

Thompson Training and Rehabilitation Facility Near Fayetteville, West Virginia USA

FADE MANAGED to achieve a state between sleep and consciousness that he could more or less maintain. His eyes were open but didn't register the hospital-like room he'd occupied for the last three months. And the dreams didn't come. They were out there, though. Hiding under his bed. Peeking through the crack in the bathroom door.

A sound slipped through his barriers, but it was hard to say if it was real or just one of those monsters on the move. In the end, it turned out to be both.

"Hajjjjjjjjjjj!"

The shout was followed by ham-sized fists hammering Fade's locked door. The handle rattled uselessly, followed by more pounding, this time hard enough for dust to rise off the jamb and hang pale in the air.

"Come out and play, Haji! You're going to die soon anyway! Haven't you heard? All you old bastards!"

Fade frowned. He was only a few years Thor Erickson's senior, and it was almost three in the morning. Apparently, the NFL lineman he was sharing the facility with found a way into the pharmaceutical cabinet.

Fortunately, the door was original to the old building, lovingly created from solid oak. Back before robots, assembly lines, and particleboard. When craftsmen learned at their fathers' sides and took pride in what they did.

"Thor!" A woman shouted. "What's wrong with you? Go back to bed!"

Fade groaned and muttered to the empty room. "What are you doing, Lisa? Lock yourself in your room." The pounding went silent.

"Are you high? Have you been taking drugs?"

Heavy footsteps, still slightly off rhythm from his knee injury.

"Stop it! Go back to bed! Now!"

His response was muted but intelligible. "Oh, come on. You said you'd do whatever it took to put me back together . . ."

Then running. Light footsteps with a quick, even beat. But then the chase was on. It shook the entire building.

Fade swung his feet off the bed and stood, stretching his back and registering once again that it felt good. Probably not good enough to save him, though.

When he arrived at the open door to Lisa's office, she and Erickson were on opposite sides of the desk, staring at each other like the lecherous boss and pious secretary from an old sitcom. When he feinted left, she moved right. When he feinted right, she moved left.

Of course, he could go over or through that piece of IKEA plywood any time he wanted. The question was whether that was really what he had in mind. So far, his violence had been limited to the psychological kind.

Would it stay that way?

Best to hang back and wait for an answer. Fade knew his involvement would only escalate the situation. If this was nothing more than a little harmless fun, better to let the god of thunder get bored and end it on his own.

Erickson's knee brace was conspicuously absent, exacerbating some residual instability to the outside. It caused him to move right more confidently than left. The power, size, and incongruous grace that had made him famous on the field were all there, though. As was the laser-like focus on destruction.

"Okay, this isn't funny anymore," Lisa said with impressive calm. "It's time for you to go back to bed. If you don't, you could do damage that I can't fix. It could end your career, Thor. Do you understand?"

The discipline necessary to conjure such a serene tone was noteworthy but also a complete misreading of this piece of shit's psyche. He fed off the fear he instilled in others. Denying him that would just cause the fire to burn hotter.

Erickson threw himself forward and managed to get hold of her upper arm. She tried to break free but, despite being a hell of an athlete in her own right, had no chance. Instead, she was dragged over the desk and spun around. With his hand now clamped around the back of her neck, she ended up bent at the waist with her cheek shoved into the blotter.

And so it began.

Fade tore himself from the wall he was leaning against and walked to the doorway.

"Hey, big guy."

Erickson spun, knocking Lisa to the floor. Instead of using her newfound freedom to bolt, she waved Fade off. "Go back to your room! It's okay."

He wondered if she actually believed that she could control this douche-bag or if she was just willing to take the bullet to keep her first— and unquestionably most

charming—client safe. Not that it mattered. Either she had an unwavering faith in humanity or bigger balls than anyone he'd ever met. That made her worth something. If Lisa Thompson existed, maybe humanity was actually worth saving.

“Looks like you got a hold of a little too much, Thor. Why don't you and I go outside and walk it off. Let Lisa hit the—” It was impossible not to marvel at the man's charge. It was like getting shot at by a hippopotamus cannon.

Options were limited, and Fade had already considered all of them. Showing up to this fight in nothing but boxer shorts was intentional. Not just because it was becoming a bit of a tradition, but because football players tended to make good use of their opponent's clothing to gain control.

The second decision had been even harder than condemning himself to being beaten to death in his underwear. He'd committed to not retreating into the hallway. While bigger than the office, it was certain death. Outrunning this prick over a quarter mile would be a piece of cake, but not so much over the length of that passageway. Further, there was nothing out there that could be used as a weapon. Going up against this bulldozer empty-handed wasn't going to end well. Anything short of an RPG was going to feel light.

Fade slipped into the office, staying on Erickson's weak side and ramming a shoulder into him as they came even. The hope was to nudge him in line with the door and let his momentum carry him through. Then they could barricade themselves inside and wait for whatever he'd taken to wear off.

It turned out to not be that easy. Hitting the guy was like colliding with a sack of wet cement. And the idea that his momentum could be counted on to carry him anywhere turned out to be a complete fantasy. The son of a bitch could stop on a dime.

