

Short Story Contest

November 2021



PROMPT: You've been recruited into a shadowy organization that handles paranormal and extraterrestrial encounters across the world. You're not a Field Agent—you're the new Head Archivist.

Deception

by **Isabella Rutherford**

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“Wait, *how* many people are missing?”

“The most recent victim makes fifteen. Ten bodies have been found, mangled. They’re nearly unidentifiable.” Hugh explained, his gruff voice presenting his concern. In the one month I had worked here, I’d never seen anything quite like this. By the look on my superior’s face, neither had he.

“To make matters worse, all the disappearances have occurred in Rachel, Nevada. The town has a population of fifty-four; that’s more than a fifth of the population missing.” Natalie, my co-worker, reminded us with the utmost urgency.

I couldn’t help but exchange worrisome glances with the ten other field agents in the room, occasionally acknowledging the many copies of case files that were given to each of the thirteen in the room. Inside the manila folders were many crime scene photos depicting victims, most of them children, trampled and torn apart like prey. We tended to shift in our seats, analyzing the gruesome reality of the case we’d been presented with. The first to rise from the table was a young Hispanic man who had become a field agent about a year ago. I assumed he was leaving to get started on the case.

“We need to get started right away. Ms. Pradhan,” the mention of my name caused my attention to shift, “If you will begin looking over what evidence we have in the archive room, I will start gathering field agents. Let me know when you find something.” said Hugh.

And with that, I retreated to the large room that contained every file that was registered with the Paranormal Investigations Unit here at the Social Equilibrium Association, or SEA for short. My low black heels clicked against the tile floor as I briskly scanned over the letters on the sides of the metal shelving, searching for *R* in order to find any information we had regarding the town of Rachel. Once I found the section, I quickly realized there had to be at least one hundred reports packed into two heavy boxes, both labeled *RACHEL, NV* with a cardstock hangtag that read *HOTSPOT!* Carefully lugging the boxes into my arms and holding the case file manila folder in

my teeth, I made my way to a table and began to sort through police reports, photographs, and bagged evidence aplenty.

It's going to be a long night.

Natalie quietly strode into the room, but I was completely unaware of her presence due to the inevitable slumber that fell upon me. Despite having consumed multiple cups of black coffee, my body could no longer handle the strain of staring at paper for twenty consecutive hours. With a gentle tap on my shoulder, I jolted and sat up straight, my glasses crooked on the edge of my nose and drool staining the messy notes I had taken. My vision was impaired for a moment from sleep, so I rubbed my eyes and adjusted my glasses, mumbling an incoherent sentence.

“Find anything correlated?” she asked with a soft, curious tone.

“Not exactly.” I sighed with disappointment, scanning over the paperwork and evidence in front of me once more before picking up a few photographs and presenting them to her. “Just your usual cryptids and paranormal sightings, they seem to enjoy the attention from the residents. I mean look, Bigfoot, UFOs, crop circles, you name it; it’s here. But no extraterrestrial creature that we know of would cause such damage.”

After a moment of contemplation, Natalie parted her lips. “Bidhya, what if there is no record of this creature here? Maybe you just need to look a little further?”

An idea struck my mind and I jumped up, shouting a thank you to Natalie before bolting to my car.

I sat in the library with a green banker’s lamp lighting up the mahogany desk, the cushioned seat providing slight relief as I ran my fingers over the strange, leather binding of the book I had checked out. Well, not *quite* checked out. I had found the journal on a shelf towards one of the dustier corners of the library, took it to the desk and the staff claimed that the book was not registered in their system. Not only that, but the book had caused nightmares and visions for any person who strayed near it, including their own employees. Disregarding their warnings, I opened the handbook and began to flip through the thin, detailed pages.

One chapter specifically piqued my interest. The pages consisted of many sketches of a creature I couldn't dream up in a million years. *I must take this to SEA.*

"Mr. Lawson, I implore you to at least read over these pages. I believe this creature is a strong candidate for our profile—" I begged frantically, following the president of SEA into the occupied control room.

"Bidhya, there is no time. We must monitor our agents and listen for any distress calls. They're in the neighborhood where all the attacks have been happening." Hugh reminded me, glancing up at the screens in the control room. There were surveillance cameras on some of the houses that provided multiple street angles. One of the three agents that were sent out was Alfonso, the Hispanic man from the previous day. They also had cameras and radios on their bulletproof vests, so everyone in the agency's control room could watch their every move and communicate with them.

