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1

CYPRESS FOREST, HIDA MOUNTAIN RANGE, JAPAN

08:54 a.m. Local time

The butterfly was an Alpine Grayling, a two-day-old creature living in a clearing in a valley of the Hida mountain range in Japan.

This particular butterfly was a male, one of a late brood, hatching in the final moments of autumn warmth, and programmed by nature to feed, locate a female, and mate—all in a ten day lifespan before the first chill nights of the coming winter would end the struggle for life.

Male butterflies are frequently territorial, they chase competitors away with a rising 'dance' that to an uneducated observer can look like a mating ritual.

The butterfly was dancing now, sparring with a rival which soon gave up the challenge and flew away into the forest. The Alpine Grayling descended to ground level and flitted among the wild flowers, feeding on the nectar with its long proboscis as bees and beetles jostled for space.

Then it sensed a threat; danger was in the air.

2

CYPRESS FOREST, HIDA MOUNTAIN RANGE, JAPAN

The butterfly collector was Professor Daichi Yamada, an entomologist from the Institute of Insect Systemization and Ecology in Osaka.

He was midway through his annual field trip, based in a tent way off the beaten track.

Yamada had set out alone at seven a.m. with his net and collecting boxes. He was a fit man for a sixty year old: tramping around these rugged mountains was a routine working day for this white-haired academic even if he often got lost along the way.

Now he was deep in a forested zone of cypress trees, searching for specimens which were missing from his collection.

He reached a clearing filled with flowers. Suddenly he saw it. An Alpine Grayling, a healthy looking specimen which had been on his hit list for a while. The brown-coloured butterfly was darting around nervously, seeming to sense a hint of danger.

Yamada crept forward on his hands and knees. Midges and biting flies were buzzing around his ears and neck but their irritating stings were the last thing on his mind at that moment.

He held out the collecting net, stretching to the limit as the butterfly came tantalizingly close.

3

PARADA DE LUCAS, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

At that exact moment, halfway round the world, in the sweltering heat of a Rio night, a thirteen-year-old boy was struggling to get a huge load of rubbish onto his back. It was a couple of hours before midnight local time, an hour when more fortunate children would be safely tucked up in bed.

The kid was slight of frame, malnourished, in fact, with the watchful, prematurely adult eyes of a boy who suspects his life is worthless and who has seen too much cruelty at too young an age. His real name was Remo, but the people of the *favela*—the shanty town—called him the 'pig-boy'.

The reason for the nickname was simple: Remo was one of the pigswill porters for the township, spending his time searching for rotting vegetables and other organic waste behind supermarkets and market stalls, then selling it for a pittance by the containerful to people who kept pigs in their gardens and yards.

The work was intensely physical and on occasions it was also downright dangerous; shopkeepers in the smarter parts of town didn't want the tone of their establishments lowered by kids like the 'pig-boy' rooting in their bins.

Sometimes they would set their guard dogs on him, just for fun. Remo had the scars on his calves to prove it.

4

CYPRESS FOREST, HIDA MOUNTAIN RANGE, JAPAN

The professor lunged forward, swiping the collecting net in a wild arc.

Missed. The Alpine Grayling dodged the mesh with a sudden swerve to the right.

The professor mopped sweat away from his eyes. He could have let it go but that wasn't Yamada's style. He was a doggedly determined man, and that specimen was one he had been searching for for several years.

The butterfly led the academic far from the clearing, into a zone of chest-high poplar bushes.

Yamada pushed his way into the dense thicket.

The butterfly descended. Nearly within reach. The professor jumped up, the mesh of his collecting net making a swishing noise in the air as he came within an ace of catching it.

Then he almost jumped out of his skin.

A black bear was sleeping right there in the thicket.

And the professor had just blundered into it.

He froze. But it was already too late.

The bear was awake. And it was mad as hell.

The creature bellowed out a mighty cry, long strings of drool dripping from a mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth.

