

P.I.P.

#2 The Roadkill Motel

A tackily painted van pulled into an empty motel parking lot. A large man stepped out of the driver's side and despite the fact it was the dead of night, was wearing sunglasses. Likewise, he wore a long brown coat even though it was seventy three degrees. The man gathered a duffel bag from his van and headed towards the motel office. He opened the door, and stepped into the pale yellow light. Inside, a woman sat behind the office desk. She was younger than Booker, probably being in her mid-twenties. She looked from her computer at Booker and pushed her auburn hair out of her face.

"I'd like to check out a room," Booker said, tonelessly.

The woman bit the inside of her cheek. After pausing, she said, "I'm legally obligated to tell you that some appliances in your room might not be in operation. This includes, but is not limited to the sink, toilet, air conditioning unit, and ceiling lights. I also have to tell you that you might hear other residents in their rooms as our walls are not soundproof. Luckily for you, only one other person is staying with us tonight so I doubt you'll be woken up. We take credit or debit cards."

Booker paid for the room. Immediately after, a crimson silhouette emerged from the woman. There were no distinct facial features, just vague shadows implying eyes and a mouth, but it was unmistakably her silhouette. It twisted away from her and produced a small flat rectangle from under the desk. When the silhouette stopped moving, the woman performed the same actions, procuring a room key from underneath the desk, performing each action her silhouette had done as if on a set track, until she occupied the same space as the red silhouette.

Usually, Booker could tune out his Deadeye's predictions, but sometimes he was reminded that at every second, his left eye perceived everything a few seconds into the future. As Booker took the key, she smiled sweetly at him.

Booker flashed a smile back, "Thank you, uh," Booker leaned forward to look at her name tag, "Casey."

Booker put some dollar bills and loose change in the tip jar and headed to his room. Once there, he tried to turn on the lights. After a moment of flickering, they reluctantly decided to illuminate. The room smelled sickeningly sweet, almost like rotten meat. He threw his coat onto the swivel chair that was placed by a desk, whose surface had an uneven sheen, implying stickiness. He took off his sunglasses and placed them on the bedside table. Booker was no stranger to shabby motels, but even he had his limits. Booker took the comforter off the bed, haphazardly folded it, and placed it in a corner. Booker didn't want any insect visitors. He laid down on the mattress and took in its pungent aroma. Booker contemplated sleeping in *The Bonhomme Richard*. He would certainly feel more hygienic.

Unfortunately, he didn't have much of a choice. For the first time in months, Booker was on a case. It hardly felt like it, but three weeks had gone by since Booker helped Luke out in West Virginia. Booker reflected that, 'help out' might be a little generous as Luke did lose his arm. Although, Luke didn't seem too angry about that since he hired Booker to investigate the death of his grandfather, the man that Booker had come to meet in West Virginia originally.

The details that Luke shared about Dr. Arling's death intrigued Booker. Apparently he died only a month before Booker came knocking, while on an impromptu road trip. Dr. Arling had not told any family members that he was leaving, much less where to, and when news

reached them that he was found dead, it came as a tragedy but not a shock. Luke explained that for the last few years, Dr. Arling had insulated himself more and more from his family. It went unspoken, but the family assumed that Dr. Arling had become terminally ill and wished to die in peace. Luke couldn't quite remember the last time he saw his grandfather, and from what he could tell, it was a similar situation for all three of Dr. Arling's children. It was an open secret that everyone had been waiting for him to be reported dead, so no one really looked into the police report. Booker could stitch the rest of the story together, having been present for some of it.

Booker found a few things in Luke's story that were quite intriguing. For someone not in the know, Dr. Arling's death might have sounded odd, but not out of the realm of possibility. For Booker, however, he knew how to interpret the facts, and he suspected an alternate series of events. Booker knew that Dr. Arling was never warm or inviting towards others, even those he supposedly cared about. However, Dr. Arling was not isolating himself. Booker could tell that Dr. Arling had found something and whatever it was, it was big. Whatever it was, it consumed him. It caused him to act like a man whose health was declining when in fact, Booker suspected that Dr. Arling was in perfect health. Besides being dead, that is.

