Sr. Toucan’s expression dampened a little bit. But he quickly rebounded by saying, “She was my girlfriend. But she’s not here anymore.”

At the table the officer gave them a cautious look, raising slightly out of his seat to lean forward and see what was going.

Gruzz nodded slowly, and grinned. He said, “Yes. Gruzz miss his woman too.”

Sr. Toucan’s expression went blank for a moment. He wasn’t sure if the creature was trying to manipulate sympathy out of him, but he was beginning to feel something strange. “Mr. Gruzz...why did you kill those animals?”

“It was not Gruzz,” said the sasquatch. “It was beast! The beast did it!”

The officer got up from desk and hurried towards them.

Sr. Toucan went closer to the bars and held them. “Gruzz, you need to describe this creature to me.”

“Stop stirring up the damn animal,” said the officer. He turned to the cell and unholstered his baton. He rapped it against the bars. “Keep quiet! I have work to do!”

Sr. Toucan grabbed the man by his collar and pushed him against the wall. He said to the officer’s startled face, “And don’t interrupt my fucking work either, sir.”

Another prisoner in a nearby cell across from them, got closer to his door. He grinned mischievously. “That’s right, bitch!” the criminal said.

Two other officers who heard the commotion ran into the room with their hands on their weapons. Sr. Toucan took notice of them. He let go of the trembling officer and said, "Make sure nothing happens with my prison until my colleagues come for him.

Sr. Toucan hurriedly left the holding bay, and as he went through the door, the officer he ruffed up said, “That’s right, bastard. Get your ass outta town.” He turned to the prisoner grinning at him, and ran to the cell with the baton, causing the criminal to retreat. “Shut your ass up, boy!”

Sr. Toucan lay in the bed of his motel room, wearing nothing but his underwear. He contemplated this morning's visit with Gruzz, and how his previous suspicions about the incident were now being verified.

The sasquatch couldn’t have done the killing of the large animals. It had to be something else. Sr. Toucan pounded the white spread of his bed, and sighed in exasperation. *I'm so stupid! Why didn't I ask to see the corpse of the dead livestock?* Sr. Toucan thought. *The culprit could have easily left evidence on it.*

Not that Sr. Toucan couldn’t go and request to see the dead bodies of the animals, but based on what he saw this morning, there were a few folks in town who knew more than they were letting on. As far he knew about Gruzz, he was just a hungry delinquent, not a cold-blooded murderer.

There wasn’t much in the room to distract Sr. Toucan besides the light of a lamp on the table beside his bed and a small tv on the table against the wall. The room had another door that lead to the bathroom. This was a cheap place to just spend the night, after all. Sr. Toucan glanced at the window, and saw the lights from outside. He lowered his head and contemplated once more about his next plan of action. The Softfeathers should be arriving any minute now to collect Gruzz. Possibly, if the town thought that everything was calm once more, the real threat would strike again. However, the issue was that Ark had to work with the civilian population. The organization's upper heads were planning to make the company go public soon. Cactus Valley was one of a few places where they had already contracted work with the ordinary populace to help with their supernatural problem. At this point, it was becoming a business. If Sr. Toucan went against the wishes of the town, it with deter relations between the people and his group.

“Business, huh?” Sr. Toucan said. Then he remembered what Mother Goose had told him; “We have to work hard to ensure our organization wins the favor of the people of earth before the *Red Scarab* does. We cannot allow them to usher in *their* version of a new world order.”

Sr. Toucan sighed and rolled over on his stomach. He rested his head on his crossed arms and said almost like a whisper, ‘People and taking over the world these days. What about just owning a castle?’”

There was a low sliding sound, like wood-against-wood. Sr. Toucan quickly looked up, and within his field of vision he caught something next to the window. When he focused his eyes in that direction, he saw a dark figure crouched within the window frame. Its red eyes beamed at him as if he were a deer in headlights.

Sr. Toucan almost yelled, but quickly reached for the pistol under his pillow. He rolled out of the bed and pointed the gun at whatever it was that stared at him.

“My,” said the person in a smooth voice, “I didn’t know you were so jumpy, John.”

Sr. Toucan recognized the voice; one that was all too familiar. He pointed the gun to the ceiling and said, “What the hell? Morgan?”

Sr. Toucan walked over to the switch and flicked it on. And sure enough, it was Morgan. Morgan the mothman.

Morgan’s body resembled a human, however he possessed a wiry frame and grey-blue skin. His hands and feet ended in claws, with the joints, abdomen and chest in dark segments. Two large red eyes sat on his face above his slit-like nostrils, and his jointed mouth fused into two lips. Two silver, feathery antennae twitched over his eyes, and his fluffy wings were folded behind him like a cape.

Morgan stepped off the window ledge and into the room, standing six feet tall. He was naked except for the green shorts he usually wore. He had a faint cinnamon smell.

Morgan chuckled and said, “You look like you missed me, John.”

Sr. Toucan lowered his weapon with an annoyed look. “I don’t,” he said. “And stop calling me by my name.”

Morgan shrugged and raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, *Sr. Toucan*.”

Out of all the known cryptid species, the mothmen, or *akribi*, as they called themselves, were the most human like in demeanor and social behavior. They were intelligent enough to know how to hide from humans, and only revealed themselves when they felt they were safe. Sr. Toucan knew that Morgan in particular was discovered in a town where he lived alongside the humans as if he were an everyday citizen. He offered his services to Ark in exchange for special resources. It’s not known if the *akribi* were a species that secretly evolved alongside humans, or

aliens that came to earth millennia ago, and had forgotten their heritage due to circumstances. Not even Morgan knew much about the history of his people. Akribies mostly lived in seclusion.

