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Khione

by

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A young man stood at the edge of the darkness and cupped his hands around an advanced night vision scope. The autumn night was cold and crisp, and the white clouds of his warm breath kept billowing up around the lens of the scope. He wore a black uniform, but he had carefully tucked his white identification badge into his pocket. He whispered right under his breath, “Okay Pearce, move up slowly, very slowly and take a look.”

Pearce wore a similar uniform with his badge hidden in his pocket. He was not too tall or too short. He seemed a little too thin for his uniform. The university provided the uniform--it was supposed to fit well enough to cut a striking appearance. Generally, you got the luck of the draw. Pearce was between sizes—he looked like a little overwhelmed by the clothing. His official belt dangled too long at his side too. Beggars couldn’t be choosers. Pearce edged along the wall of the research building and slowly pulled the scope up to his eye. Immediately, the shadows lit up and Pearce saw it. He wasn’t certain at first exactly what he saw, but as his eye became used to the scope, he gently opened the other and the object in the shadows became clearer.

Pearce made a noise—a slight gasp.

Jason at his side shushed him, “You can’t make a sound, dude. You’ll scare her.”

“But she’s so far away.”

“She can hear... Tell me what you see.”

“I see a girl. She looks small and really thin. It’s hard to tell what she looks like. She’s staring at something...”

“The thing she’s staring at is a cat.”

“A cat?” Pearce’s voice tightened a little.

“Keep it down, man. If she hears you, she’ll scamper.”

“What’s she doing?”

“Hunting.”

“Hunting for what?”

“For cats. I’ve seen her catch squirrels and sometimes rabbits. Mostly she goes for cats.”

Pearce couldn’t take his eyes off the girl, “How long have you been watching her?”

“Since the beginning of the semester. I caught my first glimpse of her in the monitor for Bay State Road. She’s usually smart enough to stay away from the cameras. After that I started looking for her with the night vision scopes. She probably thinks she’s safely hidden in the darkness. She probably has no idea we can see her.”

Pearce shook his head, but not enough he lost sight of the girl, “This is crazy.”

“You bet it’s crazy. Wait ‘til she strikes. Then you’ll really be surprised.”

“Why’s that?”

“Just watch. When she tenses like that,” Jason pointed, “She’s about to attack...”

Pearce didn't hear a sound. Through the night vision scope, he saw a green blur. He moved the scope in the direction of the blur. When he stopped, he gave another gasp. This one was really loud. For a moment, a naked girl knelt in the shadows and stared in his direction. A limp cat dangled from her mouth. Pearce couldn't take his eyes off her. Then she was gone, "Where'd she go?"

Jason reluctantly put down his scope, "Who knows, man. She moves like the wind. She's there one moment and you can barely see her move, the next she's a hundred feet away—it's uncanny."

"Do you think we'll see her again?"

"Maybe. It depends on whether this is her first or second kill tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"She usually goes for two kills in a night."

"Why two?"

"Dunno. Guess she's hungry," Jason laughed.

"Really, Jason, this is weird. Why would a naked girl be out hunting animals at night in this city?"

Jason leaned against the wall beside him, "I've been wondering the same thing for this whole semester. At first I thought it might be one of those weird sorority initiation rites. The school banned them, but you know how nuts the Greeks can get. But it wasn't a one night thing. She was really hard to spot, but she was there consistently when I made my rounds." He smiled, "That's when I started applying the animal observation methods they teach in the advanced bio-labs."

"They work?"

“They work too well. She follows basic predator behavior from stalking to kill.”

“And, you see her every night?”

Jason stared into the darkness, “Every night.”

“You see her eat the cats?”

“No,” Jason chuckled.

“Have you told anyone else?”

“I’ve been keeping a notebook, but you’re the first person I’ve told about it.”

“Why me?”

“Why not? Pearce, buddy, we’re best friends. Plus, I wanted to make certain I wasn’t going crazy. A naked girl, hunting cats, in the middle of Boston, even at the University, this is kind of strange.”

“Well you have your confirmation.”

“Yeah, my confirmation.”

“What are you going to do now?”

Jason turned his eyes to Pearce, “No idea. You got an idea?”

Pearce shrugged, “No one would believe us.”

“Unless we caught it.”

“She’s not an it, Jason.”

“It’s like an animal. It lives on cats.”

“That may be so, but she isn’t an it. She might need help. How did you propose to catch her?”

