

Preservation Falls

by P.E. Rowe

For Asher Davies, it felt strange to walk into the woods without a rifle. To compensate, he tucked his Glock into a belt-holster under his winter coat. It was mud season—mid-April after the snowmelt, and turkey season didn't start till May. Lately, for the first time in his thirty-eight years, Asher had felt drawn to the quiet of the forest. Like most of his friends and family, who'd lived their lives in the White Mountains, Asher didn't notice the mountains or the woods the way the campers and hikers from Boston did. It was just the normal backdrop of life—the horizon outside town.

Recently, though, as everything in his life had degraded, the woods offered refuge. He'd been a hunter since he was old enough to hold a rifle, but it hadn't ever been a passion or a

pastime. Asher and the people he knew hunted for meat. Deer in the fall, rabbits in the winter, turkeys in the spring, moose if they got very lucky and woodchucks if their luck ran out.

In the past few years, though, as his mother got sicker and further disabled, as his brother got addicted and then dead, as his exes got meaner and more spiteful, and as money got much harder to come by, the woods seemed the only place to find a bit of peace in the world. The trees didn't care about Asher's overdue bills. The rocks relied on him for nothing. The earth beneath his muddy boots didn't charge rent.

Asher parked along an obscure dirt road off NH 118, along the western base of Paris Mountain, a spot he remembered hunting with his uncle as a teenager. Many years back, he'd taken a doe during bow season in a grove bordering the state forest about halfway up this trail. Why he came here on this day, Asher wasn't sure. He

justified it as scouting for turkey season, which began in a couple weeks, but he'd never scouted for hunting season before.

Asher walked from his truck at the end of the road through a low muddy forest with thick undergrowth, parting saplings in the understory with his leather gloves. The air was still cool on an overcast day. As Asher began to climb, the undergrowth became thinner. There was a damp, earthy smell about the mountain as the woods began to breathe again after a long winter. The trail, if you'd even call it that, was a winding bushwhack along an old logging road that made its way up to a streambed and then up to a middle ridge.

As Asher approached the stream, the sound of flowing water, began to drown out the noise of the passing cars on the distant highway behind him. He remembered two waterfalls along the path, which he knew only by the names

his uncle used to call them. The lower one, Deer Falls, was his uncle's go-to spot for bucks in the fall. There were no deer when Asher approached this day, just a streambed flushed with water from melting snow higher up the mountain.

The upper set of falls was smaller, running over a set of mild drop-offs that split a gentle moss-filled gulley. Asher remembered seeing the largest birch tree he'd ever set eyes on midway up that set of waterfalls. His uncle called this spot Preservation Falls. Asher never knew why.

As he arrived along the flat that led up to the falls, Asher could see the skeleton of the massive old birch splayed out along the far side of the gulley. It looked freshly fallen, likely a victim of the heavy rain and wind-storm that had killed the ski season two weeks back.

Asher decided to investigate.

On impact, the tree had shattered into several large pieces along the stream's far bank. Asher walked up the near bank, looking for a way across. As he reached the flatter section about halfway up the meandering falls, Asher noticed an unnaturally round stone sitting in the dark bowl where the birch's roots had pulled up the earth beneath the tree when it fell. The spherical stone looked almost like a pearl in a dark oyster shell that the tree had been hiding under its massive roots for hundreds of years. The orb-like stone had a pink hue to it, almost translucent. It was perfectly spherical, like no stone in nature. Still, it seemed rock-like, much like the granite foundation of these ancient mountains.

He didn't care if his feet got wet; Asher decided he needed a closer look at the bizarre stone. He never got a chance to get close.

Asher's vision went out for a split second, and he felt himself growing

disoriented, a loss of balance. When he steadied himself, he wasn't alone.

Asher could see the stone, now possessed of a fully translucent, glowing skin, hovering over the hole where the tree had fallen, slightly over the water. Extending from the ball was a ghost-like figure, a yellowish-white collection of light that took the shape of a human face, a face that seemed to be examining him.

