

Stress Signal

By

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When her fiancé vanishes during a government expedition in the contaminated Appalachians, a determined fiancée must confront a monstrous lizard-Kathoga to save him.

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FADE IN:

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - ESTABLISHING SHOT - MORNING

A seven-year-old boy wanders through the dense, sun-dappled forest, his small figure dwarfed by towering trees.

In the distance, his parents' frantic voices echo through the trees.

MOTHER
(shouting)
Where are you, honey??

FATHER
(panicking)
Stay where you are!

The boy stumbles upon a cluster of peculiar leaves, glistening with a strange, sticky mass.

Curiosity piqued, he reaches out to touch it.

Suddenly, a small brown bear appears, its eyes wide with curiosity.

The boy freezes, then giggles as the bear sniffs the leaf and begins to lick the mass.

Just then, the boy's parents burst into the clearing, their sudden appearance startling the bear, which scampers away.

MOTHER
(kneeling, breathless)
Kevin, don't ever run off like that again! You scared us half to death!

She pulls him into a tight embrace, her relief palpable.

FATHER
(softening)
You could have gotten hurt, buddy.

As they walk away, the camera lingers on a nearby sign: "**DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS.**" The tension hangs in the air.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - RTC ENVIRONMENTAL - DR. AMERA QUIROZ'S OFFICE - DAY

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (26F), a passionate global warming research

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scientist, is hunched over a microscope, examining soil samples from the forest.

Her assistant, PERWAH (22F), a no-nonsense idealist, watches her with a mix of concern and exasperation.

PERWAH
(crossing her arms)
Seriously, what are you looking for in that dirt?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(eyes lighting up)
Something significant. I can feel it.

PERWAH
(exuding sarcasm)
Right. Dirt is known for its secrets.

Amera digs into a hard clump of soil, and suddenly a worm wriggles free, startling her. Perwah raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing on her lips.

PERWAH (CONT'D)
Wow, That's really something.

Amera's frustration simmers beneath the surface, a mix of irritation with Perwah and her own self-doubt.

Perwah glances over as DR. SERGIO MIERGO (27M), a confident environmental scientist, strides into the department, his presence commanding attention.

INT. DR. SAMUEL NATHAN'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Dr. Miergo enters the office of DR. SAMUEL NATHAN (64M), the head of the department. Dr. Nathan gestures for him to sit.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
How's the research coming along?

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
It's progressing.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
(leaning in, serious)
I have a potential opportunity for you. The U.S. Department of Environmental Effects is seeking a scientist to join their team in the Appalachians. It's a sensitive

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assignment, Sergio. They need someone who can manage classified information with discretion.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
(raising an eyebrow, skeptical)
Are these representatives actual scientists or just bureaucrats? What's the real agenda here?

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
I haven't seen the roster yet, but—

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
(interrupting)
Subject Matter Experts at least? I need to know who I'm working with.

Dr. Nathan's expression shifts to one of disappointment.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
This is a huge opportunity, Sergio.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
But it feels... off. Why us? Why now?

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
(leaning forward)
Because we have the expertise they need. This isn't just another project; it's about addressing urgent environmental issues. They're counting on us to provide real data, and we can't let them down.

Sergio shifts uncomfortably in his seat, the weight of the decision pressing down on him.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
But what if it's a cover for something else? I need to know what I'm getting into. Amera and I—

Dr. Nathan cuts him off, sensing the tension.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
Got it, I'll handle the conversation with Amera. Don't worry.

Sergio nods, but his unease lingers.

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DR. SAMUEL NATHAN (CONT'D)
(sighing, leaning in)
I understand your concerns, but this
is a significant opportunity. We're
talking substantial grants for the
department and bonuses for everyone
involved. When the man calls, you
answer. It's a two-to-three-week
assignment—just put your current
project on hold for now.

Sergio takes a deep breath, weighing his options. He
hesitates, the unease evident in his expression.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
Alright... I'll think about it. Thank
you, sir.

Sergio stands to leave, but Nathan's voice stops him.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
Don't take too long.

Sergio nods, a mix of determination and apprehension on his
face, then exits.

INT. DR. AMERA QUIROZ'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Perwah watches Sergio leave Dr. Nathan's office, her brow
furrowed with concern.

She turns to Amera, who is still engrossed in her samples.

PERWAH
(leans in)
Dr. Quiroz, Sergio just met with Dr.
Nathan.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(not looking up)
And?

PERWAH
(scoffing with a smirk)
He was in there with the 'BIG BOSS.'
Meanwhile, you're still digging for
worms.

Amera brushes her off, but Perwah isn't easily ignored.

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PERWAH (CONT'D)
You know that looking for things that
aren't there leads to things you never
wanted to find, right?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(annoyed, still focused)
What are you getting at, Perwah?

PERWAH
You're fixated on dirt while something
important is happening right in front
of you.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(defensive)
Sergio's talented. Dr. Nathan trusts
him.

PERWAH
(raising an eyebrow)
Why weren't you in that office?

Amera finally looks up, a flicker of concern crossing her face.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - RTC ENVIRONMENTAL - DR. SAMUEL NATHAN'S OFFICE - MOMENTS AFTER

Amera stands in front of Dr. Nathan, visibly troubled.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(urgent)
Are you really considering sending
Sergio out there alone, sir?

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
(flatly)
You're not an environmental scientist.

Amera's eyes widen in disbelief.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(firmly)
I have expertise to offer. He's not
the only one who knows about global
warming.

Dr. Nathan's silence speaks volumes.

He's unconvinced.

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DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
I've given you every chance to prove
yourself...

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(interrupting)
Prove myself?

Dr. Nathan sighs, frustration creeping into his voice.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
Dr. Quiroz, if you can bring me
something compelling, you'll earn
opportunities just like this one.

Amera's expression shifts to disappointment.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
So the rumors are true.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
(leaning back, motivational)
Get me something interesting to
report!

Amera stands there, feeling like a canvas stripped of color,
her potential overshadowed by the weight of high
expectations.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - AMERA AND SERGIO'S APARTMENT
-BEDROOM - EVENING

Tension hangs thick in the air as Amera watches Sergio pack
his suitcase, frustration bubbling beneath the surface.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice trembling)
I can't believe this! You're really
leaving for two to three weeks? Does
Dr. Nathan not realize we're planning
a wedding?

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
(scoffs)
Wedding plans, Amera?

Sergio zips up his suitcase with a sharp motion, the sound
echoing in the silence.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
You just said yes without even

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thinking. Just a quick "yes" and that's it?

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
(defensive)
You're right. I should've told him I needed to check with my other boss—my fiancée.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(raising her voice)
That's not funny, Sergio!

She pauses, taking a deep breath to steady herself.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
I didn't have a choice! It's best for the company.

Sergio slams his shoes down, his eyes locked on Amera, a mix of anger and desperation.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(staring back)
You always have a choice!

Sergio steps closer, taking her hands, trying to soften the moment.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
(pleading)
It's just a three-week assignment.
It's work, nothing more.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(shaking her head)
No, it's a whole lot more than that.

Amera pulls her hands away, hurt flashing across her face.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
Well, Doctor, we can both stand before him and make him choose. Would that make you feel better?

Sergio resumes packing, frustration evident as he drops a cylinder on the floor.

Amera's mind races with thoughts of a potential breakup, but she takes a moment to compose herself.

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She picks up the cylinder and hands it back to him, their eyes locking in a moment of unspoken understanding.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (CONT'D)
Thanks.

Amera, her heart heavy, turns away, the weight of the situation settling in.

As she walks off, Sergio's skepticism looms large, the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses from a nearby bar filtering in, a stark contrast to the tension in their apartment.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - ESCAPE BAR - NIGHT

The bar is alive with laughter and chatter as Amera, Sergio, Perwah, JAMES (24M), and other coworkers celebrate Sergio's big opportunity.

Despite the festive atmosphere, Amera's anxiety simmers.

PERWAH
(shouting over the music)
James, get us another round of shots!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(quickly)
None for me.

Perwah gives Amera a pointed look.

PERWAH
(cheerfully)
Come on! It's Turn-Up Thursday! Get scummed out!

Amera's gaze drifts to Sergio, who is chatting with colleagues, a smile on his face.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice low)
A secret project out there in the wilderness? With government agents? He hates them and everything about them.

PERWAH
(supportively)
Who doesn't? But think about the bonuses—they could be a game changer for all of us, especially for you two.

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DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(bitterly)
I've been with this company longer
than him.

PERWAH
(rolling her eyes)
You can either complain all night or
go over there and wish your man bon
voyage.

JAMES
(raising his glass)
Shots, everyone!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(sighing)
Hand me one of those.

Amera downs a shot, the alcohol burning her throat.

She steels herself and approaches Sergio, her expression
shifting to one of playful seduction.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Who's gonna protect you out there?

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
(grinning)
Don't worry about me. I'm untouchable.

Amera forces a smile, her worry evident beneath the surface.

She tries to mask it, but the tension lingers between them.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(softly)
Just promise me you'll be careful.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO
I promise.

Amera lays her head on his chest.

His confidence fades.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - RTC ENVIRONMENTAL - DR. AMERA'S
OFFICE - MORNING

Amera sits at her desk, brow furrowed as she scrolls through

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images uploaded to the company's iCloud. Her frustration is palpable.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(muttering)
A week of silence, and this is what
you choose to share?

Perwah leans against the doorframe, watching Amera with a knowing look, curiosity piqued.

Perwah's gaze sharpens as Amera points to an image of leaves covered in a strange, glistening substance.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(annoyed)
Can someone explain this?

Perwah sits beside her, smirking.

PERWAH
Never seen anything like that...

Amera cuts her off, frustration boiling over.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Not the leaves! What about him not
answering—Doctor Top Secret?

She continues scrolling, eyes narrowing as she notices the date on the last image.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(frowning)
Look at this date... five days ago.

Just then, Dr. Samuel Nathan enters the open office area, upbeat but slightly tense.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN
(exclaims)
Good morning, everyone! Quick update
for you all...

The team gathers around, their attention shifting to him. Amera and Perwah step out of Amera's office, expressions a mix of curiosity and anticipation.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN (CONT'D)
As of today, Dr. Sergio Miergo is
still in the Appalachians. It's taking

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longer than expected, which is normal
for this type of research... I assume.

Amera's confusion deepens as she notices Dr. Nathan
fidgeting, his eyes darting.

DR. SAMUEL NATHAN (CONT'D)
(quickly)
Just be ready. He'll need all hands-on
deck when he returns, so... back to
work!

He retreats to his office, a worried look crossing his face
as he closes the door.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice low)
Something doesn't add up. I doubt he's
heard from Sergio.

PERWAH
(grinning)
Well, he is a liar. You could sneak
out there and look for him. Collect
some samples while you're at
it—perfect excuse.

Amera considers Perwah's suggestion, worry etched on her
face.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - MIDNIGHT

The scene shifts abruptly to a dark, foreboding forest. A
MAN, face obscured, runs frantically, a flickering flashlight
in hand. Grotesque growls echo ominously in the background.

The camera reveals a close up of the man's boots pounding
against the forest floor, leaves crunching beneath him.

The man stumbling upon a large hole. He hesitates, then jumps
into the darkness.

Breathless, he crouches at the bottom, listening intently as
the growling grows closer, the sound of something large and
menacing climbing down after him.

MAN
(panting, desperate whisper)
Come on... come on...

He fumbles in his pocket, bloodied hands searching for his

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phone. Frustrated, he throws the damaged device aside, its screen cracked and unresponsive, and pulls out a digital recorder already in 'record' mode.

Still unable to see the man's face, we sense his terror, illuminated only by the dim light of the flashlight.

His anxiety peaks as the oppressive darkness closes in, and a massive shadow looms over him. His breaths quicken. A deep growl reverberates through the air. The man screams, the sound piercing the night. The scene fades to black.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - AMERA AND SERGIO'S APARTMENT -LIVING ROOM COUCH - DAWN

Amera stirs awake to the sound of her phone ringing. The screen lights up with "**DAD'S CELL.**" She squints at the time—5:00AM—and groans, struggling to answer.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(sleepy)
Hey daddy...

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
Hey, mijia. I hope it's not too early.

Amera rubs her eyes, annoyance creeping in.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
No, just five in the morning.

She sits up, grabs her phone, and refreshes Sergio's uploads for any updates.

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
What happened to my early bird?
(nervous laugh) Anyway, I'm going
camping this weekend. Wanna join me?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Dad, can you call me back later?

As she continues scrolling, her expression shifts as she spots something unsettling.

An image of Sergio's bloody hand catches her eye. Her heart races.

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
I left you a message about it. (sighs)
You never called back...

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DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice trembling)
I'm sorry... the Appalachians, right?

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
Yeah, but only if...

Amera's mind races, her personal issues fading into the background.

She paces, a single thought crystallizing.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(urgent)
Yeah! Let's do it!

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
(surprised)
You sure? I thought you'd be working today.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(interrupting)
Are you bringing your rifle?

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
Yep, and my Metamucil. I even packed your camping gear.

Amera glances at her phone, quickly checking directions to the Appalachian Mountains.

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(jokingly)
We might have more problems out there with the Metamucil. You still there?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I'm here!

She rushes into the home office, her heart racing, determination setting in.

INT. AMERA AND SERGIO'S HOME OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Amera frantically grabs water sample test kits and other equipment, her breath quickening.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(breathless)
I'll meet you at the shuttle drop-off!

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We need to move fast!

INT. AMERA AND SERGIO'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Amera throws open her closet, tossing random clothes and shoes onto the bed, her mind racing with excitement and anxiety.

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
Is everything ok?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(frustrated)
It gets crowded out there at the
forest station; we need approval to be
on the grounds.

OSCAR QUIROZ (O.S.)
OK... can't wait to see you, mija.

She grabs a small duffle bag, tossing it onto the bed, her movements chaotic but purposeful as she packs, the weight of the moment pressing down on her.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - SHUTTLE DROP OFF AREA - NOON

Oscar stands by the shuttle, his rugged 'cholo' exterior complemented by a surprisingly well-groomed appearance.

He exudes confidence, embodying someone unafraid of hard work or challenges.

As Amera approaches, her bags in tow, Oscar's face lights up.

