

ChapterTwo

Rangers

The following afternoon, many of the people living in Luitgarde crowded together in the sanctuary of the St. Vincente church to hear what the local authorities, namely the constable, were doing to stop the disappearances and find their loved ones. It was not typical for the church to host meetings for the town, but this was a clear exception. The town hall was not designed to accommodate such a large crowd, so the church had consented to the use of their sanctuary instead. Luitgarde was not the biggest of towns; maybe 1500 people lived there. It was small enough that the O.I.L. church was really the only game in town.

Thus, even St. Vincente had to offer multiple service times to accommodate everyone comfortably and effectively. The church itself was an old structure that dated back hundreds of years and had been expanded multiple times as the town grew from the village it once was into a proper town. It had been through a fire and an earthquake, but its stone block frame was still standing strong. An iron bell rang out from the peak of a tower that rose from its roof as an altar boy pulled on long ropes that dangled far below, signaling to all that the meeting was soon to begin.

Inside the church, hardwood benches were lined up through the sanctuary beneath the glint of color cast by light passing through a single stained glass window on the west wall. Flickering candles stood in brass and pewter candle holders at both ends of the sanctuary and strategically placed torches shed their light from sconces on the walls. There was a finely worked wooden pulpit on a platform like a small stage just beyond the benches and an altar where the Holy Book of Youja Shilud was blessed before each service. It had the biggest single-room structure in town, so it was the logical choice for such a meeting.

A lot of frightened and upset people were coming in to hear what the constable had to say, so it would have to suffice under the current circumstances. The people of Luitgarde packed the benches full and stood in the aisles, airing their opinions loudly amongst each other as they waited impatiently for the constable to speak to them. Constable Spillman stood on the platform at the front of the sanctuary, having a private discussion with the priest, Father Torsten Kluge. He turned and looked at the crowd for a moment and then shook the priest's hand, appearing to thank him. Stepping away at last, he strode up to the front of the platform to address those that had assembled.

"Alright folks... now listen up please... everyone!" he shouted over the din of voices. Some of the talking died down right away in response, as most came hoping for some answers to the continued disappearances of their neighbors and loved ones.

But, there was a lot of anger too and others carried on with their discussions unabated. Understanding this was a molten and heavily emotional issue; the constable tried his best to be patient in his approach. Some of those conversations were getting quite heated, however, so he whistled loudly to get their attention fully focused on him.

"Quiet please!" he yelled out. "Can I have your attention up here?"

Begrudgingly perhaps, the talking tailed off at last. As the full extent of the crowd turned its attention over to him, he waved his arms about in an encouraging way. Panning the crowd, he could scarcely find anyone he did not know reasonably well. They expected much from him and he did not blame them, but this unfolding of recent events had become a nightmare already. These people had no

idea how much sleep he had lost over it or how the disappearances had affected him personally. As the number of missing people grew without any progress, he was forced to ask for outside help to find answers. He took a deep breath and resolved to give it to them straight and let the chips fall where they may.

"This is a difficult time for all of us," he began. "I can assure you that we are doing everything we can to find those who are missing and what forces are behind their disappearances."

"And what does that mean, exactly?" a fiftyish man asked smartly. "People have been disappearing for weeks now and all you can tell us is you are doing your best?"

"I share in your frustration Henri," the constable replied. "This is a complicated investigation and we are bringing every resource to bear to get some answers."

"Sounds like a load of bollocks to me!" a heavy-set, sooty blacksmith retorted. "Here, here!" many others in the crowd agreed.

"Please... calm down," the constable urged them. "My own nephew is among those who are missing, so I can assure you I am as eager to get to the bottom of this as the rest of you are."

Grumbling arose and spread around the sanctuary. Few of them in their own distress had been aware that the constable's own family had been victimized. With roughly twenty known people missing in only a few weeks since the first disappearance came to light, it was easy to overlook how many families had been affected and who had personal connections to the losses. The constable understood that they were all afraid as well and, rightfully so.

"Now, we have called in some outside assistance to help us," the constable continued. "I have spoken with Father Kluge here about the church's help and we have hired a team of rangers to come in and try to pick up a trail or some kind of substantive lead for us to follow. Those rangers are out there right now, point in fact."

"But, what have you found out so far?" another man from the crowd asked. "I mean, it has been two weeks... surely you have found something."

"No, Merkl," Constable Spillman chagrinized. "That is the frustrating part about all of this. There has not been a shred of evidence, which we cannot really explain, and this is the reason we have asked for help with the investigation."

"That is all fine, asking for help, but what are we supposed to do until these... rangers find something?" a woman asked with concern.

