

P.I.P. : Consumer Rights

A tackily painted van rattled down a country road through eastern Appalachia. Emerald acrylic waves crashed on the sides of the van, the crests of which swirled into sapphire words written in cursive that named the beast of a vehicle, '*The Bonhomme Richard*'. Inside, dexterous fingers tapped methodically on the steering wheel. Those fingers were attached to calloused, toffee colored hands, and in turn those hands were connected to thick arms belonging to the large man operating the tackily painted van. He smiled as the foothills of the mountains were slowly replaced with Virginian swamps. The road had taken him through mountain passes. Terrain like that made him nervous. The curves in the road made the mountains block his sight. Booker didn't like feeling claustrophobic.

He wasn't handsome. Booker knew kind people who would describe him as ugly. He was easily six feet tall, but his head nonetheless seemed too big. His nose was anything but symmetrical, the cartilage remembering the many times it has gone through the process of bending, snapping, and healing. He had broad shoulders and a waistline to match. He was, however, by no means unfit. The calluses on his hands and the way his skin was tough like leather told a story of years of honing his body not for aesthetics, but for strength. Booker unrolled the windows to let the warm summer air bring smells of murky ponds and dank forests past his wiry beard and into his nostrils. Most people would probably detest these smells, but Booker found them nostalgic. His first set of jobs was in the Boundary Waters on the border of Minnesota and Canada and in that summer, they were less Boundary Waters and more like Boundary bogs.

Through trained ears, Booker detected that his van was making a noise he didn't quite like. Before heading back west, he would need to get an engine belt replaced. Booker was hardly a mechanic, but he knew his way around an engine as a result of his unconventional occupation. Handyman and survivalist were just two of the hats that he had to wear throughout his jobs. Booker enjoyed what he did,

for the most part, and more importantly he was good at it. Despite this, Booker was currently between clients, and had been for the last four months. It wasn't from a shortage of work, it was just that nothing interested him as of late. Every client that came his way, he passed on to one of his colleagues. They could figure it out well enough, and nothing too bad has happened as a result of Booker's semi-retirement. It wasn't until he got the urge to see an old friend that Booker started tuning up *The Bonhomme Richard*.

Behind him, the sun looked poised to be swallowed by the Appalachians, covering the landscape in a twilight. Despite the sun being out of his eyes, Booker had not removed his sunglasses. It had been long since he turned off onto a dirt road, and finally, nestled between groves of twisted trees, a proud manor appeared. It was clear that the rigidity of the estate was in a constant struggle with its surroundings. The walls jutted up against the natural landscape, attempting to defy nature any foothold. Yet vines and branches grow as they like, having woven themselves across the multi paned windows and dark wooden walls. Booker parked *The Bonhomme Richard* in the dirt driveway and walked up to the door. The dirt crunched under Booker's boots. The porch was large, and the wooden awning provided shade no matter the time of day. The porch marked the threshold between nature and opulence. Booker made his way to the door. The entrance was a slab of intricately carved wood. The doorknob was gilded and shiny. It was always a little too bourgeoisie for Booker's taste, but he couldn't deny that it was impressive.

Booker didn't have to bring his hand up to knock as the door swung inward revealing a man who looked to be in his mid-twenties. Unlike Booker's tattered coat, he was sharply dressed in a button up shirt and tie, as if he was on his way to church or a shareholders meeting. The man looked Booker up and down. He appeared unthreatened by Booker despite being a foot shorter.

"Can I help you?" the man said with an emotionless smile.

Booker scratched the back of his head awkwardly, "Uh. Yeah. I'm here to see Dr. Arling."

The man was openly leering at Booker, “William Arling is dead. I’m his grandson, Luke. Who are you?”

“I – uh. I knew him when he taught at Virginia State. We helped each other out on a few things. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know he died. I live in the upper midwest, so I never heard.”

Luke’s gaze was piercing. For a moment the two stood in tense silence. Then Luke said, “I’m curious on the particulars of how you knew my grandfather. Please, come in. You must be hot in your coat. You are aware that it is summer, yes? And please don’t wear your sunglasses indoors, I am not a fan of Schwarzenegger or John Hughes.”

“I have a light sensitivity,” Booker mumbled as he began to shake off his long brown duster and walked inside. Booker left his sunglasses on.

Standing in the dimly lit foyer, was Luke and another man. The new stranger was quite peculiar. He was as tall as Booker, and easily as muscular, maybe more so. Booker couldn’t discern his age which perturbed him. The stranger’s garments were even more formal than Luke’s sporting a jet-black suit coat and a sheet white button-down shirt. His face was the largest difference between him and Booker. Where Booker’s complexion was dark, the stranger was ghostly pale, and where Booker was asymmetrical, this man seemed perfectly proportioned. His long black hair was combed back and held in place in a neat bun and the man’s beard was neatly trimmed and professional. Booker hated him. Not for the way he dressed or looked, but because of his eyes – they were black coals that gave no indication of emotion.