With Luke pointing him in the right direction, and some elbow grease applied to relatively few police station windows, Booker acquired Dr. Arling's autopsy report. Booker thought it was a shame that no one thought to look into it, as it reeked of foul play. The family thought his health was spiraling, yet there was little muscular or organ deterioration even after being exposed to the natural elements for who knows how long. What was more, his body was covered in bruises. Tests trying to find what caused the bruises came back inconclusive. The

cause of death was reported as natural causes. The autopsy report did little more than confirm Booker's suspicions. He would have to go to where they found him, which brought Booker to the sorry excuse for a motel where Dr. Arling's body was found less than a mile from.

Laying on the now stripped mattress of his motel room, Booker ruminated on the results of the autopsy -- inconclusive. He couldn't help but smile to himself. Booker's world existed in the space made by that word. It was the reason why the secret was so easy to keep; society at large can't fit in things like the existence of vampires or Witches. They are unexplainable and therefore incompatible. As a result, most people turn a blind eye to anything they can't explain. Anyone who found out either became what Booker was, a Private Investigator of the Paranormal, P.I.P. for short, or kept quiet. Booker did his best to not let the secret out as much as possible, but sometimes that couldn't be avoided.

At that moment, a sound made Booker bolt upward in his bed. It was the sound of a nearby door. Casey was spot on about being able to hear other residents. The walls must be paper thin. Booker quickly and silently approached the window that faced the parking lot, to see if he could see who had entered or exited their room. Sure enough, there was a figure standing in an open door frame to one of the rooms across the parking lot from Booker. The figure's back was towards Booker, so he couldn't tell what they looked like, just what they were wearing -- a tan trench coat, the bottom of which looked to scrape the ground, and a brown bowler hat. Booker only saw them for the brief moment it took them to enter the room and shut the door. Booker was glad that the place was practically empty. If Booker found what had killed Dr. Arling, there was a chance the fight would happen at the motel, and if it was crowded that could cause problems. Booker didn't like Mundane casualties.

The next morning, Booker returned to the motel office and was surprised to find that Casey was working the morning shift as well.

Curious, Booker asked, “Are you the only one who works here?”

Casey smiled sarcastically, “Is that your only coat? Why are you wearing a coat anyways, it’s like eighty degrees out. Anyways, this is my regular shift, the guy who works nights didn’t show up,” Casey glanced at her computer screen, “Your name is Michael Booker, right?”

“People call me Booker. I would like some help with something, you see I--”

Casey interjected, “I’m not about to unclog any drain or make the toilet flush again, I work in the office, not in plumbing,”

Booker put his hands up defensively, “No. No, that’s not what I’m talking about at all. I was going to ask you some questions about something that happened a month ago around here. You see, I’m a private investigator, and I’ve been hired to figure out what happened to a gentleman that was found dead not a mile from this place last month. Do you know anything about that?”

Before answering, Casey bit the inside of her cheek and looked at Booker again, maybe trying to peer through his sunglasses. After she was done leering, she began, “Yeah I was around when that went down. Cops came, asked some questions then left. You want me to tell you what I think happened? Easy. Geezer pissed off whoever he was driving with and they threw him out going eighty miles per hour.”

Booker tilted his head, “You saw the body?”

Casey smiled, “I found the body.”

Booker leaned towards the desk, “Can you take me to where you found it?”

Casey looked shocked, “And leave the office unmanned? I’ll drive.”

Booker decided at that point that Casey was alright.

When they arrived, Casey stayed in the car. Booker got out and the smell of corn and heat slapped him in the face. As far as you could see in any direction was a corn field; amber waves of grain. Booker walked to where Casey pointed out and squatted to get a better look. Luke was not kidding when he said they found the body on the side of the road. Despite it happening a month ago, Booker could see a faint discoloration on the road where Dr. Arling had been found. It was probably due to the lack of precipitation that preserved the stain. Booker counted it as a blessing and went to work.

In his mind, he could see the scene. Dr. Arling splayed out on the road. Booker looked around where Dr. Arling was for some kind of clue as to how he got onto the pavement. The autopsy report stated that the bruises were uniform across his entire body, meaning that he couldn’t have been pushed out of a car otherwise they would’ve found drag marks from hitting the road on whatever side of his body that was facing the ground. Booker recalled the pictures from the autopsy. From the compression on his nose and right eye socket, Booker suspected he was found lying face down.

Booker called back to Casey, “How did he look when you found him?”

Casey unrolled her window, “What did you say?!”

