

Episode 34 — Hunger Season

Dr. Sarah Chen pulled the memory card from the trail camera with hands that had begun to shake. This was the fourth time she'd reviewed the footage. The fourth time should have made it clearer. Instead it had made it worse.

The collared wolf—Specimen 07, tracked for eighteen months—was running parallel to a mountain lion. Not predator-prey pattern. Not territorial avoidance. Running **together**, their gait matched, their direction unified. The timestamp read 4:47 PM, three days ago. They were moving downslope. They were moving toward the valley.

She'd spent three years monitoring this region's predator population. Three years of camera traps and GPS collars and acoustic monitoring. In that time, she'd documented the normal patterns: wolves hunting elk, lions taking deer, golden eagles diving for marmots, the fractal complexity of a mountain ecosystem in balance. Predators killed each other's young. They competed for territory. They avoided one another except at the kill, and only then if the prize was worth the risk.

But not this. Never this.

She uploaded the data to her university contact and left a message: **Data anomaly. Coordinate predation pattern. High confidence. Requesting guidance.**

No response came.

Sarah began packing her research station.

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The town of Everbrook sat in a valley that had been settled for a hundred and forty years, carved out of wilderness by people who understood predators as something to respect but ultimately overcome. The logging industry had defined the early decades. The farms had come after, roads and structures spreading out from the main street like roots into the forested slopes. The population had stabilized at about four hundred—stable enough to maintain schools and a library, to hold an annual fair, to feel like a real place.

The predators had remained in the mountains. That was the arrangement.

Six weeks ago, something had changed.

The first sign was the deer. Too many of them coming into town, panicked, moving in groups, staying close to structures. Then the birds—raptors observed more frequently, circling higher, waiting longer. And then the sightings began. Not one or two, which was normal. Dozens. Wolves at the treeline. Bears standing on ridge faces, facing the valley. A mountain lion, completely unafraid, watching from the edge of a gas station parking lot at dawn.

By the time the wildlife biologist's report reached the town council, the perimeter animals had begun to coordinate. They stood at the treeline. They watched. They waited.

The town had gone quiet.

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Ace arrived during a grey morning when the mist hadn't burned off the valley yet. She'd driven

through the night and parked on the main street, studying the shapes visible at the tree line—darker forms against the grey, motionless, multiple.

She didn't talk to many people. She found the retired GP who'd filed the original report, sat across from him in his home office, and listened to him describe what he'd observed in the GPS collar data the biologist had shared. The coordination. The convergence. The sense that something was organizing the predator population the way a conductor organizes an orchestra.

“How long?” Ace asked.

“Six weeks before it became obvious. But the data suggests it started earlier. Perhaps months.”

Ace nodded. She'd seen that pattern before—the slow build, the intention, the moment when a regional apex predator established dominance and began consolidating its territory. Most of them kept it subtle. Most of them hunted alone or in small groups and had no interest in ruling.

Most of them weren't hungry like this.

She drove to the highest trailhead, parked, and began walking upslope.

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The trail climbed through forest that grew steadily denser. The morning mist cleared as elevation increased, revealing sky that deepened from grey toward blue. Ace moved at a steady pace, her breathing even, her attention distributed between the terrain and the life it contained.

The wolves appeared at midday.

Two of them, young, positioned across the trail with perfect symmetry. They didn't move when she approached. They simply watched. Their posture was alert but not aggressive, not yet. They were waiting for a signal.

Ace moved to the side of the trail, stepped over loose shale, and continued upslope. The wolves tracked her but didn't engage. She was not their prey, not yet. She was something approaching the Shepherd's domain, and the Shepherd had not yet given them an order.

She kept climbing.

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At the treeline, the coordination became visible.

Wolves on both sides of the trail. Bears in the near distance, their dark shapes scattered across the slope like stones. Something large moved in the canopy above—too big to be a lion, too coordinated to be random predation. She saw at least three golden eagles, perched at intervals along the ridge, all facing the same direction.

This was not a natural gathering. This was an array. A perimeter.

She moved forward, and the signal came.

The Shepherd's command was like a frequency transmitted through muscle and bone, through the earth itself. Every predatory animal in the perimeter moved at once.

The wolves converged first. Ace didn't want to kill them—they were tools, not enemies, victims of something that had learned to puppeteer their instincts. She moved between them, using her size as advantage, moving through gaps that closed too late. One of them caught her calf, teeth raking muscle, and she struck its face with the flat of a blade hard enough to stun but not to kill. The wolf released and moved away, confused, its command overridden by pain and disorientation.