He strides forward and pulls her into a warm hug, oblivious to her slightly standoffish demeanor.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(grinning)
We're here, just like the good ole
days.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(trying to match his enthusiasm)
How long do you think this will take?

Oscar catches the hint of preoccupation in her voice.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Oh, that don't matter. It's an

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adventure. Here.

He hands her a bundle of camping gear. Amera's expression softens, nostalgia washing over her.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(smiling)
I know you missed it.

Amera stares at the gear, memories flooding back.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
Maybe we can find a lodge tonight,
head out early tomorrow?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(interrupting, firm)
No! We should go now. Find a good
spot.

Oscar blinks, taken aback by her urgency.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Uh, okay... cool with me.

He follows her as they walk toward the Appalachian Trail, the weight of unspoken tension lingering between them.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - LATER

Amera and Oscar hike up and down the rugged terrain, the sun filtering through the trees.

They finally reach a level plain, but Amera glances back at her father, concern etched on her face.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
You alright, Dad?

Oscar struggles to catch his breath, his face flushed.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(panting)
You're walking so fast.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(slightly guilty)
I'm sorry, Daddy. I'll slow down.

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OSCAR QUIROZ
(chuckling)
We have all day, you know. It's
camping, not... whatever your
generation calls it-'glamping' or
something.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(muttering)
There's nothing glamorous about this.

Amera scans the area, her eyes darting as she secretly
searches for Sergio.

Oscar suddenly coughs loudly, breaking her concentration.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(concerned)
You don't look too good.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(waving her off)
I'm fine.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
You should sit down for a minute.

Oscar snaps back, frustration bubbling over.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(raising his voice)
I TOLD YOU, I'M FINE!

Amera turns away, masking her worry. Oscar smirks, softening
the moment.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
Sorry for being short with you, mijia.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(exclaims)
Stop calling me that!

Oscar looks puzzled.

OSCAR QUIROZ
I've called you that since the day you
were born.

Amera's gaze drifts again, still searching for Sergio as they
move toward a small forested area. Oscar's expression shifts

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to suspicion.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
You still climbing the ladder at work?

Amera's aggravation flares, dripping with sarcasm.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Going on seven years now. Got
promoted, my own office, even got an
assistant. Didn't I tell you this last
time we talked?

OSCAR QUIROZ
(raising an eyebrow)
Things can change in a year.

Amera shakes her head, irritation bubbling beneath the surface.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
It hasn't been a year, daddy.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(leaning in)
How's Sergio? (sarcastic) You haven't
mentioned him once.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
He's on an assignment, Dad!

OSCAR QUIROZ
(scoffing)
I guess that's what you're calling it
now.

Amera's annoyance deepens, and she ignores his comment as they continue into the forest.

The towering trees provide a welcome shade.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(sighs)
Finally, some relief.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - EVENING

The sun dips behind the trees, casting long shadows as Amera scans the area, her brow furrowed with concern.

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DR. AMERA QUIROZ
We should've stumbled upon a camping
ground by now.

OSCAR QUIROZ
It doesn't matter. We can set up camp
anywhere. We don't have to keep
pushing on.

Amera cuts him off, her voice tight with urgency.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I just want to find a safe spot. We
have no idea what could be out here.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Whatever's lurking out there won't
stand a chance against my rifle.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(muttering)
I just hope we're prepared.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Prepared for what, exactly?

Amera's frustration boils over.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Anything! A psycho, someone lost, or a
pack of wild animals.

Oscar halts, his patience wearing thin.

He locks eyes with Amera, who stops in her tracks.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(exasperated)
What is it, Daddy?

OSCAR QUIROZ
That's what I want to know!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I'm just rambling on an on, you know
how I get.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Yeah, I know you all too
well—especially when you're lying. You
always start rambling on and on, just

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like your mother.

Amera pauses, the weight of his words hanging in the air.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
I thought we agreed to spend time
together.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
And that's exactly why we're out here!

Oscar's gaze sharpens, sensing the tension.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Is this about Sergio? You wanna tell
me what the hell is going on?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Oh, I'm sure you're just dying to
know!

OSCAR QUIROZ
If you wanna come clean about Sergio
and the other woman, just say it.
We're out here in the middle of the
damn forest!

Amera's expression shifts, anger bubbling beneath the surface.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
You keep talking down about Sergio!
He's a good man! He's not cheating on
me—he's always been respectful to both
of us!

OSCAR QUIROZ
(exclaims)
Respectful? He hasn't been respectful
to me.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I wouldn't have been either! You were
rude to him from the start—like some
overprotective lunatic!

OSCAR QUIROZ
You're damn right! You're my only
child; I don't know him!

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DR. AMERA QUIROZ
No soy una niña pequeña! (*I'm not a
little girl!) I'm a grown woman now,
and he's your future son-in-law!
Period!

Oscar glances at his watch, the tension in the air more daunting than the darkening woods.

OSCAR QUIROZ
It's getting late. We need to find a place to set up camp soon.

As they continue walking, the sound of trickling water and chirping birds fills the silence, a stark contrast to the storm brewing between them.

Amera takes a deep breath, her anger slowly dissipating as they move deeper into the forest.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - NIGHT

Amera and Oscar finally arrive at a stunning waterfall, the moonlight dancing on the cascading water.

The soothing sounds of the splashing water blend with the gentle rustle of animals settling in for the night.

They set up their tents, carefully placing their belongings inside as the night unfolds.

EXT. OSCAR AND AMERA'S TENTS - CAMPFIRE - MOMENTS AFTER

Amera and Oscar sit together, sipping hot tea while a pot bubbles over the crackling fire, filling the air with the aroma of soup.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(looking around)
This is nice.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(smiling)
I know, I didn't expect it to be this beautiful.

Oscar gazes at Amera, a mix of longing and regret in his eyes.

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OSCAR QUIROZ
I like Sergio. I just... like you
said, I didn't really get to know him.
There's no reason for us to be at odds
over our feelings anymore, I guess.

Amera's smile reflects her relief.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
He's a good guy, Dad. I promise.

Oscar glances at his phone.

OSCAR QUIROZ
I still have one bar.

Amera checks her phone.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Me too. Verizon, huh?

Oscar chuckles, but his expression shifts to seriousness.

OSCAR QUIROZ
I need to tell you something.

Concern flickers across Amera's face as he continues.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
I've been diagnosed with prostate
cancer.

Amera's eyes widen in shock.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
How long have you known?

OSCAR QUIROZ
A few months.

A wave of sorrow, guilt, and anger washes over Amera.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
That was the last we spoke.

Oscar nods, and Amera's devastation deepens.

OSCAR QUIROZ
When your mother died of cancer, I
thought I wouldn't make it. But I did.
I raised you on my own, and you've

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

made me so proud.

Amera looks away, struggling with her emotions.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
Sergio seems like a better man than I
ever was. I thought you'd fall for
someone more like me.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(tears streaming)
Daddy, there's nothing wrong with you.

Amera embraces her father tightly, but the moment is interrupted by a loud roar echoing through the trees.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(wiping her eyes)
What was that?!

OSCAR QUIROZ
Sounds like a bear or something.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
More like a bear on steroids!

Oscar quickly douses the campfire, another roar pierces the night. They hear rustling in the underbrush.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Just stay calm. We'll try to get some
sleep.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(nervously)
Yeah... Ok.

They both retreat to their tents, the ominous roars continuing outside.

Oscar humorously reaches for his rifle, lightening the mood despite the fear creeping in.

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - MORNING

CUT TO:

INT. OSCAR'S TENT

Oscar stirs awake, groggy, and disoriented.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He turns over, squinting at the dim light filtering through the tent.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(slurring)
Mija, did you get any sleep? Amera!
(panicking) Amera!

Suddenly alert, Oscar unzips his tent with urgency.

EXT. AMERA'S TENT - CONTINUOUS

Oscar reaches for Amera's tent, but it's empty. A wave of panic washes over him. He fumbles for his phone, heart racing, and sees a text from Amera: *"I went to the lake to fish. Couldn't sleep anyway... -sleepy emoji"*

He glances at her fishing pole propped against the tent, disappointment settling in.

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - RIVER - CONTINUED

Amera walks briskly along the riverbank, scanning the area for signs of Sergio. Her eyes widen as she spots a carcass of a dead deer, its body untouched. She kneels down beside it.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(to herself)
Poor baby, what happened?

She notices peculiar leaves scattered nearby. Pulling out her phone, she compares the images to Sergio's, her brow furrowing in concern.

As she leans closer, she sees some of the leaves floating in the water. She carefully collects a sample, mixing it with the water.

Amera runs a quick test on the water, her expression shifting from curiosity to horror as she gasps.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
This can't be!

She stands abruptly, scanning the surroundings, anxiety creeping in.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(shouting)
SERGIO! WHERE ARE YOU? (pause) SERGIO!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Her phone buzzes with a text from Oscar: "Is that you I hear? Are you alright?!" Amera quickly types back: "Yeah, I'm okay. I'll be back shortly."

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - OSCAR AND AMERA'S TENTS - CONTINUED

Oscar reads Amera's reply, relief washing over him, but it's short-lived. A loud roar echoes through the trees, closer this time.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(grimacing)
I'm gonna get-cha.

He grabs his rifle from inside his tent, adrenaline surging as he loads it, determination in his eyes.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Tryin' to ruin our weekend.

He steps out, following the sound, the weight of his fears heavy on his shoulders.

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - RIVER - CONTINUED

Amera spots a satchel half-buried in the underbrush, claw marks raking across its surface.

She kneels, her breath hitching as she opens it to reveal a government-issued waterproof electronic SOS beacon. Blood stains mar the fabric, sending a chill down her spine.

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - CONTINUED

Oscar creeps through the underbrush, heart pounding. He hears grunting and moaning, but the bear remains hidden in the tall grass. He readies his rifle, tension coiling in his muscles.

Suddenly, the bear reveals itself, charging toward him.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(aiming)
Stay back!

But Oscar's gaze shifts upward, his shock evident as he sees something looming above and behind the bear.

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST -
CONTINUED

Amera hears gunshots and frantic yelling.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(screaming)
DADDY!

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - RIVER -
CONTINUED

Oscar bolts, glancing back as he fires his gun. He races toward the cliffside near the river, quickly slinging his rifle across his body before leaping into the water.

The current pulls him downstream, and he looks back to see the bear hesitating on the cliff, fear etched on its face.

Suddenly, a massive, grotesque claw reaches out, yanking the bear off the edge, disappearing from view. Oscar's heart races, panic setting in as the current tosses him violently.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(shouting)
Help! Amera!

EXT. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - RIVERBANK - CONTINUOUS

Amera runs toward her father's voice, spotting him struggling in the water. She sees the river leading to a small waterfall ahead and knows she has to act fast.

She scrambles up a branch jutting over the river, adrenaline surging. She removes her jacket, wrapping it around the branch, letting it hang low.

With determination, she secures the SOS beacon strap around her wrist. Oscar can see Amera and the jacket hanging.

He lunges for it, gripping it tightly as he tries to pull himself up. Amera watches, fear gripping her heart as the branch begins to crack under the strain.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(yelling)
Hold on!

In a moment of instinct, she hits the engage button on the SOS beacon. The branch snaps!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

They both plunge into the water, splashing violently.

The beacon signals burst into the air, sending out a desperate call for help.

BEEP, BEEP,

BEEP...

The camera pulls back to reveal the river and the vast forest, the sound of the beacon echoing through the trees, a beacon of hope amidst the chaos.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA. EDDIE CARLSON'S HOME - BEDROOM - DAY

EDDIE CARLSON (13M), focused and determined, stares intently at his laptop screen.

The app he's using tracks various signals in the Appalachian Mountains, pulsing with alerts.

On the screen, his friend appears in a web chat, animated and slightly skeptical.

EDDIE CARLSON
I see it! Dude, it's right there!

FRIEND
Isn't your bro, like, a detective or something?

EDDIE CARLSON
Yeah but he won't care.

FRIEND
(interrupting)
But this one's different! It's weird.

Eddie hesitates, glancing back at the screen.

EDDIE CARLSON
Yeah... Hold on a sec.

He clicks to call his brother, DETECTIVE KENNETH CARLSON (30M).

He answers the call, his tone a mix of annoyance and familiarity.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (O.S.)
What you want, Ed?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

EDDIE CARLSON
I'm looking at this app, and there's
an alert in the Appalachian Forest.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (O.S.)
Didn't I tell you not to call me about
this stuff?

Eddie interrupts, urgency in his voice.

EDDIE CARLSON
You should really check it out!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (O.S.)
Ed, people get lost in that forest all
the time. It's usually a false alarm.
Is Kyle on there with you?

INT. KENNETH'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

EDDIE CARLSON (O.S.)
Yeah, but listen... it's happened
twice in a week. Same type of signal.
Doesn't that sound off to you?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
You two need to get out more. Find a
girlfriend or something. GOODBYE!

Eddie's frustration mounts, but he presses on.

EDDIE CARLSON (O.S.)
So you're just gonna ignore these
distress signals?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
You've heard about the local forest
rangers, right?

EDDIE CARLSON (O.S.)
Then call them!

Kenneth chuckles lightly, a mix of amusement and
exasperation.

INT. EDDIE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (O.S.)
Alright, alright. I'll look into it.
But don't call me again!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He hangs up, leaving Eddie staring at the screen, determination etched on his face.

Eddie resumes monitoring the beacon signal on his app, the alerts sounding more urgent as they flicker across the screen.

He leans closer, his brow furrowing in concentration.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA. - POLICE DEPARTMENT - LATER

Kenneth sits at his desk, immersed in paperwork, when a notification pings on his laptop. It's an invite link to the app from Eddie.

He smirks, shaking his head, and installs the app, curiosity piqued. Moments later, a signal ping from Eddie lights up the screen.

Kenneth watches it, his amusement fading as he finds it increasingly peculiar.

CAPTAIN HEWETT (51M) gestures for Kenneth to come into his office.

INT. CAPTAIN HEWETT'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth enters, taking a seat. Captain Hewett places his phone on speaker, revealing SHERIFF RUSSEL (58M) on the line, along with an executive from the Global Warming Research Department.

GLOBAL WARMING EXECUTIVE (O.S.)
This is a discreet matter.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
He's a forensic detective, so whatever
I know, he'll know.