"A very good question," the constable commended her. "From now on, wherever you are when the sun goes down, you need to stay there. That means if you are at the pub, you better have a pillow or be renting a room. No one is to be outside at night until further notice and no one goes anywhere alone in the day."

A collective groan rose up from the frustrated crowd. Public safety was always one concern of course and rightfully so, but word of the disappearances had gotten out and the effect on business was already becoming evident. Merchants were already hesitant to bring goods to the town and the travelers that frequented through had all but disappeared as well. Surely the appearances of such outwardly cautious behavior would kill any hope of a speedy return to normal in that regard. There was even a concern among the town authorities that some of those travelers or merchants could be missing too, though the constable took great care to keep that concern reserved amongst officials of the town.

"Now, I know... I know, folks," the constable empathized. "I do not like any of this either, but it is what it is. If we can take precautions and avoid making ourselves vulnerable, then maybe we can keep any more of us from disappearing while we work to figure this out. I would even advise you to

lock and bar your doors and windows at night, just as an extra precaution. Regrettably, that is really the best we can do until we have a better idea of what we are up against."

Satoochie Forest stood dark and foreboding as dusk settled that evening, with little light penetrating through its thick canopy down to the ground below. Within its shadowy confines, a ranger inspected the ground as he followed the trail of some kind of creature. There had been a combination of strange tracks left behind from its passing, though he was not exactly sure just what kind of creature had made them.

With his hand, he carefully outlined a smooth disturbance pressed into the soil and separate clawed marks near it. He pursed his lips in thought, simultaneously intrigued and perplexed by what he was finding. Then he rose after a moment, continuing his tracking on deeper into the eerie darkness.

As he crept along in his search, picking his way through foliage that was growing across the shrinking trail, he found a tatter of clothing that had snagged on a prickly bush. He picked it up in his fingertips and reluctantly gave it a sniff after looking it over closely. The material was consistent with a typical workman's shirt; a light cotton garment. It had ripped away on a sharp, thorny branch and he made an awful face from the repugnant odor. It reeked of alcohol and urine.

The path of movement and tracks led away from the narrow trail into the thick of the forest from here and he continued to follow it, despite the darkness that had settled with the coming of nightfall. Finding prints was much harder in this part of the forest, not to mention it being dark, but there was more evidence yet to be found from leaves or plants that had been disturbed. He took some kind of object wrapped in cloth out of a side compartment on his backpack, which glowed softly from within so he could scan his surroundings without drawing too much attention.

Slowly he moved forward, continuing to track, night-be-damned. Finally, he came to a hill that rose-up oddly in the deep forest. He climbed up to the top and, after looking around and listening carefully, knelt down by a tree. Digging into his pack, he stuffed the soft-glowing object back in his pack for the moment and he pulled out two small stakes, each with a red ribbon attached. He took one of the stakes and placed it between two roots of the tree and, crawling to the bushes directly across from it, he placed the second just under the cover of the leaves.

The Ranger arose to his feet then and took a step forward, intending to continue with a quick search of the area before taking a brief rest. When his foot hit the ground, however, it made an odd creaking sound like stepping onto a wooden lid or old boards. Instantly, he froze in his tracks and carefully lifted up his foot again, gingerly taking a step back from the spot.

He eased down onto his knees and probed the ground carefully with his hands. To his surprise, he found the edge of something that seemed to be a wooden door; a cleverly obscured trap door was set into the ground and covered by moss and leaves. He clutched and pulled back a layer of the moss to reveal the weathered edge of the wood underneath.

The door itself was about four feet wide and looked to be maybe twice that long; banded by twine and cut from young saplings. He unsheathed his scimitar and slipped the tip under the edge to pry it up. It lifted easily, which was not at all what he had expected. Initially, he assumed it was some old thief's stash or just on old abandoned secret storage someone had once made.

It appeared to him clearly now that this was not the case; this structure was fairly recent. Pushing it up, he looked down into a dark opening beneath. The opening dropped about four feet and descended at an angle away from him to somewhere deeper inside.

He paused and then probed the side pocket of his pack. He again withdrew the lump of cloth with the glowing object and this time pulled back the folds, revealing it. In his hand, the luminescence of a moonstone lit up the immediate area and cast its soft light down into the foreboding darkness below. He took a deep breath and exhaled; then, holding up the moonstone to light his way, he stepped carefully into the hole.

He eased on ahead, slowly and quietly through a tunnel about 12 feet long that ended at a short set of stairs descending to a stone floor. He pawed his lip, understandably apprehensive and a little confused at what he had just found. Pressing ahead regardless, he then crawled on down the short stairs there to an open area that lay below.