“I’d like to tranq her, but the guns and stuff are always locked up.”

Pearce shook his head, “For good reasons.”

“That’s one of the reasons I wanted to show you this Pearce. You’re great with figuring stuff out. Put some of your engineering brain into the problem and make me a trap.”

“I’m not sure about any of this...”

“Look, you can’t leave a girl like that running around naked in Boston. First, she’s got to be nuts, and second, when winter hits she’s going to freeze to death.”

Pearce leaned his head back against the cold wall and closed his eyes, “What else do you know about her?”

“I’ve got a way to make her move.”

“How’s that?”

“Dog whistle.”

“Dog whistle?” Pearce ran his fingers through his short hair.

“I tried it the other day. She hates the sound. Makes her jump. If we could rig up a trap and set it in one of her hunting trails...”

“She has hunting trails?”

“Yeah, I’ve been mapping them. If that’s her first kill of the night, I suspect she’ll try the alley next to Silber Way and Commonwealth Avenue next.”

“How do you know that?”

“Basic patterning. She’s wired just like an animal. She goes to the oldest hunting point first and runs through them until she can catch something.”

“Jason, you’ve been spending way too much time watching this girl.”

“You know how boring this security work is—plus this is a great chance to practice biological methods.”

Jason shook his head again, “In the middle of Boston. Alright, let’s move over to Silber Way and see if we can find her.”

“Now you’re talking. I’ll show you how the dog whistle works too.”

Jason put out his hand just at the edge of the street, and Pearce came to an abrupt stop. Jason needlessly put his finger to his lips and lifted the night vision scope. They both tiptoed to the edge of the wall along Silber Way and stared into the darkness.

Commonwealth Avenue wasn’t very busy that late at night. A bus ran along it occasionally. Every now and then a car weaved a little as its drunken driver directed it back toward home. This was the dead period: only nearly empty busses and drunks going home.

Jason pointed across the wide street at another open alleyway. He whispered almost silently. Pearce had to move very close to hear, “We’re much closer right here. She should show at the alley.”

“What will she do?” Pearce barely breathed.

“She’ll watch out of the alleyway for her prey. You’ll be able to catch her face with the scope. She’s really good with shadows. Just before she strikes, she’ll curl her lip, like an attack dog. That’s really funny to see. Then she’ll tense up and go. You should get a better look at her.”

“She’s a dirty little girl out homeless on the streets,” Pearce whispered almost to himself.

Jason tensed, “There.”

Pearce focused the scope on the alley. He had to shield it from the lights on the street. They had the intensity set pretty low because of all the existing lighting. Yes, he could make out her face there. She had a face like a fox. You couldn’t describe it any other way. It was human, but

slightly elongated. Pearce had seen people with similar features, but none quite as pronounced as hers. Her small nose was sharp and her eyes glittered. Her mouth was set in a cute snarl. She looked young, but still there was an appearance of age that Pearce couldn't explain. She looked like a woodland sylph. Pearce frowned, a woodland sylph in the middle of Boston.

All they could see was her face. The rest of her was invisible in the darkness.

Jason tapped Pearce on the shoulder. In Pearce's view, Jason raised the dog whistle and nodded. They waited.

After a few minutes, they and the girl got lucky. If it was possible, the girl became more alert, and in his peripheral vision, Pearce caught sight of some animal slinking in the shadows along the sidewalk. The girl remained motionless. She seemed to disappear into the shadows along the surrounding walls. Jason finally noticed the movement and touched Pearce's arm. He grinned and stuck the whistle between his lips.

Pearce wasn't certain what kind of animal was moving on the sidewalk. He didn't want to take his scope off the girl. The animal stopped just before the alleyway, and the girl acted as if she didn't show any interest. She couldn't possibly see the creature, so how could she know it was right at the corner and about to cross or enter the alley? "Animal perception?" Pearce breathed.

Jason didn't hear him.

The animal started walking again. That's when the girl went into action. Pearce was watching carefully but still she became an immediate bright blur in his scope. He put it down and clearly saw her under the dim street lights. She was naked and very thin. She had something in her hands, and she was about to give it a twist. Then Jason took a great breath and blew into his whistle.

Pearce heard nothing, but the girl's face twisted in pain. She dropped the animal she held and brought her hands up to her ears. The animal she released ran into the avenue—it was a cat. About that time, Jason ran out of breath. As soon as the whistle stopped, the girl made a mad dash into the street after the cat. Her hands reached desperately ahead of her, and her head was down.