Morgan seated himself at the edge of Sr. Toucan's bed and said, "So, tell. What gender was the sasquatch you captured?"

Sr. Toucan scowled and said, "...Really?"

Morgan nodded. "Yes, really!"

"It's a male," said Sr. Toucan.

Morgan winced and pounded his thigh. "Good grief. We're all the female sasquatches?"

Sr. Toucan leaned against the wall next to the door and folded his arms with the gun.

"You came with the Softfeathers; didn't they tell you?"

Morgan crossed his legs. "Nah," he said. "I asked to accompany them so I could see you. I have some news."

Sr. Toucan's interest now piped, he leaned off the wall. "What did you find?"

Morgan rocked his head and said, "You ever heard of a little place called *Wrinkl derp*?"

Sr. Toucan raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Is that a cartoon or something?"

"Nope, actual place, believe it or not," said Morgan. "It's on the east coast, in New Jersey to be exact. A witch told me. And you know how they always find the creepiest places"

"So, what about it?" Sr. Toucan said, now seating himself next to the edge of the tv stand.

Morgan said, "The town's a haven for witches, wizards, phantoms and zombies. The worst kind. My source says they often practice rituals where they feed interdimensional beings with souls. Then the creatures from the other side shit out jewels they use to summon those beings in the physical world."

Sr. Toucan held his hand out to the scarf lying on the bed-stand. It lifted and hurled into his grasp. Sr. Toucan held it up to his face, and rubbed it between his fingers. "I don't why she did it," he said. "Sacrificing herself to those people...for me." He gripped the scarf. "If only I was stronger back then..."

Morgan noticed the determined look on Sr. Toucan's face, and said, "Bullets don't really work so well against people who can warp the very fabric of reality." He gestured with his chin to the fabric the man held. "She charmed that with resonance magic to keep you safe just in case they came after you. You still sure you wanna go find her, John? She did this to protect you. The fellow that has her is known for even sacrificing babies to make rings."

Sr. Toucan lowered the scarf and said to Morgan, “That’s exactly why I have to go save her, Morgan.”

Morgan shrugged. He laid back in the bed as if it was his, yawned and curled up. “Oh well. Let me know when you decide to go there. There might be some really sexy women over there who know how to make a man feel good. I’m sleepy right now.”

Sr. Toucan said, “Aren’t your species nocturnal?”

“Not me,” said Morgan. “I just like doing things at night where no one can see me.”

Sr. Toucan’s cellphone rang. He reached over to the dresser and took it up. He answered the phone. “Hello,” he said. “Yes, Mr. Mayor, it’s me...”

Sr. Toucan’s expression darkened as the mayor gave him the news. Morgan could hear a little from the man on the other side of the phone, but was more alerted by the look on the human’s face. “Is something wrong?”

Sr. Toucan lowered the phone and said to Morgan, “...There’s been another attack. Two people got kill.”

CHAPTER THREE

Sr. Toucan drove up to the scene of the crime, a house surrounded by a thin patch of woods. The local police force had already secured the scene; however the curious neighbors had already gathered near the front of the house, weaving their heads over each other and tipping on their toes to get a glimpse of what had befallen a fellow member of the community. Sr. Toucan parked his vehicle behind the police cars, leaped out and shut the door behind him. He parted the civilians out of his way and hurried to the yellow tapes. He lifted a row of it and walked underneath, and was immediately met by two officers stopping him with their hands in his chest.

Sr. Toucan swatted their hands away and said, "I need to view the crime scene, now."

The officer said, "This is a murder, agent guy, not a farm raid by one of those things. This is our jurisdiction now."

Sr. Toucan folded his arms and said calmly, "So you are both willing to go inside and explain to the mayor why you sent me back when he specifically asked for my assistance?"

Both officers gave each incredulous looks, weighing their options gravely. One of them said, "All right...go right ahead."

Sr. Toucan walked past the men. He went through the open door and into the house. The living room seemed strangely intact, and the CSIs were already busy searching the place for prints. One of them pointed to the back where the mayor was, and when Sr. Toucan went around there, he froze with caution.

There was blood splattered everywhere in the kitchen, some in small pools where the investigators had placed signs next to. There were even signs next to a severed finger and a chopped off foot still in a woman's shoe. Sr. Toucan held the scarf to his mouth. It was not that he hadn't seen gore on such a level before, it was just the metallic, bitter smell of blood was too much.

Sr. Toucan noticed some of the investigators giving him hard looks before turning away, but undeterred Sr. Toucan said, "What did you guys find?"

One of the investigators, an older man, said, "We found mostly the blood of the couple who lived here." He walked away from the kitchen counter where drops of red were and pointed to a hole near the door. "That's where we assumed one of them tried to kill whatever

fricking demon came in here and did all this shit.” He stopped before Sr. Toucan and said, “If you're looking for evidence, the rest of the remains are out back, with the mayor.”

Sr. Toucan nodded. “Thank you,” he said. He carefully stepped around the investigators and the blood stains and exited out the back. He entered a small backyard where two investigators and the mayor, as well as the stout sheriff, were. The investigators knelt over something while the mayor and sheriff stood and observed.

Sr. Toucan walked pass a small shed and said, “Mr. Mayor!”

The mayor turned around. Upon seeing Sr. Toucan, he took his hands off his hips and marched towards the Ark agent. “Good riddance! I thought you said you captured the monster?”

“That’s what I thought as first, Mr. Mayor,” he said. “I’m sorry. When you mentioned that livestock were being eaten, I realized their might have been a second creature on the loose.”

“You’re damn right there is!” the mayor said. The mayor ran a hand over his head. “Dammit!”