Booker repeated his question.

Casey responded, “Oh! Um. He was on his face, but more on his right side, I think.”

Booker never got tired of being good at his job.

The only other thing that Booker took note of was how the banks on either side of the road sloped slightly upward. It could be possible that Dr. Arling rolled onto the road if his killer dumped him on the edge of the corn field. That didn't hold up, however. None of the corn stalks showed any damage. Booker knew that if a corn stalk was bent or pushed to the side, it conforms to the pressure, like a pipe cleaner. But the corn stalks were pristine. Of course, a month passing could've covered that up. Booker swore as he stood up. He walked back to Casey's truck and got in.

He nodded towards her and asked, "You think he was thrown out of a car? His bruises were that bad?"

Casey scoffed, "Bruises? The dude was perforated in tiny holes. I figured it was from road rubble or gravel when he hit the pavement. Made sense to me that -"

Booker interjected, "But the cops didn't buy it because they didn't find any gravel in his wounds."

Casey looked at Booker suspiciously, "How did you know that?"

Booker shrugged, "I saw the autopsy report and the pictures that came along with it. He was most certainly covered in bruises. A cadaver can't heal after death and a puncture wound can't bruise. So where does that leave us?"

It was Casey's turn to shrug, "I don't know what to tell you, when I found him he was pale as a sheet and covered in bloody spots all over. Polka-dotted."

Booker fell silent as he tried to work things out in his head. As he did so, Casey started the truck and wheeled it around to head back to the motel. Booker couldn't parse the peculiarities

of this case, and he was accustomed to peculiarities. There was no monster or creature that Booker could think of that matched Dr. Arling's death. *Unless...* thought Booker.

Booker sat upright in his chair and said, "Thanks for bringing me out here, Casey. I just have one more question -- did you notice anything strange after you found the body?"

"Sort of? The day after I found the body, our regular started showing up," Casey replied.

Booker clapped his hand to his forehead, "Your regular? You mean the guy in the trench coat? Give me all the details on this guy, he might be related."

Casey nodded, "At least once a week, he stays a night. Comes in super late so he prepays the room. I've never seen him, just heard stories about him from Sven the night office worker. Says he's a weird guy."

Booker figured it out, and he didn't like it. There were surprisingly few paranormal entities that didn't follow a strict set of rules and behaviors. One such entity was a Witch. Probably one of the most dangerous kinds of monster that exist. A Witch would most certainly be a big enough fish for Dr. Arling to be interested in, even several states away. In addition, a Witch could definitely be behind the impossible nature of Dr. Arling's wounds, and able to get the body in that location without dragging him. What nailed it for Booker was the other motel resident, the regular. Dr. Arling must have figured out that the Witch was performing some sort of ritual at the Motel, so the Witch kills Dr. Arling, moves the body, and continues with this month-long ritual. The fact that Casey said that the night shift worker did not show up signaled to Booker that the Witch's ritual is most likely almost done.

Booker turned to Casey, "I'm really sorry, but you're gonna have to learn something that you're really gonna wish you hadn't."



Booker took off his sunglasses and began to explain.

Casey pulled her truck into the motel parking lot. Booker got out and pointed to the room he saw the trench coat man walk into the previous night. The lights were on. Casey got out of the truck as well.

Booker looked at her with reproach, “What are you doing? Didn’t you hear anything I said?”

Casey gave Booker an incredulous look, “Listen, just because your eye is weird, and you could predict the very few things I could do while driving a truck, doesn’t mean you’re not crazy. I want to see this Witch for myself.”

Booker scoffed. He didn’t have time to argue. If Casey was gonna run into this mess, the safest place was most likely near him anyways. He rushed to *The Bonhomme Richard* and retrieved his revolver. The two of them approached the motel room. Booker knocked loudly. After a moment of no response, Booker kicked the door in. The pungent sweet smell of rotten meat flowed from the doorway. Casey turned away to retch. In one of the corners of the room, the figure with the trench coat and bowler hat crouched. When the door opened, he rose and approached Booker.