Asher couldn't move. He wasn't paralyzed by fear. He wasn't particularly fearful. He just couldn't move. The apparition looked him up and down. Then it seemed to focus its attention on Asher's crotch.

Suddenly his phone began buzzing in his front pants pocket. The creature's curiosity seemed to set off all of the device's ring tones in one disjointed unnatural sound, polluting the peaceful woods with its noise.

The head, inching closer, seemed to Asher to be making a gesture toward

the orb. The phone beeped twice, and the head nodded toward the orb again.

“You want my phone?” Asher said.

It repeated the gesture.

“I’d let you have it, but I can’t move.”

Asher saw no change in the glowing features of the figure, but suddenly, he felt his own hand reaching for his pocket. Only it seemed like it wasn’t him moving his arm, as though an external force were tapping the well-worn pathways in his brain, signaling his hand to reach for the phone.

Once his phone was in Asher’s hand, the figure seemed to ask again. Asher wasn’t sure if he had any real choice in the matter. He also wasn’t sure whether it was really happening.

“What the hell?” he said, and no sooner had he thought about tossing the phone to the orb—how hard he would need to swing his arm, how high, when to release it—the gesture was completed for him.

Instead of bouncing off the skin of the glowing ball, the orb absorbed the phone into its surface, almost magnetically. It began to make noise. The figure alternated its gaze between Asher and the glowing orb and the noise coming from the smartphone. The phone began to cycle through a series of languages, most of which Asher had never heard before. He recognized Spanish, and the figure noticed when he did, but it cycled through a few more languages.

“According to the information in this device’s network,” the phone announced, “this location is designated Paris Mountain, Coös county, the State of New Hampshire, in the United States of America, planet of Earth. Is this correct?”

“That’s correct,” Asher said. “Strange as it sounds to hear that said aloud.”

“Standby,” the same digital voice said. “We will explore linguistics and

the specifics of your symbolic language in greater detail.”

“I ain’t going anywhere,” Asher said, noting his current state of paralysis, but the figure didn’t know it was meant as both a hint and a joke. Asher got no response.

A few seconds later, the figure began emitting noises, and its face shifted appearance, producing a mouth that seemed to be trying to coordinate its movements with the sound of the English language. At first there was no coordination between its glowing face and the sound of its voice, then the figure looked like a poorly dubbed movie character, and then it appeared to speak perfectly.

“How did you come to possess this device?”

“The phone? I bought it at Wal Mart.”

“You did not create it?”

Asher shook his head.

The figure emitted a noise that sounded to Asher like a much faster version of an old dial-up modem.

Asher looked puzzled.

“You do not understand?” it asked.

“No,” Asher said.

“You communicate in rudimentary symbolic language and possess the capacity for pure language but do not understand it?”

“I have no idea what you mean by that,” Asher said.

“Who made this phone?”

“I don’t know, probably some ten-year-old Chinese kid in a sweatshop, if you want to get down to it. What the hell is this? What are you?”

“We have never encountered a being like you, and your symbolic language is novel to us. Can you tell us more about it?”

“Look, if you just learned English in thirty seconds from my phone, you’d be better off asking it whatever questions you want to know about

languages. I just talk. I don't put much thought into how I do it."

"These symbols you use—words you call them—how do you process them?"

"How do I process words?"

The figure nodded.

"I don't know. How do you communicate with others of your kind?"

"We use a direct numerical transcription in digital code, similar to the language in the phone."

"Okay, so let me ask you then, how do you process numbers?"

The figure paused, examining Asher carefully.

"You are intelligent," it said. "When you approached, we suspected the phone was the intelligent party using the biological entity as a beast of burden. That is not entirely the situation."

"Not entirely?"

"Yet you carry it? As a way to compound your intelligence?"

“That might be a way to put it, but I’d just say the phone’s useful.”

“This symbolic language is highly inefficient. Yet somehow functional. How was it devised?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by symbolic. That’s a better question for the phone,” Asher said. “Could you answer that question about yourself? Maybe give me a clue what you’re talking about.”

“We were gifted the pure language from our biological progenitors at the transition, and they developed the forms over point-six of a rotation in an epoch the progenitors referenced as—translated into your language—the Age of Purity.”