Erickson spun, swinging an arm that caught Fade in the shoulder he'd used so

ineffectively a moment before. The force nearly lifted him off his feet, sending him crashing into— and then over— Lisa's desk. He landed face-first in her chair, which immediately rolled away and sent him to the floor. The illusion of having a bit of cover disappeared when Erickson swept the desk away like it was made of papier-mâché.

Admittedly a bad start, but finally, part of Fade's master plan worked. Sweaty, bare skin was hard to hold on to. It wasn't a lengthy reprieve, but it provided an opportunity to throw a magnificent punch directly into the man's groin. Perfect leverage, great technique, propelled by Mystery Machine-enhanced muscles.

The motherfucker didn't even notice.

A moment later, Fade felt himself being lifted. His head penetrated the acoustic tile ceiling, providing him with a brief view of the AC ductwork before he was yanked down again. The bear hug he ended up trapped in was centered on his lower back, and he expected his spine to fail. It didn't, though. Whoever performed his surgery was due a gold star. No numbness or paralysis from the waist down. Just a complete inability to breathe.

A quick review of his situation uncovered a number of problems, the worst of which was that he was being slowly crushed to death. On the brighter side, he was facing his opponent, and his arms were free. Also, Lisa was releasing a steady stream of obscenities that would have made even his old master chief blush.

Hilarious.

He leaned forward and bit down on Erickson's nose while simultaneously trying to drive a thumb into his eye. Accustomed to having his face protected by a helmet, he was taken by surprise, and Fade once again found himself sailing through the air. This time he landed on the sofa, which wasn't too bad until he went over the side and landed on Lisa's guitar. It shattered beneath his weight, driving a sizable shard into his left triceps.

By the time he yanked it out, Erickson was coming at him, adding his own screamed epithets to Lisa's.

The sofa took the brunt of the collision, but the lineman was still able to get a handful of Fade's hair. Putting up a fight would just waste energy, so Fade allowed himself to be dragged, focusing on keeping hold of what was left of the guitar. Erickson's knee finally started to show signs of weakness, reducing the force with which he was able to slam Fade onto the desk. Still hard enough to loosen a few fillings, but not sufficient to prevent Fade from winding a couple of the guitar's strings around the man's nearly nonexistent neck.

A massive fist connected with his ribs, but Fade ignored it as he tried to fight his way into a position where he could exert some force. Then Erickson made the fatal error of jerking back.

The strings tightened, opening a deep gash that caused his incredible strength to falter. Fade held onto the broken neck of the guitar with one hand and the detached bridge with the other, allowing himself to be pulled to the floor. Erickson kept swinging, connecting repeatedly, confused as to why he was inflicting so little damage.

Lisa appeared from the right, pressing a cloth to his neck in an effort to stop the fountain of arterial blood. A swipe of the man's hand was still enough to send her spinning across the floor.

Fade got a hold of wrists too thick to wrap his fingers all the way around, gaining a certain amount of control. "You're dying, man! Pay attention!"

Erickson's eyes widened, revealing pupils dilated into manhole covers. Imminent death was a hard thing to process. Fade knew that better than anyone. But it was something to be stared in the face. No one should be cheated out of life's last and most profound experience. Not even this tool.

Erickson finally went still, and Fade tried to stand, using the edge of the desk for balance. He righted Lisa's chair and sat, not sure for a moment whether it was spinning or if it was just his head. He looked down at a desk drawer hanging broken to his right, trying to bring the image into focus.

When his vision finally cleared, one of his many suspicions was confirmed. It was refrigerated.

He retrieved an icy Coke and then forced the drawer above, revealing an elaborate junk-food stash. Ho Hos. Twinkies. Chips of various crunch profiles and flavors. The mother lode.

His first sip of Coke in years tasted like blood, so he spit it out. The second was heaven.

"Help me!" Lisa was on her hands and knees, once again pressing a cloth to Erickson's neck.

"You're wasting your time."

"Then do something!" He opened a packet of Pop-Tarts and took a bite. Cinnamon. What kind of sick taco bought cinnamon? "He's not going to make it, Lisa. Take my word for it."

"Call an ambulance!"

He made a show of searching his nonexistent pockets. "No phone."

She retrieved hers from her sweatpants and threw it at him. He scrolled through her contacts until he found one that said Matt. No last name.

It took six rings, but a familiar voice finally answered. "Lisa? Is everything okay?"

“We’ve got a problem.”

A full second passed before Egan responded. “How big?”

“About three hundred and twenty-five pounds.”

The next pause was longer, accompanied by what sounded like fingers on a keyboard.

“It’s going to be a few hours before I can get anyone there. Can you not screw anything else up until then?”

“Sure. No worries.” Fade disconnected the call.

Despite not being a particularly long conversation, sometime during it, Erickson had expired. Lisa fell back into the blood pooling behind her, blond hair glued to the tears and sweat on her cheeks. Fade grabbed a bottle of chocolate Yoo-hoo and rolled the chair alongside her.

“Here. Drink this. It’ll make you feel better.” She grabbed it and removed the lid with a practiced twist, draining almost half before coming up for air. “Better?”

No response.

“Are you hurt?” When she shook her head, he put a hand under her arm and lifted her to her feet. “Good. Now let’s get you cleaned up before the cavalry arrives.”