Booker looked at it with horror. The thing that was occupying the trench coat wasn’t a Witch. A Witch could appear in many forms, but not like this. Inside the coat was a writhing, buzzing, mass of flies. So many flies that it looked like it filled the trenchcoat to the point where Booker could see small lumps underneath it squirm. Booker’s Deadeye showed each individual fly’s trajectory, and it sent a chill down his spine. They were coordinated. The entire swarm was acting as a single unit. The thousands of red silhouettes that appeared from the swarm of flies

painted a constantly shifting and changing figure, but it was humanoid. The flies were organizing themselves to fill out the trench coat and bowler hat like a person, and they took another step towards Booker.

“Yeah. No,” said Casey as she reached for the motel room door and slammed it shut, cutting off the Fly Man.

She looked at Booker, “I’m guessing we run?”

Booker nodded, “We’re getting in the van, we’ll be safer in there.”

The two turned and started to run towards *The Bonhomme Richard*. Booker had parked it close to his room, so they would have to run across the length of the parking lot. They made it about a quarter of the way there before the ground started shaking. It didn’t feel like an earthquake to Booker, it was a strange sensation. It felt like the ground was buzzing. A sinkhole the size of Booker’s foot opened up before him and Casey. Out of it poured more flies, who took flight after breaching the surface. Booker turned away from the sight of it to see that more sinkholes have opened up. Booker’s Deadeye showed that the flies were about to swirl around the parking lot like some sort of insect maelstrom. Booker looked towards *The Bonhomme Richard* and it wasn’t hard to guess where the focus of the oncoming bug storm would be. Booker scanned around him for a solution. From where they were standing, the closest shelter wasn’t the van.

Booker grabbed Casey’s shoulder, saying, “Change of plans, we’re heading to the office.”

Casey wasn’t about to part from Booker, so she changed directions without question. The two of them ran to the door. Once inside, Casey slammed the door shut and locked it. Casey let out a sigh of relief.

Booker shook his head, “No. We can’t rest now. Check yourself for flies, then help me block the air vents.”

As Casey was batting herself down, she said, “There are no air vents in here.”

Booker stopped and turned towards her, “That’s not proper working conditions.”

Casey huffed, “You’re telling me.”

Booker took stock of their location. The office was small, filled mostly by rusted file cabinets and the office desk, which was covered in documents and a dirty computer screen.

There was one window that looked out on the parking lot, but the blinds were drawn before they got there. The door seemed sturdy enough, but Booker doubted it would hold long. Outside the office, it sounded like a jet engine as thousands of flies buzzed, trapping them.

Casey looked at Booker, “Ok, so you’re the paranormal detective. What do we do? You got like, anti-monster bug spray on your utility belt?”

Booker gave Casey a disapproving look, “Not funny. And give me a chance to think this through. So it isn’t a Witch. That’s actually good news for us, but I wasn’t really expecting this.”

Casey nodded, “So if it’s not a Witch, what is it?”

“Well, the flies are not acting independently. They are organized. So something must be controlling them,” Booker said, peeking out of the blinds. Above the motel, a dark buzzing cloud swirled.

“What can control the minds of flies?” Casey asked. Booker had figured she would still be in shock from having the secret be revealed to her like this, but she was acclimating very well.

Booker hummed, “Psychic powers, magic, something like that.”

Casey shrugged, “I didn’t really know what answer I was expecting, but ok. Psychic powers...”

“Or magic,” Booker finished.

Casey let out an extended sigh. Afterwards, she asked, “So what’s the plan?”

Booker hummed, “We need to get to *The Bomhomme Richard*. We’ll be able to make some headway when we get the supplies in there.”

“Watchu’ got?”

Booker smirked, “The usual. Guns, gas masks, a few grenades, a book compiling all known paranormal creatures. Also bug spray, but I don’t think I have nearly enough.”

“So we need the book?”

“Yeah.”

Just then, a knock came at the office door. Booker and Casey gave each other a wary look. Neither had noticed that the torrent of buzzing outside the office had quieted down. Booker moved to the windows and peeked out the blinds. Sure enough, there was the tan trench coat and bowler hat, being suspended in the air by thousands of flies. The bowler hat turned and if the Fly Man had a face, he would be looking at Booker. Booker grimaced and retreated back from the window. The office door knob turned, but caught on the lock. It started jiggling furiously for a few moments, then stopped. Booker and Casey could hear the Fly Man’s buzzing get farther from the door.

“I don’t think the Fly Man can get in,” muttered Booker.

Casey gave Booker a look, “The Fly Man?”

