

THE ACONITE DIVISION

In days long past, a purple flower thought by many only to serve as a mark of beauty in the land, could be used for a far more sinister purpose. Ancient armies used it as a weapon, for under its purple hood, it contained some of the strongest of poisons. That flower was called “monkshood” — an aconite.



The sound of a mechanical voice startles me awake from unconsciousness. My body is broken and bruised, and I lift my head, barely able to open my swollen eyes. I sit in a broken chair in a dingy, rusting room with a single dirty mirror facing me. My hands are tied to the chair with wire ties. “Special Agent William S. Shaw,” the voice says again.

“Wha...?” I respond, not having the slightest clue what has happened to me. As I move my lips, blood gushes from the gutters of my mouth and down my chin. Some of my teeth are loose. I look up to see where the light above me is coming from. It’s an old clamp light, stuck to the ceiling, shining a spotlight through the thick layer of old dust that I’m breathing.

“Agent Shaw, we know full well who you are, and that’s why you’re here,” says the voice.

It was them. They finally got me. I put it all together, and the realization hurts me. “FUCK!” I yell out as I jerk in my chair.



The blinding headlights of a semi-truck burned through the phone booth’s glass encasement and hurt my sight something awful. It was dark and storming, with the rain beating down on the booth and the wind trying to collapse the doors in on me.

“I’m sorry, honey,” I said into the phone nervously. “I can’t stop now.”

“Don’t feed me that *shit*, Will,” she yelled into the phone, crying so much I could nearly feel the tears dripping down her cheeks.

I kicked the inside of the phone booth. “Please... I can’t... I never thought it would come to this, but it... it has.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to do!” she yelled at me. “You’re going to get yourself killed!” She paused for a moment to sob. Continuing where she left off, she said softly, “And now you’re telling me I need to leave the state.”

“Just for a few weeks, just until this is over. Please, honey. It will all go back to normal soon.”

“Normal?!” she cried. “Normal was you in a rehab clinic getting shot full of methadone while I watched you crawl out of your skin! I don’t want normal, Will! I want my life back! Open your eyes! I want everything back to the way it was! Back to before you were undercover!”

I didn’t know what else to say. I wanted that too, but those times were so long ago they didn’t even seem like my memories anymore. I tried to recall them, if only for a moment. I couldn’t focus long enough. All I could do is try to connect everything together. Who knows how deep this thing ran? Wherever it went, it

was too deep, and I was left with little choice but to plummet in after it.



“Pay attention, Shaw,” blares the mechanical voice. “You’ve been injected with a poison.” I look down. There’s an emptied syringe stuck in my thigh. The voice adds, “You’ll be dead shortly.”

I look up into the light. Somewhere above it there must be the speaker from which the voice is coming from. I speak upward as if speaking directly to the voice, “Do your worst.”



“Shaw, I need to talk to you for a moment,” said Hughes as he backed into his office. He stood with the door behind his back, holding it for me. I walked in. “Have a seat,” he said, and he walked around his desk and sat down in front of the window.

“Trouble?” I ask as I took a seat in the chair next to the door.

“No, but you can sit closer. Have a seat right here,” he said, motioning to the chairs in front of the desk.

I got up and sat in the chair directly across from him. He pulled out his cigarettes and offered one to me. I politely declined, and he went ahead and lit his up anyway. He pulled from his desk a folder full of twenty or so documents written by me concerning the case I was currently assigned to.

“I liked that briefing you gave,” he said to me as he sorted through my papers.

“Thank you, sir.”

“It was all horseshit, but very entertaining.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, struck off-guard.

“This whole thing about these two kids you think know somebody closely related to somebody’s something whatever inside some law enforcement agency, or whatever you were saying—that’s fun to think about, but *I know* that *you know* that what you’re coming up with is a lot of rubbish. It might make you look good by thinking you’re on to something big, but we can’t use any of this speculation.”

“Speculation? Sir, I’m not sure if I follow. You’ve read my reports, you just listened to my briefing. I believe I’ve compiled some very solid evidence that these two are connected to someone very big, perhaps someone very high up who maybe even works for *this* administration. Are you accusing me of fabricating evidence?”

“No, I’m not accusing you of anything. I’ll tell you what I am doing, though—I’m pulling you off this case. You’re obsessed with it, all to the point where trying to make connections where there are none.”