“So it took a long time?”

“Correct.”

“Us too. I think when we were apes, we made certain noises at certain things until a noise stuck. Something like that.”

“And a word stands in for a feature of your experienced reality, for example the word phone refers to any device such as that one?”

“That’s right,” Asher said. “And just so we’re on speaking terms here, my name—the word for me—is Asher. Asher Davies. Do you have a name?”

“That is difficult to answer,” the figure said. “We are not a discrete entity, not embodied as you are, Asher Davies. We are a sub-designation of a collective consciousness, a larger mind at a great distance from here.”

“How would that larger mind tell you from it, if it was trying to communicate with you?”

The entity displayed a look of surprise. “You are intelligent, Asher Davies.”

“Intelligent enough.”

“There would be a numerical prefix in our communication for the duration of our separation, which I suppose I could attempt to translate into your

Roman characters and then syllables.” The figure hesitated for several seconds. “It takes a long time to retrieve information from your phone, but there are several million permutations that would be accurate. Accounting for the familiarity of consonant clusters in your language, our designation would sound something like Bannskark.”

“Bannskark it is,” Asher said. “And seeing as we’re on a first-name basis now, Bannskark. Would you mind letting me go?”

Bannskark again looked at Asher as though surprised.

“I won’t run off or nothing. I’d just feel better if I had control of my arms and legs and what not.”

“That is against our protocol. We intend to sample you, Asher Davies, for when we report back to the collective.”

“Am I that interesting?”

“You are unique in the galaxy. Between the information we have

gathered in this conversation, and from the information we are collecting from your phone, we can truly say we have never encountered anything as improbable and intriguing.”

“I suppose that’s high praise.”

“An observation. A true observation.”

“So, you’re going to sample me, you said. Care to tell me what that means for me?”

“We will collect your data.”

“Like my memories and such?”

“And your physical makeup, down to the cellular and subcellular levels.”

“I’m not so sure I’m on board for that, Hoss.”

“Hoss?”

“Excuse me. Banskark. That’s just me being familiar.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, sounds like the whole sampling thing isn’t going to work out so well for me—for Asher. I don’t suppose I’d live through that?”

Bannskark paused, seemingly considering. “No, we don’t suppose you would. Does this bother you, Asher Davies?”

“Uh, yeah, that bothers me,” Asher said. “Not that my life is great fun at the moment or nothing, but more than anything, I’ve got obligations.”

“To other people?”

“My mother for one. She’s disabled. She needs my help to get by.”

“This is one of the many things that intrigues us about your species, Asher Davies. The phone has revealed much fascinating data. You perceive yourself to be an individual, yet you are a collective consciousness, yet you have minimal sense of the collective consciousness as an individual. The tension between the competitive and the cooperative has created a feedback loop of hyper evolutionary characteristics in your kind. We are absorbing your species’ body of self-study on your evolutionary psychology. Fear of

death shapes much of your individual experiences. We can see how you would prefer not to be sampled. We would like to continue this exchange of information. If we release you, which violates our protocols, will you agree to stay and converse with us?"

"Sure," Asher said.

Asher felt his limbs return to his control. He shook out the stiffness in his body. For a split second, with his legs once again under his control, Asher considered running off, but no sooner had the thought occurred than he figured the entity would just seize control of his body again at the first sign of flight. He figured he'd have to convince the figure to let him walk.

"The way I see it, Bannskark," Asher said. "By handing you my phone, I just told you more about my species than I could in about a hundred years of conversation. So how about you tell me who and what you are? Alien of some

kind is the only thing that makes sense, but I'm not into sci-fi and all that.”

“We are, as you say, alien to your world. But we are uncertain whether you will be able to comprehend what we are. We are struggling with aspects of your nature, and our processing power outstrips yours by many orders of magnitude. Your symbolic language lacks the precision to encapsulate either our nature or our purposes.”

“How about you give it a try. We may surprise you.”

“Very well,” Banskark said, and he proceeded to tell Asher the origin of his collective.