Sr. Toucan went over to the next piece of evidence. What the two investigators had in front of them, was piece of a man’s torso. It appeared to have been eaten down to just the right arm, shoulder and the right side of the chest. The arm was still in the its blood-stained blue plaid sleeve.

“I guess you boys over there in the Ark group ain’t so efficient, heh?”

Sr. Toucan slowly shifted his stare to the round-faced sheriff. The sheriff grinned at him at him, however Sr. Toucan’s composure didn’t falter. He replied with, “We got one before. I’ll get this one.”

“Sure...” the sheriff said.

Sr. Toucan noticed something on the forearm, and said, “Hold it guys.”

The investigators stopped. They made way as Sr. Toucan knelt over the torn limb. He took out a small plastic bag with a swab in it. He took it out and wiped it on the bite mark on the forearm.

Finally!

Sr. Toucan put up the piece of evidence and said, “Aren't there supposed to be two bodies?”

The sheriff gestured with his head to the back fence. “The monsters carried the rest it with him. Probably for lunch.” And the sheriff grinned once more.

Sr. Toucan approached the fence where he saw piece of clothing stuck to a sharp outcropping off the wood. Sr. Toucan took up a tweezer and removed it off the fence and placed it into another plastic bag.

Sr. Toucan looked around. Once he was satisfied there nothing more he needed to see, he said to the sheriff, “Well, I'll get on this right away. I'll let you guys know something by tomorrow morning.”

Sr. Toucan was just about to enter the kitchen when the sheriff said, “By the time you're finish playing with that, the monster would've found its next meal.” He smiled devilishly. “I hope you brought enough body bags, cause looks like since you came here, the funs just starting.”

Sr. Toucan stopped and said, “And I won't be as nice to them as the previous guy was with the raiks.” And satisfied with the angered expression on the sheriff and the investigators' faces, Sr. Toucan smirked and walked off.

The inside of Sr. Toucan's van was constructed into a makeshift laboratory and storage unit. One side held his arsenal of weapons on shelves and on racks, while the other side had a small cabinet of test tubes, Petri dishes and flasks, a table and bench, a water cooler and a small stove. Sr. Toucan sat around the table with a lamp illuminating his work. He had taken the swab with the sample of DNA and wiped it on a slide. He viewed it beneath a microscope to determine its genetic identity.

Sr. Toucan manipulated the depths of the magnification by slightly turning the knob on the microscope. He finally got a good view, and was able to properly see the shape of the molecules and their arrangement. He felt something hard drop in his gut. He slowly leaned back in his chair, folding his arms as he thought about the creature those cells belonged to.

So you guys are here, huh? Sr. Toucan thought.

It was two o' clock in the morning. Sr. Toucan stood outside the motel in the parking lot next to his van. He wore his usually brown suit, including his scarf, of course, and while he waited on his associates in the half cloudy night, he busied himself with a puzzle game on his smartphone. He crouched next to the van, preferring to keep his head down out of instinct. He

occasionally looked up each time a car drove by on the street. Across from the motel was a diner, however food wasn't on Sr. Toucan's mind.

"Why'd they have to make them move so fast each time...?" Sr. Toucan mumbled to himself as he tried matching the objects by shape and color as he scrolled down the screen.

He saw the lights of a vehicle coming down the street out of the corner of his eye and looked up. A gray van drove into view. Upon noticing the silver tires, Sr. Toucan stood up, paused the game and put away his cellphone. The vehicle slowed as it neared the sidewalk, eventually stopping. Sr. Toucan approached the vehicle, and as he did a woman with cropped black hair and fair skin hopped out of the driver seat and walked around the other side to meet him.

The woman stood just four inches below Sr. Toucan, but she had a stocky build. She wore a black leather jacket and brown jeans, however the most notable thing about her was a shiny bracelet around her left wrist.

"Good to see you, Nadeen," Sr. Toucan said.

The woman smiled and said, "I told you you'd need company out here in these parts, John."

They both hugged each other and let go. Nadeen held him by the cheeks and said, "You look like shit." She patted him on the chest. "Haven't been getting any rest?"

Sr. Toucan said, "Not with this thing running around."

Nadeen was a fellow field agent in the organization just as Sr. Toucan was. In the confines of a place like this, both of them could casually refer to each other by name. However, in public, Sr. Toucan had to remember to refer to her by her field name; *Kiwi*.

Nadeen folded her arms. "So tell me," she said, "what did you find?"

Sr. Toucan prepared himself as if he was trying to prepare Nadeen as well. "We've got a chimera on our hands," he said.

Nadeen's eyes opened wider and she arched her back a little. "You're serious?" she said. "One of those things...out *here*?"

"Positive," Sr. Toucan said. "I checked a saliva sample and found human, reptilian, bear and feline DNA. We know that they usually frequent remote regions. The only time we ever heard of them this close in civilian population was that time in Haiti...and now here."

Kiwi shook her head. "Damn," she said wanly. "The Red Scarab doesn't give a damn who it has to kill to prove a point, huh?"

"You think they're testing the beast out on this town too?" said Sr. Toucan

"Isn't that what they always do?" Nadeen said. "They've all this weaponry they plan to use to take over the world. They have to know how it works somehow?"

"You can thank Dr. Typhon for that," Sr. Toucan said. He leaned against the van next to Nadeen. "He gave them all that genetic material in exchange for funding to conduct his experiments. But anyway, did you manage to bring him?"

Nadeen grinned, and pounded the van. "You can get out now!"

The back of the van swung open with a bang. Out leapt Gruzz, wearing a blue pullover and trousers. He snarled and violently swung his arms. "Gruzz no like being in iron box! Gruzz need free!"