“But, sir...”

Hughes interjected, “No, I don’t want to hear it. This isn’t the first time something like this has happened. Do you know how many junkies there are in this city that we think are connected to some high-profile dealers? A fuckin’ lot, you know that much. There’s only so many agents we can get swimming with these fish, and every damn one of them, their veins pumping with heroin and their minds racing on coke, thinks they’ve run into the sharks. What we have here are two average white guys who are so pissed off at the world, they need to spend the rest of their days in a tripping stupor just so they forget how much their life sucks. That’s all.”

“But...” That wasn’t all.



"You're going to tell us who you work for and how much you've told them about our Aconite division," says the voice.

I look back down at the syringe in my leg. Blood rolls down into my eye from the gash in my forehead.

"If you think your death will be quick, you are mistaken," says the voice. "You'll be sitting in that rusty chair for five or ten minutes in complete agony before you finally die. If you cooperate, we'll give you the pleasure of being shot before the poison starts taking effect. Now tell us who you work for."

"I work for the Drug Enforcement Administration," I say. "The *real* Drug Enforcement Administration, not the Aconite division."

"Wrong answer."



I walked out the back door of my apartment with my golf bag hanging from my shoulder. It was early in the morning, and it looked like a fine day to hit a few balls around. My good friend Lyndon, a co-worker of mine, followed close behind. We were laughing and joking about something as we walked to my car. I went around behind it and opened the trunk. Just before I threw in my clubs, I looked down at all of them and realized what was there—bricks upon bricks of cocaine. I slammed the trunk as fast as I could.

"Something the matter?" Lyndon asked.

I was slightly out of breath when I tried to reply, "There's..."

"There's what?"

"Agent Shaw?" asked a voice from behind me. I turned to see two men in short trench coats and business attire. The one who spoke had in his hand a badge along with a

DEA identification card tucked in the clear, plastic sleeve below it.

I dropped my clubs. "Yeah?"

"What are you guys doing here?" asked Lyndon.

"You know these two, Lyndon?"

"We're going to have to detain you, Mr. Shaw. Please put your hands behind your back," said the agent.

The other agent said, "No. We've never met before."

"Wait," I said. "What's going on here? Which office are you guys from? I've never seen you downtown." I stepped back, butting up against the back of my car.

"Put your hands behind your back, Mr. Shaw."

The other agent replied, "We work for an internal division of the DEA. We have reason to believe you are violating your authority as a drug enforcement agent. We'll need to search your effects."

I slowly put my hands up. Just then, Lyndon pulled his gun out from behind him and aimed it at the agent's head. "Put the cuffs away," he said.

"Agent Fuller," the agent said to Lyndon in disgust, "put your weapon away. Shaw is becoming a threat to Monkshood. Rest assured, we'll make it quick."



I jerk in my chair again, but it does me no good. The wire ties cut deeper into my wrists.

"Would you rather we ask your pregnant wife?" asks the voice.

I yell out, "You fuckers!"

"What? You didn't think we knew? She's on her way here now, beaten and bloody just like yourself."

I scream at the top of my lungs, "You better hope to God you're lying! I'm gonna fucking kill you! Do you hear me?!"



The two unknown agents were dead, both shot by Lyndon where they stood. He drove me to his house immediately afterward. He took a shot of strong whiskey and slammed the glass down on the bar that sat in his basement.

"I didn't know they were after you, Will," he said to me. "I knew you were getting close, but I didn't know you were that close."

"You've got to fill me in here," I said. "You knew those two, didn't you?"

"Unfortunately, yes." He bowed his head. "You have to realize that what I'm about to tell you will put you in great danger." He looked back up, looking right into my eyes. "As a matter of fact," he added, "I'm already dead."

"What is it, Lyndon?"

"Those two agents back there worked for a division codenamed Monkshood. The same division that I work for."

"Monkshood?"

"It's a secret sector within the DEA that works beyond the authority of most government officials. Their sole purpose is to provide the government with funds through illegal drug-trafficking." He had a seat on his bar stool and leaned up against the wall. "This is what you've been getting close to. Too close."

"I knew there was something underneath all this," I said.

