

Hunger

There was nothing unusual about the invitation itself. It was a letter from the manager of a local fracking plant, where there had apparently been a few issues recently. Holes in the ground, loss of stock and product, destruction of property, as the letter explained. He required assistance, my assistance, in getting to the bottom of it. He'd heard of my work with some other local companies in catching perpetrators when their stores or facilities had been broken into, he said, and that I seemed to be the perfect person to catch whatever hooligan was causing these problems. The flattery was somewhat helpful, but the sum offered if I could solve their issue was more than enough to convince me to send back a letter informing them I'd be taking the job that same day.

It really did just seem like a normal job, even though the plant I was to be working on was definitely a step above the shops and small businesses I usually dealt with. The complex was massive, with machinery I couldn't begin to explain as far as I could see. There was a managerial office, however, which I had been instructed to head to for my meeting with Mr. Simmons. So there I went, picking my way through the halls to find room 346. The elevator was marked with an Out of Order sign printed in a small text on a blue sheet of paper. The tape was peeling and it looked like it had been there a while, despite the building itself looking new and well-kept.

I found room 346 just before my watch ticked over to 9 A.M., when I had scheduled to arrive. I knocked, but the door was unlatched and swung open on smooth hinges.

The room itself was large, with a window taking up the majority of the wall across from the doorway, overlooking the massive fracking operation that was taking place outside. The machines drilled on, pumping water into the ground and pulling up oil and gas or whatever else they were looking for, destroying the environment along with it, or so I discovered later. When I was called into that room, however, I had no idea how fracking worked, or its impacts, or just how much the manager whose office I was standing in made off of it. I was just working a job, a job like any other.

The room was sparsely decorated in a lavish style, with an expensive leather couch on one side, lacking the stress marks of a well loved piece of furniture, and a desk on the other side, a thick dark wood, with a heavy, embossed chair behind it. Everything spoke of wealth, and the implication that a designer had put this room together instead of the man behind the desk. I had only seen such a thing on the television that stood in my apartment that I rarely watched, usually finding it occupied by my roommates at the rare times I had a moment free from the jobs I needed to pay the bills. I did this detective-style work on the side, using the skills I had from the few college credits I earned before I had had to drop out to look after my mother. She died a few months later, leaving me on my own. My father left when I was young, and I was an only child. Now an orphan, I had to fend for myself, so I worked odd jobs as well as a steady one in the local movie theater. I was getting old for that job, since they liked to hire teenagers, and even with my baby-face I could barely pass as that anymore, but the manager knew my mother and

seemed to pity me enough to keep me on for enough shifts to keep a roof over my head. If this man hired me, I would be making more than I usually did in a month between everything I did.

He stood when I entered, pushing his chair back without making a sound on the polished wooden floors. He was a large man, not too tall but quite round in the middle, seeming to take up more space than just what his body occupied. He smiled when he stood, his teeth sparkling white and straight except for a single rotated bicuspid that caught my eye. He was dressed in an impeccably tailored suit, a color somehow darker than black, fabric that seemed almost reflective. I felt underdressed in my sale-rack slacks and buttoned shirt. At least I had tucked it in today, an attempt to mimic professionalism that came so naturally to others, but that I had never quite mastered.

“Come in, come in,” Mr. Simmons said, his voice polite and commanding and just a touch too loud. “I am glad you found your way here without difficulty. Please, take a seat. It’s Sam, correct?” he said, gesturing to the large couch. I moved and sat on it gingerly, not wanting to disturb the surface, almost as if it was a rounded bubble of water, taut with surface tension that would break if pressed too hard.

I nodded once I had sat down, keeping my eyes on Mr. Simmons as he sat in the wide, matching leather chair placed across from the couch. There was a coffee table between us, made of animal hide with the fur still attached, and a wooden tray with a pot and two mugs on it.

“Would you like some coffee, Sam?” Mr. Simmons asked next, holding up the metal pot filled with it, and pouring himself a cup once I’d seen his gesture.

“Yes, that would be great,” I answered, putting on as professional a tone as I could. I waited for him to fill the other cup, and took a sip. There was no sugar or cream on the tray, but I

took coffee black if I ever drank it, and this coffee definitely was. It was bitter, dark and rich. It tasted expensive, a far cry from the instant packets or gas station brew I was used to.

“Thank you. Now, you told me a little about your problems in the letter, but would you mind going over the specific issues that have been going on?” I asked him, pulling a small notepad and pen out of my pocket.

