

## # Episode 29 — Canopy

The logging camp's foreman was named Robert Dickens, and he'd worked in old-growth forest for twenty-eight years. He knew the sounds of the timber, the creaks and settling of trees under the strain of being opened up. He knew what wind sounded like in the canopy—a specific hiss, a directional complaint from the branches. And he knew that what he'd been hearing for the past six weeks was not wind.

The morning was cold, early October, with fog in the lower forest so thick it made the tree trunks disappear into grayness. The staging area—where the equipment was organized for the day's work—was just becoming visible as the sun moved toward the ridge. Dickens walked the perimeter doing a final check. The equipment was mostly prepped. Two teams were scheduled to move out at full light.

He was crossing the center of the staging area when he stopped.

Above him, sixty meters up in the canopy, something had arranged the logging team's personal items in a line along a prominent branch. Hard hats. A lunch box. A work glove. A radio, still attached to its belt clip. A jacket. Each piece positioned with care, spaced at regular intervals, like a display. Like a collection.

Dickens stood very still.

He'd heard the sounds from above—the wrong sounds, the moving sounds. He'd dismissed them because dismissing unusual things was part of the job. You didn't survive in old-growth by spooking easy. But he also hadn't dismissed the two men who'd disappeared in one week. Michael Torres hadn't been found. David Chen had been found three days later, at the base of a tree on the eastern perimeter, with trauma consistent with a fall from an extreme height.

Dickens looked up at the arranged items. Someone had taken time to place them. Someone had climbed up there—or something had—and carefully positioned the equipment like a person arranging things on a shelf at home.

He walked back to the camp. He called the operation supervisor in Riverside. He said the words “safety concern” and “suspicious disappearance” and “I'm not comfortable proceeding.” The supervisor tried to convince him otherwise for exactly four minutes. Then the supervisor called the operation's legal team, and the legal team said it was better to suspend than to litigate if something else happened.

The entire operation was pulled out within eighteen hours.

By the time the camp was abandoned, two loggers were missing and one was dead. The reason remained officially unstated.

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Ace read the company suspension notice in a regional timber trade publication, one of the dry industry reports that showed up in libraries and online archives. The suspension notation mentioned a safety concern and a management decision to pause operations pending investigation. The investigation, in the manner of such things, led nowhere. The death was attributed to a fall. The two missing people were filed into the missing persons database and forgotten about.

But the pattern existed for those who knew how to see it: two disappearances in one week, then

immediate operation suspension, then investigation that found nothing. The silence that came after suggested that something was still there, still active, still waiting.

She drove up the logging road twelve days after the camp had been abandoned. The road was rough but maintained—the company kept their roads up even when they weren't operating. The staging area came into view gradually through the forest: the cleared space, the equipment parked neatly, the prefab buildings that served as office and break room.

The camp was intact. Nothing had been removed except the people.

Ace parked on the road and approached on foot. The staging area was maybe two hundred meters across, clear-cut down to stubble. The canopy began just beyond the perimeter—a wall of massive trees, two meters in diameter, their trunks rising straight up like pillars to a ceiling that was sixty meters above the ground. The canopy itself was dense, layered, a separate ecosystem that got its light through calculation and shadows.

She stood in the center of the staging area and looked up.

The canopy was a ceiling of green and brown. Detail was hard to pick out, but if you looked long enough, shapes became visible. Branches. Gaps. The shadows that meant there was something held up in the structure.

If something had arranged items there, she couldn't see it from ground level.

She spent an hour at the camp's perimeter reading what she could. The supervisor's office had a log of the final days of operation. Torres had gone missing on the sixth. Chen had gone missing on the twelfth. Chen's body had been found on the fourteenth, at the base of a tree one hundred meters from the staging area. The impact trauma had indicated an extreme height fall.

The medical examiner's report was sparse: consistent with a sixty-meter impact. Possibly disoriented, fell attempting to climb. Or fell from something climbing something.

Ace found the tree where Chen had been found. The base was unremarkable, but when she looked up the trunk, the ascent path was clear: branches at reasonable intervals, natural climbing advantages. Someone could have climbed this tree if they needed to. Something could have dropped something from the top of it without much effort.

She pulled out binoculars and scanned the canopy, working methodically, moving her search pattern across the visible structure. Most of what she saw was branches and leaves. Shadows. The density of old growth that had never been opened up until the logging company arrived.

Then she found it.

The collection was in a broad area of the canopy, maybe forty meters across, where the branches seemed to have naturally arranged themselves into a display space. And in that space, arranged with deliberate care, were objects. A hard hat. Pieces of equipment. What looked like human clothing, though the distance made details impossible. A boot. A tool belt. Other things that were too far or too obscured to identify.

The entity that lived in the canopy collected things.

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She chose the largest tree at the perimeter of the staging area—a two-meter diameter giant that rose straight up with branches at reasonable intervals until it reached the canopy proper. She spent two hours rigging: rope, carabiners, webbing for her feet, backup lines. She was not a climber by trade, but she understood the physics and the angles, and the equipment was straightforward.

She started at first light, when the fog had burned off enough that she could see the trunk. The climb was almost pleasant for the first twenty meters—the tree was wide enough that there were stable holds, the branches were thick, the angle was manageable. Her hands found rhythm. Her feet found placement. The staging area fell away.

At twenty meters, something moved in the canopy above.

She didn't look up. Looking up was how predators tracked prey. She looked at the trunk, at the branch in front of her face, at the next hold. She kept climbing.