Luke gestured to the stranger and said, “Have Alan here take your coat, he’s this estate’s butler and groundskeeper. He’ll put your coat in the closet and then make himself scarce so we can have our conversation. To go clean some other room, perhaps.”

Booker, fumbling to get an arm out beneath his balled-up coat, reached out a hand and said, “Thank you, Alan. I’ll be sure not to make a mess of the place.”

The butler’s expression was as if Booker offered an insult. Alan took Booker’s hand in his to give it one shake, then promptly released it. Booker tossed Alan his coat, a sleeve hitting Alan in the face. Booker felt a sense of satisfaction.

Luke waved a still expressionless Alan away and went into the room to the right of the foyer. Many bookshelves lined the walls and gave the room a cozy feel. There were two lounge chairs facing a fireplace; Luke gestured to one and sat in the other.

After a few moments of getting comfortable, Luke began, “So who do I have the pleasure of hosting?”

Booker adjusted himself in the chair, it was comfy, but he seemed to sink down in a way that made it difficult to move. After situating himself as much as possible, Booker replied, “The name is Booker.”

Luke nodded expectantly, signaling that Booker had not given enough information.

“Michael Booker is my full name. People just call me Booker.”

Luke seemed pleased enough with the answer, “Well, Mr. Booker who has a light sensitivity, tell me this – if you didn’t know my grandfather was dead, why did you show up on my doorstep?”

Booker sighed, “Well, I wanted some more help on a project I’m working on. I’m tracking down a book on American mythology that Dr. Arling had.”

Luke's tone turned to ice, "A book? This might be confusing for you, but despite having a lovely collection of books here at this estate, this is not a library nor is it a charity. I imagine you rarely find yourself with people who value their belongings. If you are in need of a librarian, I suggest you find one."

Booker ignored Luke's attitude and said, "Well, I was originally here for the book, but now I'm here for something else."

Lacadazzily, Luke responded, "And that would be?"

Booker smiled, "I want you to hire me to kill your manservant."

"...Excuse me?"

"I suggest you decide quickly, because if you don't, then he will most likely kill you instead."

Luke blinked twice, as if Booker was some apparition that would disappear at any moment.

Booker leaned back, "Have you ever seen Alan work outside in the daytime? If so, was he ever in direct sunlight?"

"Uh. I don't quite see what that has to do with... Should I call the police?"

"The police can't save you from Alan."

Luke, becoming increasingly tense, "I would actually prefer they protect me from you."

Booker chuckled, "Trust me, I'm the least of your worries right now. In fact, I just might be the only one that can help you," Booker lifted himself up from the chair and cheerily waved towards the foyer and said, "It always takes a bit longer when they're still pretending. Though, it should be working right ... now," as Booker finished he flicked a finger in the air and immediately a loud crashing could be heard from the hallway.

Booker and Luke rushed into the foyer to see Alan writhing on the ground. The large pale man convulsed and spat into the air.

Luke regarded Booker furiously, “What the hell did you do?”

“It’s called allicin. It’s an organosulfide – the one that makes garlic so pungent,” Booker replied dryly, “I crushed a packet of it on my hand right before giving him a handshake.”

Luke took a step back, “Hold on a minute. You mentioned if I saw Alan working in sunlight, and now garlic... are you insinuating that Alan is ... is a”

Booker sighed, “A vampire, yes. Although the actual term is Oris Sapien. And it’s less insinuating and more proving. Look at him, that’s not a person. Not anymore.”

As they had been talking, Alan’s appearance started to change. He no longer was the same height as Booker, he had grown another foot, maybe a foot and a half, and his clothes seemed poised to tear at the seams. His skin had lost all color, making the already pale man practically translucent. His hair was no longer a luscious black but now platinum white. His hands had become gaunt and at the end of each finger was a long sharp dagger of a fingernail. The most significant change was Alan’s eyes. His pupils were still small black coals, but they were no longer emotionless. As Alan looked at Booker and Luke at the end of the hallway, his eyes were not filled with anger or fear. Instead, his eyes were filled with hunger, the way a starving person would look in a deli.

Luke slumped in place, “Oh my god, my manservant is a vampire.”

Booker sniffed sharply, “Not to be pedantic, but I just explained that he’s an Oris Sapien. Latin for ‘wise mouth’. Anyways, are you gonna hire me to get rid of him?”

“I don’t understand. What are you? Why is this happening?”

Booker shook his head, “Well I’m still not quite sure myself, but I can tell you this,” he pointed at Alan, snarling on the floor, “I hunt monsters. But I prefer to be called a Private Investigator of the Paranormal. P.I.P. for short.”

Luke began hyperventilating.

Booker adjusted his sunglasses and frowned, “I probably should have eased you into these things, but we don’t have time for that. What’ll it be? Ready to get rid of your monster problem? Because he’s gonna get back up... now.”