“Well, you see, it started just a few weeks ago,” Mr. Simmons began, stirring his coffee slowly and not making eye contact with me. A little odd, sure, but nothing that captured my attention then. He just seemed to be a strange man with few people skills and expensive tastes, not much more interesting. “Supplies started disappearing. Expensive supplies. Drill bits, circuit boards. Most we found elsewhere on site, so it wasn’t a major tragedy, though I had to ask the drill operators to come in early to check their machines and replace anything that was missing.”

That was strange, and I made a note of it. Expensive supplies taken, only to be dropped on the massive site? Most robberies were committed with the intent to sell what had been taken, to make money. This site had a lot of security, that was for sure. So why would someone go to the trouble and take such a risk if their only intent seemed to be to cause a disturbance?

“After that, it was mostly electronics,” Mr. Simmons continued, not waiting for me to finish making notes. “Circuitry at first, then computers, but these were smashed or ripped up, not taken or anything. It’s caused us a lot of trouble, you see, replacing all that and dealing with the messes. The operators have been working overtime to make up for the losses, and unfortunately we haven’t been able to pay the time-and-a-half that overtime usually pays, what with all the money spent replacing equipment. And a good deal of the workers, janitorial staff and security and even some of the operators, have just stopped showing up, without a word! What ever

happened to good old-fashioned work ethic, honestly? Muffin?" he asked, interrupting himself. "I'm starved."

"I'm fine, thank you," I answered, but he was already reaching for one for himself. I somehow doubted that a company this large couldn't afford the extra pay just because of a few broken computers, but I tried to reserve my judgements, nodding along to the account and marking down anything relevant. It wasn't my job to tell them how to run their business, as much as I wished it could be. No, I was only there to solve their mystery and return everything to normal. I nodded for him to continue, not that he seemed to be looking.

"The police have been, but didn't find much of anything, of course. Nothing happened for a week after we increased security, so we thought it was over. But then..." Mr. Simmons shook his head, revealing a nearly patronizing smile before continuing. "Well, after that, we knew we had to call someone in. One of my coworkers, his brother owns the deli in town, the one that you helped out a few months ago, so we thought we'd see if you could solve our issue."

I frowned, glancing up at him from my notes. He'd skipped something. "After what, Mr. Simmons?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral. I knew this man wouldn't deal well with criticism, even so little as being told that he couldn't keep things from me if I was going to continue my investigation.

He looked up at me, finally, and I was startled. I guess I had assumed, because of the man's blond hair, that his eyes would be light in color. But instead, I found myself staring into irises that were dark, indistinguishable from his pupils. It must have been the lighting, making them turn from what was surely a dark brown into a chilling black. Yes, the lighting. Nobody

had eyes that naturally black. Just a dark brown, and maybe he dyed his hair that golden shade to cover up greyness, as some did.

Mr. Simmons sighed, running a hand through those thinning locks, before continuing. “The vandalism escalated a few days ago, I’m afraid. I hate to admit it, but I haven’t a clue how they could have done it. It must be one of my workers, to know how to operate the machinery like that, or someone I’ve had to fire, something like that. The security I hire wouldn’t be able to figure that out, that’s for sure.” He chuckled to himself at the little insult, pausing in his account, but I waited for him to go on, watching him take another long sip of his coffee. I finished mine off, and he refilled our cups, seeming to stall for time.

“We had just tapped into a new oil reserve, a massive one, if the sensors were correct. It should have made us millions. But the day after we started siphoning it, we found it empty. Completely empty!” he exclaimed, slamming his cup onto the tray. Some of his coffee spilled, over his hand and the tray and even the side of the table, but he didn’t seem to care, or even notice. He fell silent for another few moments, breathing heavily. I was about to ask him to continue, the silence growing tense, but he did just as my mouth began to open.

“Completely empty,” he repeated, voice much quieter, but as bitter as the coffee he drank. “An entire reserve of oil, gone in a night. On top of that, the machine that was at that site was destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” I prompted, when it became clear he wasn’t going to continue. “In what manner was it destroyed?”

“Well, it sounds insane, but I saw it with my own eyes,” he prefaced, looking at me once again. I kept my eyes on my notebook this time. A shiver was trying to start in my body, but I

held it in. I wasn't cold, I wasn't. "The arm was completely pulled off, the compartment was turned on its side. And there were, well... bite marks, it looked like. Obviously from whatever tool they used, but it had scrunched up the metal good, and left these big holes too."

"That sounds very odd," I agreed, nodding and writing down "bite marks" with exaggerated quotes. "Do you still have the destroyed machinery?" I asked, looking up at him once more. He was staring into his coffee, the spill from before gone. Maybe I had imagined the scope of it, or he had a handkerchief that he'd used and then put away while I had been taking notes. That would make sense.

"I had to dispose of it," he sighed. A pity, it would have been helpful to look at, but nonetheless.