They were technological beings, descended from a species of invertebrate water-based, sea-dwelling creatures that became so dominant as to eliminate all competition to their collective intelligence on their planet. Banskark indicated that the closest Earth-borne analogue was probably the Caribbean Reef squid or the

cuttlefish. The progenitors, as he called them, were phosphorescent, and communicated using digital pulses of light that grew faster and more complex as they evolved.

They lived for hundreds of millions of years in relative harmony as a biological collective on their world, their understanding of the galaxy improving as they constructed better and better tools for observing the universe. The planet of the progenitors, though, was destined over millions of years to become enveloped by its own sun, just as the human planet of Earth would be in the distant future. The progenitors spent several million years debating the two viable options for surviving the impending disaster. The first would have been to manipulate the orbit of their home planet and temporarily stabilize their natural environment. The second option was to abandon their biological form for a technological substrate,

relocating their collective consciousness to an interstellar craft that could be steered away from all future cosmic threats, functionally making their collective consciousness space-bound and immortal.

When Bannskark had finished explaining, the figure asked, “Do you understand, Asher Davies?”

“So, you’re like a society of immortal techno-squid that lives in outer space. Something like that?”

“Remarkable,” Bannskark said. “You understand, Asher Davies. Now we see the power of this symbolic form of communication in human language. You abandon accuracy in data representation for meaning and you make meaning on the level of the symbolic instead, using words. It’s an ingenious form of data compression.”

“All those millions of years and you techno-squid didn’t think of that? What have you guys been doing all this time?”

“Travelling the galaxy collecting information.”

“Apparently you haven’t learned to take a joke yet either.”

“Ah,” Bannskark said. “Our progenitors had something like humor. We will attempt to incorporate humor into our idiolect as we exchange information with you, Asher Davies.”

“Whatever that means,” Asher said. “So, you’ve been out in the galaxy for how long exactly?”

The glowing figure gave a long answer for a question Asher thought was a simple one. According to Bannskark, once the progenitors transfigured into technological beings, they drifted for eons in the current of the Milky Way’s progression, never venturing much farther than a thousand light years from their origin. But as they developed better probes that traveled farther into the Milky Way, the collective decided that they could gather sufficient information on

any given star system to faithfully simulate those environments digitally, without ever having to visit any of them. However, the collective realized it couldn't probe every star system in the galaxy to find other intelligent life if they remained stationary.

So the collective decided they could explore more of the galaxy by travelling the direction opposite the Milky Way's rotation, dropping hundreds of millions of probes as they progressed. Then, every two hundred fifty million years, when the galaxy cycled around again, they could collect data streams from hundreds of millions of distant star systems the probes had been exploring and simulate nearly all the star systems in the galaxy within their collective consciousness.

"So that glowing ball over there is one of your probes?"

"From three cycles ago," Bannskark said. "It returned some interesting data

that we missed two cycles ago and then went dormant. We could not connect on the previous cycle.”

“What did it see that caught your attention?”

“According to the collective intelligence of your Wikipedia, Asher Davies, I believe we discovered the bones of the gorgonopsian.”

“Never seen one of them around here,” Asher said.

“You wouldn’t have, Asher Davies. They went extinct nearly five hundred million of your years ago.”

“That was another joke.”

“Ah, we did not detect it.”

“Keep at it,” Asher said. “Anyway, what were these gorgonopterous bones or whatever like? Some kind of dinosaur?”

“Similar, but not exactly. Apparently, they were reptilian, not unlike a large omnivorous mammal that is still present in these woods called bears.”

“Stick around for a while and you’ll definitely see a few bears, fellas.”

“We will certainly do so. We are fascinated by the vertebrate life forms on your planet. Bones are an ingenious evolutionary solution to locomotion in a high-gravity environment.”

“I tend to take mine for granted.”

“Ah, a joke?”

“You’re catching on now, Banskark,” Asher said. “So let me ask, you guys have been out here for hundreds of millions of years sending out probes, what exactly are you looking for?”

“We’re looking for other beings to share information and experiences with.”

“And have you found any?”

“None as interesting as you, Asher Davies.”