Alan rolled onto his belly and shakily pushed himself up to his knees. Luke let out a yelp as Alan began to stand up and step towards them. As he stood up, his dress shirt began to tear into rags, unable to stretch to fit Alan’s massive growth spurt. Standing up to his full height, the monster was nearly eight feet tall. Then, with surprising speed, Alan bounded across the hallway. Covering nearly half of the hallway’s length in a single burst, it would only be seconds before Alan would be upon them.

Luke shrieked, “Get him away from me!”

“All I needed to hear,” Booker smirked

Booker pulled Luke to his side of the foyer, stepping out of the way as Alan crashed into the space where they had just been. Alan skidded to a halt in front of the entrance.

Booker looked at Luke and said, “I’m going to get him away from the front door, I want you to go outside and get in my car.”

Booker didn’t wait to make sure Luke understood and took a step towards Alan. Booker eyed the eight and half foot monster up and down behind his sunglasses, and said, “Well, you’re a big sucker, ain’t ya?”

Alan snarled at him and lunged forward with blinding speed, but Booker had already taken a step back, leading him away from Luke and the front door. Alan took a swipe at Booker, aiming his claws at Booker's head. It missed its mark. The two moved in unison. The instant Alan would swipe or lunge, Booker had already gone outside Alan's range. It wasn't long before Alan had moved away from the foyer and back into the hallway following Booker.

Luke swallowed a scream and took a step towards the door. As he did so, Alan wheeled around. As their eyes met, Luke froze in place, like a squirrel before the talons of an owl.

"Wrong move, Alan," Booker said as he rushed past and slapped Alan in the face.

Immediately, Alan began to roar in pain and crumple to the ground.

Booker ran past Alan and met Luke at the door. A balled up coat was under Booker's arm.

"Allicin. Gets 'em every time, now move." Booker said as he opened the door and shoved Luke out.

The two raced to *The Bonhomme Richard*, almost leaping off the porch and into the warmth of the twilight sun. Luke was gasping as he fumbled with the passenger side door, while Booker had gotten in and started the car.

As Luke shakily lifted himself into the seat, Booker glanced at the map on his phone and pulled out of the driveway.

Booker started on a northbound dirt road. When the manor disappeared behind trees and swamp, it became clear that Alan was not in pursuit. The swamp felt cramped and oppressive. Like the environment was about to swallow the van.

Still hyperventilating, Luke said, "I've never seen anything like that."

Booker nodded, “Yeah, that’s obvious. And you were wrong.”

“About what?”

“Earlier when you said I’m not used to being around people like you. I’ve met a hundred men just like you. I thought for a moment that your grandpa wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.”

Luke breathed for a moment before realizing what Booker had said, “What’s that supposed to mean? How well did you know my grandfather?”

“Not well enough, I suppose.”

Luke, beginning to calm down, pensively looked at Booker. A few minutes passed before Luke said, “You’re faster than Alan.”

Booker, remaining cool, chuckled, “I’m actually not. Most everything that I’ve come across is faster and stronger than me and can usually lose a limb or two and keep on swinging. In my line of work, you tend to die if you don’t find ways to close the gap between us and them.”

“And you did that? You closed the gap?”

Booker said, “You tell me,” as he took off his sunglasses and looked at Luke.

His right eye was a light hazel with flecks of green. His left eye was a solid red orb. No pupil, no iris, no white. The gaze of the red eye seemed to grip Luke. It wasn’t until Booker turned his eyes back to the road that Luke could breathe again. He hadn’t even realized he was holding his breath.

After a few minutes, Luke began talking again, “So. You’re a detective?”

“A Private Investigator of the Paranormal, a P.I.P.” Booker said, curtly.

“Yes, a P.I.P. What does one do as a P.I.P.?”

Booker sighed. He had hoped that Luke was feigning ignorance back at the manor, that Dr. Arling had explained something to his family, anything about the truth of the world. However, it was clear that Luke knew nothing, and dangerously so.

“Listen, we really don’t have time for you to get a history lesson, so all your questions are gonna be answered on a need to know basis. Now that we’re outside, we only have until sundown before Alan comes after us, and he will catch up, and he will be pissed. Oris Sapiens can regrow limbs and internal organs. Normally, when facing an Oris Sapien, I would get together with at least four highly experienced P.I.P.s and get our hands on some military grade artillery. Not to mention a weapon that can actually kill an Oris Sapien,” Booker smiled, “It is going to be a challenge to take him down with no backup, no plan, and not long before sunset.”

“Are we going to die?” Luke whimpered.

Booker didn’t respond.

“Is this how my grandfather died?”

Booker sighed, “Listen. With this job – with this life – that Dr. Arling and I have, there isn’t a retirement plan. You just... do your best... until it’s not enough.”