Pearce heard it first—the quiet hum of one of the new electric busses. Its headlights rose up the slight incline in the road and around the curve there. The headlights caught the girl in the middle of the street. She held the cat in her hands ready to twist again. The look on her face was surprise and awe. She didn't make a sound. She dropped the cat. It scrambled for a moment and ran toward the side of the street Jason and Pearce were on. The girl leapt back toward the middle of the street. She would have made it too except the bus swerved away from the cat. It missed the cat. She didn't fare as well.

Everything was hidden behind the bus. Pearce heard a sickening thud. It wasn't very loud. The bus driver likely didn't hear it. The bus didn't stop. It just kept on going. When it passed, the girl lay curled up in the middle of the street.

Jason gave a low curse. Pearce moved first. He ran into the street and knelt beside her. He gazed at her for a moment. She didn't have a stitch on. Her body was small and thin but curvaceous. She didn't look so young at this range. Not that she looked old. Her breasts were small and pointed, but they didn't look like those of a child. She had hair, down there and under her arms. She was very dirty. Blood was starting to pool near her head.

Pearce raised his gaze for a moment to check for traffic.

Jason stood on the sidewalk and called, "What are you doing?"

Pearce stared at him.

Jason cried, "Get out of the street. A car's coming." He still stood motionless on the sidewalk.

Pearce glanced behind him and spotted the headlights. He knew he shouldn't move her. She was bleeding, maybe dead.

"Hurry, Pearce. Get out of there."

Pearce picked up the girl. She was very light. Her body was soft and completely flaccid in his arms. He hugged her to himself and ran toward Jason. Her arms and legs flailed with his movement. The car passed right behind him. At the sidewalk, he laid her down.

Pearce pulled off his heavy coat and lifted her again to put her on it.

Jason still hadn't moved, "Hey man, you aren't supposed to move an accident victim."

Pearce ignored him. The girl had a nasty gash on her forehead and bloody cat scratches on her arms. A new rope burn ringed her neck, but she didn't seem injured otherwise. Her chest rose and fell, but her breathing wasn't even or steady, "She's bleeding do you have anything to stop it?"

Jason shrugged.

Pearce gave a curse and untucked his shirt. He pulled out his knife and cut off the lower part of his undershirt. He rip cut it into two strips and folded one into a pad. He placed that on the gash until the blood stopped. Then he carefully tied the other piece around her head. When he was done, he pulled his coat more closely around the thin girl and finally glanced up at Jason, "You're worthless. Have you called 911?"

"No way man."

Pearce's mouth opened and shut, "She could be dying. Call them, now."

Jason shook his head, “No way. I need this job and so do you. We caught a naked girl in the middle of the night. How are we going to explain this?”

“I don’t care how we are going to explain it. We can’t let her die out here on the sidewalk.”

Jason turned his head away, “She’s like an animal on the streets. I’ve never heard her make a sound. What do you think this looks like for me, for us?”

Pearce’s face hardened, “I’ll do it, if you won’t.”

“Let it go.”

“Then help me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Get your car. I’ll take her to a hospital myself.”

“Not to the university hospital.”

Pearce cursed again. “Okay, not there, but someplace to get her help. I’ll carry her. Get your car.”

Jason backed a step. He had a frightened look on his face.

“Look, just help me, Jason. I won’t tell anyone what happened.”

Jason took another step back, “It was a hit and run by a bus. The police will get involved. You’ll have to tell them everything. You won’t be able to hide this.”

“I don’t want to hide any of it.”

“When the university finds out, you’ll lose your job, and I will too.”

Pearce sighed, “Just help me.”

“Take her to your place.”

“That’s impossible.”

“She’s breathing. Let her stay there until...until...”

“Until she dies. Are you crazy?”

“You’re crazy. You want to throw away everything for this animal girl. She’ll be safe at your place. I know you won’t do anything to her. You didn’t take advantage of that sorority girl who passed out there during your party. You’re a good guy. I promise, I won’t tell anyone.”

Pearce sighed again and began to lift the girl in his arms, “If she dies everything will come out, Jason.”

“Yeah, that might be true, but if she gets better, we’re safe.”

“You’re safe. What am I going to do with her then?”

“Release her back into the wild.”

“Now, you’re really talking crazy. I don’t need any of this.” Pearce stood with the girl in his arms. Jason stepped back a little, and Pearce began to move toward the main campus.