"Quiet down, will yah!" said Nadeen. She neared the kohakui and flexed her wrist with the bracelet. "You want me to use this on you again?"

Gruzz bit his lip and frowned. His shoulders slumped, and he said, "Gruzz...will...be *nice*."

Sr. Toucan approached Gruzz, careful not to get too close. "Hey, big guy. How's your leg?"

Gruzz's expression suddenly lightened, and he said, "Birdman...Gruzz is fine." Gruzz pounded his chest once, like a drum. "Gruzz strong."

Sr. Toucan just realized something about the man-ape. He seemed to respect strength. Sr. Toucan said, "Good to hear. You did me pretty bad, too. I don't think I can most as good as before. That's why I need your help."

And immediately Gruzz's expression darkened. "Help...from Gruzz?"

Sr. Toucan nodded firmly. "That's right. The monster. The real monster that's killing the animals. It killed two people just a few hours ago."

Gruzz's expression remained the same. He made a low hum, and said, "Human wants Gruzz to help...Human. But men never help Gruzz. They only take from Gruzz!"

Sr. Toucan said immediately, "You won't help humans, Gruzz. You'll help everyone. The forest and the town."

Gruzz scratched his head. “Gruzz, not sure. Men always use nature for own good.” Gruzz dropped his hand and suddenly smiled. “But Gruzz will use human too!”

The two humans present gave each other puzzled looks. Not only was this being above them in physical strength, he could use his head. Sr. Toucan’s face made a semi amused-suspicious look. “What would a guy like you want, Gruzz?”

“Gruzz keep it secret,” he said. “Gruzz will tell after Gruzz work.”

Nadeen said, “That’s not usually how one should do business. An employee has to make their demands known up front. That’s what this interview’s for.”

“Gruzz’s secret,” he said, “won’t tell.”

Nadeen sighed and rolled her eyes. “Okay. Fine. Have it your way. So long as you help us capture the monster.”

The kohakui said, “Huh? Beast moves all over place at night...but...Gruzz know one place where it sleeps.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Sr. Toucan. “At least now we know it’s mostly nocturnal. Its best to conduct our search during the day.”

“Hey!” Sr. Toucan, Nadeen and Gruzz switched their attention to the motel where the voice came from. Up in a window, they saw a woman looking out at them. She wore a nightcap with her sagging breasts dangling over the window ledge. “You all get that damn giant monkey out of the parking lot before I call the—” the woman held her tongue when she saw Sr. Toucan “—wait a minute! Ain’t you that Ark guy?”

Sr. Toucan lightly waved her off and said, “Don’t worry mam! I got it all under control! Just giving him a stern warning before I ship him off.” Sr. Toucan said to Gruzz, “How about you stay with Kiki here, for the night, Gruzz?”

Gruzz nodded and said, “Hmmm. Gruzz no like Kiwi. She mean to Gruzz with power.” Gruzz pointed to the motel window. “But Gruzz know ugly lady in house would be meaner.”

The following morning, or six hours later, Sr. Toucan drove down a silent highway in his van. The birds were singing, and the cold of the night was just lifting as the curious fingers of sunlight crept over the hills and trees. Patches of sunlight broke up the shade over the road Sr. Toucan drove. The man took a deep breath and exhaled with a pleasant smile.

“You smell that, Gruzz?” Sr. Toucan said.

Seated next to him in the van was Gruzz. His size was so impressive he threatened to reach over to Sr. Toucan's seat.

Gruzz wore an amused smile as he looked through the window of the passing trees and flowers on the side of the road. "Yes," he said. "The forest is pretty."

They had been on the road for nearly half an hour. They had gone from the center of the city and closer into the surrounding forest. Between the two seats Sr. Toucan had his Biotic Energy Scanner active, however, he didn't have much of a sample to keep the signal going. So now, he had to rely on Gruzz's knowledge of where the beast slept.

Gruzz leaned back in the chair and said, "Gruzz will keep promise to help, if birdman keep his. Gruzz has plans for forest."

"And I don't suppose you're still willing to shore those ideas?" Sr. Toucan said.

"Gruzz keep secret..." said the kohakui. Gruzz turned to Sr. Toucan and smiled, exposing his huge teeth.

Sr. Toucan chuckled and said, "Okay, Mr. Gruzz."

Several minutes later, Gruzz ordered Sr. Toucan to stop the vehicle. Sr. Toucan parked the car along a grassy roadside. He checked his surroundings and found the sight of all the flowers, trees and fluttering butterflies a bit overwhelming, not to mention the acrid smell.

"We are here," said Gruzz, opening the door and stepping outside.

Sr. Toucan stepped outside as well, closing the door behind him. He took off his sunglasses, and everything seemed a little brighter. The man walked around to the back of his van and opened it with a key. As he did, Gruzz came to his side to see if what the vehicle contained where similar to what was in Kiwi's.

Sr. Toucan said as he climbed inside and went towards the side of the van filled with weapons, "I don't think you're a fan of guns much, are you Gruzz?"

Gruzz made a guttural sound, then said, "Gruzz hate men's boom-stick weapons. Too loud."

Sr. Toucan reached for a Desert Eagle and its respective magazine and attached to his belt. "I figured as much," he said. Sr. Toucan reached for a large, rectangular rifle and slung it over his shoulder. These kinds of rifles were what the Ark agency's field agents usually used. It was known as a *Shellcrash* rifle; named after its explosive rounds capability to blow apart a tortoise's shell. The rifles held eighteen bullets in the magazine, and the rounds could be filled

with any kind of soluble substance. Seeing as how he would be fighting a chimera, Sr. Toucan doubted he would be able to bring it back alive. However, just in case some miracle happened, and he could, Sr. Toucan took three handcuffs of a special material and pocketed them inside his jacket.