Booker waved away her incredulity, “It’s what I’ve been referring to it as in my head, shut up.”

Suddenly, a loud crack filled the office, and an indentation the size of a baseball appeared in the door.

“Yeah, the Fly Man sure can’t get in. Jeez. Some monster hunter you turned out to be,” Casey exasperated as she ran behind the desk. She began rummaging around for something. She looked up for a moment and said, “Keep it busy for a minute, I have an idea on how to get us out of here.”

Not knowing quite what to do, Booker turned to face the door. As he did so, there was another crack and an accompanying baseball sized indentation. Booker did his best to analyze the situation. He couldn’t see the flies, so his Deadeye wasn’t going to help right now. If Booker shot through the door, he would only make a hole for the flies to get in. The indentations were pretty wide, but they didn’t protrude all that much. Booker estimated that the flies were hitting the door with about as much force as a decently strong person. Booker squinted at the door and figured that he was a decently strong person. Booker returned to the window and looked out.

The flies that made up the bug storm had now coalesced into a small ball. It was floating about ten feet from the door. Beside it stood the Fly Man. From the sinkholes, more flies were adding themselves to the condensed bug orb. Booker figured that the flies were launching themselves at the door, and everytime they were probably squishing more flies than not. The time it took to add more flies accounted for the interval between volleys.

Booker noticed that no more flies were being added to the black ball. A Deadeye projection shot out of the buzzing sphere and showed Booker exactly where it was going to hit

the door. Booker waited until he saw the flies begin to move, rushed to the door, and started counting. He had to time it perfectly or it wouldn't work. Feeling his body become hot with adrenaline, he had reached the count and punched the door in the spot where the flies were buffeting it on the other side. Booker screamed and there was a crack. His hand became racked with pain and a shudder went up Booker's arm into his shoulder. He looked down. There was a small indentation, but it was protruding outwards instead of inwards. Booker smiled as he clutched his aching hand and a tear rolled down his cheek.

"Ok, open the door," Casey ordered, as she started towards Booker.

Booker squinted back at her, "Open it? You just told me to make sure it stays closed."

Casey held up what she found.

Booker smiled, "That'll work."

Booker swung the office door open. Immediately, a cloud of flies swarmed the entryway. In response, a spout of flame burst into the buzzing swarm. The burning flies separated, like a veil, making room for Booker and Casey, holding a can of hairspray in one hand and a lighter in the other. Casey looked at the Fly Man, and sent a cone of fire at it. The Fly Man reacted faster than the rest of the bugs, separating into a cloud. The trench coat and bowler hat floated through the air, until they were a safe distance from Casey. The Fly Man reformed, but did not approach.

Casey and Booker did not wait for the flies to regroup, rushing towards *The Bonhomme Richard*. Booker hopped in the driver's seat and Casey opened the side door and got in the back as the engine roared to life. Booker threw the van into reverse and began to leave the motel parking lot.

Booker twisted around in his seat to see where they were going through the back window. Behind them, blocking the parking lot exit, the flies had reformed into a swirling storm. Booker floored it and entered the swarm. From inside the van, it sounded like the outside was getting pelted by hail. Flies poured over the windshield. The back window was quickly covered in flies, making it nearly impossible to see through it. Booker did his best to maneuver, and emerged out onto the highway. Booker jerked the wheel to straighten the van, turned to face the front, and took off. Behind them, the swarm of flies attempted to follow, but the van outsped them easily. After driving for a few more miles with the windshield wipers on max speed, Booker pulled over to the side of the road, and got into the back of the van.

*The Bonhomme Richard* had a row of seats behind the driver. Behind the seats, there was an array of objects that made it clear that the van doubled as Booker's mobile living space. The back had a tacky but comfortable looking rug across the floor. A crate of non-perishable food and an ice cooler was next to a long heavy trunk with cushions on top that was pushed to one side of the van. In addition, there were several over-the-shoulder bags and small cardboard boxes. Some were labeled indicating that they were filled with survival supplies or eating utensils, but some had labels like, 'cursed objects' or 'creature parts'. Other boxes were not labelled at all. Casey had been sitting in the second row of seats, and joined Booker in the rear part of the van.

"Why did we stop?" Casey asked, "We aren't going back there, right?"

Booker rummaged through some bags and produced a hefty book with an intricately designed cover, "You don't have to go back --"

Casey interjected, "But you are?"