As he stepped down onto what appeared to be a cut stone floor, he was a little surprised to say the least. Whatever this place was, it had been constructed elaborately and was no mere thief's stash or hole in the ground. He looked on carefully ahead for potential threats in the soft light given off by his moonstone. The area that opened to his left was actually a room constructed of relatively smooth, cut stone blocks. There were roots squeezing through between the stones in many places and it was dusty with a stale, sour smell like rot. Whatever it was, if it was anything, this part was very old.

"What in the holy hell?" he said under his breath; simultaneously amazed and concerned.

It appeared to him that he had stumbled onto some long buried and forgotten temple or citadel of some sort, but he could not be entirely sure of which just yet. He would have to see more to figure out what this strange place was and why it was out here in the middle of a dense, old forest. What he did notice right away was that there had been activity here recently, so it was either not abandoned entirely or something else had moved in and made it its lair. That might explain the wooden door he had stepped on, at least.

No wood lying exposed to the elements in a moist forest would have survived so long. The recent activity was in the form of notable disturbances evident in the layer of dust that had collected on the floor over the years. Looking up, he then spied another set of stairs across the room going down to somewhere farther below ground, so he began to creep quietly towards them.

Moving closer though, he took notice of the familiar patterns in the disturbed dusty crud on the floor; it was the pattern of foot traffic akin to the tracks he had been following in the forest. The tracks lead between the flights of stairs and were much more distinct here than those found in the forest. They were absolutely not human prints; at least that much was for certain. What they did resemble clearly puzzled him.

"Serpent?" he said ponderingly, barely above a whisper. "Cannot be..."

He looked around and tried to create a scenario in his mind where the details of what he had found in his search so far made some sort of sense. They did not, however. This was nothing he had ever seen before and the ranger had seen a whole lot of strange things in his lifetime. He was an expert on things found in a forest, but this was new to him. What he was pretty sure of now was that these findings must all somehow be related to the disappearances happening in Luitgarde.

He eased over to the second set of stairs and looked down into the soft moonstone-lit area just below. The distinct and unmistakable smell of mold wafted up from somewhere down below and he pulled out a bandanna to try and filter the spores in the air, covering his nose and mouth as he secured it behind his neck. Casting a glance over his shoulder at the stairs leading back up above ground, he seriously considered returning to Luitgarde at that moment and reporting what he had found. But that was just it; what had he found?

He had tracks he could not positively identify and a sunken structure with recent activity. It was something but he was not sure it was enough to go on just yet. He had to know for certain before he reported back because the only thing he really had was a circumstantial guess. If he jumped to conclusions and was wrong, it would reflect badly on the ranger's reputation.

He needed evidence; perhaps an item from one of those who were missing, obtained from inside the structure. Thus, he resolved to continue on down the stairs, descending into the unknown that lay in wait for him below. He crept down to the bottom where the stairs ended and opened up into another

dank, stone room, adorned eerily by shadows cast across two doorways and a hall passage from the moonstone's glow.

As the next morning unfolded, the constable finished his breakfast anxiously and walked down the street to the town hall. He pulled open the front door and walked straight down the central hall of the building to the conference room where the town elders conducted their meetings. Today the room was being used by the constable to meet with the ranger team the town had hired to help with their investigation of the disappearances.

Inside, the head ranger, Captain Jahko Silger, stood at a long table waiting for him. Seated around the table was his team of experienced rangers who had assembled to report on the previous day's search activities and to get their daily briefing on their respective assignments.

"Good morning, Captain Silger," Constable Spillman greeted as he entered.

"Morning, constable," Captain Silger returned cordially.

"Your search turned up something... I hope?" the constable inquired apprehensively, but hopeful.

"Not exactly," the ranger captain admitted before pulling the constable aside in a hushed discussion.

As the two spoke, the frustration of the constable was evident. He shook his head in disbelief and looked around for a moment as if wondering what he had to do to get a break in this case. After speaking privately with the ranger captain, the constable then turned to the others and addressed them.

"Alright.....up here fellas," he directed as the ranger captain clapped his hands together loudly in tandem... "Let me have your attention for a moment. Am I to understand that no one found anything significant in their assigned sweeps yesterday?"

"Well... yes... and no, constable," one of the rangers said finally after a short silence.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean, Quinn?" the ranger captain quipped back. "Elaborate please."

"I am um...not really sure how to explain it, cap," the ranger replied. "None of us found tracks of brigands or some kind of hungry monster stomping around or anything. It is just that... um..."