The bears came next, and she used terrain against them—ledges too narrow for their bodies, slopes too steep for their mass. She felt the rake of a claw catch her shoulder, tearing fabric and skin, and she moved deeper into the pain, drove her body forward, refused to let distance establish.

An eagle dove from above. She twisted, let it pass, heard its cry of frustration cut short. The thing in the canopy moved downslope—a massive shape, something feline but wrong in size and structure. It was trying to close her position from above.

She kept climbing.

The perimeter thinned as altitude increased. The animals that could not reach the higher elevation fell away. The wolves couldn't maintain coordination above the treeline. The bears surrendered to gravity and slope. The thing in the canopy—whatever it was, whatever the Shepherd had learned to control—lost the overhead approach.

She reached the summit as the sun was beginning its descent toward the western peaks.

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The Night Shepherd stood against the sky like a negative space, like the shape of something that had cut itself out of the world.

It was much larger than the regional specimen Ace had encountered once before. This was apex—a creature that had run this territory for years, slowly consolidating power, learning the language of predation that bound the mountains together. Its form was elongated, almost graceful, with the suggestion of limbs that were longer than they should be, and a face that was mostly mouth, lined with structures that could have been teeth or could have been something worse.

When it saw Ace, it turned to face her. This was the first time it had directly acknowledged a threat.

She drew both blades and moved forward.

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The fight at the summit was brutal and without shelter. Wind moved across the exposed peak, carrying the smell of earth and distant snow. There was nowhere to use terrain, no edges to turn to advantage, no cover that could be exploited.

The Night Shepherd was faster than it looked. It moved like something that had learned to bend the normal relationships between weight and motion, striking with a reach that extended farther than anatomy should allow. When it opened its mouth, the command-frequency hit her like physical impact—a vibration that tried to override her autonomous nervous system, to turn her body against her will.

She closed herself against it. There was a trick to it, a way to make yourself a thing that could not be commanded, and she had learned it long ago. The frequency washed over her and found no purchase.

The Shepherd shrieked. It was the sound of something accustomed to absolute obedience encountering the first genuine refusal it had met in years.

Ace drove forward.

The blades found points of entry between the joints of its elongated limbs. She moved through its strikes, using her size and speed and the fact that she had no hesitation about violence. Her blades were emerald-bright, burning in the afternoon light, and where they went the Shepherd's form convulsed.

It tried to command her again. The frequency hit with more force, and she felt it this time—a real pressure, something that made her nervous system scream and her muscles want to lock. She pushed through it and kept moving, kept cutting.

The Shepherd was dying. It was old and dominant and had never learned to doubt, and now doubt was overtaking it in the form of a small figure moving like water around its defensive strikes. It fought with increasing desperation, with the particular violence of something that realized it was losing.

Ace was bleeding from three places—her shoulder where the bear had raked her, her calf where the wolf had bitten, and a long cut on her ribs where the Shepherd's movement had been faster than she'd anticipated. But she was still moving and the Shepherd was slowing, and eventually speed and precision overcame size and reach.

She killed it with everything she had, driving both blades deep into the space where its elongated form narrowed toward something like a torso. The entity's form convulsed once, twice, and then it was still.

The summit went quiet. The wind that had been roaring suddenly felt ordinary again.

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Ace stood in the aftermath, breathing hard, her hands steady despite the blood. She looked down from the peak and saw the predators—the wolves and bears and eagles that the Shepherd had controlled—dispersing into the wilderness. They were moving away from the valley, moving apart from each other, becoming animals again instead of instruments.

She could see the valley from the summit, lit in the late afternoon light. The town was small from this elevation, a collection of structures in the green valley, smoke rising from chimneys, the normal world reasserting itself.

She descended slowly. Her body wanted to quit and her mind had already accepted the damage and she knew that she would climb down this mountain and drive away and it would take weeks for the wounds to stop reminding her of the fight.

The town was safe now. The treeline was clear. The predators were returning to their old patterns, each to their own territory, each to their own hunger, which was how it should be.

By the time she reached the lower elevations, the treeline had disappeared behind her and the valley was rising to meet her and the sun was moving toward the western mountains where the Night Shepherd would never command again.

She didn't stop in town. She filled her tank at a gas station and drove north, leaving Everbrook in her rearview mirror, leaving the mountains to settle back into their natural patterns. The town would

rebuild its sense of safety. The predators would learn to fear the place again. The ecosystem would rebalance.

Ace had long ago learned not to wait to see the aftermath. The work was the killing. Everything else was someone else's story.—

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