Jason followed closely behind, “There’s something hanging from her hand.”

Pearce carried the light girl, “Get it. I don’t need to trip.”

Jason moved a little closer and tugged at something on the girl’s arm. Pearce felt the pull, and a broken leather lace came loose. Jason held it up in the dim light from the street.

“What is it?”

“Dunno. Looks like a necklace of some kind. There’s an old coin attached to it.”

“It must be hers. Stick it in my pocket.”

Jason tucked the necklace into Pearce’s upper shirt pocket, “You shouldn’t take her straight back.”

“Why not,” Pearce growled.

“Too many lights and too many people.”

“No one will be out at this time of night.”

“Plus, the campus cameras might catch you.”

Pearce growled again, “We aren’t watching them.”

“They’re still recording. I’ll lead.” Jason moved ahead of Pearce.

Pearce tried to tuck the girl’s arms closer to his chest. The gash on her head was bleeding again. He cursed again and followed Jason as he took to the shadowed alleyways and tried to keep them out of sight of all the cameras that monitored the campus.

After about thirty minutes, they approached the building just off campus where many graduate students had their apartments. It was an older building built in the 1960s. It was almost entirely concrete with small windows and a heavy modern style façade. Pearce was tired. The girl was light, but she still weighed at least 90 pounds. Jason wouldn’t come near them. He certainly wouldn’t help carry her.

Jason put his student card against the reader and opened the front door. They quietly climbed the back stairs to the second floor. At Pearce’s door, Jason pulled Pearce’s key card around and put it near the reader. The bolt clicked and he pushed open the door. He reached inside and flipped the light on, “I’ll leave you here. Give me your student card. I’ll cover for you and give it back tomorrow before your first class.”

Pearce bent his neck a little so Jason could get the lanyard that held the cards over his neck. Pearce stepped into the room, and Jason backed further into the hall.

Jason pulled the door shut, “Tomorrow.” The bolt clicked.

Pearce stood in his front room before the closed door. He took a deep breath and swallowed. The girl lay heavy in his arms. He slowly turned around. His room was almost bare of furniture. In the early morning darkness, the florescent lights lit her foxy face. It was washed out and

nearly white. He tilted his head closer to hers. She was still breathing, but it was ragged. He had felt her every tortured breath on the way here.

A lone desk with an old computer sat before the single small window. To the side was a tiny kitchen. He had a couple of chairs and a table in the room. That was about all except for the books. Homemade bookshelves covered almost every other wall. They were filled with books and notebooks—just books and notebooks.

Pearce carried her to his bedroom. It was off the kitchen. A short hall ran from the kitchen to the bedroom. The bath was there, then the bedroom. The bedroom had a single long window and a bed. It was a single. The walls here were covered with filled bookshelves. Only the small closet wall wasn't filled.

Pearce laid the girl on his bed. It wasn't made. He gently took his coat off her. His breath caught—she was finely and beautifully made. Pearce hadn't seen many naked women in the flesh. He was astounded at how wonderful she was. Still dirty and bruised. The bruises were just showing. She hadn't fared as well as he thought. Her thigh had a large darkening splotch and her arms were bleeding from scratches. She had scrapes everywhere from the concrete. Her face was still too pale. He placed the pillow under her legs and covered her lightly with the sheet, then he went to the bathroom to see what he had to treat her wounds.

Pearce returned with a wash cloth, bandages, and some antibiotic ointment. He was certain, it wasn't entirely what she needed, but this was the best he could do for her. He carefully cleaned the scrapes and cuts, applied the ointment, and bandaged the worse places. He checked the bandage on her head and replaced it. The cut had become only a slight ooze of blood. That seemed good. He didn't know what else he should do for her. He wondered afresh if he should

call 911 and get an ambulance. She seemed to be breathing better, and her complexion looked less pale.

When he was done, he covered her with the sheet and blankets and undressed himself. Then he took his other sheet and blanket and lay on the floor to sleep until day. Although his mind was filled with many thoughts, he fell quickly into an exhausted sleep.

In the late morning, the alarm woke Pearce out of a dead slumber. He had dreamed of a feral girl who was now in his bedroom. The bright light streamed through the single long window into the room. It flowed across the bed and outlined the girl's face. It was turned toward him. Her dark hair had a reddish glint as it cascaded across the bed and down the side of the mattress. He hadn't noticed how long it was until now. He stood and went to the side of the bed. Her petite face was framed by her hair. In the sunlight, she appeared no less wild than last night--so strangely wild.

