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The beast awoke with a start, as was his habit. He often woke with a violent shudder; it was an unwanted and sometimes painful consequence of being alone in a world full of enemies. The constant anticipation and tension had made his body taut, like a finely wound spring; so much so that now he had great difficulty relaxing. Sleep, when it came at all, was brief and fitful, and rarely completely invigorating, yet he had learned to live with it.

It was the price he paid for being the master of the forest.

He slowly raised himself to his feet and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to his surroundings. Noting instantly that the great sky light was falling low on the horizon, he smiled in anticipation of the evening's hunt. He was always hungry, and tonight, especially, his stomach churned within him. The hunting had been bad since winter, as though the animals of the forest knew of him and avoided the area, forcing him to get by on what roots and berries he could scavenge. But it was never enough to entirely silence the cravings within him—especially those that

could only be sated with blood and meat and bone.

Tonight it would be different, he decided. He had gone without fresh meat long enough, and now he was willing to move farther into the forest than ever before to find it. The game, he believed, would be better nearer the great valley, and so that's where he would go.

That would bring him nearer to the dwellings of the hairless ones, he knew, but he didn't care. He was not afraid of them—especially not at night when they rarely ventured out of their dwellings and he had all the advantages if they did.

The creature began moving down from his lair in the tiny, dark valley he called his own, anticipating what thrills and challenges the evening might hold. He fought the urge to scream out with excitement, for that would only signal his presence to the animals of the forest, causing them to scurry away. No, he would remain silent as always, permitting himself only an occasional grunt of satisfaction as he worked his way along one of the many natural trails carved through the forest. By the time he reached the base of the mountain, the long shadows would turn to blackness, and he'd be safe.

Then he could begin the hunt.

He moved swiftly but quietly or, at least, as quietly as he was capable of moving through the thick underbrush. Despite his best efforts, though, his ears still registered the unwanted sounds of snapping twigs and cracking branches beneath his immense, calloused feet, but that could not be helped. His great mass often betrayed his presence, but that was more than offset by the tremendous strength and stamina it afforded him.

Occasionally he stopped to sniff the air and study the darkening terrain ahead carefully. Though he could pick up the scent of the forest easily enough, his sense of smell was not sufficiently sensitive to distinguish the individual odor of prey. What he lacked in olfactory abilities, however, he more than made up for with his highly developed senses of sight and hearing, which he quickly put to good use now. He would have to if he was to satisfy the hollow ache in his belly that grew more insistent as day turned to night and the blackness enveloped him.

As he had thought, prey was more abundant as he moved deeper into the great valley, but what small animals he came across were more fleet footed than usual. Never a creature of endless patience, he grew more frustrated with each unsuccessful effort to trap one of the stealthy creatures, and before long his anger boiled within him. In his simple but brutal mind, he knew he might have to forego his preferred diet of meat in favor of the bland, uninteresting food of the forest if he didn't find prey soon.

That thought alone was enough to push him onward through the darkness.

The creature struggled through the loose mud around a small, swift stream, after which he climbed another small embankment and rested, letting the cool night air fill his massive lungs and reinvigorate him. While he stood quietly amidst the trees, his eyes suddenly noticed a dull flicker of light far ahead among the shadows of the forest, and he narrowed his eyes in an effort to focus on the unexpected point of light. Moving cautiously toward it, a moment later he realized what the light was. He had seen it before. Many times.

It was the light of the hairless ones—the light they fashioned for themselves for their lairs.

He felt it strange that the dim light gave off no heat as did the great light of day, but yet it still managed to bring light to their flimsy dwellings. Most curious, he thought.

Finally, more curious than afraid, he moved closer to the light, his ears constantly attuned for the sound of discovery. Of course, sometimes he enjoyed letting the hairless ones see him before he pounced, but now he only wanted the quiet. He was too weary and hungry for surprises this evening.

A fish smell. He sniffed the air again.

A fish smell was coming from the hairless one's lair. He moved closer.

Now he could see the structure clearly. It was large and made of great logs, but it also contained a small square of light built into one wall through which the smell of fish wafted upon the evening breeze.

The smell made his stomach churn, inviting him to come even nearer, and so he cautiously crept forward, trying to move as silently as he could. Now only a few steps from the dwelling, he could see inside clearly. Once, a season or two earlier, he had come this close to one of the hairless one's dwellings and had watched in mute fascination as the hairless one inside went about its business completely unaware of his presence. He had wanted to kill the hairless one that time, but was afraid to enter its dwelling. There could be more than one. The dwelling could be a kind of trap. Instinctively, he knew entering one of their lairs to be dangerous.

But he had not been so hungry then, nor as bold as he was now.

Peering into the square of light, he could see no hairless one within the lair. Perhaps it was unoccupied, and he would be able to enter and eat undisturbed. Perhaps there was other food inside as well—enough to fill his belly for a week. Cautiously, he stepped up to the edge of the dwelling and put his huge face closer to the light square, the smell of fresh fish making him insane with desire.