SHERIFF RUSSEL (O.S.)
A forensic detective? He better be as
good as you say he is.

Kenneth, accustomed to skepticism, maintains his composure, a hint of amusement at the Sheriff's thick Southern drawl.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
He'll be down there to meet you,
Sheriff.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SHERIFF RUSSEL (O.S.)
We need to get to it before nightfall!
That's all I'm sayin.'

The Sheriff disconnects, leaving Kenneth slightly agitated.
Captain Hewett's expression turns serious.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
I'll let Mr. Schweller explain.

GLOBAL WARMING EXECUTIVE (O.S.)
Yes, I assume he has all the security
clearance needed.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
As much clearance as I'm gonna get.

Captain Hewett gestures for Kenneth to calm down.

GLOBAL WARMING EXECUTIVE (O.S.)
This is highly classified information.
A global warming research scientist,
Dr. Sergio Miergo, along with four
government representatives, was sent
on a top-secret expedition to the
Appalachian Forest Preserve. We
haven't heard from them in almost four
weeks.

Kenneth's interest piques.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Why hasn't the government sent their
own people to search for them? They're
your men, except for this Dr. Miergo.

A heavy silence falls. The Captain sighs, glancing at
Kenneth.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
Mr. Schweller, don't worry. I'll get
him up to speed.

The call disconnects, leaving Kenneth with a furrowed brow.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
This doesn't make any sense. They send
these men out there and now want local
law enforcement to find them?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CAPTAIN HEWETT
Well, since Dr. Miergo is considered a civilian, they're trying to avoid... complications.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Why weren't they monitoring their own people?

The Captain exhales deeply, the weight of the situation evident.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
They were tracking them. There was another beacon signal about a week ago. The agents were found dead-decapitated, bodies torn apart.

Kenneth's expression shifts to one of fear, as if he's already in the treacherous forest, facing unseen dangers.

CAPTAIN HEWETT (CONT'D)
But no sign of Dr. Miergo. His boss contacted us recently because he wasn't getting any cooperation from the execs. (*pause) Look, this conversation never happened. Just find him before this becomes an even bigger ubiquitous conspiracy.

Kenneth, overcome with a mix of fear and skepticism.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
You want me to go out there and look for one man?

CAPTAIN HEWETT
I don't want any higher-ups on my ass about this! I'm sending you because I need it done right. Now, whatever else you find, you inform me and only me.

Kenneth reluctantly nods and exits the Captain's office.

INT. DETECTIVE KENNETH CARLSON'S DESK - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth approaches his desk, glancing at his phone. The signal continues to move erratically, raising his suspicions.

He checks the app's history, tracing the signal's origin.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - RTC ENVIRONMENTAL - DR. AMERA QUIROZ'S OFFICE - LATER

Perwah sits at her desk, scrolling through assistant positions on her laptop, frustration etched on her face.

As she hears footsteps approaching, she slams her laptop shut.

JAMES
(entering, breaking the silence)
Find your new career yet?

PERWAH
(shushing him, opening her laptop)
Shh! You're so loud! (sighs) It's been all morning, and Dr. Quiroz hasn't shown up yet. I really need a reference.

JAMES
(teasing)
Maybe she's avoiding you. She knows how you feel about her.

PERWAH
(defensive)
She's my mentor! And my friend. I just wish she'd stop with these mediocre projects.

Perwah clicks on an intriguing job post, her guilt simmering beneath the surface.

JAMES
You don't have to jump ship. I've been fortunate to work with both Dr. Ferguson and Dr. Miergo.

Perwah rolls her eyes, still scrolling through the post.

PERWAH
The thirst is real. (leans closer to the screen) Please, save my life.

JAMES
(serious now)
Uhm, have you heard?

Perwah pauses, concern creeping in.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PERWAH
Heard what?

JAMES
(somber)
Sergio's missing. (trying to reassure)
I'm hoping it's just a rumor.

Perwah's expression shifts, her world crumbling as urgency takes hold.

Suddenly, a moment of realization suddenly dawns on her.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN RANGER STATION - NOON

Kenneth arrives at the ranger station, greeted by CHANCE LUCHANON (25M), a strikingly handsome, exuberant forest ranger. His enthusiasm is palpable, but there's a hint of naivety.

Nearby, Sheriff Russel stands with a sour expression, the weight of disappointment heavy on his shoulders.

He sulks in the shadows, like a man who has lost faith in people.

Kenneth studies the Sheriff, his face carefully neutral as he assesses the man's authority and demeanor.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
Detective, this is Chance Luchanon.
Our guide.

Kenneth shakes Chance's hand, eyeing the Sheriff's smugness.

SHERIFF RUSSEL (CONT'D)
Surprised you made it here so quickly.

Kenneth raises an eyebrow, sensing an underlying racial jab.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(excitedly)
Good thing you did. There's a lot of terrain... hills, valleys, mountains...

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(cutting in, impatient)
So, basically, stuff we can't avoid?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHANCE LUCHANON
Pretty much.

Chance strides over to his truck, unfurling a map of the forest across the hood.

CHANCE LUCHANON (CONT'D)
According to this, the signal stopped moving right around here.

He points to a spot on the map, pulling out a GPS device labeled "**JIPS.**"

CHANCE LUCHANON (CONT'D)
She's gonna be a big help.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
Jips?

CHANCE LUCHANON
Yeah, Gypsy!

SHERIFF RUSSEL
Gonna be a long fracken day.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I'm using an app that shows the signal too.

CHANCE LUCHANON
You got VERIZON?

Kenneth glances at Russel, puzzled.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
No, why?

CHANCE LUCHANON
(smirking)
Kiss your reception goodbye. You might as well toss it in the trash-over there.

Chance gestures playfully.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I'm not doin' that.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
How deep we goin'?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHANCE LUCHANON
About a three-mile hike on foot.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
What about my four-by-four?

CHANCE LUCHANON
Eventually, we'll have to leave it
behind.

The Sheriff's bitterness surfaces, sarcasm sharp.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
A three-mile hike sounds just great.

CHANCE LUCHANON
Not as much as the hidden cave I found
as a kid. Haven't seen it since.

Kenneth and the Sheriff exchange glances, clearly
uninterested.

CHANCE LUCHANON (CONT'D)
Every time we look for lost souls out
here, I try to find it as part of my
task.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Do you ever find any of those lost
souls?

Chance chuckles, lighthearted.

CHANCE LUCHANON
Of course! But we might as well have
some fun during the turmoil.

Sheriff Russel interrupts, his tone sharp.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
Listen, young fella, we need you
focused on finding these missin'
people, nothing else! I'm not spending
the night out here!

Kenneth maintains a neutral expression, observing the
dynamic.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(almost sheepishly)
Alrighty then. If we head out now, we

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

can beat nightfall by a couple of hours... hopefully.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Let's get moving.

Chance grabs the GPS and map as the trio climbs into his truck, ready to tackle the wilderness ahead.

They drive off down the dirt road, the weight of their mission settling in.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - RIVER - LATER

As Kenneth rides through the forest, the bumpy terrain jolts him around.

He glances at the stunning greenery and inhales the fresh pine-scented air, but the beauty does little to calm his nerves.

The thought of what lies ahead weighs heavily on him.

He stares at the rushing river up ahead, dread pooling in his stomach. "*I hate rivers*", he thinks.

Chance pulls up to the riverbank and stops the truck.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(exclaims)
Hold up! Why are we stoppin' here?!

CHANCE LUCHANON
(grinning)
How else are we gonna cut down a three-hour hike? We go by boat!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
You could've mentioned this while you were rambling on about terrains, hills, and valleys!

CHANCE LUCHANON
(smiling)
Spur of the moment decision?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Look, this black man, and boats do not mix!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHANCE LUCHANON
It's more of an inflatable raft.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(chiming in)
And this big white guy and small
inflatable rafts... Not a great combo
either.

CHANCE LUCHANON
It'll be fine, fellas. We just need to
work together so the river won't kill
us.

Chance laughs as he starts inflating the raft.

Kenneth and Sheriff Russel exchange skeptical glances but
grab the equipment from the truck, their attitudes matching.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(muttering to himself)
Not funny.

They help Chance drag the raft to the riverbank, loading the
gear onto it.

Kenneth hesitates for a moment, eyeing the churning water.

CUT TO:

INSIDE RAFT - MOMENTS AFTER

The raft is suddenly caught by a vicious current, hurtling
them forward.

Kenneth's heart races as he fights to steady his breathing,
gripping the sides of the raft.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(shouting over the roar of water)
Fellas, grab the handles and lift
gently to straighten us out!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(yelling)
We can all swim, right?

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(loudly)
Yeah, and I'm sure Mr. Wilderness over
here can too!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHANCE LUCHANON
(yelling back)
We'll be fine once we hit this smooth
stretch!

The raft glides into calmer waters, but Kenneth, still catching his breath, scans the surroundings, bracing himself for what's to come as the tension hangs thick in the air.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - DEEP IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - RIVER - LATER

A faint beacon signal cuts through the chaos, quickly drowned out by splashing water.

CUT TO:

INT. INSIDE RAFT - CONTINUOUS

Chance's expression shifts to urgency.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(shouting)
We need to stop ASAP to avoid the
waterfall up ahead!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(eyes wide)
What?! WATERFALL?!

Kenneth's gaze is drawn to a gruesome sight—a dead bear, bloodied and torn apart, on the riverbank.

CHANCE LUCHANON
Come on, fellas!

Chance grabs three oars, handing two to Kenneth and Sheriff Russel. They struggle to steer the raft toward the bank.

Chance reaches for a low-hanging branch, pulling the raft onto the bank with a grunt.

EXT. RIVERBANK - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth stumbles onto solid ground, relief washing over him.

He takes a moment to appreciate the stunning scenery, but his gaze is soon drawn to a broken tree branch pointing ominously toward the river.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHANCE LUCHANON
Those branches all grow out like that.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(skeptical)
Yeah, but do they just break for no
reason?

Chance chuckles lightly, trying to lighten the mood.

CHANCE LUCHANON
I guess not.

Kenneth kneels, examining the ground closely.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
What are the coordinates for that
branch?

Chance pulls out the map and shows Kenneth the coordinates.

Kenneth checks his phone, scrolling through the app's history. The numbers match, but a warning flashes: "**NO SIGNAL.**"

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
Aww damn!

CHANCE LUCHANON
(grinning)
I warned you it was a no-go. Might as well toss it in the river—over there.

Chance points and walks off, oblivious to Kenneth's irritation. Sheriff Russel gestures for Kenneth to join him, his expression serious.

As Chance finishes deflating the raft, Kenneth's curiosity is piqued by something unusual.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(frowning)
What in God's green forest are these?

Kenneth's brow furrowed in confusion.

SHERIFF RUSSEL (CONT'D)
(yelling)
Hey Chance, you know what these are?

Chance rushes over, bewildered.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
These leaves don't look familiar to
you?

CHANCE LUCHANON
(shaking his head)
Heck no! These look foreign—definitely
not from around here. People plant all
sorts of things they shouldn't.

Kenneth leans closer to examine the strange mass, then heads back to the scene of the mauled bear.

The sight is gruesome: claw marks, blood streaks on the nearby tree, and massive bite wounds in the bear's midsection.

Sheriff Russel and Chance approach, the Sheriff's frustration evident as he sees Kenneth inspecting the bear.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(pointing)
The same blood streaks from that cliff
over there.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
What could overpower a bear like this?

CHANCE LUCHANON
Maybe a lion.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(incredulous)
Are there lions out here?

CHANCE LUCHANON
Not that I know of.

Kenneth kneels by the cliff spotting shell casings scattered on the ground.

He looks up, realizing the claw marks in the tree aren't from the bear. He gasps quietly.

Sheriff Russel, growing impatient, steps closer.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
You're awfully quiet there, detective.
Care to share?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(focused)
Just trying to piece this together.
Shell casings, two different sets of
claw marks, a broken branch.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(interrupting)
Someone was chased by that bear, shot
it, and it ended up as someone else's
breakfast. Not too hard to figure out.

Kenneth studies the bear and the casings, shaking his head.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
No. This bear wasn't shot.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
What makes you so sure?

Kenneth's patience is wearing thin, but he maintains his composure, still staring at the bear and the broken branch.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
There was someone shooting, but they
weren't aiming at the bear. They were
both being chased.

Kenneth gathers the evidence, his mind racing with possibilities.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(determined)
If you're right, those men can't be
too far. We can find them and I can be
home to my wife before supper.

Kenneth hesitates, then finally admits the truth.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
One man. Sergio.

Sheriff's anger flares.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
All this for one man? What happened to
the others?

Kenneth looks away, guilt washing over him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I don't know.

Sheriff Russel's frustration boils over.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
You're not a good liar.

Kenneth meets the Sheriff's gaze, his expression steady.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(calmly)
I can't share everything I know.

Sheriff Russel scowls at him.

Meanwhile, Chance shifts nervously, sensing the rising conflict.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(sarcastically)
Oh, you're Mr. Good Cop, always following orders, huh?

Kenneth leans in, his voice low but firm.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(scolding)
What I was told doesn't matter right now. The facts are clear: HE'S IN SERIOUS DANGER, AND WE NEED TO FIND HIM NOW, SHERIFF!

Sheriff Russel hesitates, the weight of Kenneth's words sinking in. Just then, Chance steps in, trying to lighten the mood.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(cheerfully)
Alright, fellas! We gotta get movin'! The signal's shifting again... not too far, just a little further from where I last mapped it.

Sheriff Russel, still simmering, turns away with a huff. Kenneth exhales slowly, a mild sigh of relief escaping him.

INT. LINDEN, VA. - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CAVE - CONTINUED

Amera and Oscar navigate through the darkness, the air thick with the sounds of water trickling and bats squealing

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

overhead. Shadows dance around them, heightening the tension.

Amera, breathing heavily, clings tightly to Oscar's injured arm, her grip a mix of fear and desperation.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Mija, be careful.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Sorry. What are we gonna do?

OSCAR QUIROZ
Just breathe. We'll find a way out...
okay?

Amera takes a moment, her breathing steadies as she nods, glancing at the flashing SOS beacon strapped to her arm.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
I can't believe this is ruining our
trip.

A wave of guilt washes over Amera, her expression shifting.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Daddy, Sergio's missing. I came here
to find him.