"I'll get to the bottom of this, Mr. Simmons. If you could let your security team know I'll be here sometimes during the night, unscheduled just in case it's one of your men, I would appreciate it." I didn't exactly want to get caught by security trying to catch whatever person or team was doing this.

"Of course," Mr. Simmons said, standing. He went to his desk, and took something from it.

I took a sip of my coffee, the first taste of the new cup, and blanched. The batch had gone bad, somehow, as the liquid in my mouth was not coffee. It was darker, I saw, only after the sip. Almost black, and thicker, too thick to see to the bottom. It tasted bitter, but not in the pleasant way of a good cup. No, this bitterness filled my mouth and threatened to make me gag. I swallowed before I could spit, forcing it down and glad that Mr. Simmons wasn't looking in my direction to see my face of disgust.

He returned to the couches, and I forced a smile, looking at what he held toward me.

“And here is half of the price we agreed upon. The other half will be delivered to you, when you either catch the perpetrator or the attacks stop for a significant amount of time.” He handed me a check, half of the offered amount. Somehow, it was astounding to see that amount of money, represented by just a small rectangle of paper. He handled it with such ease, so casually, as if he barely thought about giving that amount of money away. Taking the paper, and carefully tucking it into my wallet, I now held a fragile 3 months rent.

I thanked him, made my goodbyes, and left his office, feeling no more confident I could solve this issue than before the meeting. But nonetheless, I set out to do what I had done, if only for the promised paycheck.

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I started my work when I got home, researching the plant and the process of fracking. My first idea was local environmental groups or their affiliates, so I interviewed a few of the leaders locally. What I learned didn't help me all that much. I didn't live in an especially large town, and as such, the only groups that existed were small and focused more on things like invasive plants and lake pollution. Most of their events were community projects to remove Buckthorn, or letter writing campaigns. None of them had the resources, neither monetary or in amount of members, to take on a fracking corporation. And even if they did, they were so staunchly against violence and destruction as forms of protest that destruction of property would be very out of character.

Still, I questioned the leaders about any of their members who might have gone rogue, taken it upon themselves to get justice instead of waiting for letters to get answered or petitions to get attention. But as far as anyone I asked knew, none of their members were that passionate

about fracking to do such a thing, nor did they have a propensity for violence or the resources to cause such destruction.

“Almost all of our members are people with families, jobs, lives,” one of these leaders told me. “They wouldn’t risk being caught or hurt, not for this. None of us are happy about that operation, no, but if we get arrested, or lose our jobs, our kids are the ones who suffer for it. And with this sort of activism - if it even is that - you never really see any change. It doesn’t get policies in place, it rarely gets anyone to resign, it doesn’t significantly impact the people in charge either. Really all it does is hurt the people at the bottom of the corporate food chain. They’re the ones who take the pay cuts, or more work without getting overtime. No, it really never is worth it.”

It seemed a dead end, the environmentalist groups. There was a possibility of a member being the culprit still, though a misinformed and dangerous one, but I didn’t find it likely that I would find them through further investigation into the groups. The ones I looked into only met monthly, so it would be time consuming while probably not leading anywhere. Besides, if environmentalists were at fault, it was equally likely to be one from another town, or even one of the closer cities, though there wasn’t a large one for a while out. I was more likely to catch them in the act than I was to discover the guilty party through questioning. I put the groups to the back of my mind, thinking I may follow up if I was no further towards an answer by the time a group meeting rolled around.

It seemed unlikely, but my next investigation effort was into delinquents in the area. Seeing as the plant was a good few miles out of the town proper, I also had to look into those of neighboring towns it was equally far from. Bored teens had been responsible for a few of the

robberies I had looked into before, but I didn't think any of the groups I'd discovered previously could take on something to this scale. Still, kids were wild and unpredictable, so there was a chance. The only problem if kids were responsible, however, was how to figure out which ones and then catch them with enough proof to get them in trouble.

I began with the schools in the area, and then those in the surrounding towns. I'd talked to principals and counselors and social workers before, but was having no luck this time. There were the usual bad kids, yes, the ones smoking cigarettes and pot and drinking on the weekends and skipping school, but all of the administration seemed to agree with my sentiment that this was far too large-scale for them. Even the ones that had had run-ins with the police were unlikely to want to go up against the dozen armed guards that patrolled nightly around the plant. It was still a possibility, but I really wasn't getting anywhere through this line of questioning. Just like with the activists, I was more likely to catch them in the actual act than discover them this way, and was really just wasting my time.

From there, I interviewed most of the remaining staff, surprised to see how many had just up and left their jobs without explanation or notice since the attacks had first escalated. As expected, the managers had little regard for the increased workload of those who were still around, which might explain why so many of them had left.