“Can you tell me anything about him? Considering our situation, that seems like something I ‘need-to-know’,” Luke said, as he looked out the window.

“Dr. Arling did good work. So few P.I.P.s are as educated as he was. We needed help researching a coven of Witches. You should hope that if we survive tonight, you never come across a Witch. He helped put a lot of puzzle pieces together and thanks to him we saved a lot of lives. It was his book that compiled his research that I had hoped to find. I have some unanswered questions about that case.”

Luke turned to Booker and said, “Tomorrow, you’ll have it. If you keep me alive that is... Did he ever talk about his family?”

Booker shook his head, “Not much. Just that he had one. He really didn’t tell you anything?”

It was Luke’s turn to shake his head. Despite Booker’s hopes, he wasn’t really surprised.

With that, they sat in silence as the swamp cicadas buzzed. Twilight was fading.

“Why is Alan doing this?” Luke asked.

“How long have you known Alan?”

Luke thought, “He was there when I first came to the estate. I had received it per my grandfather’s will. In total, I’ve known the man for less than a month.”

Booker sighed heavily and said, “That tracks. Oris Sapiens prefer to live in ornate mansions. Stereotypical, I know, but sometimes Hollywood gets something right once in a while.”

“A stopped clock is right twice a day?”

Booker scoffed.

Luke shifted in his chair uncomfortably, “He didn’t have fangs,” he said, making sure not to look at Booker’s left eye.

“Huh?”

“He... he didn’t have fangs. I thought vampires – or, excuse me, Oris Sapiens – had fangs. How does he suck blood out of people?”

Booker thought Luke had completely lost his prim and proper attitude, unfortunately it was slowly coming back. Booker replied, “Well, what you call vampires do indeed suck the life out of people,

but not the way it's portrayed in movies. You see, they don't use their mouth or fangs, or something perverted like that. Instead, they have evolved to be the perfect parasitic organism. They have complete control over the composition of their body, and as such, they have manipulated their biology to consume any organic matter it touches down to the cellular level. Essentially, every single one of their cells can act as a mouth. That's why Alan was trying to lunge at me. If he could tackle me, I would have been killed slowly as each of his skin cells would start digesting me. It would look like I was being absorbed by him."

Luke winced, "How unsightly."

Booker nodded, "And extremely painful."

"This is all too much," Luke whined, head in hands.

Booker scoffed, "Get ahold of yourself. We're not dead in the water. Despite your personal lack of knowledge, this is a fight that's been going on a long time. We know what Alan is capable of far more than what he thinks we are. He underestimates us, so if we act on a plan instead of our fear, we'll have the advantage. That's how we win."

Color began to return to Luke's face as he acclimated to his paradigm shift, "So how do we dispose of him?"

Booker furrowed his brow. He could make a rousing speech, but something else that Hollywood gets right about Oris Sapiens is that they are particularly tough to kill. Booker remembered the first time he had tracked down an Oris Sapien. Years ago, Booker was young enough that he wasn't the leader of the hunting party. That honor was reserved for Dr. Arling. It seemed like it was a different world back then. Everything seemed like a mystery and every new scrap of knowledge felt like peeling back a curtain to reveal reality as it truly was. It wasn't until later that Booker realized that the world was made of

curtains and veils and obscurities. Despite this, Booker had never given up the belief that the world and all the monsters in it operated on a set of rules.

“Allicin slows them down, and they absorb metal slowly so my gun I keep in the glove box won’t be completely useless, but neither will kill your carnivorous butler. No, we’ll need something a little more potent. The problem is their control of body composition; it makes it impossible for the usually fatal injuries to do any lasting damage because they just eat anything you throw at them. Allicin is one of the few things they have trouble breaking down, which is why I could touch him when my hand was covered in the stuff, but even if we dump a gallon of it on him, he would still just eat everything we hit him with.”

Luke began massaging his temples, “So we have to disrupt that bodily function somehow?”

Booker nodded, “Exactly, which brings us to our current destination. Get out.”

As they got out of the car, Booker looked up at the Appalachian Mountains. The sun was more than half-way obscured by them now. Booker furrowed his brow. He turned to Luke, who jumped slightly when he saw Booker’s red eye again, and motioned towards the woods.

“How well do you know the area?” Booker asked, traipsing through the underbrush.

Luke, still in his formal wear, trailed behind, “Um. I haven’t memorized the topography if that’s what you’re asking.”

Booker shook his head, “What time does the sun set at this time of year?”

“Seven... Maybe sooner. I can’t think straight right now.”

Booker looked back at Luke. When they made eye contact, Luke diverted his gaze quickly. Booker was used to it. He knew that people were made uncomfortable about his left eye. It was a reminder to others that he wasn’t fully one of them, that he was an ambassador of another world. Booker

closed the gap between him and the monsters he hunted, but he felt like he became a little monstrous in the process.