5

PARADA DE LUCAS, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Back in Rio, a souped-up Hummer jeep was racing through the streets of the *favela*, thrash metal blasting on the stereo. The chunky vehicle was almost too big to squeeze through the alleys of the slum, the shanty buildings zooming past in a crazy flash of speed as the driver whooped and laughed with drunken pleasure.

A fifteen-year-old driver with no licence and a belly full of rum.

The vehicle was a real piece of work, a blinged-up bullet-proof monster which had cost more than two hundred thousand dollars. It was sprayed in gold, quartz pimp-lights studded into the alloys, smoked-glass windows protecting the occupants from curious eyes.

The owner of this travelling fortress was a man as dangerous as he was rich. Leonardo was one of Rio's more notorious drug barons, a cunning backstreet mobster who had got lucky and pulled off some huge deals. Now, thanks to a series of violent coups against his rivals he was king of the *favela*, a much feared gangster with a small army of enforcers and dealers working for him.

The driver—Leonardo's son Casio—was following enthusiastically in his father's dubious footsteps. He even mimicked Leonardo's look, with intricate buzz-cut hairstyle and razor-striped brows.

'Don't be such a wimp!' Leonardo goaded his son. 'I don't want to see that speedo fall below sixty.'

Leonardo twisted the cap off a bottle of whisky and swigged hard on the liquor as Casio pushed the Hummer even harder down the dirty alleys. 'You're doing good,' Leonardo said, 'I'm proud of you, son.'

6

CYPRESS FOREST, HIDA MOUNTAIN RANGE, JAPAN

The bear pawed the ground, ripping up roots and clouds of earth with powerful claws. The professor stood stock still, quivering with terror, his mind racing through half-remembered tips on how to survive a bear encounter.

The truth is this: if you are going to bump into a bear in the wilderness of Japan (or in any wilderness for that matter), it really is advisable *not* to meet one in the autumn.

At that time of the year bears become anxious. They sense that winter is coming and it makes them nervous. They are painfully aware that they have to build up crucial body fat to survive the long hibernation. They get stressed, inclined to pick a fight. Just a year or so earlier a bad-tempered black bear had seriously injured nine people in a small mountain town nearby.

It just wandered out of the woods and mauled them for no reason whatsoever other than it was having a bad day.

This bear was having a bad day as well.

And the hapless professor had just made it worse.

Seconds later, the creature charged.

7

SHINKANSEN BULLET TRAIN, TOKYO CENTRAL STATION, JAPAN

At that instant in Tokyo, two hundred miles to the east, a fourteen-year-old girl called Saki arrived at the central railway station and boarded a bullet train for Nagano.

Saki was getting some curious looks from her fellow passengers.

It's not every day you see a pet rat on a train.

The rat was a two-year-old creature, sitting now on Saki's lap in its little cage. Its name was 'Brad': Japanese girls are crazy about Mr Pitt.

Saki spent quite a bit of time on the bullet train: her parents had split up a year before, forcing her to shuttle backwards and forwards between her mother in Tokyo and her father in Nagano. Since then she had felt as if her life was sliced in two—with neither half complete.

No wonder Brad the rat had become so important to her. At least he was company on the endless journeys from one parent to another.

Plus, secretly, Saki liked the way he freaked people out.

Saki was feeling thirsty. She needed a soda. She picked up the little cage by its carrying handle and set off towards the catering car. As she did so she heard the doors shut with a gentle hiss.

The bullet train pulled out of the station and began to pick up speed.

8

CYPRESS FOREST, HIDA MOUNTAIN RANGE, JAPAN

Yamada crashed through the thicket, the galloping bear rapidly gaining on him. It was phenomenally fast for such a huge creature.

Control the panic. Don't lose control.

Even as he ran, the professor was thinking what to do. Should he lie on the floor and play dead? Try to climb a tree? Keep running in the hope he could outpace the bear?

He decided to throw his rucksack.

Perhaps the bear would be distracted by it. Attack the rucksack instead of him?

He shrugged off the straps and slung the bag into the undergrowth as he ran. But the creature ignored it and kept coming. The professor risked a glance back. The bear was just a few metres behind him and it certainly didn't look as if it was going to give up the chase.