In mute fascination, he examined the interior of their hairless one's dwelling through the light square, studying the strange things inside it. It contained a menagerie of objects: flat things, box-like things, colorful things—things that held other things. He was as amazed as he was hungry, and could only stare at the interior in wonder, trying to imagine what each thing was for.

His preliminary inspection over, he suddenly spotted a round thing that contained the fish smell and instinctively knew it contained food. He gently put his hand up to the light square and was surprised to learn that it was solid. It looked to be only a hole in the dwelling wall, but now he noticed it was covered in something hard and cold that permitted light to shine through while keeping the night air out. He gingerly ran his thick, cracked nails over the strange material, testing its strength. Finally deciding it felt thin and fragile, he drew his massive arm back and flung his fist against the light square, only to feel it crumble at his touch. Delighted at the discovery, he tore at the rest of it until there was nothing separating him from the interior of the lair, but as he tried pulling his massive body through the opening,

he discovered it was too small for him to get more than his head and one arm through. Angry at the fact and determined to enter the lair, he pushed with all his strength until he heard the crack of splitting wood, signaling that he had been successful in opening the gap further. Now large enough to pull his entire body through, a few seconds later the beast stood inside the hairless one's dwelling, smiling in anticipation of exploring the wonders it contained.

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Ray Sanders prided himself on being a man who could fall asleep anywhere, anytime. It was a skill he had picked up in the Royal Canadian Army thirty years earlier, when, as a special forces ranger, one often had to catch brief naps whenever time permitted, especially when on field maneuvers. He even recalled one time actually dozing off while standing in waste deep mud cradling a mortar in his arms.

But for some reason, tonight his brain refused to surrender to the darkness. Instead, it continued to run the day's events over and over in his head—reliving every conversation, every thought, every statement. It had been a long and tiring day to be sure, but nothing significant enough had occurred that he should be robbed of the sleep he so eagerly sought. He was being kept awake by trivial thoughts and obscure notions, which he considered tremendously unfair.

Briefly he considered turning on the lamp next to his bed and doing some reading, but he wasn't in the mood. What he *was*

in the mood for was sleep, and the fact that he was having such a hard time at it made him both angrier and more wide-awake with each moment. Stubbornly, he rolled over again and tried to force himself into unconsciousness, unwilling to surrender to what was rapidly looking to be another bout of insomnia.

Ray had one more trick up his sleeve, however. Sometimes, if he listened very closely, he could hear the sound of the wind gently scuffing branches against the side of his house. For some reason, that sound had the ability to lull him to sleep, so he concentrated on listening for the familiar noise, confident it would work its magic one more time. Minutes passed in the darkness uneventfully, but soon he began to feel himself drifting closer to the welcome world of unconsciousness. He could feel his brain growing fuzzy as sleep finally seemed to come for him, and could sense himself sliding deeper into the darkness. He was almost there now, moving nearer....

The sound of shattering glass tore him back to consciousness, and his eyes flung open with both surprise and annoyance.

It sounded as though the window in the kitchen had shattered and he sat up in his bed. He grew even more fully awake as he heard more sounds of breaking glass and splintering wood, followed by a thump of something heavy landing hard on the kitchen floor. For a moment he sat perfectly still, listening carefully as something or someone moved about clumsily in the kitchen mere feet from his bedroom door.

For a second he thought he heard a grunt, followed by the sound of objects falling to the floor. Growing angry now, both that his sleep had been denied him and that someone had the

audacity to break into his cabin, he quickly flung off the covers, found his trousers hanging from the bed post and stealthily slid into his unlaced boots. While he hurriedly dressed, his mind raced as he tried to consider what could possibly be going on in his kitchen to make such a racket. A human intruder wouldn't make so damned much noise, he decided as he zipped his pants. It had to be an animal. Maybe a raccoon, though judging by the amount of noise, it would have to be the biggest damned raccoon on record. Either that, or it was a bear.

He instantly chastised himself for being too lazy to clean the salmon he had gotten from Ted Marker that afternoon. He had left them in a bucket in the sink, intending to get to them in the morning, and now his negligence was apparently costing him dearly.

Ray had just finished lacing the second boot when an immense crash jarred the walls and vibrated through the cabin, suggesting that his "guest" had just turned over something large—like the refrigerator or the stove.

"Jeez, I've a god damned elephant in there!" he muttered under his breath. Suddenly convinced it would be wiser to confront his visitor with more than just his ire, he reached through the darkness to his night stand, carefully slid open the drawer, and fumbled for the .44 he knew was in there. Locating the pistol's cold, reassuring steel by touch alone, he pulled it from its leather holster and balanced it in his hand. He knew it was loaded, for he meant it precisely for the purpose he was about to use it for.