The bandage on her head wasn't bloody, and he resisted a sudden impulse to lift the covers to look at the rest of her. She was breathing more regularly now, and a pink glow covered her cheeks. She seemed to be sleeping. He hoped it was not because she was in a coma.

Pearce dressed for his classes and ate some cereal dry. He hadn't been shopping for a while and the milk was dead. The knock he had been expecting came at his door, "Hey Pearce. You up?" Jason called him.

"Come on in."

The door bolt gave an electronic click and Jason entered. He held the lanyard with Pearce's student and key cards on it before him like a talisman and stepped over to the small table. He placed the lanyard on the table and glanced nervously from side to side, "Where's she?"

“Still sleeping.”

“She okay?”

“No idea. She was pretty beaten up.”

“Yeah, a bus’ll do that.”

“Sit down.”

Jason sat in the other chair. He wrung his hands, “What are you going to do with her?”

“I suspect I’ll just wait for her to get up and tell us how happy she is to see me.”

Jason gave him an appraising look, “You think she’ll be all right?”

Pearce rubbed his eyes, “I’ve no idea. I should have taken her to the hospital.”

Jason let out a little smile, “Too late for that now.”

“Never too late if she has problems...I can’t let her die here.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“You’re an idiot, Jason, and I’m a fool for listening to you.”

“We’re both in this together. I took care of the tapes.”

Pearce cursed, “Couldn’t you leave well enough alone. If they audit them, they’ll know there are missing parts.”

Jason smiled a real smile then, “I fixed that too. There won’t be any problems from that angle.”

“I still have a wild girl in my apartment—how do you think that will go if the university finds out.”

“Lots of people have live-ins...”

“But not injured naked girls.”

Jason glanced wistfully at the bedroom, “She still naked?”

“What do you think?”

“About her, not a lot—she’s just a little girl.”

Pearce didn’t say anything about that, “So, how will that look—a minor girl in my apartment.”

Jason stared at him aghast.

“Don’t worry. She isn’t as young as you thought.”

“How old?”

“Hard to tell, but I don’t think she’s that young.”

“Good for us, and you.”

Pearce cursed again, “Good in what way?” He stared at Jason. Jason lowered his eyes.

Pearce continued, “I’m going to class.”

“You going to leave her here? What if she wakes while you’re gone?”

“If she’s gone when I return, all the better.”

“I’d hoped...”

“Hoped what?”

“To keep studying her, man. This would make a great thesis study. See if you can keep her around, at least long enough for me to observe her a little.”

Pearce shook his head, “I’m going to class. If she’s gone when I return, you can keep studying her in the wild.”

“After an injury like that, she might not be able to make it.”

Pearce made a face, “Now you’re worried about her. You’re the crazy one. Why I listen to you at all, I don’t know? If she’s gone, she’s gone. I won’t lock her up here. She might be dangerous.”

Jason's nervous smile returned, "I guarantee you she's dangerous. That was my point before."

"And you let me bring her back here."

"That too."

"Get out. I'm going to class. I'll see you tonight."

Jason stood and backed to the door. He started to say something, but Pearce raised his hand, "Don't say anything. I'll see you tonight."

"Yeah," Jason pulled the door shut behind him.

Pearce rubbed his forehead. He went back to his bedroom. The girl was still sleeping. He picked up his uniform and hung it up. That's when he noticed the broken leather necklace in his pocket. He pulled it out and examined it. The cord was old leather slightly rotted and didn't look like it was originally well cured. It was sinew and not hide. A tight knot still held, but the sinew had snapped. Still attached to the cord was a small dirty coin that was black with tarnish, likely silver. The coin wasn't anything modern. It was larger than a dime, but about as thin. It wasn't pierced, but tied intricately into the sinew of the necklace.

Pearce brought it into the sunlight so he could see it better. The inscription was fine but not well delineated. In spite of the tarnish, it didn't look that worn. The writing appeared to be Greek and on one side was a wolf or a fox. The other had an owl. That seemed strange. Pearce tied the sinew where it had broken and slipped it around his neck. Just another mystery and somehow connected with the girl. He took another close look at her face. Then he wrote a note and placed it near her head. The note read:

You were hurt last night, and we brought you back here. I'll be back in the afternoon. There's some food in the fridge and cereal in the kitchen.

Pearce took a last look and went out. The door locked automatically behind him.