One thing was sure. This was no bluff charge. The creature was going to teach this blundering human a lesson he would not forget.

The professor saw a cypress tree ahead. It had a low hanging bough which he might just reach if he jumped. He leapt for the branch, curling both hands around it . . .

9

PARADA DE LUCAS, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

The Hummer blitzed a trail through the slum, the two-tone horn blaring, sending roosting chickens squawking into the night. A couple of late-night revellers dived for a ditch as the vehicle roared past. Leonardo zapped down the window and fired his pistol into the sky, the ripe stench of rotting rubbish filling his nostrils as he breathed in the night air.

'Wake up, losers!' Leonardo screamed. 'There's no time to sleep!'

Casio slammed the Hummer into top gear, a big grin splitting his young face. It was shaping up into a great night.

Just an hour or so earlier, Casio and his thuggish mates had been downtown, targeting a family of rich American tourists eating at one of Rio's late-night food malls. There were two young boys with the family, both laden with attractive gadgets and innocent as new-born lambs.

Casio and his gang had waited until the two boys went to the rest room, cornered them there, slapped them around a bit and mugged them of their toys.

The thugs had split the spoils; Casio—the ringleader—coming out of it with the American kids' iPhone and a state-of-the-art MP4 player.

The look of raw fear on the kids' faces had been a buzz. Sure, they were only eleven or twelve years old, but it still made Casio feel like a real gangster.

He loved that rush. There was nothing like it.

10

CYPRESS FOREST, HIDA MOUNTAIN RANGE, JAPAN

Professor Yamada made it to the main trunk and scrambled awkwardly up to the highest point of the tree. He was shaking with morbid fear as he watched the angry bear pace backwards and forwards on the grass beneath him.

Would it try and climb the tree?

If it did he had no idea what he would do.

He forced himself to get his brain in check. A call. He had to get some help. Fast. He needed someone to come and shoot that bear before it killed him.

Yamada took out his mobile and dialled the emergency services.

'Hello. What is the nature of your emergency?'

'M . . . m . . . m . . . m . . . my . . . n . . . n . . . n—'

Yamada could have wept with frustration. He had suffered from neurogenic stuttering ever since childhood and—now of all moments—the stress of the bear incident had brought on an attack.

'Speak up please, caller. I am not hearing you properly.'

'N . . . n . . . n . . . n . . . n . . . name . . . '

The police operative did her best but she could not understand a single word that the professor said.

Yamada terminated the call. The bear was still staring up at him with furious intent. Then he remembered a colleague; a friend who could understand him well even when his stuttering attacks were at their worst.

Yamada selected his contacts folder.

11

PARADA DE LUCAS, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Remo the 'pig-boy' turned down a sewage-filled alley and found the bins of a fast-food restaurant. Years working in the dark had given him phenomenal night vision. He was using the faint glimmer of starlight to help him sift through the waste.

There was plenty of good food there for pigs: half-eaten pizza crusts, rock-hard rinds of mouldy cheese, withered old potatoes which were soggy to the touch.

Remo got to work. Filling up his sack.

As he worked he thought about his mother, lying sick in a tumbledown hut on the other side of town. Her working days as a factory cleaner were over; her lungs riddled with disease. Remo's father Carlito was no longer around; he'd gone to sea on an oil tanker two years earlier and they'd never heard a word since.

There was no safety net for the inhabitants of the *favela*. No sickness benefit. No government support. Neighbours could be kind, but how often can you ask for help from people who have themselves got nothing?

That was why Remo had started up the waste collecting. Without the few coins he brought home to his mother every Sunday she would starve to death. That was the hard reality of life in the *favela*.

Remo longed to leave the stinking little tin shack where he lived. Sometimes he fantasized about taking his mother back to the sugar cane plantation where she had spent her

childhood. The stories she told about that place . . . it seemed like a sweet heaven: clean sheets, hot food . . .

A scabby dog growled at him from the shadows.

Dream on, he thought. *Get real.* This is how it's always going to be.