Oscar's face tightens, memories of his own reckless youth surfacing.

He lets out a nervous laugh, an instinctive reaction to mask his concern.

Amera looks at him, taken aback by his unexpected response.

Suddenly, a LOUD GROWL echoes through the cave, reverberating off the walls.

Startled, they cling to each other, the gravity of their situation momentarily forgotten as they press forward cautiously into the darkness.

Dr. Amera's phone buzzes in her pocket, breaking the tense silence.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(pulling out the phone)
Hey, Perwah!

The connection is shaky, the voice on the other end cutting

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

in and out.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
I can't hear you! We need help— we're
stuck down here!

The call abruptly disconnects, leaving Amera staring at her phone in frustration. The screen shows barely one bar of signal, but then it lights up with a couple of incoming messages.

Amera opens the message and can see two images sent from Perwah. After a moment, her eyes widen in shock, her heart racing as she processes what she's reading.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - SUNSET

Chance, Kenneth, and Sheriff Russel trek through the dense forest, the sun dipping low in the sky.

CHANCE LUCHANON
This signal keeps bouncing around. If
this is your guy, he's definitely
running from something.

Chance hands each of them a walkie-talkie, a flashlight, and some flares.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(eyeing the steep incline)
That's a mighty steep mountain up
ahead.

CHANCE LUCHANON
We'll go around it through that hilly
area.

As they begin to hike up the hill, Kenneth's attention is drawn to a flash of color in the distance. He squints, trying to make out the shapes.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
HELLO! ANYONE OUT THERE?

Silence hangs in the air, thick and unsettling. Sheriff Russel's gaze follows Kenneth's, landing on the red and black tents nearby. Instincts kick in, and he pulls out his gun, firing a shot into the air.

The three men stand still, waiting for a response, but

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

there's only silence.

Kenneth and Sheriff Russel cautiously approach the tents, while Chance hesitates, anxiety etched on his face.

EXT. RED AND BLACK TENTS - CONTINUOUS

They scan the area, rifling through the contents of the tents.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Just two regular campers.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(sarcastically)
And then there were three.

EXT. FOREST - CHANCE'S POV - CONTINUOUS

Chance hears a rustling in the bushes. He turns slowly, heart racing, and inches toward the sound. Suddenly, a small orangutan bursts out, leaping onto him in an aggressive stance.

Chance falls back, gasping in fear as the creature reveals its large teeth. In a panic, he quickly draws his stun gun.

ELECTRIC SHOCK!

The orangutan convulses and falls to the ground, stunned. Chance takes a moment to catch his breath, pushing the dazed animal off him.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(yelling)
YOU ALRIGHT OVER THERE?

CHANCE LUCHANON
(nervously shouting back)
YEAH, BUT WE SHOULD REALLY GET GOING!

EXT. RED AND BLACK TENTS - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth's eyes narrow as he spots bullets that matches the shell casings they found by the river. He picks one up, a sense of unease settling in.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - PATH -
CONTINUED

Chance readjusts his bag as the trio descends the steep hill.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He glances at the sheer cliff face, and a surge of panic grips him.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(yelling)
STOP!

Sheriff Russel stumbles slightly, catching himself.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(breathless)
What the hell?! I thought this was a
hill. Should be easier than this. I'm
tired, and my dogs are barking!

CHANCE LUCHANON
Just like my ex-girlfriend.

Sheriff Russel raises an eyebrow, slightly offended.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
Let's just keep moving! The sun's
fading fast.

Kenneth chuckles lightly. Chance clears his throat, anxiety
creeping in as they continue.

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - CAVE HOLE -
CONTINUED

The trio approaches a gaping hole in the ground, the air
thick with unease. They gather around, peering into the
darkness.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(yelling)
HELLO! IS ANYONE DOWN THERE? THIS IS
THE SHERIFF!

Silence.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Hey Chance, can you get an updated
coordinate on that signal?

Chance checks his device, eyes widening as they see the
signal is right beneath them.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(relieved)
Thank you, Lord!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He shows it to Sheriff Russel, who nods, the urgency palpable as the sun dips lower.

CHANCE LUCHANON
I'll go in first and check it out.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(hesitant)
Alright, but keep us updated on what you find.

INT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Chance inches down, flashlight flickering. Tension mounts as he scans the walls, spotting bright green colors ahead.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(yelling with excitement)
HEY! THIS IS THE HIDDEN CAVE I WAS TALKING ABOUT! But this isn't the secret entrance.

Kenneth kneels closer, a hint of annoyance creeping in.

KENNETH CARLSON (O.C.)
Just take a look around! We need to know what's down there.

EXT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Chance falls silent, the weight of the moment heavy. Kenneth and Sheriff Russel exchange worried glances as dusk settles around them.

KENNETH CARLSON
(yelling)
Say something! Should we come down there?

INT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Chance shakes the GPS locator, frustration mounting.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(yelling)
IT STOPPED!

SHERIFF RUSSEL (O.C.)
WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT STOPPED, SON?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHANCE LUCHANON
JIPS! I CAN'T SEE HER SIGNAL ANYMORE!

EXT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth's brow furrows in confusion.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE! WHY WOULD
IT JUST SUDDENLY STOP?

CHANCE LUCHANON (O.C.)
I don't know, they're supposed to be
active for at least 24 hours.

Kenneth turns on his flashlight, pointing it down the hole, worry etched on his face.

INT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Chance shines his flashlight, spotting a broken beacon.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(shouting)
I FOUND IT! I FOUND THE BEACON!

He grabs it, disgusted by its wet, slimy condition.

EXT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth watches Chance's flashlight flicker erratically.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
What is it?

Chance comes into Kenneth's POV.

CHANCE LUCHANON
It's government-issued.

Kenneth's expression shifts to one of realization.

INT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

CHANCE LUCHANON
(yelling)
I'M COMING BACK UP!

He struggles to climb, the tension thickening.

EXT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Suddenly, an unsettling silence envelops the area. Kenneth steadies himself and reaches out to help Chance as he climbs.

EXT. SHERIFF RUSSEL'S POV - CONTINUOUS

Sheriff Russel hears a rustling sound from the tree behind him. He turns his flashlight toward the noise, and to his horror, a grotesque, massive lizard, camouflaged against the bark, reveals itself.

Sheriff Russel's mouth drops in disbelief.

(SLOW MOTION)

The flashlight slips from his grip, falling in slow motion to the ground. Fear grips him, and he struggles to steady his breath while slowly drawing his weapon.

(NORMAL SPEED)

The creature leaps down from the tree, landing with a thud.

He stands frozen, speechless.

The creature, with long, sharp teeth and enormous tusks, inches closer, its long, split tongue flicking out, tasting the air.

EXT. KENNETH'S POV - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth hears the click of Russel's gun and a low growl.

CHANCE LUCHANON (O.C.)
(frantic)
Detective? What happened to the assistance?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(urgent)
Get back down there! NOW!

CHANCE LUCHANON (O.C.)
Why? Is there a monster up there or something?

Chance chuckles nervously, trying to lighten the mood, but Kenneth's serious expression cuts through the tension.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I'm not joking! Get down there! NOW!

EXT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Chance finally emerges from the hole and immediately spots the creature.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(whimpering)
Oh, I see.

Panic sets in, and he loses his balance, falling back into the hole and spraining his leg, letting out a yelp of pain.

Sheriff Russel stands face-to-face with the creature. Both men open fire, but the bullets seem to bounce off its thick hide. The creature lets out a furious roar, its eyes locking onto the Sheriff, as if enraged by the attack.

SHERIFF RUSSEL
(turning to Kenneth, voice filled with terror)
DO SOMETHING!

In a swift, brutal motion, the creature lunges, using its tusks to lift the sheriff by the head and decapitates him. Kenneth stares in horror as the Sheriff's head falls to the ground.

ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE!

Kenneth turns to run, but the creature leaps, blocking his path with its massive tail. He whimpers, raising his gun, but hesitates, the image of the Sheriff's fate haunting him.

The creature lunges again, its tongue shooting out and knocking him backward into the hole.

INT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth lands on top of Chance. The creature begins to squeeze through the hole.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(yelling)
WE HAVE TO MOVE! NOW!

Kenneth helps Chance as they scramble through the dark cave, the creature crashing down behind them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Chance hobbles along, fear etched on his face.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(whimpering)
I can't! I can't keep going!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
You can do this! Just a little
further!

They spot a narrow passage ahead.

Chance crawls through the tight space, moaning in pain.

INT. CHANCE'S POV - CONTINUOUS

Chance makes it through the crawl space, a mix of amazement and fear flooding him.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(yelling)
THERE'S A LAKE!

INT. CAVE HOLE - CONTINUOUS

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
KEEP GOING!

Kenneth looks back just as the creature rams its tusks into the cave wall, narrowly missing his foot. He crawls through, and Chance pulls him through just as the creature begins to break through the rocks.

INT. CAVE LAKE - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth and Chance dive into the lake just as the creature bursts through the widened space. The hole collapses behind it with a deafening CRASH, sealing them inside.

The creature dives into the water after them.

CHANCE LUCHANON
(panicking)
I'm not gonna make it!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
You have to swim! Come on!

Kenneth and Chance finally reach the other side of the lake, gasping for breath. Kenneth pulls himself out of the water,

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

turning to help Chance, but it's too late. The creature snatches Chance, dragging him deep into the depths.

Panic surges through Kenneth as he frantically scans for safety.

Suddenly, Amera appears, yanking him into a tight hiding spot, her finger pressed to her lips.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(whispering urgently)
We have to be quiet!

The creature emerges from the water, Chance clamped in its grasp, by his throat, supported by its massive tusks. Chance squirms, terror in his eyes.

The beast scans the area, its anger palpable, searching for Kenneth with a grotesque intensity.

Chance claws at his throat, gasping for air.

The creature dives back into the water, dragging Chance with it, its tail disappearing into the darkness.

Kenneth, heart racing, takes in desperate breaths, his mind racing with fear and helplessness. A moment of silence hangs heavy in the air.

Amera gestures for Kenneth to follow her deeper into the cave, her expression a mix of urgency and determination.

INT. INNER CAVE - DEAD END TUNNEL - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth follows Amera, his heart racing. They reach a small alcove where an older man, Oscar, is slumped against the wall, nursing a shoulder wound.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
You okay?

Oscar nods, but his eyes flash with anger and pain.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(gritting his teeth)
Just peachy. Thanks for asking.

Kenneth's instincts kick in, overriding his fear.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I'm guessing you have no idea what the

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

hell that thing is, do you?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I have my suspicions.

Kenneth turns to Oscar, urgency in his voice.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
What happened?

OSCAR QUIROZ
(bitterly)
Tossed around in the river... that...
DAMN THING!

Oscar tries to stand but winces.

Amera rushes to support him, concern etched on her face.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
He barely made it out alive.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Those tents belong to you, I assume.

Amera nods, and Oscar scoffs.

OSCAR QUIROZ
Thought we were just spending time
together. But my daughter had other
plans. Right, mijia?

Amera looks down, guilt washing over her.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(confused)
What's going on here?

Amera wipes her eyes, but Oscar interrupts, his voice rising.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(yelling)
WHY MIJA! Why wouldn't you tell me
about something so serious, so
dangerous?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I was confused. No sé lo que estoy
haciendo (*I don't know what I'm
doing*).

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

OSCAR QUIROZ
(frustrated)
Who tricks their father into a secret
rescue mission?

Kenneth's eyes widen as a realization hits him.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Sergio? You're looking for Sergio?

Amera's expression shifts, a glimmer of hope igniting.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
My fiancé.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(nodding)
Your fiancé.

Kenneth feels a sense of clarity amidst the chaos.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(angrily)
He's one of the top scientists at RTC
Environmental. Isn't that right, mijia?

Oscar limps over to a nearby spot, sliding against the wall,
wincing as he settles down.

Amera sighs.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
We were in contact with your boss.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
So, you're a cop?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I'm Detective Kenneth Carlson.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I'm Dr. Amera Quiroz, and this is my
father, Oscar.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Tell me about Sergio.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
He was in contact with me for weeks,
then... nothing.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
What was so top secret about this
assignment?

Amera's eyes flicker with regret as each question lands, her shoulders slumping slightly.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I don't know.

Kenneth glances at Oscar, who is still nursing his shoulder.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
I wasn't involved in the assignment.

Kenneth listens intently as Amera's expression shifts to one of solemnity.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
Working with your future husband can
be a rollercoaster. (*She sighs,
shaking her head.*) I can't believe I
let this happen.

Amera sinks into despair next to Oscar, who moves closer to comfort her. Kenneth hesitates, unsure of how to intervene.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
The men who were with your fiancé were
all found dead. Some of them,
decapitated.

Amera's eyes widen in fear, tears brimming.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
What?!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
There are some strange things out in
that forest.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
The leaves, right?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Yeah. What's going on with those?

Amera reaches for her phone and steps closer to Kenneth, who watches her with curiosity. A hint of amusement appears on his face.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
Verizon, right?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Yeah, how did you know?

Kenneth smirks, a hint of relief breaking through the tension.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
It's waterproof. We all have one for field work.

Amera hands Kenneth her phone, wiping her eyes as she does.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Wait, what is this?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
My assistant sent me this article. It details an incident caused by those strange leaves.

Kenneth zooms in on the article.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(reading)
"Detective Lt. Vincent D'Agosta, with assistance from an Evolutionary Biologist named Dr. Margo Green, resolved a homicide investigation linked to several murders aboard a cargo ship from Brazil, connected to more deaths at 'The Natural History Museum of Chicago.' A mysterious creature, the 'KATHOGA...'"

He looks at Amera, shock crossing his face as she meets his gaze, fear evident in her eyes.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(reading)
"...was discovered to be the culprit behind the murders, resulting from a Brazilian ritual involving a parasitic-fungus-infected leaf that triggered this evolutionary phenomenon. Dr. Margo Green acted heroically in destroying the creature..."

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Kenneth stops reading, shaking his head, fear intensifying.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
This thing exists because of some damn leaves?!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I took screenshots of my uploaded images from the company's iCloud account.