"You don't understand what you've stumbled into. Monkshood is a highly secretive group. The members themselves don't even know how the organization is run, or who's in it, or who's leading it. Every once in a while we'll get correspondence detailing what job we

need to do, and we do it. It doesn't matter what they say we have to do, we just do it, because we get paid a large amount of money. And if we don't do it, we'll be punished. They'll come after us, our families."

"What kinds of things have you done?"

"I don't want to say." He paused. "Accepting a position within the division was the worst decision I've ever made. I regret everything I've helped accomplish. I've had to kill men, Will, men with families, men like you and me."

"Then why did you save me?"

"I'm tired of watching men die."



"I don't see how you're going to do that," says the voice, "seeing as you're tied to a chair in a warehouse in the middle of nowhere, dying, while I sit in my comfortable office."

"You chicken shit," I reply.

"Let's get one thing straight, Agent: you aren't about to threaten us, you aren't about to bargain with us—you have nothing to bargain with. On the other hand, we have everything of yours, your wife and your unborn son. Since you apparently care nothing for your own life, we will see just how things change when we toy with *their* fragile lives."

"You're wrong."

"Oh, am I? Perhaps you would be so kind as to point out where I have made a mistake. Please, enlighten me. This should be entertaining."

"I have a folder," I say, spitting blood from my mouth, "and it has everything there is to know about the Aconite division encrypted inside it."



Lyndon was dead, and I had to kill him. He shot himself in his bathroom with my gun. Afterwards, he handed the gun to me and begged for me to shoot him in the head. It was a fate, he said, far better than the one he was about to receive at the hands of his Monkshood superiors. They'll believe, he said, that one rogue DEA agent was behind the murder of all three of the Monkshood agents, Lyndon included. In death, this would clear Lyndon's name and spare the lives of his wife and his daughter, which Monkshood would surely take if they knew Lyndon was to betray them.

It was left up to me to bring them down and stop what they were doing.

"Here," Lyndon said after he finished another drink, pulling a thick folder filled with papers from his locked file cabinet, "You will need this."

I took it from him. Opening it up, I took a glance at some of the pages. All of them were filled with strange combinations of recognizable characters. It seemed like wasted paper, the stuff left over from a printer malfunction.

"Monkshood has a very strange way of keeping records, and this is it," he said, pointing to the pages I was looking at. "What you have there is all the information the people need to know about Monkshood, encrypted on those pages. If this goes public, everyone who had a part in this will hang. The whole operation will burn to the ground, and you'll be safe."

"But what does it say?"

"I don't know, but I know who can help you decrypt it."

"Help me? Willingly? Another Monkshood agent?"

"The reason they came after you is because you were getting close to someone

important within Monkshood, two of them, actually. Remember those two stoners you briefed the administration on?"

"They're in on it," I said, partly questioning if I understood him correctly.

"And they'll have what you need to decrypt it."



"The Aconite division?" asks the voice. "What makes you think there's only *one* Aconite division? You've done a fine job of telling us just how much you think you know about Monkshood."

He was bluffing. He had to be.



"Don't fucking move!" I yell as I run up to the suspects with my gun drawn. "Get your hands up! I said GET YOUR HANDS UP!"

The two of them casually drop their grocery bags and put their hands in the air as if I won't shoot the two of them dead right there. I shoved them inside the building they were calling their home and forced them upstairs to the room we used to sit around and smoke blunts in.

"Just out doing a little shopping, eh? Sit the fuck down," I said, shoving Carl down into their torn couch. "And keep your hands up."

"Man," whined his brother, "what the hell do you think you're doin'?"

"You too," I said. "Sit your ass down—in that chair over there." They both took a seat, their hands raised without enthusiasm. I pulled from my pocket my ID and badge, showing it to them. I had spent the past two months working my way to these two, pretending to be a stoner like them, killing brain cells and

thrashing my body. I couldn't get anything out of them. "I'm Special Agent William Shaw of the Drug Enforcement Administration." I looked into their eyes, expecting them to be surprised that I was a cop, but they just sighed and rolled their eyes.

"We know who you are, dude," said Carl's brother, Leon. "We knew that shit all along." It was then I realized that Monkshood had been working against me the whole time. "You're out there, runnin' 'round, pretendin' to be an undercover cop or some shit, tryin' to get close to the big dogs. The big dogs bite, man, and all of them are gonna bite a hole in your ass if you don't put that gun down a just walk away from this."