“I have to,” Booker shrugged as he began flipping through the pages of the dusty tome.

Casey huffed, “Going back there won’t bring back Dr. Arling. I’m sure you can handle it, Mr. Monster Hunter, but at the end of the day, you’re risking your life for something that is already gone.”

Booker furrowed his brow, “I know that Dr. Arling is gone. I still have to do this.”

“For what? To stop the Fly Man? I say we call the military or someone important and they torch the place. If my little lighter caused so much trouble, I’d like to see the suckers handle a flamethrower,” Casey stopped and then asked, “Do you have a flamethrower?”

Booker shook his head, “Getting the feds involved is not how I operate. The Fly Man poses a threat, yes. But even if it didn’t, I need to go back there. I have to find out what happened to Dr. Arling.”

Casey hummed, “This guy really meant a lot to you, huh?”

Booker chuckled, “It’s more complicated than that.”

“Uncomplicate it,” Casey demanded.

Booker pursed his lips before asking, “I’m not getting out of explaining myself, am I?”

Casey smiled, “Consider it payment for emotional damages.”

Booker breathed heavily through his nose, “Well, when I first was starting out in the P.I.P. business, Dr. Arling helped me out on a few cases -- showed me the ropes. I’m not saying that I was unappreciative; I am still grateful for his guidance. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off between us. Eventually, I found out that he had some opinions about my Deadeye. We had a falling out, and it wasn’t until I looked for him in West Virginia that I had any intention of seeing him again.”



Casey frowned, “What did Dr. Arling think about your Deadeye?”

Booker stopped flipping through the book, but he did not look up at Casey, “Do you know how hard it is to walk around with it? Wearing sunglasses everywhere I go? When Dr. Arling and I were working together, he thought of my Deadeye as something to be analyzed or dissected, like it was some creature he didn’t understand. I didn’t need someone to remind me that I’m not so far off from the things we were hunting. I knew that then, and I know that now.”

Casey shook her head, “So what is solving his murder going to do?”

Booker looked up at her, meeting her gaze. As Casey made eye contact with his Deadeye, she winced.

Booker clicked his tongue, “In addition to stopping a threat? I’m doing this to prove that while I might be a monster, I’m not the monster he thought I was. Plus, I was hired by a friend and we P.I.P.s take our hirings very seriously,” Booker then turned the book around and pushed it towards Casey.

The book was open to a page showing a diagram of what at first glance looked like a normal house fly. However, its thorax looked engorged and in the middle was some sort of jewel. Around the diagram was text written in some foreign language, but in several places were handwritten notes in english. One such note was above the diagram, titling the drawing, ‘Pandamonius Diptera (Demon Fly)’.

“What do you know about Beelzebub?” asked Booker.

Casey replied, “Just that he has a devil put aside for me in that Queen song.”

Booker chuckled, “In Christian myth, he’s known as the Lord of the Flies,” Booker pointed at the diagram in the book, “This guy is said to be one of his servants, organizing other

flies when Beelzebub was busy. It's smaller and faster than an average fly, despite its junk in the trunk. From what the book says, it controls other flies via sending some sort of signal from the jewel. Considering how much faster it responded to commands, the bugger is most likely somewhere in the swarm making up the Fly Man."

"So we're going up against a demon's bedazzled assistant manager?"

"Basically. And what do you mean by, 'we'? I thought you didn't want to go back there?"

Booker asked, raising his eyebrow.

Casey shrugged, "Well, it seems like this is gonna be a two person job. That, and if you died on my work shift, I would feel somewhat responsible, I suppose."

Booker smiled, "Glad to know you're dedicated to providing quality motel service. Now let's talk shop. The stunt you pulled earlier gave me an idea."

When they arrived back at the motel, the sun had sunk low into the sky, bathing the rolling fields of corn in an amber light. As *The Bonhomme Richard* rolled into the parking lot, Booker and Casey took in the damage. All the doors to the rooms were ripped off, and every window had been smashed. Booker was used to fighting on his terms. Leaving the Fly Man to its own devices meant that Booker and Casey can no longer rely on any previous knowledge of the motel. Booker also figured that he wasn't getting his duffel bag back which meant he was down another pair of sunglasses. One piece of comfort was that they knew what they were up against. Booker hoped that it would be enough.