“What does it do? Your eye that is,” Luke said, pensively

Booker stopped walking and turned around. He looked at Luke, who winced when Booker’s eye passed over him, but didn’t turn away.

Luke repeated, “Your eye is what makes you able to keep up with things like Alan, right? What does it do?”

Booker huffed. Not many people ask about the details. Usually, they just avoid eye contact. They act as if he didn’t know that his eye was a solid shade of red. Acting like if they didn’t bring it up, that he wouldn’t notice how uncomfortable he made everyone.

Booker turned around, began walking and replied, “I call it ‘Deadeye’. I can predict the intentions of others when I look at them. It only predicts their next action, though. At first it was hell, having one eye see reality and the other see a second into the future. Half my vision is red silhouettes of people doing things a moment before they do them. Took a lot of training, but I can react to movements that people haven’t even made.”

Luke nodded, “So you can predict what I’m gonna say next?”

Booker shook his head, “Only works with movements, no audio.”

“Can you see your own future with it?”

Booker paused before saying, “Sorta. I can briefly see my potential movements and pick which one I think will work best.”

“Does it hurt? Your Deadeye? Very filmic naming might I add.”

Booker remembered the searing light from the sky, the last thing his left eye ever saw that was real. Booker responded, “It only hurt when I got it.”

With that they walked in silence. Booker didn’t know what to make of Luke. He acted like some rich know-it-all. Luke really rubbed Booker the wrong way. He openly abused Alan when he thought he had power over him, not to mention his distaste for Booker when he showed up. He didn’t have to wonder long why Dr. Arling didn’t let him in on the whole, ‘monsters are real’ secret. Without the proper oversight, Luke would definitely talk to the wrong people and either get himself institutionalized or worse, get people to believe him, which would lead to a lot of innocent people picking fights they couldn’t win.

Booker couldn’t help but see some of the Dr. in Luke. Quick to pick up on things, able to roll with the punches. Not to mention he asked about Booker’s Deadeye, but that might speak to the Arlings’ morbid curiosity more than anything else. Booker smiled as he reminded himself that Dr. Arling wasn’t too tactful about his thoughts on Booker’s humanity. Despite his mixed feelings on the Arlings, the biggest question on Booker’s mind was why Alan hadn’t killed Luke when he first showed up. Oris Sapiens usually loathe taking orders from anyone, even other Oris Sapiens. Alan’s behavior did not line up with normal patterns. Booker hated when the things he was trying to kill broke the mold. Booker looked at his watch, which read six-forty-five. He would figure this all out in the morning... If they survived the night. Suddenly, the sound of rushing water told Booker they had made it, with little time to spare.

“We’re here,” Booker said, standing on a riverbank.

“Which is?” asked Luke, whose fancy attire had become significantly muddied.

“See how this river splinters off a few yards ahead? This is the beginning of a delta,” Booker knelt down and took a small vial of liquid out of his coat, “If you have the know-how and the right materials, a delta can be quite useful if you find yourself in need of some rarities.”

Luke began to understand, “Rarities that can kill Oris Sapiens.”

Booker nodded, “Exactly. Oh, quick warning, you’re about to see some crazy shit, so don’t say something a human would say in front of her.”

Luke scoffed, “Her? Who’s her?”

“Not even a second in my presence and you show disrespect,” said a voice. The location of the voice couldn’t be discerned, nor was it human. It spoke in English, but it filled Booker’s and Luke’s ears with sounds eerily reminiscent of river water running over stones.

The voice continued, “Do you, the human that isn’t dressed for the weather, mean to imply that you do not know how to properly greet me?”

Booker replied, “Which one are you talking to? I’m wearing a full-length coat in eighty-degree heat and this one is wearing dress pants in a swamp.”

In front of them, the water began to swirl in a wide circle and from the center a blue hand poked out. Following the hand, was a blue arm and then a blue body. Already this was a peculiar sight but what was specifically strange was the head on the blue body that rose out of the river. Instead of being the blue head of a woman, it was the head of a trout, fully proportioned to the size of a human head.

The trout-headed woman regarded Booker and said sloshily, “I was speaking to your fancy friend. But since you were the one to gift me with a water I have never filtered through my gills before, I am now

talking to you. Can you answer me some two questions? Where did that delicious water come from and what would you be needing on this evening?"

Booker winced and said, "Don't remind me of the time, we are kinda on a tight schedule right now."

"And that was technically three questions," corrected Luke.

Booker turned back to Luke accusingly.

Luke held his hands up in defense, "I'm coping the best I can in this situation."

Booker sighed, "To answer your questions, I got that water from a cave in the Himalayas, isolated from any other body of water. In return for that, we were wondering if you could gift us an Aquester?"

The river spirit tilted her head in thought and hummed. Or at least, what Booker assumed to be humming. It sounded like water churning. River Spirits were hard to read.