Kenneth scrolls through the images.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
These tests reveal severe contamination—high levels of flammable chemicals and GMO parasites. It's as if the entire forest has been poisoned.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I wouldn't be surprised. But what does this have to do with Sergio?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I think there's more to why Sergio was sent out here than just a shady 'Top Secret' mission. I suspect the forest was deliberately contaminated. I don't know why... but it feels like something needs to be uncovered. Sergio was being used for something. I just can't figure out what.

Amera glances at her father, who is struggling.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
My dad can't take much more of this. We have to get out of here!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Great idea, but how?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I've had a few chances to observe this thing. It's basically a giant lizard. It knows how to break through things, especially when it senses danger.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
We might not find one of those

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

'creature-made' openings. We'll probably need to swim.

Amera's worst fears collide—trapped in darkness, a sick father, and a grotesque danger lurking nearby.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(panicking)
Where that thing is?!

Kenneth glances at Oscar.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Will you be able to swim?

Oscar nods, but Amera's panic escalates.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(exclaims)
I can't!

Kenneth digs deep, trying to calm Amera.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Let me get you outta here. Then I'll call in a SWAT team to find Sergio.

Kenneth pauses, gauging Amera's anxiety.

She eventually nods, fear still evident in her eyes.

Together, they help Oscar, determination replacing their earlier despair.

EXT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - RTC ENVIRONMENTAL - NIGHT

Perwah rushes out of the office, her breath quickening as she approaches James's car.

He sits inside, tension radiating from him.

She jumps into the car, and James accelerates down the road.

INT. JAMES'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Perwah frantically dials Amera's number, her anxiety palpable.

JAMES
(eyes on the road)
Do you really think she'll answer

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

again, out there?

PERWAH

I can't stop trying! I shouldn't have suggested that idea to her. What was I thinking? I hate myself sometimes.

James smirks, trying to calm her down.

JAMES

That's a few more times than I do.

Perwah hesitates, but then dials "911" instead.

JAMES (CONT'D)

(urgently)

Perwah, don't-

PERWAH

I'm calling the police!

JAMES

You know they told you not to call again.

PERWAH

This is different!

JAMES

What we should have done was tell Dr. Nathan.

PERWAH

And get her in trouble? He doesn't care about anyone but himself.

JAMES

They'll just brush it off as another one of your crazy theories.

Anger flashes across her face.

PERWAH

Don't feed me that conspiracy bullshit! That's what the CIA made-up to discredit people, calling them crazy. But I'm not crazy! This whole thing has felt off from the start, and Sergio knew it too. (voice trembling) I just hope he's alright.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

James glances at her, uncertainty creeping in.

JAMES
How do you know?

Perwah falls silent, her gaze drifting out the window.

JAMES (CONT'D)
(realization)
You didn't!

Perwah's expression shifts to shame.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Is that why you're looking for a new
job? You do hate her!

PERWAH
(defensive)
No! I don't hate her!

JAMES
You're just in love with her man.
Aren't you?

PERWAH
Just drive.

She opens the company's iCloud account on her phone,
scrolling through.

PERWAH (CONT'D)
This is between us. It happened before
they started dating. He still calls me
sometimes. That's all!

JAMES
(scoffing)
What now? Guilt's gonna make 'YOU' go
investigate too?

She immediately starts scrolling through all of Sergio's
uploads.

PERWAH
First off, what exactly are 'WE' going
to do? And second, shouldn't 'WE' at
least go to the police and tell them
everything 'WE' know?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JAMES

I think 'WE' should just stay out of it and not overreact. (pausing) I'm sure everyone will turn up, and everything will be just fine.

James's expression falters, doubt creeping in.

PERWAH

Even you can see how ridiculous you sound.

JAMES

Alright, she's a bit obsessive, impulsive, and ambitious but—

Perwah looks at him.

JAMES (CONT'D)
We all have eyes.

A beat.

JAMES (CONT'D)
She went out there for nothing. I'm sure Sergio's fine!

Perwah's eyes widen as she spots something on her phone.

PERWAH
Think again.

James leans closer, his confidence evaporating as he sees the image of Sergio's bloody hand.

INT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CAVE - LAKE - LATER

Detective Kenneth Carlson, Dr. Amera Quiroz, and her father, Oscar, swim cautiously through the dark waters of the cave, their flashlights cutting through the gloom.

Kenneth glances back, reassured by the absence of danger.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(whispers)
It's clear.

Amera nods, her anxiety evident. Oscar grimaces, pain etched on his face.

The cave falls into an eerie silence, heightening Kenneth's

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

paranoia.

He scans the perimeter again.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(whispers)
Come on, Daddy, I've got you.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(whispers)
It really hurts!

Kenneth's flashlight catches a stunning teal glow in the water, momentarily distracting him.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(mutter)
Wow.

Suspense thickens as the lizard-Kathoga lurks above, watching them with predatory intent.

Just as Kenneth shines his flashlight in its direction, the lizard-Kathoga retreats, remaining undetected.

Kenneth spots something hopeful ahead.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(whispers)
There's a passageway.

He angles the flashlight for Amera to see.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
We need to find a way up.

Oscar moans again, the pain evident.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(whispers)
He can't take much more of this.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Just keep going.

OSCAR QUIROZ
I don't know if I can!

Oscar leans heavily on Amera and Kenneth as they inch closer to the other side.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Amera's gaze catches on a peculiar rock formation.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(whispers)
I see the other side.

They reach the strange rock and begin to climb.

Amera goes first, helping her father, then Kenneth follows.

Kenneth shines the flashlight ahead, revealing a narrow pathway.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Let me go first.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(grimacing)
It's hurting worse now!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Just lean on us.

As they step off the peculiar rock, a low grumble echoes through the cave.

Amera freezes, fear gripping her.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
What was that?

The lizard-Kathoga, camouflaged as the rock, reveals its jagged teeth.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
MOVE BACK!

Kenneth steels himself, the echoes of past tragedies ringing in his ears.

He pulls out a flare, ignites it, and hurls it into the lizard-Kathoga's mouth.

The lizard-Kathoga roars in fury as the trio bolts down the cave's pathway.

It retreats into the water, spitting out the flare, then surges after them.

INT. HALLOW CAVE TUNNEL - CONTINUOUS

The trio sprints as fast as they can, glancing back but seeing no sign of the lizard-Kathoga—yet.

Kenneth spots a small gap in the pathway.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
WE HAVE TO JUMP FOR IT!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(urgently)
Dad, come on!

Fueled by adrenaline, they leap over the gap just before the lizard-Kathoga reaches it.

It leaps after them with terrifying speed.

They come upon a much broader gap ahead, halting in hesitation.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(yelling)
It's coming!

Kenneth pulls out another flare, the lizard-Kathoga's eyes locking onto them.

He ignites the flare and throws it, but the lizard-Kathoga ducks, the flare sailing past.

Amera glances down the hole of the gap, spotting a small but wide landing.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
Look!

The lizard-Kathoga is almost upon them.

The trio turns and jumps for the landing.

The lizard-Kathoga leaps off the cliff after them.

They land safely on the small ledge, watching as the lizard-Kathoga falls into the darkness below.

Amera realizes the landing is crumbling beneath them.

She looks up, gauging the height of the gap.

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CONTINUED:

Kenneth glances at Amera, a teasing smile creeping onto his face.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Didn't think that far ahead, did you?

Amera meets his gaze, and for a moment, they share a slight chuckle of relief.

But the tension quickly returns.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(whispers)
It's just right there!

Kenneth studies the wall, stepping closer to assess it.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(panicking)
There's not enough room on this rock!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(urgent whisper)
Daddy, keep your voice down!

OSCAR QUIROZ
(whispers fiercely)
It's gonna climb back up! It's not stupid!

KENNETH CARLSON
(interjecting, steadying)
We'll figure this out.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(bitterly)
Figure what out? We'll die if we stay here! It's only a matter of time!

Kenneth examines the rough edges of the cave wall, a plan forming.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
We'll just have to climb. If I can just get up there.

Oscar winces, feeling a sharp pain in his shoulder.

Amera instinctively massages it.

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DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(somberly)
I really messed up this time, daddy.

Oscar looks at her with compassion, his expression softening as he gently squeezes her hand.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
I'm so consumed by everything—Mom's death, my career falling apart, Sergio... who was just trying to protect me. Now I've dragged you into this mess.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(softly, smiling)
Listen, mija, you're gonna make a great wife. I'd rather be here with you than have you out here alone.
(lightly) Just like your mother and I used to, fighting to survive.

Amera hugs her father tightly, drawing strength from him, feeling the warmth of his embrace.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice trembling)
I just wish I could be as strong as she was.

Oscar pulls back slightly to look into her eyes, his gaze steady and reassuring.

OSCAR QUIROZ
You are very strong, Amera. Remember your Freshmen year in High School, the science fair?

They both chuckle, a moment of lightness breaking through the heaviness.

OSCAR QUIROZ (CONT'D)
She always said she'd believe in you, even when you didn't believe in yourself.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(sniffles, wiping her eyes)
I remember. She always knew how to make everything seem possible.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

OSCAR QUIROZ
(smiling gently)
You won first place every year. She
was so proud, and you know what? She
would be proud of the woman you've
become.

Oscar looks at her with compassion, his expression softening
once more.

In the background, Kenneth watches, a flicker of hope
igniting in his eyes.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(urgently)
We can make it; we just need to stay
focused.

OSCAR QUIROZ
What's the plan?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I need you two to lift me up as far as
you can to that ledge.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
But his arm is throbbing!

Kenneth leans in, his voice firm.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Do you want to get out of here?

Amara and Oscar exchange skeptical glances but nod,
determination creeping in.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
Alright, then! Let's get the hell out
of here! Once I'm up there, I'll pull
you up, and then we'll get Oscar to
the ledge.

Amara looks at Oscar, concern etched on her face.

OSCAR QUIROZ
And then what?

Kenneth hesitates, the weight of the moment settling in.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
We have to jump across.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Amera and Oscar exchange terrified glances, the gravity of the situation sinking in.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA. - POLICE DEPARTMENT - CAPTAIN HEWETT'S OFFICE - LATER

Perwah and James stand in Captain Hewett's office, anxiety etched on their faces as they show him Amera's uploaded iCloud images.

PERWAH

(urgent)

She's out there! She's looking for him, right now!

Captain Hewett scrolls through the images, his expression unreadable.

CAPTAIN HEWETT

I've dispatched one of my best missing persons detectives. If she's still out there, he'll find her.

His calm demeanor feels unsettling, as if this is just another routine case.

PERWAH

(voice rising)

She is out there, OK! A team should be out there! It's a huge damn forest!

CAPTAIN HEWETT

(maintaining composure)

Ma'am, my detective is with the local sheriff and an Appalachian Forest Ranger. I'm confident they'll find everyone.

Perwah snatches her phone back, frustration boiling over, guilt flickering in her eyes.

PERWAH

This is Sergio's hand! You know exactly what's happening, don't you?

Captain Hewett exhales, his patience wearing thin.

CAPTAIN HEWETT

Just go home and await my call!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PERWAH
I can't believe this.

She stares at her phone, scrolling frantically.

JAMES
(sighs)
I guess there's nothing more we can
do.

James stands, resigned.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Let's go, Perwah.

But then Perwah remembers the screenshot of the article she sent to Amera about the strange leaves, a glimmer of hope igniting within her.

She thrusts the screenshot toward Captain Hewett, urgency in her voice.

PERWAH
What about this?

He grabs the phone for a closer look.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(reading)
I remember this. From the late '90s.

PERWAH
You have to do something! They're my
friends.

Captain Hewett realizes she's not backing down—and she's right.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(reluctantly)
Okay, but afterwards, GO HOME!

He quickly makes a phone call.

Perwah glances at James, anticipation building.

CHICAGO PD OFFICER (O.S.)
Chicago PD.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
This is Captain Hewett of the Virginia

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Police Department. I have a situation involving missing persons. Is there a Lt. Vincent D'Agosta still with the force?

CHICAGO PD OFFICER (O.S.)
Let me check.

A tense moment passes.

CHICAGO PD OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
He retired years ago. But he died in
2023.

Captain Hewett's face falls, sorrow washing over him.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
I'm sorry to hear that. What about Dr. Margo Green from the Natural History Museum in Chicago? Any information?

The officer pauses, considering.

CHICAGO PD OFFICER (O.S.)
She was his wife. It's Dr. Margo D'Agosta now.

Captain Hewett nods, determination igniting in his eyes.

Perwah and James exchange excited glances, hope rekindled.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
I need to contact her immediately!

The scene transitions, tension hanging in the air.

INT. LINDEN, VA. - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CAVE - NIGHT

Oscar and Amera strain to lift Kenneth as high as they can.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(exclaims)
Almost there!

Kenneth pulls himself onto the ledge, reaching down to grab Amera's arm.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(grunting)
I've got you!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

With a determined effort, Amera pulls herself up Kenneth's arm, finally making it to safety.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(voice trembling)
I don't know how I'm gonna do this,
mija.

Suddenly, a low rumble echoes from below, sending Oscar into a panic.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
We'll pull you up! Just trust us!

Amera shoots Oscar a look filled with hope.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Come on, Daddy!

Oscar reaches up with his good arm, and Kenneth grips him tightly, pulling him upward.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(urgent)
Wait, watch his shoulder!

Amera helps by grabbing Oscar's belt.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(strained)
Careful, my shoulder!

Kenneth struggles to keep his footing as he lifts Oscar.

The rumbling grows louder, and rocks begin to crumble.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(exclaims)
Oh, come on, rocks!

Kenneth peers over the ledge, and the noise suddenly stops.

He squints into the darkness, relief washing over him.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Come on!

He yanks upward with all his strength, but then—

The darkness shifts, revealing a lizard-Kathoga camouflaged

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

against the cave's wall.

Kenneth gasps, eyes wide.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(blurts out)
Don't look down!

Oscar glances down anyway, gasping at the sight of the lizard-Kathoga's menacing form.

A loose rock tumbles from Oscar's leg, striking the creature and causing it to lose its grip.

It slides down several feet, roaring in fury.

Kenneth and Amera strain to lift Oscar, but Kenneth's footing slips.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(yelling)
DADDY!

Oscar looks down, panic flooding his face as the lizard-Kathoga looms closer.

Adrenaline surges through Amera—"What if he dies?" she thinks.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(yelling)
THIS ISN'T WORKING! WE NEED BOTH OF
HIS ARMS! He'll hold onto me, and you
pull us up.