Booker turned to Casey, "You ready?"

"Depends on how used you are to ramming your van into monsters," Casey replied.

"You have no idea."

Casey breathed deeply, looked Booker in the eyes and said, “Punch it.”

Booker slammed his foot on the gas. *The Bonhomme Richard* rocked and as the engine fired loudly, Booker and Casey lurched backwards in their seats. Before them was the room that the Fly Man was found in, and the motel wall was rapidly approaching.

“Now!” Booker called out as both he and Casey jumped out of the van and rolled, hitting the hot black top.

*The Bonhomme Richard* rocketed past them and smashed into the door frame of the Fly Man’s room. Both the driver’s and passenger side doors flew off the van as it collided with the wall. The makeshift two ton battering ram punctured a hole in the building with a roar of splintering wood and crinkling metal.

Across from Booker, Casey was doing her best to get to her feet. She looked over at Booker and asked, “Do you think that got its attention?”

As if in response, a dull buzzing could be heard from the depths of the Fly Man’s room. Very quickly, a black flood of flies poured over the van and started spilling out into the parking lot. The swarm of flies acting almost like a liquid. The trench coat and bowler hat bobbed up and down on the surface of the wave of flies.

Booker rose to his feet and as Casey stood at his side, he asked, “Casey, how good is your throwing arm?”

Casey looked at him, wide-eyed, “Why do you ask?”

Booker shrugged, “No reason. Just that the last time I tried this, the guy who I was working with lost his arm.”

As the rushing wall of insects came at them, Booker readied his revolver. If their plan worked, they *shouldn't* be swept up in the oncoming bug storm. Casey pulled her arm back and threw what she was holding. Booker began to count and scan the air above the fly swarm. That is where he'll need to pay close attention. Casey had aimed exceptionally well, placing the grenade right on top of the trench coat. With the added weight, the trench coat sunk down into the buzzing mass.

As the fuse ticked away, Casey began to run from the tidal wave of flies. Booker however, kept his gaze fixed. Everything had worked out so far. Booker knew that the Demon Fly couldn't risk being caught in the blast, but it also couldn't resist continuing its attack on Booker and Casey when they were so defenseless. The only way it could do both was if it separated from the mass of flies, as there was no guarantee how fast the fire would spread between the flies in close proximity. Booker was banking on the Demon Fly being smart enough to realize this.

Booker's Deadeye could usually keep up with most movements, but with so many independent motions being projected, the crimson silhouettes merged into one big red dot in Booker's vision. If one fly decided to break away from the group, however, Booker would be able to predict where it would move like normal. The very thing that obscured the Demon Fly from Booker would be what Booker used to pinpoint it.

The grenade was less than a second away from going off when Booker saw a singular crimson projection shoot from the swarm. The mass of flies was less than a foot away from Booker. He could hear nothing but the sound of a million flies buzzing, ready to perforate his body with their tiny mandibles. Booker aimed at where the Demon Fly would be in a millisecond

and pulled the trigger. The fly and the bullet sped through the air and met each other exactly where Booker predicted. The bullet tore through the fly like paper. As it did so, the grenade went off, blasting a wave of heat in Booker's face. He figured it was better than being hit by a wave of bugs.

The swarm of flies scattered immediately, most of which ascended into the sky. As the blast of the grenade subsided, and the cloud of bugs dispersed, the ground began to shake again. Booker looked around as thousands, maybe millions more flies poured out of the sinkholes in the parking lot. The flies moved wildly and randomly. Booker risked smiling as the bugs flew past him. They had squashed the Demon Fly, stopping the Fly Man.

Casey let out a whoop of triumph as the orange skies began to clear of flies. Booker looked to his ally, who was parading around and smiled. Booker turned and headed for *The Bonhomme Richard* which was currently perforating the Fly Man's bed. The smell of rotten meat hit him worse than the heat wave from the grenade. With each step, Booker had to become reacclimated to the odor. When he finally got in the room, he could barely keep tears from welling in his eyes. After a few seconds of regulated breathing, Booker could see again. The van wasn't as damaged as he had thought. The only parts that were beyond repair was the hood which was crinkled like a candy wrapper. As well as the doors which had come clean off. Based on a preliminary once over, Booker figured the van might still be drivable. Booker opened the back door and assessed how badly it jostled everything around. After figuring he could fix it with a little time, Booker rummaged through a bag and produced a gas mask.