Finally, the River Spirit looked at Booker and said, "For this rare water, I can give you this which you asked for. One moment please," the river spirit pencil dived into the water, leaving Booker and Luke alone on the riverbank.

After a moment, Luke asked, "...So that's what, a river guardian?"

Booker gave Luke a look, "Did the fish head give it away?"

Another moment passed and a blue hand rose from the water once more, only this time it was holding what appeared to be a small glass ball. It gave it a toss and Booker caught it. The blue hand waved goodbye and sank into the river.

Luke looked at the glass ball and said, "So that's how we are gonna kill Alan?"

Booker nodded and said, "It's called an Aquester. Luke, let me ask you a question," Booker inhaled sharply, "What is the most important resource in a fight?"

Luke thought about it and said, "Ammunition."

"No. It's oxygen. If you run out of oxygen, you die. And every movement you take costs you oxygen. If you overextend yourself, you die. Not coincidentally, Oris Sapiens are oxygen guzzlers. When they are hunting, they need a constant intake of organic life to break even with their oxygen balance. Unfortunately for us, and lucky for them, they can store oxygen reserves when they aren't hulking out. And every person they absorb adds to their reserves. As such, any Oris Sapien that has made it to the modern age probably has enough oxygen to be in their roided form for an hour, probably longer."

"So, we have to survive for longer than an hour of Alan like he was back at the house?" Luke looked like he was going to be sick, "How long could you last in a fight like that?"

"Thirty seconds, give or take, but that is where this comes in," Booker held up the Aquester, "To simplify a lot of science, this little guy can redistribute oxygen between two surfaces. What we are going to do is break it against Alan, which will cause all the oxygen in his body to redistribute into the air around him. The Aquester was designed to be used underwater, where there is a significantly higher density of oxygen in the environment. So, in open air, it will drain him dry. He won't have enough energy to spend on absorbing anything. We are going to force his body to overextend itself."

Luke nodded, "That's when we can kill him?"

Booker smiled, "That's our win condition. The difficulty now is to set a trap before sundown."

The two got back to *The Bonhomme Richard* and set to work. Booker got his six-shot revolver from his glove box. Luke borrowed some jeans that were too big for him so he could move easier.

As Luke fastened his belt, he said, "So what else is out there?"

Booker looked up from where he was sitting in the back of *The Bonhomme Richard* and said, "Come again?"

"There's River Guardians and Oris Sapiens. You also mentioned Witches. What else is out there?" Luke's tone was somber, reality setting in.

Booker breathed slowly out his nostrils. He didn't know where to begin. He could tell Luke about the creatures that hide in plain sight, or the deadly monsters that once were human, or he could start to explain the Witches, beings from a far away place that Luke wouldn't be able to comprehend.

"When I was younger, just starting my P.I.P. training, I asked a similar question. I heard urban legends and read myths from countless civilizations. I was curious about what was real and what wasn't. I didn't like the answer. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

Luke nodded

Booker smiled and his Deadeye seemed to glint in the amber light filtering in through the car window, "Everything."

Luke nodded, slowly this time.

"You good?" asked Booker.

Luke seemed to snap to attention, "Um, No. But a lot of factors are weighing on that at the moment."

Booker smiled grimly and planned an ambush. Luke had a panic attack. It seemed like the sun sped into the toothy maw of the Appalachians. Then a cold pale blanket of moonlight swept over the swamp.



Luke wiped his mouth as he walked warily from the hollow tree stump he had used as a vomit receptacle. It wasn't far from where Booker needed him to be for the plan. He didn't know how to feel about Booker. Luke knew the man meant no harm to him, but he was dangerous. There was also Booker's ludic demeanor when it came to their situation. Booker put on airs, acting out a jaded and grizzled investigator past his prime, but Luke knew better. He too had met plenty of men like Booker, men who seemed on the way out of the game, ready to quit. Everytime they came back to the table, they came back hungry. Booker, for the most part, had a decent poker face. It was his Deadeye that gave the game away. It was an unsightly thing, and gave Luke the worst sensation of cold whenever it passed over him. Despite its ugliness, it had all the tell tale signs -- when Booker talked about their situation, his Deadeye lit up with glee. Luke was unsure of how to feel about this. Booker enjoyed hunting monsters, some of which, to Luke's understanding, used to be human. That made Luke uncomfortable. Did that make Booker a killer? Was Booker defending the weak, or satisfying some violent urge? If Booker was hunting monsters, what did that make Booker? Luke didn't have answers to these questions.