“Jesus. Well that’s disappointing. Thanks for putting the work in, fellas. On the bright side, though, you guys

just saved us humans like a billion years.”

“That joke was enjoyable, Asher Davies.”

“That’s great, you’re catching on,” Asher said. “But seriously, you don’t run into other civilizations out there?”

“Unfortunately, no. Nearly all solar systems are barren, lifeless collections of chemical masses. We have probe data from tens of billions of planets similar to your neighboring bodies. Very few planets exist in ideal cosmic circumstances to harbor life at all. Planets that do host life mostly never see it evolve past the stage of bacteria or single-celled organisms. We have seen remnants of intelligent life on hundreds of planetary bodies, but these societies tend to be primitive and short-lived on the cosmic scale.”

“So for billions of years you fellas go out and turn over every last stone in the galaxy looking for somebody to

talk to, and there's nothing under any of them? Sounds boring as hell."

Banskark looked perplexed by the comment.

"That wasn't a joke, by the way," Asher said.

"We know. We are trying to understand the perspective based on your words. Boredom, Asher Davies, is a bodily sensation presented to your brain as a biological imperative. Because you have a limited time to feed yourselves, secure a safe environment, and procreate, your body tells you when you are pursuing fruitless activity or inactivity that fails to serve some useful human end, compelling you to act in a different, more productive manner. We have no such constraints on our consciousness."

"On account of your immortality?"

"Yes, Asher Davies. It would seem paradoxical to you, but we simply

don't get bored because we have all the time in the universe."

"Welcome to New Hampshire, then, I guess. Big Day."

Bannskark's image expressed a passable smile. "It is a big day, as you say, Asher Davies. For us, this encounter may rank as the most momentous event since the collective took to the stars."

"It's been a pretty exciting day for me too, Bannskark."

The figure laughed.

"See," Asher said. "You're already catching on. If you really want to level up your sense of humor, do a search on George Carlin."

"We will do so now," Bannskark said. "There is something further we need to discuss with you, Asher Davies."

"Yes?"

"The business at hand, as you would say, is still unsettled."

"Yeah, I haven't forgotten," Asher said. "And for the record, I still would

prefer not to be sampled, if it's all the same to you, Bannskark.”

“We have developed strict protocols over the ages in the event we encounter a species such as yours. Our duty is to collect the first viable sample and as much data as possible before returning to the greater collective for a consensus on proceeding.”

“How long will going back to your ship take?”

“Our ship is five hundred light years away, which would seem instantaneous to us, but our consciousness could not return to this probe for a thousand years. And you, like the gorgonopsian, Asher Davies, would be gone by then if we failed to sample you now. We would still like to bring you back with us, though.”

“I, on the other hand, would prefer not to die today, Bannskark. Still pretty solid on that one.”

“Yes, that is our dilemma, because now that we understand your species,

we can see that it would be a violation of your sense of autonomy to sample you against your wishes. We have devised an alternative, but we suspect our alternative is imperfect, as it passes our dilemma on to you, Asher Davies.”

“How do you mean?”

“Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure,” Asher said, though he couldn’t have guessed what it would mean for him.

“We cannot absorb your consciousness into our collective, Asher Davies, because, though we would learn from your thought patterns, knowledge, and experiences, you would also learn so much from our collective that you would cease to be distinctly Asher Davies any longer. However, we could sequester your consciousness in a stable bubble within our collective, capable of exchanging information with us as we are doing now. Your existence would be a pleasant reality of your choosing, and

it would solve the inherent problem of your mortality. You would be a part of our collective, only a distinct part, just as we Bannskark are distinct from our collective while here on this Earth gathering data from this probe.”

Asher grew quiet.

Bannskark seemed to probe still with a look. “Because we know more about you now, we understand the seriousness of this dilemma, Asher Davies.”

“It’s just,” Asher paused. “You’re basically offering me heaven in a bottle if I’m understanding this correct.”

“You are understanding.”

“Peace, bliss, never worrying about another thing for all of eternity?”

“Correct.”