Casey had approached Booker as he was assessing the van's state and asked, "You got another one of those?"

Booker looked at her suspiciously, “You wanna help me search the place?”

Casey, who was looking quite green said, “I’m gonna see this thing through.”

Booker chuckled, “Spoken like a P.I.P.,” and tossed her a second gas mask.

Finding the hole was the easy part. It was barely hidden underneath the motel room bed. Getting down it would be the difficult part. The walls of the hole were covered in some sort of material that Booker suspected was made by the flies. Whatever it was, it was dry and looked to make the entire tunnel stable. The hole was slanted, so Booker and Casey could make their way down it, the process was slow, taking each step as warily as possible to avoid tripping and falling to its depths. Booker went in first, lighting the way with a flashlight. A few meters down the tunnel, Booker could see it leveled out.

Muffled by the gas mask, Casey spoke, “Tell me again why we are going into the abandoned fly tunnel?”

“We still need to find out how Dr. Arling died, and how he got to where he was. I have a feeling that we’re gonna find something down here.”

“If you say so,” replied Casey.

Sure enough, the tunnel leveled off and continued a few more meters. As Booker shuffled through the level part of the tunnel, he let out a stunted shout.

“What! What is it?” pleaded Casey.

Booker turned back and soberly said, “Found Sven.”

Booker sidestepped and revealed that caked into the wall of the tunnel was the body of a young man with the same work polo that Casey was wearing. Booker noted that bruises covered the body. They matched Dr. Arling’s.

“Oh,” Casey said, sadly.

Booker continued. Beyond Sven’s body, the tunnel opened up to a wider cavern. As Booker and Casey emerged from the tunnel into the cavern, they realized that this chamber exists underneath the parking lot. Several streaks of amber light lit the room. The skylights were the sinkholes, from the other side. Similarly sized tunnels opened into this chamber. The tunnels shot out in all directions. As Booker and Casey saw what was in the middle of the cavern, Booker placed all the pieces of the puzzle together.

In the center of the chamber, a large lifeless creature laid. It’s face was half-gone, bug eaten. It had claws, a scaled tail, and two reindeer like antlers. Where it wasn’t bug eaten, its body was covered in shaggy fur.

Booker began to laugh, “I am so good at my job. I was right the first time Casey. Dr. Arling was after a Witch. This is what a Witch looks like. Or at least, this is what this one looked like. You see, the Demon Fly was doing what flies do best -- eat dead things.”

“I don’t understand,” said Casey.

Booker nodded, “So the Fly Man or rather the Demon Fly’s goal was to eat the dead Witch. How did the Witch die? Well, Dr. Arling of course. He did it. He killed the Witch. But that wasn’t good enough for him. He wanted to study it, so instead of disposing of the body, he left it. And what happens when you leave something dead out?”

Casey began to understand, “It attracts flies.”

“And a nasty one at that. Dr. Arling must have been taken by surprise like Sven. Also I figured out why the wounds were so weird. The puncture wounds were there, which is what you saw, but bug bites bring blood to the surface without making a big hole in the skin. The puncture

wounds were so small that the blood began to pool under the top layer of the epidermis. After a few days, it looks just like a bruise,” Booker said, putting his hands on his hips.

“And how did Dr. Arling get to the side of the road?”

Booker scratched the back of his head, “I’m willing to bet one of these tunnels lead directly to where we found Dr. Arling’s body. The Demon Fly was pretty smart so I’m guessing it knew that it was only a matter of time before someone who knew what to look for would show up. So it moved the body far enough away to throw off any suspicions. However, it didn’t count on one thing.”

Casey nodded, “Which would be?”

Booker hummed, “Us.”

As Booker and Casey stood, leaning against *The Bonhomme Richard*, they watched as the motel crumbled into a blazing fire on the horizon. Booker felt a weight lift from him. Something he had been carrying ever since deciding to go to West Virginia seemed to disappear. Booker realized that throughout his career, he had never allowed himself to be angry at Dr. Arling. Booker began to whistle. Maybe he thought Dr. Arling would win if he ever got angry. Maybe it was his attempt at professionalism. Whatever the reason, it lifted off of him and rose into the sky, joining the smoke and flies.