Then, without warning, a sense of fear trickled down Luke's spine. He hadn't noticed until then, but the sounds of swamp had been silenced. Luke froze in place. Behind him, in the trees he heard a sharp shriek. He whirled around to see that perched on a thick tree branch, illuminated by the moon, was Alan. His attire had become little more than tatters, showing his muscular form. His white hair billowed in the breeze. On his forearm, Luke could see the source of the shriek. It was a squirrel, or what was left of it. Its back half seemed to have sunk into Alan's arm like he was made of quicksand. Luke saw the squirrel go limp as it was pulled further in. As Alan shifted on the branch, Luke could see that the squirrel was not the only creature that was unfortunate enough to cross paths with his former manservant, although Luke

figured that he was neither man nor servant at this point. Among other things, Luke was pretty sure he saw a bird wing sinking inward.

From his lofty perch, Alan spoke, his voice deep and tonal, “You’re making a mistake.”

Luke couldn’t move. Every instinct in him was screaming to run. He wanted to let out a yelp but no noise came out.

Alan descended from his branch and landed nimbly. The moon shone brightly on his pale skin. Luke noticed that where Alan was perched, there were two indentations into the branch where his feet were. Alan could, apparently, eat organic matter with the soles of his feet.

Alan cocked his head at Luke and said, “Why do you think I put up with your insolence? To have you for a meal? Don’t make me laugh. Compared to my normal diet, you’d be little more than an appetizer.”

Luke still couldn’t move, but he found he could talk, “How... how many people have you killed?”

Alan smiled cruelly, “How many slices of bread have you eaten?”

Luke felt sick again.

Alan took a step forward, “No, I had bigger plans for you. I was planning on letting you become what I am. You would be good at it. Wouldn’t you agree that being a shark is better than being a minnow? Isn’t that why you dress and talk and spend the way you do? To show how much better you are than the rest? You can’t claim to not have entertained these thoughts. I know better than anyone what you are. Being your servant for the last month was the greatest proof to me that you are truly an Oris Sapien at heart.”

Alan took another step forward, “This is how ecosystems work, you see. Every organism has its place. I am not to be blamed for merely bringing things to their natural order. There are one’s who are meant to lead, and those who are meant to be food. You have what it takes to ascend beyond being food. It’s just Darwinism. I assure you, my mind is free of hatred and there is not an ounce of malice in any of my actions.”

Luke took a step backward, “You can turn me into what you are? That’s possible?”

Alan laughed chillingly, “Yes, but not by force. It only works if you choose it, like I have. But I know you want it to. Liberate yourself from the bottom of the food chain.”

As Alan took another step forward, Luke turned to his right and screamed, “Booker! Now!”

A roar of machinery along with two bright yellow orbs came from the underbrush. They rocketed out of the tree line and brought with them two tons of tackily painted van. Luke leapt out of the way, but Alan was not so fortunate. *The Bonhomme Richard* slammed into the pale man and sent both careening into an oak tree. Screeching metal signaled that the front of the van wrapped around the oak, pinning Alan between the two. Alan went limp and crumpled onto the crushed hood of the van.

The driver side door swung open and Booker dizzily stepped out.

“Ok Luke, I got him pinned, now throw the thing,” Booker said, as he stumbled away from the car.

Luke fumbled with the glass ball that he had been hiding, he wished that Booker had held on to it, but knew that they couldn’t risk it breaking during the car crash. Luke approached the car and quickly took aim. The last thing he wanted was to get too close to Alan, so throwing the glass ball would have to suffice.

Luke brought his arm up to throw the Aquester. Alan stirred and four things happened simultaneously. First, Booker looked at Luke and his eyes widened in shock. Second, a loud sound of metal scraping and bending filled the air. Third, Alan disappeared. Fourth, Luke no longer had feeling in his arm. As he turned and looked downward, he saw his arm was on the ground, with the Aquester rolling across the dirt.



Being able to see things before they happen is a useful ability. Yet, it is acutely frustrating when you see something that you can't prevent. Booker felt this as he saw Alan's red silhouette project out of his body with blinding speed, and swipe at Alan's shoulder. As Alan's projection of his hand passed through Luke's shoulder like water, Luke's own crimson colored projection reacted, slowly realizing that its arm had been removed and then falling silently to the ground. Then it happened again, except this time it was not faceless silhouettes. Luke's face turned into a grimace, while Alan smiled hungrily. Luke collapsed to the ground with a grunt, clutching what was left of his shoulder.

Booker didn't expect Alan to react so quickly. He looked at where Alan was a moment ago. *The Bonhomme Richard* was still wrapped around the tree, but now there was an indentation into the tree trunk. Alan must have absorbed the tree through his back to get free. Booker couldn't believe how wrong this had gone. He was a professional, and this was turning into a fiasco. He didn't get long to kick himself though, as Alan's silhouette moved again, this time charging Booker. In less than a moment, Alan would put his talons through Booker's chest. Moving on instinct, Booker jumped backwards, so that the tips of Alan's fingernails would just miss him. As the flesh and blood claws followed its projection, a new silhouette appeared. This time, a swipe upward that would bifurcate Booker's skull. Booker wretched himself to the right, ducking into a roll. He could feel a rush of wind blow across his face as Alan's arm missed again. As he hit the dirt, Booker knew he had to go on the offensive. Eventually, he would see a

projection he wouldn't be able to dodge. Booker came to a halt on his knees a few feet from Alan. He darted his eyes to see if he could catch a glance at where the Aquester rolled to. He needed to keep an eye on Alan as well. Booker's Deadeye was powerful, but he couldn't see Alan's projections if he wasn't looking directly at him. Booker reached into his coat and gripped his revolver. It wouldn't do much to Alan at this point, but anything that would give him a second more to think or find the Aquester would be warmly welcomed.