Kenneth's mind races—"Back to square one!"

Amera is lowered feet-first.

Oscar grabs her waist with his good arm.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(exclaims)
HOLD ON, I'VE GOT YOU!

Kenneth pulls with all his might, but Oscar's weight is too much.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(strained)
I'll find another way!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Oscar's strength wanes, and he begins to slip.

Amera finally reaches the ledge.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ

(desperately)

Daddy, please, don't let go! I'm right here with you!

Oscar's grip falters as the lizard-Kathoga lunges, its claws slicing through his leg.

He screams, losing his hold and plummeting into the darkness.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)

(screaming)

NO!

Kenneth grabs Amera, trying to console her as she cries out in despair.

The lizard-Kathoga now plummets after him.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON

I know, I know.

Amera collapses to her knees, tears streaming down her face.

INT. MUDDY CAVE WATER WELL - CONTINUOUS

SPLASH!

Oscar lands in the murky water, the lizard-Kathoga crashing down after him.

It lunges, but Oscar spots a narrow opening below and swims toward it, heart racing.

He squeezes through just as the lizard-Kathoga's claws swipe at him, missing by inches.

INT. HOLLOW CAVE TUNNEL - CONTINUOUS

Amera kneels, tears in her eyes, staring into the abyss as the lizard-Kathoga roars in the distance.

Kenneth peeks over the edge, gasping at the sight of the lizard-Kathoga climbing back up, faster than before.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON

We have to go!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He scoops Amera into his arms, urgency driving him as he backs away from the ledge.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice trembling)
We're not gonna make it.

The lizard-Kathoga's roar grows louder, and Kenneth's breaths quicken, memories of his long-jump days flashing in his mind.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouts)
I HATE THIS CAVE!

Kenneth sprints down the tunnel, Amera pressing her face into his chest, her grip tightening around him.

He recalls the adrenaline of his long-jump days, channeling that energy as he propels himself forward.

Out of the shadows, the forelimb and claws of the lizard-Kathoga suddenly emerge.

Without a moment's hesitation, Kenneth seizes the opportunity, using the lizard-Kathoga's body as a springboard.

He leaps into the air, soaring over the gap and landing safely on the other side.

(SLOW MOTION)

Kenneth turns just in time to see the lizard-Kathoga scaling the wall, its grotesque form a chilling embodiment of relentless horror.

He pulls out a flare and ignites it, hesitating as he gauges the creature's movements.

The lizard-Kathoga roars, a primal sound that reverberates through the cave, then leaps toward them.

(NORMAL SPEED)

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouts)
AGAIN, I HATE THIS MOTHAFUKKIN' CAVE!

In a split second, Kenneth hurls the flare into its gaping maw.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The lizard-Kathoga panics, its scream echoing as it crashes against the wall, disoriented and clinging to the rock just out of Kenneth's reach.

Kenneth doesn't waste a moment as he bolts down the tunnel, adrenaline surging through him.

POV OF THE LIZARD-KATHOGA - CONTINUOUS

The lizard-Kathoga spits out the flare, its eyes wild with rage as it claws its way upward, relentless and roaring in pursuit.

INT. CAVE TUNNEL - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth races deeper into the tunnel, adrenaline coursing through him.

The echo of his footsteps reverberates off the walls, heightening his sense of urgency.

He hears the lizard's growl echoing behind him.

He glances back—no sign of it.

He looks forward, but it's too late.

INT. LIZARD-KATHOGA'S LAIR - CONTINUOUS

Suddenly, Kenneth trips, dropping Amera as they tumble onto a gruesome lair of bones and decapitated bodies.

They gasp, horror washing over them as Kenneth recognizes the decapitated head of Chance.

Amera lets out a muffled scream, her voice trembling.

KENNETH CARLSON
(mortified)
I guess... this is home.

Amera's eyes widen as she spots a familiar black jacket among the carnage.

She crawls over, trembling, and checks the jacket pocket.

Her heart sinks as she sees the label.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(whispering)
No!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

She looks at the decapitated body next to the jacket, then down toward the bloody hand, noticing a ring on the finger that matches her own.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(whimpering)
Sergio.

Kenneth instinctively moves to console her, but his eyes catch a bulge in the jacket pocket.

He reaches in and pulls out a recorder, slipping it into his own pocket.

Suddenly, a loud roar reverberates through the air.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
We can't stop now.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(crying)
I just wanna die.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(firmly)
Nobody wants to die! Not even Sergio.

He grips her shoulders, searching her eyes for strength.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(urgent)
He fought to live! Why shouldn't we?

Amera meets his gaze, determination flickering in her eyes.

She wipes her tears with anger, steeling herself.

They hear the sound of trickling water nearby, a small stream flowing through the cave, carrying the blood of the fallen.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(pointing)
Streams lead to rivers.

Kenneth rushes over to the water, spotting a narrow passageway.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
That thing can't fit through here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(eyeing the space)
And you think you can?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(urging)
Don't worry about me. You go first.
I'll follow. Just move fast!

Amera nods, crawling through the tight space.

Kenneth follows, struggling but determined.

The lizard-Kathoga appears in the background, watching as Kenneth's feet disappear into the crawlspace.

Its eyes narrow, frustration evident.

It turns and bolts back into the cave, defeated for now.

INT. CRAWL SPACE OF CAVE - CONTINUOUS

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(gagging)
This blood. It's everywhere!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Just keep moving! We're almost there.

Amera's resolve strengthens as they push forward.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(excitedly)
I see lights up ahead!

Faint sound of a helicopter.

EXT. SECRET ENTRANCE TO CAVE - CONTINUOUS

The cave opens up, revealing a wide entrance with a shallow river leading toward freedom.

Kenneth's face lights up as he realizes what Chance had been so excited about.

Amera's phone buzzes incessantly, notifications flooding in.

EXT. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth and Amera wave their arms frantically, desperation etched on their faces.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(yelling)
Over here! We're here!

Kenneth spots a SWAT team van in the distance, parked along the forest path.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(pointing)
That way! We need to get to the van!

Suddenly, without warning, the lizard-Kathoga bursts through the highest point of the cave mountain's wall, soaring above them.

Kenneth and Amera freeze, horror dawning as the lizard-Kathoga lands behind them, its eyes locked on its prey.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(shouting)
GO! GO!

They sprint, adrenaline propelling them forward as the helicopters above open fire on the lizard-Kathoga.

The back doors of the van swing open, revealing SWAT and special forces officers, weapons at the ready.

SWAT OFFICER
(shouting)
COME ON!

Kenneth and Amera push through the chaos, barely making it to the van as it speeds off into the forest.

Inside, officers fire at the lizard-Kathoga, but it keeps charging, relentless and terrifyingly close.

SPECIAL FORCES OFFICER
(urgently)
Hurry with that canon!

As the lizard-Kathoga lunges, its mouth gaping wide in a grotesque display, everyone gasps in horror.

SPECIAL FORCES OFFICER (CONT'D)
(firing)
Now!

BOOM!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The cannon fires directly into the lizard Kathoga's mouth, and it explodes in a shower of gore.

The van races through the forest, the explosion echoing behind them as helicopters hover above, surveying the chaos.

The explosion ignites a massive brush fire, flames licking at the trees as the inferno spreads rapidly.

Firefighters rush to the scene, but one firefighter, caught in the blaze, screams as the flames engulf him.

INT. INSIDE SWAT VAN - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth and Amera sit, shaken, as the EMT checks them over.

EMT
(examining Amera)
You've got some bruises. Any other injuries?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(shocked)
No, I'm fine.

EMT
(turning to Kenneth)
And you, sir? Any injuries?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shaking his head)
No, I'm good.

The EMT continues checking their vitals, the distant sound of explosions echoing outside.

EMT
(looking out the window)
That's definitely not normal for a forest.

Amera glances at the EMT, realization dawning as the weight of their ordeal sinks in.

EXT. LINDEN, VA. - APPALACHIAN FOREST RANGER STATION - MIDNIGHT

The van pulls up to the Appalachian Mountains Forest Ranger Station.

Captain Hewett, DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA (58F), (composed but

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

visibly tense), and a forest ranger await their arrival.

In the background, a fire rages, smoke billowing into the sky—a stark reminder of the chaos.

Kenneth, Amera, and a Special Forces Officer exit the van, making their way toward the group.

The Special Forces officer hands Margo a USB flash drive, relief and urgency in his expression.

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA
(nervously)
I take it you got it?

SPECIAL FORCES OFFICER
(relieved)
We got it.

The officer nods and heads back to the van, leaving tension hanging in the air.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(turning to Margo)
This is Dr. Margo D'Agosta, a lead evolutionary biologist from Chicago.

Kenneth extends his hand, shaking Margo's firmly, trying to convey confidence despite the circumstances.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(trying to lighten the mood)
So, I hear you had quite the close encounter with one of those things.

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA
(somberly)
Yeah, feels like it happened yesterday.

Suddenly, a distant explosion rocks the area, causing the group to flinch.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(urgently)
We should get inside. It's safer there.

The group moves toward the ranger station, the van driving off into the chaos behind them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The camera pans upward, revealing the disastrous scene: flames raging fiercely, a stark contrast to the fragile hope of safety that lies ahead.

INT. LINDEN, VA. - APPALACHIAN FOREST RANGER STATION - LOBBY
- CONTINUED

The group enters the station, tension palpable. A Ranger grips his Walkie Talkie, urgency in his voice.

RANGER
Can we get it contained? Over!

RANGER II (O.S.)
It's like lighter fluid was poured all
over the damn forest! This is
madness... over!

Amera stands frozen, her mind racing.

Margo watches footage of the creature pursuing Kenneth and Amera, shock and grim acceptance.

RANGER
(concerned)
Ten-four. (turning towards the group)
We have to evacuate soon.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice rising)
We can't! My father's still out there!
I won't leave him.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(steadyng)
We have the SWAT team on standby.
They'll find him. You have friends
that are worried about you.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(fiercely)
I don't care about anything but
finding him.

Margo's analytical mind races, cutting through the tension.

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA
It resembles the Kathoga. The tusks,
the teeth. It lacks human-like traits.
It moves more like a lizard. I need
samples to confirm. This is definitely

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

linked to those leaves.

Amera approaches Margo, curiosity piqued.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
The Kathoga? Just like in the article.
What do you mean by "lacking human-like traits"?

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA
The one that attacked me started as human. Without those leaves, it decapitates its victims.

Amera's anger simmers beneath her sarcasm.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Yeah, I've seen its handiwork.

Captain Hewett's gaze sharpens, suspicion etched on his face as he turns to Kenneth.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
What's she talking about?

Kenneth glances at Amera, who nods.

He pulls out Sergio's recorder, the weight of its implications heavy in the air.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
This belonged to Sergio. He was found... decapitated.

Captain Hewett reaches for the recorder, but Kenneth hesitates, protective.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
We need answers, Captain.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
Dr. D'Agosta, I need to connect this to your laptop. Ranger, do you have an auxiliary cord?

The Ranger retrieves the cord, urgency in his movements.

The captain connects the recorder, and the group leans in, tension thickening.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.)
Day One. The goons here told me not to
film anything, but I'm recording
anyway. They know what's happening out
here; they just want me to shut up.

A beat.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You know me—I never follow orders.
Took my first sample; nothing serious.
We're going deeper tomorrow.

A beat.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Amera, I know you're still mad. I hope
you still wanna marry me.

Amera's eyes glisten, the weight of his words hitting her
hard.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
OK, that was weird. (nervous laugh) I
just want to find whatever they're
after.

Captain Hewett fast-forwards the tape, urgency mounting.

The other Ranger bursts in, panic in his eyes.

RANGER II
What the hell are you all still doing
here? The fire is spreading!

Ignoring him, the captain plays the tape again.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.)
Day sixteen. I don't know what's
happening. All my samples are
contaminated. They're using codes on
the radio. What's the big damn secret?

Captain Hewett fast-forwards again, the tension rising as
Sergio's voice grows more distressed.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(shouting)
I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL THAT THING
WAS! IT WAS HUGE!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Amera exchanges a knowing glance with Kenneth, fear, and determination mingling.

The other ranger, halfway out the door, waves his arm in the air, signaling for the helicopter.

RANGER II
 I'm heading back out there! (*glancing up at the sky*) (*into his radio*) Great, bring that damn water over here!

He storms out, leaving the group in heavy silence.

The recording plays on, the air thick with tension as a deafening roar reverberates through the speakers.

Sergio's heavy breathing cuts through the chaos, each labored gasp echoing his rising panic.

His footsteps pound the ground in a frantic rhythm, a desperate flight from the unseen terror that lurks behind him.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.)
 (exclaims, breathless)
 THEY'RE ALL DEAD! THIS THING MAULED
 THEM—RIPPED THEIR HEADS OFF! I CAN
 FEEL IT WATCHING ME!

Captain Hewett fast-forwards the tape, his face a mask of grim determination.

He presses play again.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 (whispering, anger bubbling)
 DAY TWENTY-ONE. I'M TRAPPED IN THIS
 CAVE. MY SAMPLES. THEY WEREN'T
 CONTAMINATED.

The group looks around at each other.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 THERE ARE CHEMICALS ALL OVER THIS
 FUCKING FOREST! IT DOESN'T MAKE
 SENSE—WHY WOULD THEY DO THIS? ONE OF
 THE GOVERNMENT REPS... HE WASN'T EVEN
 AMERICAN! HE'S A BRITISH MI-6 AGENT!

Kenneth's brow furrows, confusion and concern etched on his face.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Are we really hearing this?

The recording continues, the sound of a creature roaring and Sergio's frantic footsteps echoing in the background.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.)
(distressed)
THESE SICK GOVERNMENT FUCKS! THEY
DUMPED CHEMICALS INTO THE WATER AND
ALL OVER THE FOREST! THEY PLANTED
THOSE LEAVES!

A beat.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I FOUND DOCUMENTS—IT'S A SCAM TO PUSH
A GOVERNMENT BILL FOR CLIMATE CHANGE!

A beat.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
THEY RIGGED THIS FOREST TO LOOK LIKE
THE AFTERMATH OF GLOBAL WARMING! THIS
ISN'T JUST A MISTAKE; IT'S A COVER-UP!
THEY THOUGHT ALL THE ANIMALS WOULD BE
UNALIVED!