His heart beating loudly, Ray felt his way through the blackness until he located the doorknob. He turned it slowly until he

felt the latch click, then slowly pulled it open until a tiny sliver of light cut into the room. Through the crack in the door Ray could make out the sound of more grunting, and he listened closely for a moment as he tried to identify what kind of animal might make such a noise.

It would be helpful to know what his adversary was, he thought, but he was unable to identify it. Low, guttural, almost human—but not quite. He had never heard anything like it before.

Finally ready to confront whatever it was that had trespassed on his property with such insolence, he pulled the door open and stepped into the dim light of the small entryway leading into the kitchen. Waiting a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, he cautiously moved forward, his gun held before him like a saber. Turning the corner, he stepped into the kitchen and stood in mute disbelief at the sight before him.

As he had imagined, the kitchen floor was littered with glass, pans, buckets, and the spewed contents of his refrigerator, which lay on its side. Instead of encountering an animal responsible for the carnage, however, he was surprised to see instead an immense man in what appeared to be a gray matted coat, his back to him, hunched over, digging through the contents of the overturned refrigerator.

The light was not good in the kitchen—it was lit only by the oven light—but as far as Ray could see the man appeared to be massive, with a back as wide as the refrigerator was tall. Though turned away from him and down on his knees, Ray could only guess at his size, but decided he had to be one of the biggest men he had ever seen.

But no man was bigger than a bullet from a .44, he decided as he cocked the hammer and brought it to eye level.

Furious now that some fat man had broken into his home in the middle of the night, trashed his kitchen, and now had the audacity to raid his icebox, Ray took a bead on the center of the fellow's broad back. It was only then that he became conscious of the overpowering stench the intruder gave off—a combination of sweat, manure, and sewer gas—and he let his finger rest gingerly on the trigger.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Ray challenged the man, holding the gun tight.

The man in the gray coat didn't answer, but abruptly stopped his foraging amidst the debris. He sat perfectly still for several seconds, during which time Ray noticed the filthy gray coat the man was wearing seemed to extend all the way down his legs and to the top of his huge skull, fitting tightly as if sewn in one piece. Slowly, the intruder turned around until their eyes met.

Ray Sanders fancied himself to be a man who was afraid of very little. He had taken on bears and mountain lions with bows and arrows, and had done a tour of duty as a cop in one of Vancouver's roughest harbor districts. He had parachuted from a plane, been dug out from beneath an avalanche, and had once stabbed a man in a knife fight outside a bar. But now he decided he had found something to be afraid of, for the face that turned to greet him was like nothing he had ever encountered before. Humanoid, but with immense side-flaring nostrils and a wide, full mouth filled with cracked, yellow teeth, the visage that stared back at him was not a man at all. Instead, it was more like some

kind of massive ape, though with more human-like features than a true gorilla. What froze Ray in his tracks, however—and what told him what he was looking at was more animal than man—was the thing's eyes. Penetrating and bright, they stared out from beneath thick, bony ridges of hair, their vibrant topaz color reminding Ray of nothing so much as the eyes of a cougar. Wild. Dangerous. They seemed to look through him with an air of contempt and hatred.

Letting out a deep-throated snarl, the thing whirled around and stood up, immediately demonstrating that Ray's first estimation of its size was far too conservative. Now fully erect, it had to crouch to fit beneath the eight foot ceiling in the kitchen, and instantly Ray Sanders knew he was in very serious trouble.

The creature hovered over him for a few seconds, its enormous chest—probably four feet across—heaving as its flaring nostrils pulled more oxygen inside it. For a moment, Ray thought it seemed to smile at him, though it was the kind of vicious grimace one might see on the face of a psychotic killer. Ray felt the pistol fall from his hand the same instant he felt his bowels let go.

The “thing” crossed the room in two easy strides and instantly had him pinned by the throat to the wall. Its hand as strong as granite, it pulled him off the floor and slid him up the wall until his head was touching the ceiling. Both of Ray's hands clutched the beast's thick wrist as he tried to kick at it, but he already knew it was useless. It had him pinned like a rag doll against the ceiling of his own kitchen, his feet flailing harmlessly in the air, his ability to breath non-existent.

Ray was trying hard to make his mind work when the crea-

ture put its massive, hideous face close to his own until only a few inches separated them. Its eyes—wild, malevolent—were like looking into the eyes of the devil himself, he thought. They burrowed into his own and Ray felt himself slipping into unconsciousness as his mind began shutting itself down, no longer capable of processing the terror that had engulfed him. Suddenly the thing let out a wail that cut cleanly through him and was loud enough that his eardrums churned in protest. It snapped him back to reality, but also made Ray Sanders realized that he was about to die.

He was right.

What he didn't know was that the creature intended to have some fun with him for a while first, and that he was going to spend the next few minutes screaming in agony as the creature found new and interesting ways to play with his new toy.

And there was no one to hear him scream for miles around.