Booker took aim and saw the projection of his bullet. Booker shifted slightly and saw the projection replay until the bullet would land right between Alan's eyes. Booker saw Alan's projection recoil. It would give Booker at most three seconds to track down the Aquester. It wasn't ideal, but it would have to do. Booker knew it was at least within arm's length of Luke.

Alan snarled and Booker started to squeeze the trigger.

Then Luke coughed and said, "Ok... Alan... I choose it."

Both Booker and Alan turned towards Luke. Alan's demeanor changed drastically as he relaxed. Disregarding Booker, he began walking over to the crumpled young man. Booker scanned the area to find the Aquester but to no avail. It had gone missing.

"I'm glad that you see it my way. I was worried when you were going to throw that little bauble at me, but look at you now. All I had to do was increase my metabolism to eat enough of the tree to free myself. And look how easy it was for me to gain the upper hand. Do you see what you could be? Are you not impressed? Unfortunate that you had to go through so much pain to see your error, but you can easily get your arm back after you consume a few humans. You can make some headway by helping me catch this annoyingly elusive snack. Now, I apologize, the process is usually painless, but considering your current state, it will have to be sped up a bit. There will be some... discomfort."

With that, Alan sunk his fingers deep into Luke's chest. Luke let out a yelp as Alan lifted him up, suspending Luke by skewering him. Booker could hardly believe what he was witnessing. Booker brought up his gun again, except this time the bullet's projection was aimed at Luke's head. Booker wasn't sure of the science, as there was no documentation on where in the process of becoming an Oris Sapien do they fully turn, but Booker knew that if Luke changed, there would be no way to continue to dodge both at once. Booker was already getting close to his limit.

Being able to see things before they happen is a powerful ability. It allows Booker to act before anyone else. Another way Booker explains it is that Deadeye allows him to not make mistakes. Booker removed his finger from the trigger. With what must be the last of his strength, Luke pinwheeled his remaining arm, Aquester in hand, into Alan's face. The sound of glass shattering rang out. Alan dropped Luke, who crumpled on the ground again. Alan grabbed at his face and started howling.

Alan's skin became taut. When he moved his hands away from his face, his eyes seemed to bulge, and several deep cracks appeared on his skin. Booker aimed his gun one last time and saw the projection. At last, it was what he wanted to see. Booker pulled the trigger. Alan looked at Booker and as they made eye contact, Booker could tell that, just for a moment, Alan no longer considered Booker food. Alan knew he lost and the emotion in his coal like eyes was anger. Anger, hatred, and fear. As the bullet hit Alan between the eyes and passed through his head, the cracks forming on his face raced down his neck and spread across his entire body. As he fell backwards and hit the ground, his body shattered like a marble statue being toppled.

Booker let out the breath he had been holding. It was over. Booker couldn't help but feel both guilty and impressed with Luke. Booker shouldn't have let Luke get injured like that. On the other hand, even when he was maimed, Luke never lost sight of the goal. Booker didn't know what happened between Luke and his grandpa, but he knew that Dr. Arling would be proud of him now. Booker certainly

was. As he walked over to Luke, Booker saw that, surprisingly, he was conscious. Whatever Alan did to him stopped the bleeding from his arm. However, it was undeniable that Luke needed help.

Booker crouched down and said, "Luke, I am so sorry. You shouldn't have gotten hurt. It's all my fault."

Luke looked up at Booker and said, "Did we win?"

Booker paused, "... Yeah. We won."

Luke smiled weakly, "Great. That's just great. I require the services of a hospital if that's not too much trouble."

Booker smiled, "We'll get you to a hospital. Do you have a car back at your place? Mine is busted."

Luke closed his eyes in pain and nodded in affirmation, "It's on the back side of the estate.... I'm going to lose consciousness now."

Booker chuckled, "You do that. I'll keep you safe. You can trust me."

Luke began to grin, "Yeah... I can... I do... trust..."

And then Luke passed out. Booker cradled his unlikely friend in his arms and started walking back to the Arling manor. The moon was steadily making its way into the sky. Booker silently debated how to explain their condition to the unfortunate intake nurse at the hospital. Car crash? Bear attack? Car crash then a bear attack?

Booker then realized that in the chaos, he lost his sunglasses. Booker stopped to think for a moment, then shrugged and continued walking into the night.