"You mother fuckers," I said, grinding my teeth together.

"Say whatever you want 'bout us. Them big dogs be watchin' our backs. They're gonna take you out. You think this is a fuckin' game here? They're gonna get you, and they ain't gonna stop there. They gonna get everyone you know too—wife, kids... whatever, man. And I know..."

Just then I drove my elbow down on his jaw as hard as I could. It took him off-guard and he collapsed on the floor. "Fuck!" he yelled out, spitting out a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

"Shut the fuck up!" I yelled back to him. His brother got up from the couch, nearly ready to hit me. I shoved my gun in his face, reaching for another gun in my belt at my back, just in case he thought it would solve everything if he pushed my hand away. "Sit the fuck down." I pushed the gun barrel into his skull, and he fell back down to the couch. That's when I shot him in the ankle so he wouldn't get up again. Carl yelled and Leon shouted profanities at me. "Both of you shut the fuck up! One more worthless word out of either of you and you're

both fucking dead. Do you understand? I want to know what you know about Monkshood! Now!" Neither of them said anything so I got down in Leon's face. "What about it? What do you want the papers to read tomorrow? Carl and Leon Summers, shot in their shitty fucking apartment, choking in their own goddamn blood because they wouldn't say nothing but shit."

"My name isn't Summers," he said quietly. "The name's Hughes. So is his," he said, nodding to his brother.

"Hughes?" They were related to someone I knew. "You know my boss," I said.

"He's our cousin. We're all Monkshood agents. He's the one that got us into this, on the payroll, ya know. All we gotta do is keep the dealers supplied and keep the cash flowing in. That's all we fuckin' do, man. Just take a look around. I don't know what the hell else you want, but I ain't got nothin' else to say. I told you everything. You're gonna be dead soon anyway."

"I didn't expect you to know anything important about Monkshood. I don't actually care. However, *there is* one thing you can tell me: What do I need to do decrypt Monkshood documents?"

Leon looked at me strangely. He blinked, not saying anything.



The sound of a creaky door opening to my right makes my head snap in that direction. Someone is there, but I can't tell who. All I can see is a silhouette under this blinding light.

"This folder you mentioned," says the man, "what was in it?"

"Tired of the view from behind the curtain?" I ask.

"You mean the view from behind that one-way mirror?" he replies, stepping into the light. He was a gruff man with black hair and a full, black beard. He wore a business suit, a trench coat, and leather gloves. He pulled the edges of his gloves to make them tighter on his hands.

"Where am I?"

"I asked you a question, Agent Shaw. What was in the folder?"

"You know what was in it," I say.

"That's right. It was trash. Nothing but trash. And look what you had to do to get it."



Carl lied dead on their bloodied couch after a futile struggle to get my gun from me. Leon was duct-taped to the chair he sat in, with his hands and fingers firmly strapped to his thighs. The computer they used to decrypt messages they received from Monkshood was turned on, the first page of the documents was in the scanner, and the computer was waiting for the right input. A salt, much like a password, was needed in order to read the information. Enter the wrong salt and the program returns a mess of characters that made no sense. Enter the right salt and the program returns readable information.

"If I tell you, they kill me," said Leon.

"You'll tell me the salt, or I'll kill you," I replied.

Leon closed his eyes and shook his head.

At that, I took from my pocket the pins. I said, "This will hurt. A lot."

He opened his eyes. His jaw dropped. "What are you gonna do with those, man?"

"These will go under your finger nails. I have many, so if, for some very unintelligent

reason, you choose not to give me the salt, you're going to be in a lot of pain.

"No! Please don't," he said. "Please, I can't tell you."

"You will."



The man in the trench coat laughs. "I don't want to know where you came up with that one, but those two morons deserved what you gave them." He reaches up to his beard, rubbing his chin. "We would have killed them both if you hadn't, just like we killed the other Hughes, your boss, that other incompetent bastard. It must run in their family. I would have enjoyed seeing Agent Fuller killed as well, but you took care of that for us too. Well done."

"You're killing your own people?" I say to him. "You knew I was killing your people and you just let me do it?"

"They needed to be taken care of. They were a liability—as are you."