A beat.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
A LOT OF THEM ARE SICK AND
CONTAMINATED! NEVER TRUST THEM! IT'S
ALL ABOUT MONEY! IT'S A FUCKING SCAM!

The group stares in shock, the weight of his words sinking in.

The Ranger, trying to monitor the blaze, approaches the window.

His expression shifts to fear and confusion as the tension escalates.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(screaming)
Amera, please find this! If anything
happens to me, just know that I love
you!

Suddenly, a loud roar pierces the air.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Sergio screams, his voice filled with terror as he runs, then abruptly stops.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(screaming)
THERE'S ANOTHER ONE!

The recording cuts off, leaving everyone in stunned silence.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(fearful)
What did he just say?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Captain rewind it again.

Captain Hewett quickly rewinds the tape, urgency in his movements.

He hits play.

Extreme silence as they lean in.

DR. SERGIO MIERGO (O.S.)
(screaming)
THERE'S ANOTHER ONE!

The recording continues, but now there's only silence.

RANGER
(screaming)
WE GOTTA GET OUTTA HERE, NOW!

(SLOW MOTION)

The Ranger's eyes widen in horror as he sees the other Ranger trapped within the tusks of a grotesque brown-bear-Kathoga, its body ablaze and advancing toward the building.

In a moment of instinct, the Ranger leaps from in front of the window.

Everyone else rushes toward the front door as the brown-bear-Kathoga bursts through the wall.

Debris falls from the building, dousing the flames on the brown-bear-Kathoga.

(NORMAL SPEED)

They watch in horror as it decapitates the other Ranger right

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

before their eyes.

Margo and Amera scream, their voices filled with terror.

Kenneth grabs Amera and Margo, urging them out the front door, slamming it shut behind them.

RANGER
(fearful)
NO WAY!

The Ranger scrambles to his feet, but the brown-bear-Kathoga, having finished with the other Ranger, turns with a terrifying speed and lunges at him.

Kenneth and Captain Hewett watch in horror as the Ranger is decapitated.

The brown-bear-Kathoga drops his severed head from its tusks, a grotesque display of power.

Captain Hewett hands Detective Kenneth Carlson a gun, urgency in his voice.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
SHOOT THIS DAMN THING!

Captain Hewett opens fire on the brown-bear-Kathoga.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
CAPTAIN, BULLET'S WON'T WORK!

EXT. RANGER STATION - CONTINUOUS

Margo and Amera are hiding behind nearby trees, unable to ignore the sounds of gunfire and roaring from within.

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA
(yelling)
I KNOW IT LOOKS LIKE A BROWN-BEAR, BUT
IT'S REPTILIAN TOO!

INT. RANGER STATION - CONTINUOUS

A faint sound of Margo is heard, her voice strained but determined.

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA (O.S.)
ONLY EXTREMES OF HOT AND COLD WILL
KILL IT! WE NEED THE CANON!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Captain Hewett, his face set with resolve, grabs his radio, urgency in his tone.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(shouting)
GET THAT CANON BACK HERE, NOW!

Suddenly, the brown-bear-Kathoga charges forward, its massive bear claws swiping at Captain Hewett, knocking the gun from his hand. The sound of metal clattering echoes in the chaos.

The brown-bear-Kathoga spins, its long, green, and brown lizard-like tail sweeping through the lobby, sending Kenneth and Captain Hewett crashing against the wall.

CAPTAIN HEWETT (CONT'D)
(yelling)
The back way! Move!

Kenneth nods, adrenaline surging as they sprint toward the back of the building, fear propelling them forward.

INT. INNER OFFICES AND HALLWAYS - CONTINUOUS

The brown-bear-Kathoga pursues them, its monstrous form weaving through the narrow corridors like a relentless predator.

Kenneth and Captain Hewett finally reach a huge metal back door, their breaths heavy with panic.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(breathless)
We can't let it corner us!

They push through the door.

EXT. OUTDOOR SIDE REAR OF BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

They slam the door shut behind them, the sound echoing like a heartbeat in the silence.

Suddenly, the brown-bear-Kathoga bursts through the door with a deafening **BOOM!** The massive door crashes to the ground, a testament to the creature's power.

The brown-bear-Kathoga continues its pursuit, its massive body and longtail flowing behind it like a dark shadow.

EXT. RANGER STATION - CONTINUOUS

Kenneth and Captain Hewett pause, turning to face the beast as it rounds the corner, its terrifying gaze locked onto them.

Meanwhile, Amera and Margo stand nervously, their eyes widening in fear.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(urgently)
We need to split up! It can't follow
us both!

Kenneth hesitates, fear battling with the instinct to survive. The brown-bear-Kathoga's growl reverberates, a chilling reminder of their urgency.

Captain Hewett and Detective Kenneth Carlson stand tense, eyes fixed on the approaching brown-bear-Kathoga, a creature of nightmares.

It lumbers forward, its massive frame casting a shadow that swallows the light. Its fierce eyes lock onto the two men, a silent promise of violence.

KENNETH CARLSON
(voice steady, laced with humor)
So, when are we splitting up?

Suddenly, the thunderous roar of the SWAT team truck approaches, screeching to a halt. They maneuver it into position, revealing a cannon mounted in the back.

A collective gasp ripples through the group as Captain Hewett and Detective Carlson stand their ground, facing the monstrous beast.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(shouting)
KILL THIS SON OF A BITCH!

An explosion echoes in the distance, sending debris raining down like confetti of chaos. The ground shakes as everyone's thrown down, the force of the blast knocking the wind from their lungs.

The brown-bear-Kathoga, undeterred, leaps into the air, its powerful limbs propelling it toward the SWAT team, who scramble to load the cannon.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(yelling)
GET OUT OF THE VAN!

It crashes down onto the van's roof with a deafening thud!

INT. INSIDE THE VAN - CONTINUOUS

The beast's grotesque paw crashes through the side, yanking a SWAT officer out with a blood-curdling scream.

The driver, gasps for breath, stumbles out and crawls beneath the van, panic etched across his face.

EXT. UNDER THE VAN - CONTINUOUS

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
MOVE! GET OUT FROM UNDER THERE!

The officer shakes his head, paralyzed by fear, unable to respond.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(voice rising)
GET FROM UNDER THERE, NOW!

Suddenly, the brown-bear-Kathoga's other paw reaches under the van, seizing a second officer by the foot. His scream pierces the air as he's dragged out, helpless.

EXT. TOP OF SWAT VAN - CONTINUOUS

The brown-bear Kathoga holds two officers, one dangling upside down, its tusks glistening with malice.

In a swift, brutal motion, it decapitates one officer and splits the other in half, a gruesome display of power.

EXT. BACK END OF VAN - CONTINUOUS

Amidst the chaos, Amera's eyes dart to a grenade in the back of the van.

Heart racing, she steels herself and sprints toward it, determination fueling her fear.

She snatches the grenade and takes off.

EXT. FRONT VIEW OF AMERA RUNNING - CONTINUOUS

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA (O.S.)
(shouting)
YOU WON'T ESCAPE IT!

EXT. TOP OF SWAT VAN - CONTINUOUS

The brown-bear-Kathoga, sensing a new target, pivots, and lunges after Amera.

EXT. BACK END OF VAN - CONTINUOUS

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(yelling)
SHE'S LOST HER DAMN MIND!

Kenneth rushes to a stash of rifles and grenades, grabbing an elephant rifle for himself and distributing the others to Captain Hewett and the remaining officers, urgency driving their every move.

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - CONTINUOUS

The brown-bear-Kathoga gains ground on Amera, who runs with a fierce desperation, survival her only option.

EXT. POV OF SPECTATORS - CONTINUOUS

Innocent bystanders, drawn by the forest fire, spot Amera sprinting toward them. Their eyes widen in horror as the brown-bear-Kathoga charges after her through the engulfing darkness.

THE CROWD PANICS!

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - CONTINUED

Amera skids to a halt, turning to face her fate. As the beast closes in, she grits her teeth and yanks the grenade pin free.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(shouting)
AMERA, MOVE!

The crowd scatters, a wave of panic washing over them as they flee in all directions. The brown-bear-Kathoga opens its maw, and in that split second, Amera hurls the grenade.

The grenade soaring through the air.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(shouting)
EVERYBODY GET DOWN!

Amera dives to the side, heart pounding.

The grenade lands squarely on the brown-bear-Kathoga, and—

BOOM!

The explosion reverberates, the brown-bear-Kathoga's roar echoing through the forest as it collapses, wounded and thrashing.

Detective Carlson, Captain Hewett, and the SWAT team advance cautiously, weapons raised, as the brown-bear-Kathoga struggles to rise.

The SWAT team opens fire, a cacophony of gunshots echoing through the forest as they unleash a relentless barrage from their rifles.

Each shot is a desperate plea for survival, the air thick with tension and fear.

The brown-bear-Kathoga thrashes violently, but slowly, its movements begin to falter.

The officers stand their ground, eyes locked on the beast, breaths held as they witness its strength wane.

Finally, the brown-bear-Kathoga gives up, its massive body lays there, finally relenting with silence falling over the chaos.

But then, with a guttural growl, the brown-bear-Kathoga stirs, its enormous mouth opening wide, revealing a row of jagged teeth.

In a split second, Kenneth raises his rifle and fires directly into the brown-bear-Kathoga's gaping maw.

The shot rings out, a final act of defiance, and the brown-bear-Kathoga goes still, its body finally lifeless.

Amera stands at a distance, her heart racing as she watches the scene unfold.

A growing crowd of onlookers gathers, their vehicles lining the road, some stepping out, eyes wide with a mix of awe and horror.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

They look to her, as if she's the one who tamed the beast. Amera smiles with relief as she joins the others.

DETECTIVE KENNETH CARLSON, CAPTAIN HEWETT, DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA, AND DR. AMERA QUIROZ, stand together, gazing at the smoldering forest, the flames beginning to die down, but the devastation remains.

Dr. Margo D'Agosta's expression is a complex tapestry of longing, sadness, and relief.

She watches the fire flicker, memories of what once was dancing in the flames.

DR. MARGO D'AGOSTA
(softly, almost to herself)
I wish you were here, detective.

Her words hang in the air, a bittersweet reminder of those lost and the weight of their choices.

CUT TO:

EXT. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - FIRE BLAZE - CONTINUOUS

Firefighters arrive, their presence a stark contrast to the chaos. They begin to tape off the area, urging the now massive crowd to evacuate.

Spectators pull out their phones, capturing the aftermath—the fallen brown-bear-Kathoga, the charred landscape—each click a testament to the horror they've witnessed.

EXT. POV OF AMERA - CONTINUOUS

Amidst the chaos, Amera feels the weight of their gazes.

She's not just a survivor. She has become a symbol of courage in the face of terror. Yet beneath the surface, sadness lingers.

EXT. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - CONTINUOUS

The scene reveals: a forest scarred by fire, a creature defeated, and a crowd left to grapple with the reality of what they've just witnessed.

The echoes of gunfire fade, replaced by the distant crackle of flames—a haunting reminder of the battle fought and the lives forever changed.

INT. AMERA AND SERGIO'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - MORNING

Morning light filters through the curtains, casting a soft glow over the room.

Amara stands surrounded by memories, gathering Sergio's belongings with a heavy heart.

She sighs, placing his clothes into a box labeled "**Sergio**," each item a painful reminder of what was lost.

Her gaze drifts to a framed photo of herself, Sergio, and her father, Oscar.

A bittersweet smile flickers across her face before it fades, the weight of grief pulling her down.

She sinks onto the bed, trembling fingers pulling out Sergio's wedding ring—the last tangible connection to him.

Tears well in her eyes as she stares at it.

Suddenly, her phone vibrates, breaking the silence.

ON SCREEN: PERWAH CALLING!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice thick with emotion)
Perwah, hey. You weren't answering.

PERWAH (O.S.)
(crying)
I'm not going to ask how you're holding up. I already know.

A heavy silence envelops them, thick with unspoken pain.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice trembling)
Is there such a thing as too much loss?

Perwah takes a deep breath, the weight of guilt and shame evident in her silence.

PERWAH (O.S.)
(softly)
I'm sorry I didn't answer.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
It's ok.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Amera lets out a soft sigh, the sound tinged with bitter sweetness as she continues to pack Sergio's belongings.

Grief washes over her, a tide of memories and unfulfilled dreams.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
 His mother wants his things. She was never kind to me... just like Daddy wasn't kind to...

PERWAH (O.S.)
 (with quiet resolve)
 I know, sweetheart. Things will get better, and justice will prevail.
 You're on the brink of uncovering the truth behind a major government conspiracy. At least you have that to hold onto.

INT. PERWAH'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Perwah, lying in bed, holds an old photo of Sergio, a flicker of hope mingling with sorrow, unacknowledged feelings lingering in the air.

She wipes her eyes.

INT. AMERA AND SERGIO'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Amera catches sight of something on the TV, her heart racing.

PERWAH (O.S.)
 Are you there?

Amera quickly turns up the volume.

ON SCREEN:

NEWS REPORTER
 (serious tone)
 We have an update on the Appalachian Mountain disaster with unusual developments. It seems that a lizard and a brown bear were genetically altered. The creatures were destroyed, and the footage is too graphic to broadcast. This incident, including the blaze, has prompted an immediate investigation into the origins of this catastrophe. The fire department has

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

concluded that there may have been criminal activity involved, linked to a deceased Dr. Sergio Miergo...

Amera's face contorts with rage, fists clenching.

ON SCREEN:

NEWS REPORTER (CONT'D)
...who allegedly spread chemical properties around the forest. More reports are coming in as firemen continue to search for survivors and clues that may connect this conspiracy to Dr. Miergo. We will keep you posted on further developments.

Amera mutes the TV, her anger boiling over.

PERWAH (O.S.)
(fuming)
You gotta love FAKE NEWS—exaggerated, made-up narratives. I really thought they'd finally get it right this time.

Amera's gaze drifts to her phone, her heart racing as she scrolls through her recent contacts.

She stops at Detective Kenneth Carlson's name, emotions flickering across her face—hope, anger, and desperation.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(firm)
I gotta go!

Without waiting for a response, Amera disconnects the call, resolve hardening.

She grabs her keys from the end table, the metal clinking sharply in the silence.