The movement became faster, became intentional. She heard the branch displacement—a sound like water through a sieve, multiplied across dozens of branches at once. The thing was coming down through the canopy at a speed that suggested it could move through the branches the way something terrestrial could move across ground.

At thirty-five meters, it began to drop.

She heard it coming. The displacement of air. The way the branches were being shoved aside. The sound was a half-second warning and she rotated hard on the rope, extended a blade upward at an angle that put it between her body and the falling trajectory, and braced.

The thing hit the blade at speed.

The impact twisted her on the rope, jammed her shoulder, nearly tore the blade from her grip. But the thing was deflected. It passed to her left and crashed into the branches, its trajectory broken, its drop interrupted. She caught a glimpse of it in that moment: too many limbs, wrong geometry, moving like something that wasn't bound by the physics of a single body plan.

Then it retreated, climbing upward with the same liquid speed, vanishing back into the canopy proper.

She hung on the rope for ten seconds, breathing hard, shoulder already throbbing. Then she continued climbing.

The canopy layer began at forty meters. The branches here were massive—as thick as small trees—and they formed a network rather than a ladder. She hauled herself up through the transition point, found purchase on the upper structure, and pulled herself into the canopy proper.

It was a different world. The light here was green-filtered, strange, moving constantly as the leaves shifted. The air was humid and still. The space between the massive branches was smaller than she'd expected, but navigable if you didn't mind the squeeze.

It found her immediately.

She saw it before it reached her—a shape moving through the branches with a kind of liquid speed, long limbs extending and contracting. It was bigger than she'd expected, and the limbs were too many. It had evolved or adapted to move through the canopy in ways that didn't respect terrestrial limitations.

The fight at sixty meters was constrained by the environment. She couldn't plant her feet. She couldn't engage from a stable position. Every exchange was half a second of contact before she had to move again, before she had to find a new branch, before she had to reposition her entire body to avoid the next attack.

The thing was faster in this space. It understood the geometry. It moved like it was made of the canopy itself.

She took a hit on the first exchange—a limb caught her on the upper arm and the pain was immediate and significant. She transferred the momentum and swung away, found another branch, came back at an angle. She got the blade in, felt it contact something solid, but the angle was wrong and the cut was shallow.

Another exchange. Another evasion. Her shoulder, the bad one, was screaming. The thing was trying to drive her off the branches entirely, was trying to force her back toward the open air, but she understood now what it was trying to do and she refused to be driven. She moved inward instead, toward the denser network of branches, toward the collection.

The thing tried to cut her off.

She ran up the side of a branch like it was ground, two meters wide, the bark rough enough to grip. The thing followed, but its geometry was built for weaving through smaller branches and it was slower on the broader surface. She made distance. She made it to the collection.

Up close, it was worse than the binoculars had suggested. Hard hats, yes, but also pieces of things that might have been people. A whole boot, empty and preserved. A jacket with no one in it. Tools that had belonged to the logging team, positioned carefully. And in the center of the arrangement, something that looked like a complete human form, carefully positioned, preserved in the canopy itself.

She understood then. The entity didn't eat. It collected.

The thing came at her from behind.

She turned, but she was on a branch and it was coming from an angle that gave it advantage. She had to choose between defending and maintaining balance, and she chose to roll backward off the branch and swing on her rope, dropping six meters fast.

The thing pursued. It came after her like something that didn't understand what gravity was supposed to do, came after her through the air, multiple limbs extended.

She swung the rope around a branch—a maneuver that probably violated every safety guideline—and used the momentum to come up hard. She met the thing mid-air and drove both blades into it at once.

It screamed. Not a human sound. Something deeper, something that suggested pain was real even for something that didn't have emotions. The blades were deep, were in something vital, and she twisted hard before pulling them free.

The thing fell.

She watched it drop through the canopy, saw it try to catch itself on branches that didn't slow it enough, saw it accelerate toward the ground sixty meters below. It hit the staging area hard enough

to crack the compacted earth.

It didn't move again.

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The descent was slow. Ace came down one meter at a time, her shoulder wrenched bad, her hands shaking, her entire body screaming for rest. It took her forty minutes to make the ground, and when she did, she sat at the base of the tree for ten minutes and didn't move.

The thing lay on the staging area, motionless. Its geometry was still wrong even in death, limbs at angles that didn't make biological sense, the raw form of something that had never been designed to wear a human shape.

She didn't approach it. She sat and breathed and felt the forest settle around her. The canopy was quiet now. The collection upstairs would eventually fall out of the branches, piece by piece, as the years passed and the branches moved and the preservation failed. Or maybe the canopy would hold it forever, that collection of the things it had found interesting enough to preserve.

After a while, she wrapped her shoulder tighter and got to her feet.

She drove away from the camp at sunset, driving slowly, driving carefully, driving without looking back at the trees. The logging road curved through the old-growth forest, and the canopy arched over the truck, and somewhere above, in the branches sixty meters up, things hung in the air waiting for the next thing to fall.

She drove until she was out of the mountains and then she kept driving, and she didn't think about what had been arranged in the branches, carefully positioned, waiting to be collected. She thought instead about the road ahead, and the next thing that needed to be found, and the places where things with wrong proportions were still waiting to be dealt with.

The forest was very quiet behind her. The canopy was full of shadows and silence.

Above the staging area, suspended in the branches, the collection swayed slightly in the wind, waiting for the next interesting thing to arrive. —

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