“I could make my own reality? Walk in these woods for a million years without a care in the world if I want it?”

“Yes.”

“And all I’d have to do is give the word to leave with you now and not come back for a thousand years?”

“If the collective decides to examine your Earth more closely, we would return then, yes.”

Asher was quiet now, he closed his eyes and listened to the water pouring down Preservation Falls. He sampled the smell of the earth and the moisture in the air as it hit his skin. For a moment, he thought that when he opened his eyes again, he might be alone in the woods with the trees, imagining the whole thing. But when he did open his eyes, Bannskark was still there, observing.

“You know, when my dad left us, it crushed her. Broke my mother so bad she took up with any unstable deadbeat who looked at her for long enough she could tell he was paying attention. And that was what broke my brother, and probably me too, if I’m honest.

“And that was the real choice. It’s either that’s real, and that’s the way life is, like it was for my brother, or you say no. That’s not the way it has to be. And that’s the way I’ve always been. I didn’t believe that. It’s always been hard to say no. But I never turned my back on her, and I won’t do it now. And what, for the next million years think about how when it really came to it, I turned my back on my own mother? I’d get to think about that for eternity, floating in bliss?”

“I’m sorry, but no. I have to say no.”

“We thought so, Asher Davies. We are learning much from you and your species, and among those things is the importance of the autonomy of individuals in your collective. We believe that our collective will agree with our decision to not sample you and to wait here for another human willing to take our offer.”

“I’m glad you’re learning,” Asher said. “Wish I could say I learned a little bit from you guys too.”

“Still joking, Asher Davies, even about such serious matters?”

“Especially about those.”

“We have one final request, if we may?”

“Sure, if I can help.”

“We would like to keep the phone to continue to collect data while we wait.”

“I guess you fellas don’t have 5G in that glowing pink ball of yours yet.”

Bannskark laughed. “Very good joke, Asher Davies. It turns out our 5 Million G network is having compatibility problems.”

“Hey! That’s a pretty good one for a first joke. I give it a five or six out of ten. Keep working at it.”

“We will indeed, Asher Davies.”

Asher turned to leave, and as he did, he nodded and said, “Any parting words of wisdom on the nature of the universe?”

“The closest we can come to such truth in your words is that the foundational reality of the physical universe is the mobius strip.”

“I have no idea what the hell that means, but it was nice to meet you guys anyway. Real eye-opening.”

“And we believe the proper words for this situation are: we wish you well, Asher Davies.”

“Good choice,” Asher said, nodding, “you too.”

As Asher walked toward his truck, the peace he'd sought in the wilderness became overwhelming. In his entire life, he'd never walked so indecisively in the woods, turning every so often to look behind him, half expecting to see that glowing pink orb following at a distance, hovering in the tangle of naked saplings. Yet each time he looked, there was nothing there.

He found his hand reaching for his front pants pocket, checking less for his missing phone than for his sanity. Was

it gone? Yes, his phone was gone. Had it happened? Yes, it had happened.

By the time he started his truck, Asher's mind had grown doubtful, not of its accuracy but of its conviction. There were parts of him that now brought forward every awful thing his mother had ever done. Every time she'd let him and Jamison down—left them in the cold car at the Outstation while she got drunk inside and then struggled to keep the car on the road on the way back to the awful little trailer they crashed at in Gorham when she was with Ritchie. The time she'd abandoned them with Uncle Seb and disappeared with that biker whose name Asher could never remember.

The hunger.

The time they had to move when Jamison's teacher started snooping around and threatened to call CPS when he saw where they were actually staying. All those things. That was her. That was what she'd done for him. For

Asher. Couldn't he be the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the universe for one day?

Then he'd force himself to think that if he did give in, go back, he'd be no better than she was on her worst day, no better than their father. Jamison wouldn't have hesitated long enough to take a breath. God damn it.

Asher couldn't go home and sit in that apartment by himself. And watch television? Stare at the wall?

He went to the bar instead. Took forever to get there. It was quiet when he came in. It always was.

"Usual?" Libby said, as Asher sat at the end of the dimly-lit bar.

"Just a Coke," Asher said.