CUT TO:

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

As she storms out, her expression is a storm of determination and fury, grief propelling her forward.

The front door slams behind her, echoing her urgency.

INT. VIRGINIA POLICE DEPARTMENT - LOBBY - DAY

Amera storms into the police station, a mix of determination and despair on her face.

She spots Detective Kenneth Carlson, who waits with a cautious demeanor.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Dr. Quiroz. I know you're upset.

Amera stands, her frustration palpable.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice rising)
Upset? I'm beyond upset! How could you let this happen? You know Sergio didn't do what they're saying!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(gesturing down the hall)
Let's talk somewhere private.

He leads Amera down the corridor, tension thick in the air.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

They stand before a two-way mirror, the weight of the situation pressing down on them.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(lowering his voice)
I can't share too much, but they've seized all the evidence.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(frustrated)
They can't just sweep this under the rug. This isn't right.

Amera's anger simmers, her mind racing with unvoiced thoughts.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(voice breaking)
Sergio's not even in the ground yet.

Kenneth shakes his head, arms crossed, his forensic mind churning through the implications.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
I won't let them use him as a
scapegoat.

Kenneth pulls out a small USB drive, a flicker of hope
igniting in Amera's eyes.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
What's that?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I made a copy of Sergio's tape.

For the first time, a glimmer of hope shines in Amera's eyes.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
That's... good, right?

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(sighing)
I wish it were enough. But it won't
spark an investigation. My captain is
cooperating with the CIA and other
officials. This isn't going the way I
thought it would.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(interrupting)
He has to tell the truth!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(frustrated)
He's not going to risk his job or
retirement for an environmental
scientist.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice rising, passionate)
¡Esto no es correcto y no es justo!
(*This isn't right and it isn't fair!*)

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(hesitant)
I don't know what that means, but...

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(cutting him off)
It means this is complete CRAP!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I wouldn't say that just yet. There's

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

still a chance.

Amera locks eyes with Kenneth, recognizing the determination in his expression, but fear creeps in.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
You can't!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I need to find any other evidence
before it disappears!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice trembling)
It's too dangerous!

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Sergio was blowing the whistle on this
whole thing; I have to find something.

Amera's resolve falters, her face reflecting total defeat.

Suddenly, Kenneth's phone rings.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(answering)
Detective Carlson here.

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.)
We found someone in the forest
crawling out of a cave.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(leaning in)
Who?

Amera steps closer, her heart racing as Kenneth puts the call on speaker.

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.)
We couldn't find any ID on him; he
looks like he's been through a lot.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Describe him.

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.)
He's an older guy, possibly mid-to-
late 50s.

Amera's eyes widen, hope surging.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
He's Salvadoran-beard and goatee,
salt-and-pepper hair. He's wearing a
blue short-sleeved button-up, jeans,
and black boots. Looks like he has a
serious shoulder wound.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(breathless with relief)
That's my dad.

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.)
(hesitant)
He's holding onto something and won't
let it go.

A tense pause hangs in the air, the weight of uncertainty
palpable.

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(continuing)
He seems very apprehensive about
talking to anyone.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(urgent, almost pleading)
Where is he being taken?

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.)
He's being rushed to Daily Memorial.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(voice firm)
Don't let anyone near him until I get
there!

SWAT OFFICER (O.S.)
Will do, Detective.

Kenneth hangs up, determination and concern etched on his
face.

INT. DAILY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - FOURTH FLOOR
- LATER

The elevator doors slide open, and Kenneth and Amera rush
out, urgency in their steps.

They approach two SWAT team officers stationed outside a
hospital room.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Amera's heart races as she catches sight of her father, Oscar, through the glass.

Without hesitation, she bursts into the room.

INT. OSCAR'S HOSPITAL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Oscar is sitting on the edge of the bed, clutching a mysterious bag tightly to his chest.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice trembling with relief)
Daddy, you're alive.

She envelops him in a tight embrace, kissing his forehead.

Oscar, still in mild shock, looks at her, confusion clouding his eyes.

Kenneth enters and notices Oscar's blank stare.

OSCAR QUIROZ
I made it?

Amera nods, her smile a mix of joy and concern.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
You did.

Oscar's expression shifts, a flicker of fear crossing his face.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(voice low, almost a whisper)
That thing. It's still out there?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(reassuringly)
No, it's dead. You're safe now.

Kenneth watches Oscar closely, sensing the tension in the room.

The nurse enters, breaking the moment.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
What did you give him?

NURSE
(calmly)
Just antibiotics for his injuries.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Kenneth approaches cautiously, trying to maintain a sense of calm.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(softly)
Oscar, what's in the bag?

Oscar's eyes widen, confusion and fear etched on his face.

Amera glances at Kenneth, her brow furrowed in concern.

OSCAR QUIROZ
(voice fading)
I think I should rest now.

She kisses her father gently, then turns to Kenneth as they step into the hallway.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(urgent, almost pleading)
I really need to ask him more
questions and see what's in that bag!

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice firm, protective)
He's in shock; he needs a minute.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(frustrated)
We need him to tell us more about what
happened out there soon! We're running
out of time!

Amera's expression shifts to one of anticipation, her heart racing as she contemplates the weight of the secrets her father might hold.

INT. CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA - POLICE DEPARTMENT - MIDDAY

Captain Hewett strides toward his office, brow furrowed.

He glances at Kenneth Carlson's empty desk.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(voiced raised)
Yarbrough. Where's Carlson?

The Officer looks up, shrugging.

OFFICER
Not sure, sir.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Captain Hewett's frustration boils over.

He storms into his office, slamming the door behind him.

INT. CAPTAIN HEWETT'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Captain Hewett's phone buzzes.

He glances at a text from a private number.

TEXT: *There's a survivor.*

Captain Hewett types back, his fingers tense.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(typing)
I know. I heard.

The phone buzzes again.

TEXT: *We can't risk what he might say to the press. It could damage us.*

Captain Hewett's jaw tightens.

CAPTAIN HEWETT (CONT'D)
(typing)
He knows the rules. No talking to the press.

Another message arrives, and Captain Hewett's expression darkens.

TEXT: *We have a bigger issue.*

His anger flares.

CAPTAIN HEWETT (CONT'D)
(typing)
I'm aware of that too.

TEXT: *GET YOUR AGENT UNDER CONTROL!*

Captain Hewett grabs his coat, urgency in his movements.

TEXT: *Or we will have to INTERVENE!*

Now on edge, he dials Kenneth's number.

INT. DAILY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - FOURTH FLOOR
- CONTINUED

Kenneth, his phone buzzing with the Captain's calls, deliberately ignores them.

The doctor approaches Amera, carrying the bag that Oscar clutched tightly earlier.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
Doctor?

The doctor offers a warm smile, recognizing her.

DOCTOR
You must be Oscar's daughter.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
I am.

DOCTOR
He spoke very highly of you. Oscar's under sedation now—he was quite agitated when the firemen found him. Disoriented. We'll give him some more relaxation meds throughout the day.

The doctor's smile fades slightly, replaced by concern.

He hands Amera the bag, his grip firm yet gentle.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
He wouldn't let go of this at first.
But he insisted I give it to you. And only you.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(stepping forward, tone steady)
You did the right thing, Doctor.

The doctor nods and walks away.

Amera's curiosity piques as she opens the bag, but Kenneth gently stops her.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON (CONT'D)
(grabbing the bag)
Let me handle the cop stuff. We need privacy.

Amera nods, urgency in her eyes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CUT TO:

INT. EMPTY HOSPITAL ROOM - MOMENTS AFTER

Kenneth retrieves a pair of latex gloves from a box on the windowsill, the sound of the gloves snapping echoing in the silence.

He opens the bag, and Dr. Quiroz watches, anticipation etched on her face.

As they sift through the contents, shock washes over them.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
These are Sergio's specimen
containers.

Kenneth's hand brushes against a black zipped folder marked "CLASSIFIED."

He unzips it, revealing a chilling document: a kill request for Dr. Sergio Miergo.

Amera's expression shifts from shock to confusion.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(voice trembling)
They planned to plant infected leaves,
spread chemicals, all to eliminate
him?

Kenneth's brow furrows, piecing together the puzzle.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
A small company, untraceable,
operating in the shadows. They'd
"discover" these abnormalities, then
write a report to legitimize the
findings.

Amera's eyes blaze with realization, her voice rising.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
And if anything goes wrong, then they
can blame him for it. (turns to
Kenneth) He was a visionary, Kenneth.
Too brilliant for them to control.

She locks eyes with him, her intensity palpable.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)
(softening)
And so are you.

Kenneth allows a small smile, but the weight of the situation looms over them.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
The Captain's probably on his way.
He'll want everything we've uncovered.
If he tells the truth, he's done for.
If he covers it up, I take the fall.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(voice softening)
So, what now?

Kenneth holds her gaze, the tension thick between them.

The world outside fades away.

INT. DAILY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - FOURTH FLOOR
- LATER

Captain Hewett scans the bustling emergency room, tension etched on his face.

He spots Kenneth and strides over, frustration radiating from him.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(voice raised)
Where's Dr. Quiroz?

Kenneth meets his gaze, calm but resolute.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
She left.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(surprised)
She left? Just like that?

Kenneth stands firm, his eyes steady.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Yeah... she left.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(angry)
While her father is still here? You're

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

telling me she just walked away?

Kenneth's frustration bubbles to the surface.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
Whoever's behind this cover-up isn't
getting away with it.

Captain Hewett's expression shifts, concern creeping in.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
You better be grateful you're not
being locked up right now. I hope you
didn't do anything else reckless that
could jeopardize our department's
future over a conspiracy theory.

Kenneth's voice is steady, but there's an edge to it.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
(angered)
We both know there's no conspiracy
here. I wasn't even in the room when
she spoke to him. What was said is
between them, and frankly, it's none
of our business.

He hands a USB drive to the Captain, who inspects it with
skepticism.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
(smiling wryly)
Plausible deniability, huh? Whatever
he told her, it can't be better than
this recording.

Kenneth's expression hardens, defiance in his voice.

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
It doesn't matter. It's out of our
hands now. Both of our hands. Agreed?

Captain Hewett chuckles softly, but there's a weight behind
it.

CAPTAIN HEWETT
I hope you know what you're doing.

Kenneth meets his gaze, unwavering.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DT. KENNETH CARLSON
I always do the right thing. Maybe you
should take a page from that book.

A flicker of shame crosses Captain Hewett's face, quickly replaced by relief.

He places a hand on Kenneth's shoulder, a gesture of camaraderie.

Kenneth nods back, their bond solidified in this moment of uncertainty.

INT. LINDEN, VA - APJ RESEARCH FACILITY - MORNING

Amera steps off the elevator, taking a deep breath as she enters her new research facility.

Determination fills her stride as she heads to her office.

INT. AMERA'S NEW OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Amera places her purse in a drawer, then retrieves her lab coat, slipping it on with purpose.

INT. APJ'S RESEARCH LAB - LATER

Amera peers through a microscope, her eyes lighting up at the intriguing samples before her.

This is a fresh start, and it feels promising.

INT. LINDEN, VA - APJ RESEARCH FACILITY - AMERA'S OFFICE - DAY

James and Perwah burst into Amera's office, surprising her with an expensive bottle of sparkling wine.

JAMES
(grinning)
Hey, boss.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(playfully)
I'm not your boss.

PERWAH
(teasing)
Did you forget our initials are on the building?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Laughter fills the room as James pours the wine into three glasses.

JAMES

Just be glad you finally invested your parents' money into something worthwhile for a change.

Perwah's smile falters slightly, guilt flickering in her eyes.

PERWAH

It was a necessary investment.

James catches her gaze, a silent understanding passing between them.

JAMES

Just be glad you're not in my boat with these student loans.

Amera smiles at James.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ

I have something for you.

She hands James a folder.

He opens it, surprise washing over his face, followed by a broad grin.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ (CONT'D)

I spoke with the chairman of the environmental grant organization. Fill out that application, and it's yours.

James's excitement is palpable.

JAMES

Oh wow, thank you! This is incredible!

He hugs Amera, but Perwah's sarcasm cuts through the moment.

PERWAH

(staring down at Amera's samples)
I see we're done with the worm business.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ

(relieved)

Yep! It's about forest management and

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

enhancement. No more studying "climate change"—something that doesn't exist. We're gonna prove it to the world.

PERWAH
(raising her glass)
Here's to the Appalachian Mountain Coalition Fund... with exclusive access before any other research team in Virginia.

They clink glasses, a moment of triumph.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
And to that anonymous whistleblower.

Perwah's skepticism surfaces.

PERWAH
Yeah... anonymous.

Amera smirks, while James looks contemplative.

JAMES
The less I know, the better. But seriously, you're not nervous about us working with those private sector folks?

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
(reassuring)
Not at all. With the FBI watching, they'll be on their best behavior.

James's concern deepens.

JAMES
Aren't you scared to go back?

Perwah interjects, trying to lighten the mood.

PERWAH
Come on, it's all over. Daddy is safe, Miergo is resting peacefully untarnished, and that beautiful detective Carlson is taken. DAMMIT!

JAMES
He already had a girlfriend.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PERWAH
Not one that I knew of.

Their laughter fades as the trio continues their banter, the camera pulling back.

DR. AMERA QUIROZ
You'd be too much for him anyway.

PERWAH
(smiling)
Perwah's too much for anyone.

CUT TO:

EXT. LINDEN, VA - APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN FOREST - CONTINUED

The camera glides through an underground cave, revealing a medium close-up of water trickling.

JAMES (O.S.)
One night with her and it's... WHOA,
WHOA!

The camera glides out of the cave to the waterfall, then toward the river.

Laughter echoes in the distance.

The camera glides over the river, sunlight glinting off the surface, creating a serene yet deceptive beauty.

The camera pans up to a leaf hanging slightly above the water, a mass oozing from it, slowly seeping into the river.

In the background, a wolf approaches, its thirst evident as it lowers its head to drink.

We zoom in on the oozing mass, the liquid contrasting sharply with the clear water—a silent warning of what lies beneath the surface.

The sound is rhythmic, almost hypnotic, but it carries an undercurrent of dread.

DRIP... DRIP... DRIP... DRIP... DRIP!

FADE OUT.

THE END