What it didn't account for, however, was the sudden nature of everyone leaving. No more than two of the fifteen employees that had quit had put in any type of notice. And the majority of those that had left were janitorial staff and security - they would have been impacted by the company losses, of course, but not nearly as much as the technicians. No, their jobs had remained pretty much the same, or so I was told. Mostly night technicians, as well, which was

strange. A lot of them lived up in the city, apparently, commuting close to an hour for the slightly higher than average pay of the plant. I noticed, actually, that I didn't meet a single person working at this complex who lived in the town I came from.

I didn't see Mr. Simmons any of the times I was in the building, though I left him updates in the mailbox on his door every few days, telling him what I had been doing and trying to make it seem like I had discovered more than I actually had. Two nights after I began my search, and another 3 after that, there were more attacks: and they only seemed to be escalating. It was beginning to feel like I had only one option left: to sit in wait, and watch to see who - or what - showed up.

After two week of fruitless search and interview, I decided I had to move on with my investigation. I was hesitant to stake out such a massive plant in the night, especially not knowing what type of animals might lurk there, or whether the vandals would show up. They might even be armed. I brought a pocket knife with me, mostly to make myself feel better, as well as Mr. Simmons' letter, in case security tried to apprehend me. I knew most of the guards by now, though.

I didn't tell anyone that I would be there, going through a hole in the fence I had noticed scouting the area the previous day. I arrived just after midnight, and went to sit behind one of the drills near the center of the mass of them, thinking it a good hiding spot.

I sat until daybreak, revealing nothing. I went home, disappointed, and came back again the next night. And the next night, and the next night. I continued to work on the case and my other projects during the day, but at night I sat, with a flashlight, in the darkness, alone and cold. I knew I shouldn't be scared, that I could cry out for security the moment I saw anybody, but

something about the huge looming figures of the machines that became my midnight company sent shivers down my spine. There were no attacks, however, not even ones I missed. By the fourth night I was exhausted, downtrodden, and thought maybe I'd tipped off the perpetrators somehow in my investigations. I dropped into unconsciousness leaning against the massive machine, its silence providing the illusion that it, too, was asleep.

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A crash wakes me, my chest already tight with panic. I can't see anything, not in the dark, not without the glasses that must have slipped off my face while I was sleeping. I scramble to find them, smashing them onto my face and standing to peer over the machine's giant base.

What I see doesn't make any sense. I don't know how to explain it, other than terror. As my eyes adjust, I see what hasn't yet noticed me. It moves, smashing into one of the other drills and ripping it apart.

It's black, but the kind that seems almost bright it's so reflective. Shiny and rolling, the dim light glancing off it with every movement. It's constantly moving, both the shape and whatever it's made of, something I couldn't explain but know instinctively would be overwhelmingly cold to the touch. The shape isn't human, and it must be 30 feet tall, maybe taller. It's got great grasping arms, but not just two, and sometimes none, moving and absorbing into the main mass of its body before rolling out again from another spot. It bites into the machine like a piece of candy, the crunch making my ears ring. I wince, and it turns, and I see its eyes.

Oh god, its eyes. They're big, they're round, they're black and they're inhuman but I recognize them, I recognize them, I don't know how but I recognize them.

It slides, not walking so much as moving as a wave, a sliding mass, and it disappears. I realize once it's gone that it has gone into one of the holes, the deep shaft that the oil comes from. It goes, and I want so desperately to run, but my feet won't move.

I hear a gurgle, and I turn, just in time to realize that there is another excavation hole right next to me, in use by the machine that I am still leaning against, that is supporting my body because my legs sure as hell aren't. I stay as still as I can, watching the sludge, the goo, the *oil* slide out of the hole and into the open air.

It's almost funny, the burp it lets out. It's loud, and it rocks the machine with the force of it. It might just be that it's closer, but the monster seems taller than it was before, seems to have eaten its fill and added to its slimy, swirling body.

And, almost in an instant, it's gone. My eyes shift from the top of it, to the ground, and I nearly fall once again. Standing beside the hole in the ground, straightening his shining black suit, is Mr. Simmons. He starts to walk away, apparently full for the night.

I hold my breath. I am finally able to take a step backwards, trying to retreat instead of being intelligent and staying put until he is out of earshot. And of course, of course I slip. I slip and I fall, and I don't have time to realize how much it must have hurt, falling on the hard, cold ground.

No, I don't have time. Mr. Simmons' suit shifts once more, and I watch as he grows, and grows, the shining black taking over from his pale skin, his limbs retreating into the mass of oil once again.

As the creature turns and I am faced with those dark eyes once again, I realize I don't have much time at all.