Sr. Toucan took two more magazines for his I rifle, and said, "Then Gruzz, maybe..." he reached for a large battle axe off the wall and gestured with it to Gruzz "...this will suit you..."

Gruzz puckered his mouth thoughtfully. He saw the sheen coming off the blades of the weapon, something which he didn't take a liking to much, but he also noted the impressive texture of the wooden handle. Gruzz grunted, and took the weapon from Sr. Toucan.

"Gruzz, will make do," Gruzz said. He swung the weapon fiercely, stirring a small wind that even Sr. Toucan could feel and hear. Gruzz smiled and lowered his weapon. "Gruzz like!"

"Good," said Sr. Toucan. He stepped out of the van and closed the door. He turned to Gruzz and said, "Lead the way."

Gruzz walked off and said, "Follow Gruzz."

The sasquatch led them through the thick forest, slowly going up a long slope. Along the way they noted a variety of small wildlife scurrying about; squirrels, deer, wildcats and a plethora of small birds. Sr. Toucan had gotten accustomed to the smell permeating the air now, and he managed to observe the environment with more interest now.

"This place really is beautiful," said Sr. Toucan as he walked by a bunch of flowers with bees dancing over them. He looked up at the canopy at the scattered patches of sunlight; stars beneath a green background.

Gruzz made a low chuckle, sensing the emotions in the human's voice.

Sr. Toucan spotted a few rodents scurrying into their burrows before his attention was drawn to the scarf around his neck. It was pulsating with light, as if the conscience attached to it could also feel the tranquility. He touched it and made a deep sigh, feeling its warmth.

The slope ended on a level surface. There were fewer trees here, replaced by smaller shrubs that sprouted mostly yellow flowers. In the distance, both travelers could hear the gurgling sound of a running body of water. After walking some more they came upon a stream. They stood next to the edge of it, watching the sparkling water as it bent into flowing lumps over the rocks.

“Birdman,” said Gruzz in a low voice. Sr. Toucan took his eyes from the water and turned to Gruzz. He saw Gruzz looking down the other direction. Gruzz pointed at something, and said, “Look...”

Sr. Toucan looked along the stream as well, and when he spotted it, he smiled with childish glee. “No way...” he said.

Several meters away from the two males, crouched a small humanoid next to the stream. It had adult proportions, but by Sr. Toucan’s estimate it stood no more than three feet tall. It had shiny, almond colored skin, and white hair like cotton that tapered to a point. It drank from the stream, cupping the water in its hands.

“A real fairy,” said Sr. Toucan.

“They are rarely seen,” said Gruzz. “They have lived here...with my people...since ever.”

As if alerted to the travelers, the fairy stopped its hands from reaching its mouth. It turned in their direction, exposing its face of delicate features, but in particular its large blue eyes and its full lips. The fairy stood, and Sr. Toucan could see a loincloth of leaves and twigs around its chest and waist, and its broad hips.

“It’s a female too,” said Sr. Toucan.

The fairy tilted her head at them, and ran off across the stream. Sr. Toucan motioned to go after the creature, but stop himself, as if he realized he were entranced somehow. He saw the fairy’s feet make contact with the surface of the water without so much as a splatter. The fairy ran across the water up the other side of the stream, vanishing out of sight.

Sr. Toucan was left with a tingling feeling. He had to take a deep breath. “I never saw one of those up until now. Usually it was just pictures of them running away.”

“They must always run,” said Gruzz. “It is what we do to survive against humans.”

Suddenly, Sr. Toucan felt something in him snap, and he turned to Gruzz and said, “Not all humans are evil, Gruzz. Just as how not all non-human species are good either.”

Gruzz studied the stern expression on his human companion’s face, and said, “...Gruzz knows this. But, too many humans harm us. It is hard to tell sometimes...but you are different, birdman.”

Sr. Toucan relaxed and said, “I’m pleased to hear. Now, which way?”

Gruzz pointed across the stream. “That way.”

They both walked through the water across. The stream was no more than a foot deep, so Sr. Toucan was only soaked a little above his ankles. Luckily he had taken off his shoes and put them back on once he was on the other side.

After tying his last shoe lace Sr. Toucan stood up and said, "Sorry about that." He fixed the strap of his I rifle.

Gruzz said, "Shoes make Gruzz feet not feel life in earth." He continued walking.

"I'm not as sensitive as you, buddy," said Sr. Toucan.

Ironically, the other side of the forest here was also a slope which they went down. There were seemingly less flowers here, and the cluster of trees at the bottom were huddled very closely together, creating a darker setting amongst each other.

Walking through hear, Sr. Toucan noted a smell a bit on the foul side, and noted there was a lack of any grazing animals besides the scavenging kind. There was also a silence that didn't sit well with Sr. Toucan, and he held his rifle as if ready to shoot at the slightest movement.

"How much further Gruzz?" the man said, his eyes scouring the area for anything unusual. The grass here was becoming dry, and more in patches surrounded by dry earth.

Gruzz said, "There is cave ahead. Gruzz has walked here before. Have seen creature bring prey here to finish. She is very large."

Sr. Toucan gawked a Gruzz. "What? It's a female?"

Intrigued, Gruzz turned around and said. "Yes, birdman. Monster is female." Gruzz smirked mischievously and cradled his chest. "She has very nice breasts..."

Sr. Toucan scowled. "Come on now, Gruzz. This isn't the time to get carried away. This chimera has killed people."

"Yes..." said Gruzz. "She is very dangerous...and smells fertile..."