I frustratedly shoved the book in my suit jacket, folding my arms in concentration as I skimmed the screens. The room fell silent as the screens displaying street views of the neighborhood lost connection, showing instead a dark screen which drove fear into each of us. I met the glances of many panicked individuals, the cameras going out one by one except for the body cams. A scream blared over the speakers in the room, followed by the sound of running and more frenzied cries.

Alfonso was being ripped apart by the large shadow-like creature, and all we could do was watch.

Later that night, my stomach churning ferociously and my heart pounding in my chest, I threw a satchel containing the handbook over my shoulder and grabbed the crossbow from underneath my work desk. Although it was a strange birthday gift, my mother swore I would need it someday, and she was right. It was against protocol for me to take the case into my own hands—my only job was to view the evidence and analyze it as Head Archivist—but I could no longer stand on the side and watch innocent lives be cut short like puppet strings.

Storming out of the bleak, empty office at around midnight, I didn't expect to run into the very woman I had started to grow close to during my time at SEA.

"Bidhya? Is that a *crossbow*?" Natalie questioned, her voice hush.

Silence and guilt consumed me, my glance shifting down to my shoes as I avoided eye contact with the brunette. "I can't let this monster keep killing." I finally replied, meeting her gaze while her bottom lip quivered as she pouted. I assumed she would turn me in for insubordination.

Without another word, she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around the back of my neck and shoulders, her face burying into the crook of my neck. She held on rather tightly, tilting her face up to register my surprised expression. "Be careful, and don't tell anyone. There was a reason the Head Archivist position was open. I don't want to lose you too."

I ventured on into the starless night, only equipped with a leather-bound book and a crossbow. I crossed the flat, chilly desert in search for the relentless monster, repeating what I had seen in the book in my mind.

The Ichtaka

Aztec cryptid native to Central America, possesses the bare skull of a horse, the swift, flexible, spotted body and tail of a cheetah, and the curved horns of a ram.

Threat Level: 10/10

Possesses ability to mimic voices—used to lure prey—predict the future, shapeshift, and project past events from its hollow eyes. Beware of sharp canine teeth.

Suddenly, the air ran chillingly cold, sending a shiver down my spine as something whispered my name. My trembling hands hooked onto the crossbow, and I drew back the arrow, whipping around and pointing the weapon upwards. Directly in front of me was the very monster that was responsible for the despicable murders, its bony head and eyeless sockets just inches away. At this point, my hands shook so violently that I could barely aim at the beast's forehead. My teeth clenched and my jaw set while my finger anxiously rested on the trigger. Finally, I was able to muster a sentence.

“I know what you are, and I know what you did.” I stated, fury lacing my voice. I hoped fear hadn’t conquered my entire being in this moment, as I knew the cryptid could likely smell it.

The creature did not speak for a moment, nor did it flinch at the sight of the weapon.

“You have no idea who we are.” he finally responded in a strong, unwavering voice.

Despite the creature not having eyes, he seemed to stare directly through me, my nerves spiking and my finger applying steady pressure to the trigger. He still seemed unphased. Something about this creature seemed...less monstrous than its description, so I lowered the crossbow as a result and stepped back with a tremulous sigh.

“My name is Montezuma, and I have a story to tell you.” he paused, his eye sockets beginning to glow a fluorescent red and projecting several scenes on an invisible screen. “A story to *show* you.”

Images flashed before my very eyes, a series of perspectives retreating from the darkness and coming into the light. Montezuma was shown placing the mysterious handbook to the oddities onto the shelf while in the form of a human, casting a spell upon it so it would only be chosen by the correct hands, *mine*. A herd of Ichtakas thundered across the land, stalking their prey with great precision. I almost turned away, not wanting to witness the murders, however, I quickly noticed a pattern in the imagery; the only victims were criminals of merciless and irreversible crimes. The children that were slaughtered had reason as well—because the creatures had the ability to predict the future, they sought out future criminals as well.

The next images were almost more painful to watch. I watched Hugh yelling at a woman behind closed doors, very obviously at headquarters. The scene shifted to the same woman picking up a briefcase and venturing out into the woods with a flashlight, only for Hugh to follow behind her with a rope in his hand. The shadows of her strangulation forced me to look away, Natalie’s words replaying in my mind. *There was a reason the Head Archivist position was open.*

It took me several long minutes to process the information I had been given, my breathing losing its rhythm and my heart beating irregularly. I felt an indescribable rage burn within me; not only had I been lied to about the job opening due to a supposed retiree, but there was so much corruption within the SEA that I couldn’t even distinguish what was real anymore. The now

gentle, wary creature stood in front of me, lowering his skull and taking a half-step forward. “So, Bidhya, what do you propose we do?”

A moment passed without recognition of time.

“We strike back.”