For such a cowardly man, he could sure take pain. He sat there and screamed his head off when I used the needles on him, but he never said a word about the salt. That changed when I started shooting his extremities. Leon could handle the pain, but his life was ticking away as blood emptied from his body. I insisted I would bandage his wounds or take him to a hospital if he would tell me the salt, which he finally did. By then, he was only moments away from unconsciousness, and in that unconsciousness he would slip into his death.

I entered the salt, and the scanner began to hum and buzz. The light it gave off shined through the cracks of its encasement, casting a

blue glow on everything it came near. In a few seconds, it was all clear. "The Aconite Division" was at the head of the document, and below that, a sentence, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dogs." After that, another, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dogs." Another, and another, and another—the sentence was continuously repeated throughout the page.

This was nothing. It didn't mean anything. I opened up the folder which contained the rest of the Monkshood documents. Among the encrypted text, I could see patterns. Every page had the same set of characters. Every page had the same sentence repeated over and over again. The documents weren't real.

"Agent Shaw," said a voice from behind me. I didn't turn to look. "Put your hands in the air." I slowly let the folder close and I raised my hands. "It's over," said the voice as a tremendous force struck me in the back of the head.



"You don't work for anyone, do you?" asks the man in the trench coat. "That is to say, you don't work for anyone important."

"I used to work for Hughes... until you killed him," I say.

"Until he attempted to set you up with a considerable amount of cocaine planted in the trunk of your car," added the man, "or until he tipped off his superiors that you were getting too close to discovering the truth about Monkshood."

"The truth?" I ask.

"You never really worked for him, Shaw. He was always one of us, working against you."

"I know the truth about Monkshood, you say?"

"I only said you were close."

"The quick brown fox..."

The man cocked his eyebrows.

I continue, "...I learned the truth about him. He jumped over the lazy dogs."

"Indeed," the man replied.

"Is that some sort of code that contains all the information about Monkshood?" I ask sarcastically. The blood from my forehead washes into my eyes. I can't see a thing. My situation is so hopeless, I can't help but laugh at least a little. I have to laugh, because I know it's the least I can do to piss this son of a bitch off.

"No. It's a sentence elementary school students use to entertain themselves. It contains every letter in the alphabet. Like I said, it was trash. That folder was just a pile of garbage. We give those documents to nearly every one of our agents. The loyal agents destroy the papers as they were told, and the disloyal agents decrypt them to see what's inside, or hang onto them in case they ever decide it's time to decrypt them."

I spit blood in his general direction.

"You missed, in case you were wondering," he replies. "You know, it's rather unusual that some lone agent like you, doing something so innocent as his job, reaches this point—having to be eliminated."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for the blood to wash from your eyes so you can see me as I put a bullet in your skull. I can at least give you that: an honorable death."

"I figured you'd be the kind of person to shoot me from behind. Or maybe you'd just run away and let the poison do your work for you."

"I'm afraid not, Shaw," says the man. He reaches out and rips the needle from my thigh. He casually tosses it into the corner. "It'll

start getting painful soon. It's done its job. It struck you with enough fear to tell us what we need to know—that you're not working for anyone but yourself."

"I never told you that."

"You didn't need to. I could tell. Every once in a while an FBI agent or a CIA agent will stumble on another agency's Aconite division, and sometimes we have to figure out who let that happen. That's why they call me in, for interrogation and execution if necessary."

"The FBI has an Aconite division?"

"Yes, Wolfsbane."

"The FBI's version of Monkshood?"

"Yes, just like the CIA's Blue Rocket as well. You might think of it as counter-productive to have an organization claim to be fighting an evil while the vast majority of the organization is the one creating that evil. Monkshood keeps illicit drugs on the market throughout the world, Wolfsbane is responsible for pyramid schemes, all sorts of scams,

religious cults, a good amount of poverty, among many other things here at home, and Blue Rocket is responsible for everything else from arms-trading to terrorism."

"But why do these things?"

"Money," he says simply. Human lives will always come second. "We make money, money to spread capitalist ideals throughout the world. We're making your American dream flourish, with your sleek car and your stylish clothes, your fast computer, your gigantic house..."

I interrupt him, "I think I get it." I could feel the blood drip from my eyes. My vision began to clear. "You know the road to hell is often paved with good intentions."

"You've just given me a very good reason to be optimistic." He raises his gun to my face. "I wonder where a road that's paved with bad intentions leads." I close my eyes shut as tight as I can.

Never would I open them again.

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