"That's precisely the issue," said Sr. Toucan. "Female chimeras are more reproductively capable than the males. This creature also has bear DNA, so what do you think will happen she and a male bear falls in love?"

Gruzz wasn't the brightest crayon in the box, but he wasn't stupid either. He knew very well what could be the result of a male and female with compatible DNA coupling. He frowned, and said, "*More beasts...*"

Sr. Toucan nodded. "And more dead people," he said. "Now let's hurry up."

Gruzz continued to lead Sr. Toucan through the forest, and several minutes later, they came upon a small hill covered in shrubs, with a large hollow beneath. Both males stood before the entrance into the earth. Gruzz's hair visibly curled upon sensing what was inside. "She is here," he said.

Sr. Toucan, his eyes fixed on the dark hollow, said, "Good for us. Now we can set up a trap and wait for her. Unless she has enough food in there, she'll have to come out to feed."

Gruzz turned to Sr. Toucan, and said, "So, we wait...?"

"Unless you plan on having us blindly go in there, we have no other choice," Sr. Toucan said.

Gruzz sat atop the hill, gazing into the sky of countless stars. He slowly rocked back and forth, thinking about the good times he used to have with his mate. Laying next to the sasquatch was Sr. Toucan, busy with a puzzle game on his smartphone. However, the man made sure to turn off the volume to hear what was happening around him. More than once he and Gruzz had been startled by racoons and birds flying overhead.

Sr. Toucan smiled triumphantly as the last puzzle fell into place. The stage was cleared. He sighed. He took up his night vision binoculars and looked around him. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary other than small critters scurrying about.

But Sr. Toucan had patients, and went back to his game.

Then Gruzz's body hair curled. He suddenly tensed and took his eyes away from the sky. He turned his head in the direction to where the entrance of the cave was, just beneath them on the other side. "Toucan..." he whispered.

Sr. Toucan immediately turned to Gruzz, and when he saw the purposeful stare on Gruzz's face, he knew what the deal was. Sr. Toucan and Gruzz both cautiously got up. Sr. Toucan took up the rifle he had lying next to him, and Gruzz reached for his axe. They slowly crept to the edge of the hill, and peered over at the cave's entrance.

And sure enough, as according to Gruzz's senses, there was the beast.

A massive specimen of muscle and bone, the creature walked on all four as a bear would, however, it was almost twice its size and a little less stout looking. Its body was covered in green scales that were more predominant on its back and shoulders. It had a flexible tail ending in a

buddle of scales that spoke to Sr. Toucan's eyes as its use as a flail. However, he couldn't see the chimera's face, but its hair was frizzled around its head and along its back.

Sr. Toucan watched as the chimera walked towards a tree where Sr. Toucan had tied his bait; a piece of beef, along with a small explosive within it.

That's it, Sr. Toucan taunted as he reached for the detonator on his waist. Gruzz, crouched next to him, tightened his grip on his axe.

The chimera sniffed the bait, and made a guttural sound. It suddenly rose on its hindlegs, reaching nine feet in height. And as Sr. Toucan's thumb hovered the switch, the creature suddenly lifted its massive, clawed *hand* and swatted the bait away, taking chunks out of the tree along with it. By that time, Sr. Toucan had just pressed the button, and the bait exploded, scattering bits of flesh and sleep-inducing powder everywhere.

"What the hell?" Sr. Toucan said. He quickly got up.

Gruzz growled and rose to his feet.

And to their horror, the chimera began to chuckle. It was a deep sound, but still possessed a feminine quality. She turned around on her feet, and glared at Sr. Toucan with beaming yellow eyes. The man visibly flinched.

The chimera had a very short snout that was almost like a face, with wide nostrils and a wide mouth. Her ears were short and jutted off the side of her head. But most of all, as Gruzz had said, she had very ample breasts with dark nipples. Looking at them, Sr. Toucan thought, *If only Morgan was here.*

"Really, hunter?" the chimera said. "Do you think I'm stupid like that monkey you have with you?"

Gruzz snarled. "Gruzz will make beast pay for framing him!" The sasquatch leaped and slid down the hillside.

"Gruzz wait!" said Sr. Toucan, following after the ape.

The chimera smiled, exposing her many sharp teeth. "So...you're first." She went back on all fours, and turned her body to the side while still looking at Gruzz.

Gruzz leaped and brought the axe down, but the chimera leaped out of the way with surprising speed. Gruzz kept pushing forward as he swung the axe, but the chimera expertly deflected the blows with the barbed end of her tail.

Sr. Toucan tried getting a shot off, but Gruzz kept on moving into his sights. "Shit!"

Gruzz made to strike, then fainted. The chimera's tails hit nothing, and she was momentarily stunned as Gruzz switched his trajectory from her head to the base of her tail. But she was fast, able to shift her weight on her hands and swivel her body out of the way as the sasquatch buried the axe into the dirt. The chimera brought her body around along with her tail, and used it to lash Gruzz across his back.

Gruzz snarled and staggered forward. The blow would have snapped the spine of a regular man, but Gruzz was way sturdier. But the scales left huge, bloody scars in his flesh. Gruzz quickly spun around, and now the chimera switched tactics and came at him. Gruzz, now on the defensive, feverishly tried to dodge the huge, swinging claws of the creature. At the same time, Sr. Toucan ran close to them, trying to get the chimera alone in his sights.

The chimera lunged with his claws, sure of a clean in Gruzz's chest, however the sasquatch leaped away in time. Then the chimera became over confident, leaping at Gruzz once more. And that was when the sasquatch suddenly lurched with a wild right hook across her face. The blow stunned her for a split second, causing her to miss Gruzz and dive into the ground. She quickly rolled onto her feet and took her defensive stance again. Gruzz quickly went to deliver a finishing blow, but the chimera leapt away and now stood on her hind legs.