"What he is trying to say, I think," another ranger interjected, "is that many of us found similar impressions across our search radius that we could not quite identify."

"Impressions?" the constable asked blankly.

"Movement patterns; tracks, sir," the ranger quickly added.

"I would say that was pretty significant, Stack," the ranger captain then said. "Why could not any of you identify them and why are you just now bringing this up?"

"Honestly cap, we did not feel like telling the constable that the town having a snake problem was relevant at the time," Ranger Stack explained. "Once the boys got to talk about it though... and once we realized we were seeing the same things all over. We are not really so sure that it is not relative now... in some way at least."

"Snake problem?" the constable inquired, skeptical.

"You have seen a lot of snakes lately?" the ranger captain asked the constable.

"No, nothing," the constable replied confidently. "To tell you the truth, I am not even sure the last time I saw one."

The ranger captain put his fingertips to his chin, rubbing with a look of concern as he puzzled for a moment. This new information seemed very strange and did not make much sense to him, but surely it had to be more than a mere coincidence if the team was seeing the same pattern all over the area. In any case, it was the only lead of any substance they had to go on at the moment. Finally, he

turned to the others, hoping to glean something else that might shed more light on the mystery of the disappearances.

"What kind of snake makes tracks that none of you could identify? He said at last, seriously bothered. "You are all well trained and none of you are new to the bush."

"Maybe a kind of giant python or some other constrictor," Ranger Stack guessed blindly. "The movement pattern is not consistent with anything we have ever seen though. Whatever this is, it is something new."

"A hybrid of some sort, maybe some new kind of species," another ranger at the far end of the table, Bo, interjected. "A giant species for sure."

"Preposterous!" the constable exclaimed. "Giant snakes are not eating the people of this town."

"You have got a better explanation, constable?" the ranger captain said in retort, defending his team. "And, no one said anyone was being eaten. Am I right, boys?"

"No sir," Ranger Quinn affirmed. "No signs to indicate that, cap. Even if snakes were only swallowing parts of people, they would not be able to go far and we would have found them resting somewhere or found a nearby lair at the least."

"I do not believe this," the constable said, frustrated.

The ranger captain frowned. He found the snake's relevance a bit of a stretch himself, but it was the only angle they had to work with at the moment. Until the finding could be eliminated as a possible catalyst for the disappearances, it was still going to be suspect number one. Then he suddenly noticed that one of his team members was not present. It startled him that he had not noticed before, despite his being busy with other matters.

"Where the hell is Ritter?" he asked the others.

"Have not seen him cap," Ranger Bo admitted. "We just figured you had him off on a special assignment or something."

"No," the ranger captain replied with concern. "He never reported in after his sweep yesterday. He did not come in last night?"

"No cap," Quinn revealed. "We did not see him after we split up. We thought maybe he came in late and reported directly to you."

"Shit," the ranger captain said angrily; mostly at himself. "Get the map out on the table."

Two rangers in the back got up and went to a wooden rack that hung on the back wall of the room. The rack, cut from polished oak, held a score of maps wrapped in protective covers, detailing the town of Luitgarde and the surrounding areas. They grabbed a large map of the whole area and spread it out upon the tabletop in front of them.

The ranger captain came around the table to look at the map, shadowed closely by the constable who peered over his shoulder. Captain Silger leaned over it and studied it closely, mentally identifying the division of assigned areas designated for their search radius. Singling out the area assigned to Ritter, he traced with his finger from their current location to a forested area on the map.

"Alright then," the ranger captain said finally. "Ritter covered the forested area right here; designated section four."

"That is Satoochie Forest," the constable noted. "It is some heavy forest too; more like a jungle in most places and there are swamps farther south."

"Bo?" the ranger captain inquired. "Your area skirted the east part of that forest. What did you see there in section 3?"

"Just the same snake patterns, cap," Ranger Bo replied. "There were lots of them too."

"Constable?" the ranger captain inquired.

"Not too many people venture off into Satoochie," the constable relented with a sigh. "It is a dangerous place; honestly, there could be pretty much anything lurking in the dense cover of Satoochie."

"Well," the ranger captain said finally in response. "I think we have ourselves a target area to focus on, boys: Satoochie Forest."

The ranger captain pounded his pointer finger down onto the map area of the forest and looked at the constable, who reluctantly nodded his agreement. Now, Satoochie was a very old forest that had claimed its fair share of lives in the past. On occasion, remains of a hunter or some kind of vagrant had been discovered there or someone had gone missing and never returned, but such things were not too abnormal, if uncommon.