"You all right, Ash?"

"I'm great," Asher said. "Today I learned the secrets of the universe."

"Right," Libby said, pouring out a glass of wet brown sugar water from her soda wand and pushing the ice-filled glass forward. "Isn't it like forty-six or something like that?"

“Huh?”

“I think it’s supposed to be forty-six? Forty-something. Whatever.”

Libby turned her back and left Asher alone on his bar stool.

Asher drank two Cokes in silence, resisting the temptation to start drinking for real. He knew if he had one, he’d be drunk before he knew it, rushing back to Preservation Falls begging Bannskark to take him out of this place, this life.

Before long, Asher was driving again, in twilight, heading back over the pass toward Paris mountain. He wasn’t drunk. He’d won that fight. He’d never forgive himself—not in a million years—unless he made the decision with a clear head.

When he got to the turnoff, Asher could see a set of tire marks in the mud that weren’t from his truck, and as he did, his heart began pounding in his chest. He feared the worst possible thing that could happen had already

happened. That not only had he failed to live up to the only ounce of himself remaining that mattered, but that he would be too late to cash in on his weakness. That some other lucky bastard had already beaten him to the punch.

At the end of the road, there was a newer-model compact car with Vermont plates parked where Asher had parked his truck earlier. He stopped, got out, and felt the Vermonter's hood with the back of his hand. It was still warm. Asher knew he could still get there first.

At intervals, as he rushed up the western foot of Paris Mountain, Asher would stop, listening for footsteps in the darkening understory, trying to gauge if anyone else was near.

It was fully dark in the woods by the time Asher found himself back at Deer Falls, listening to the sound of the flowing stream in the gully below. He descended the bank at a narrowing, as

he knew the fastest way up to Preservation Falls was on the far side. The clouds had cleared off in the evening hours. As he crossed over the water, Asher noticed the skin of the stream sparkling in the cool moonlight, the brilliant half-moon radiating through the gnarled, leafless tree branches overhead. Asher's breath fogged the air before him in the darkness. He suddenly felt compelled to stop.

What are you doing, he said to himself. What are you actually doing?

Asher stood on the bank for what seemed like minutes, listening to the water flow. He looked up at the stars, at the moonlight. The panic that had taken hold of him began to flow out.

To think those bastard squids had traveled all over creation, just to end up here in Coös county. And what have they found for all that?

In the darkness, uphill, Asher could see the black outline of the ridge that

led up to Preservation Falls. He still hadn't made the decision.

Across the stream, in the distance, he thought he heard the sound of crunching leaves in the dark, followed by snapping branches and more footsteps. Asher sat down on a log at his feet. As the noise grew clearer, two pinpoint smartphone flashlights began to make their way down the bank to the stream.

"You see, just like it says on the GPS. We just gotta go up a little ways further, I think."

"You're going to get us lost, Evan," a young girl's voice said back.

"We're not lost," the boy's voice answered.

Asher sat there across the water, obscured in the darkness watching the two lights of the young couple as the kids stumbled their way through the undergrowth.

"This is the dumbest idea you've ever had, Evan. If we get murdered out here by some creep who tricked you

into coming to the middle of nowhere like this, I'm going to kill you myself."

"We're not going to get murdered, Trish. We'll be fine. The worst thing that can happen is nothing will be there."

Sticks snapped. Leaves crunched. Their lights wound painfully slowly, progressing along the bank across from Asher. He thought about calling out to them, to guide them in the darkness—show them the way up to Preservation Falls. Then he figured the sound of a strange voice in the darkness, even a well-meaning one, would startle them so fiercely they might hurt themselves in the fright, so he sat in the darkness, listening. People have to make their own way.

"I don't know why I put up with you," the girl said. "This is so dumb. We're going to get lost."

"I'm not going to get lost in the woods, Trish. The moon's out. Just look at the sky."

Asher did. He looked at the sky. For hours he looked at the sky. He sat in the cold and listened to the water as it passed by and wondered what eternity felt like. Then, as the moon went down, before leaving, he pondered the bones of the gorgonopsian.

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