Sr. Toucan fired a shot, but missed the chimera by an inch. The bullet hit a tree and ripped out a huge chunk. Sr. Toucan scowled and put away his rifle. He pulled the scarf from around his neck and channeled his spirit energy into it, morphing it into a rapier. He un-holstered his handgun and ran towards the two in-humans.

The chimera held her claws before her as she paced around Gruzz. As Gruzz circled her in turn to deny her an opening, he noted that she now concealed her tail's movements behind her.

The chimera smiled and said, "I never knew sasquatches could fight like this..."

"Gruzz kohakui!" the ape said. He launched himself at the chimera.

The chimera skipped around, side-stepped and ducked from the axe. Her footwork was faster than Gruzz's, and when an opening came she scratched Gruzz across his shoulder. Gruzz winced, took a swing at her head, missed, and the chimera countered with an opened handed slap across Gruzz's face. Her claws scored bloody marks across his face, and she leaped away and cackled.

“How’s that, you moron?” the chimera said. And she suddenly heard two explosions, and felt a searing pain in her left side. The chimera shrieked and recoil. She retreated far away from Gruzz, but her senses told her to look in the other direction.

Sr. Toucan came charging with the rapier before him, the barrel of his pistol bellowing vapor. Sr. Toucan took stiff jabs at her, but somehow the gunshot wound didn’t seem to slow her down in the least as she dodged them.

“You little worm!” the chimera said, then swung her tail.

Sr. Toucan was a lot nimbler than Gruzz, and managed to duck under the tail. The chimera swung her tail once more, but this time wrapped it around the man’s arm, and squeezed. The man felt the pressure on the bones in his arm and winced. The sword fell from his grasp as the blood flow from his arm decreased. He raised his gun to shoot her, but she suddenly threw the human into a tree.

Sr. Toucan made a loud grunt as the breath flew from his lungs on contact with the tree’s trunk. He fell, and remained still. The chimera went on all fours and ran towards him, but Gruzz intercepted her with a tackle. Both tumbled in a heap before coming to a stop. The chimera stood up, and was instantly met with a massive backhand from Gruzz. She yelped and instinctively threw her tail, embedding it in Gruzz’s thigh. Gruzz gritted his teeth as he fought through the pain. Then he grabbed her tail and brought the axe down, cutting clean through it.

The chimera wailed. “Fuck!” she said. Almost half her tail was gone, but with control over almost every miniscule part of her muscles, she cleaned the severed end, stopping the flood of blood.

Gruzz charged with the axe raised, and the chimera pounced upon him and pinned him on his back. She crouched over Gruzz and began viciously slashing him. He roared and delivered a solid punch to her face that snapped her head back. Gruzz pushed her off him and went on top of her. He pounded away at the chimera’s face. As she felt her head going numb, she instantly coiled the remained of her tail around Gruzz’s neck. The sasquatch felt the noose tightening around his throat and frantically tried to pry her tail open.

With a devilish smile, the chimera yanked Gruzz off her. She rose to her feet, with Gruzz, bloodied and kneeling, and gasping for air before her. She raised her hand, with the claws already drenched in Gruzz’s blood. “I’ll enjoy eating you...” she said.

And Sr. Toucan, kneeling with his rifle favorably aimed from his thigh, fired.

The rifle bucked, and the muzzle flashed. The round struck the chimera right beneath the right of her rib cage. Gore exploded from the wound, the force shaking her entire body. She stood briefly before careening over. The coil around Gruzz's throat loosened and he quickly pulled it from around his neck. He took huge breathes as he lay motionless on his back.

Sr. Toucan whimpered as he stood up. He touched his side and felt his rib moving out of place. "Okay...these people really need to give my bones a break..."

As Sr. Toucan hobbled over to the fallen chimera, Gruzz got to his feet as well, reaching for his axe. Sr. Toucan took a deep breath as he stood over the chimera; who's body was now evaporating. Gruzz stood next to the man and observed the phenomenon.

"What is happening?" Gruzz said.

Sr. Toucan watch the mass in the cloud of vaporized flesh decrease in size, until finally, what was left was a sobbing girl. "This," said the man.

Gruzz gasped. "Gruzz...surprised," he said.

Sr. Toucan knelt over the naked girl, and immediately recognized her. It was the waitress from the diner who he met yesterday. A perplexed look came upon his face.

The girl stared at him with watery eyes, almost as if pleading. Some of her intestines poked out of the bloody hole Sr. Toucan had dealt her.

"I'm...I'm sorry..." she said. "I didn't mean to..." Sr. Toucan held her hand gently, feeling it getting colder by the second in the night's chill. The girl began to cry harder. "She said...she said it was just a test run...that I would be finished once I killed those cows. But...but she wanted me to stay...so I could...kill that couple. She wanted me try to fight armed humans..."

"Who" Sr. Toucan said, his voice hard. "Who made you do this? Give me a name? Please!"

The girl's mouth fumbled, "It...it...it was...it was that woman. The mayor's...the..."

The girl's voice got softer, and until it couldn't be heard. She stopped moving, and the feeble grip she hand on Sr. Toucan's hand was gone.

The man stood up and said, "Fuck!" He rubbed his head in disbelief. He kicked up the dirt, staring at the ground miserably.

Gruzz turned to the man, and said, "What was that, Toucan?"

Sr. Toucan sighed and turned to the sasquatch. “That...Mr. Gruzz, was the Red Scarab.” Sr. Toucan relaxed and regained his composure. “They’re humans who seek to better our species by any means necessary.” He gestured to the dead female. “That girl...she was one of their experiments. They combine human blood with that of other animals to create monsters they can use in wars.”