Those who lived near the forest, the smart ones at least, just avoided it. There were plenty of deadly creatures and plants to be found in an old forest; everyone knew that. Not all of the animals and plants in such forests had admittedly even been cataloged. Also, the dense forests of the sub-tropics were far more dangerous than those of the north. There were many more species of life to be found there and the food chain was less agreeable that humans were at the top.

The constable stepped away from the table to the door of the meeting room and pulled it open. He stepped through the open doorway and outside of the room into the hall, closing the door behind him. Next to the door stood a town guard; an older man in his late forties. The constable turned to him and gave him the news.

"Sergeant...it's Satoochie Forest," he said. "A ranger went missing there. Go tell Father Kluge that it is time to assemble the church's team of volunteers."

"Right chief," the guard replied.

"Oh," the constable added. "Keep this under your hat too. No one outside of Father Kluge needs to know anything."

"Certainly," the sergeant agreed.

The constable returned to the room and closed the door behind him as the guard headed down the hall and off to find Father Kluge. He hung his head low, still unsure whether they were making the right call. When he looked up again, the ranger captain was looking at him.

"Are you alright, constable?" the ranger captain asked.

"I will be fine when this is all over with," the constable replied. "I have a community that I'm trying to hold together... it's a lot of weight for one man."

"I can appreciate that," the ranger captain replied. "I have a team I'm trying to hold together and I am a man down already."

"Captain," the constable countered calmly, "people disappear in Satoochie: always have, probably always will. That team may not come back out and we may not get a second crack at this. I just hope your hunch is right."

"You have any better ideas, constable?" the ranger captain asked pointedly.

"No," the constable replied, "nothing at all."

"Well then, for everyone's sake... I hope we are right too." the ranger captain said.

The town guard, Sergeant Schepers, exited the building straight away and walked briskly across and down the street, heading for the rectory at the St. Vicente church. Like everyone else there in Luitgarde, he was just as eager to put the stress and terror of the past few weeks behind him and get on

with a daily life that resembled something normal. The town had lost two guards already and finding volunteers to replace them for street patrols was proving difficult.

The townsfolk may have demanded results from them, but few were so keen as to put themselves in danger to protect everyone else. Fear was eating the town alive and, in some respects, was worse than the problem that had spawned it. As he walked along, he whistled aloud nervously. He took great care to keep the matter to himself as he exchanged pleasantries with those he passed along the way, but he wanted to tell everyone in the worst way.

With so little hope to hold on to as of late, any kind of hope, even a fool's hope, would be a big boon to the town's morale. Still, there was probably no sense in exciting anyone and maybe causing them to foolishly let their guard down either. They would know all they needed to know when the time was right. When the team of volunteers arrived at their little town armed for battle, they would know.

Scheper crossed the street again to the church and made his way around to the rectory on the far side of the grounds. He looked around to see if anyone was watching him, concerned someone might ask questions or see through his pretense that nothing important was going on. By his own admission, lying was not really his strong suit.

He reached the rectory door, relieved that he could finally tell someone, though he realized that he still had to make it back to the town hall without cracking. He would feel much better after the constable had made an official announcement. He knocked on the rectory door and waited anxiously. When the door creaked open at last, it was a postulant, not Father Kluge who stood before him.

"I... I have an important message for Father Kluge," Scheper stammered, a little surprised to find someone else at the door. "He is resting at the moment," the postulant explained to him. "Give it to me and I will see he gets it as soon as he wakes."

"NO...no," Scheper panicked before calming himself. "I must give it to him and it must be now. Wake him at once... it is very important."

"Alright... I will tell him," the postulant replied after a moment, a bit taken aback by the sergeant's odd behavior. "Wait here."

The door closed again and Scheper nervously waited. He fidgeted as the minutes passed by, eager to just deliver the message and be done with it. Then, the door opened again at last, this time with Father Kluge standing there before him.

"Sergeant Scheper," Father Kluge greeted, curious. "Not an urgent confession, I hope?"

"Thank heavens," Scheper said, relieved. "No, no... uh, well later maybe. I bring news from the constable, father."

"Malvay?" Father Kluge called behind him to the postulant who appeared beside him shortly.

"Yes, father?" he responded.

"Go to the market and fetch us some fresh fruit," Father Kluge ordered gently.

"Now, father?" the postulant asked.

"Of course now," Father Kluge responded, less gently. "Go on."

The young man slipped past Scheper and walked away, off toward the market. The two of them watched him go, until he was out of earshot. Then the priest turned his attention back to the sergeant.

"Come inside quickly then," Father Kluge replied, glancing one last time across the grounds. "Tell me everything."