“War?” said Gruzz. “War with who?”

“Anyone,” Sr. Toucan said. He rested his hands on his hips. “Monsters or humans; anyone or anything they feel is a threat to them.”

Gruzz hung his head, contemplating what he just saw. He didn’t know whether to feel relieved the monster died, or that the girl was forced to become one.

Sr. Toucan paced around the area. Then he abruptly said, “You’re right, Gruzz. Not all humans are evil.” He stopped and looked the sasquatch in the eyes. He shook his head. “But there’s just too damn many to tell them apart...”

Gruzz approached Sr. Toucan and laid a hand on his shoulder. He looked in the human’s eyes and said, “You are good human, Toucan. You are good man. Gruzz no need glasses to see...”

Sr. Toucan managed to make an acknowledging smile—and something clicked in his mind. His smile was replaced by an almost stupefied face. He looked at his inhuman companion and said, “Glasses...”

The next day, Sr. Toucan made his way to the mayor’s office. He parked his van at the front of the building. He left the vehicle, and closed the door behind him. Gruzz and the chimera’s body were safely with Kiwi, and safely on their way to Ark’s headquarters. Now, Sr. Toucan could safely focus on his last task in town.

He did the usual procedure of showing the men his identification. As usual, they gave him snide scowls before allowing him to enter inside. Sr. Toucan walked through the various halls, casually greeting everyone, until he reached the door leading to the main hall.

He knocked before opening the door. There he saw the secretary. She looked from her work and said, “Good morning, Sr. Toucan.”

Sr. Toucan smiled at her and said, “Good morning to you too.” He stopped at her desk and said, “I need to speak to the mayor about something important. Is he in...?”

“Oh,” the woman said, “let me see if he has time. One moment please...”

Sr. Toucan watch the secretary reach for the phone, and her other hand reach for something under the desk.

Sr. Toucan, in that moment, glimpsed his scarf glow faintly, and his thoughts were confirmed. He immediately tensed as the secretary shot him a crazed look, and pulled away from the table just as the woman whipped out a 44 magnum.

Sr. Toucan swatted the gun aside as she fired. The bullet echoed in the small space deafeningly, punching a fist-sized hole in the wall.

Sr. Toucan attempted to wrestle the gun from her, but the woman thrust her palm in his chest with such force that the man was thrown against the wall. Sr. Toucan quickly got up and reached for his gun, but the woman had already leaped over the counter and through the door.

“Little bitch!” Sr. Toucan said.

The mayor hurried into the hall, his face flushed with confusion. “What the hell’s going on out here?”

Sr. Toucan turned to him and said, “Stay here, Mr. Mayor!” and he ran out the door after the woman. Sr. Toucan spotted her shoving several people out of the way as she headed for the door. Sr. Toucan aimed at the exit just as she reached, and fired.

The woman yelped and stumbled hard into the door when the bullet struck her shoulder, however she quickly got back up and went through the door. And Sr. Toucan was right on her heel.

He ran into the brightness, but his eyes were shielded behind his glasses, and they were fixed upon the frame of the woman. She ran into the street before stumbling and falling. Sr. Toucan said, “Stop! Don’t move!”

But the woman stood up. She was hunched over, feeling the effects of her wound. Her glasses had fallen off, now exposing her yellow eyes with slit pupils. The civilians nearby scattered in a chorus of screams and shouts. Vehicles halted, almost ramming into each other.

Sr. Toucan stopped just three meters away from her. His gun was aimed directly at her head. “You used that girl...” he said, almost like a snarl.

The woman before him smiled. “But you killed her,” she said.

Sr. Toucan’s finger pressed the trigger slightly. “I killed a monster,” he said. “That girl was done for the moment she met you all.”

The woman straightened herself. She cackled, and Sr. Toucan felt a nerve in his head snap. “Stay down and put your hands behind your head,” he said. “Don’t make me have to tell you twice!”

And then the mayor ran up to Sr. Toucan’s back with a few of his guards calling out to the man. “Mr. Toucan, what’s going on?”

Alerted to the mayor’s voice behind him, Sr. Toucan’s mind momentarily fell back on the thought of securing the important personnel attached to his organization, and he spun around and said, “Mr. Mayor I told you to—”

And that was when the secretary opened her mouth and spewed a stream of stomach juices at Sr. Toucan. The man had caught the movement from the corner of his eye, and ducked beneath the foul liquid in time. However, the mayor wasn’t so fortunate, as he was showered in the acidic substance.

The mayor fell and wailed, vapor rising from his body as his clothes and flesh fell apart. His security detail quickly fumbled for a way to free the man of the burning cocoon he was in.

The woman suddenly hunched over, and erected herself with bat-like wings ripping from out of her back. She leaped into the air, and with one powerful flap of her wings she was off. Sr. Toucan shot at her, but his efforts missed. He swore beneath his breath and lowered his weapon, looking at the woman in the air.

But though she was rapidly distancing herself, Sr. Toucan heard her say, “Don’t worry, hunter. We’ll make more power specimens to entertain you properly the next time.” And she laughed heartily, a sound that was drowned out the further she went.

Sr. Toucan clenched his jaw and lowered his gun. He turned to the mayor, and saw a few people gingerly removing the melted pieces of cloth and pouring water on his wounds. The man had gone unconscious due to the sheer pain, but based on what Sr. Toucan could see, the burns weren’t that extensive, and the mayor would survive.

Sr. Toucan turned his attention back to the sky, where the woman had now become a dot in the distance that eventually disappeared. “Yeah,” he said, “definitely next time.”

The End.

Thank you for reading.

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