

WE, THE WATCHED

ADAM BENDER

©2008 ADAM BENDER

WE, THE WATCHED
ADAM BENDER

©2008 ADAM BENDER
Published July 13, 2008

Thanks for downloading this free eBook. The following is a chapter from *We, The Watched*. More episodes are available at the official website, <http://www.WeAreWatched.com>. Check back every week to download the latest chapter.

If you like what you read, please tell your friends to visit the official site and get some copies for themselves. A storyteller needs an audience more than he needs money, and believe me: a couple emails to a couple buddies will make all the difference. When you're done, treat yourself to a cookie. You deserve it.

And now some boring legal disclaimers: This PDF contains copyrighted content. You *may not* sell, rent or otherwise profit from any digital or physical copy of this document. You *may not* prepare derivative works based upon the content. You may print or email this eBook so long as you *do not* remove any page (especially this one), edit any text, or otherwise modify the document. This work is protected by a registered copyright, and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License.

To contact the author:

Email: adam@WeAreWatched.com

CHAPTER 1

AWAKE

The light is blinding. I cough up pine syrup, shake off the sweat and dew in a shiver. A million needles stab; a woodpecker hammers and pounds. I roll away from the light and scurry into the cool shadow of a towering oak.

Stop. It's just a nightmare. I'm still in bed; just need to open my eyes. Just get them open and this will all be over.

Something itches my neck—a tick, maybe. I picture the insect's dark head sink into my skin, its abdomen ballooning red. I sit up fast, scratching all the way.

Oh my God—I'm not dreaming.

I thrash about, a futile attempt to improve the reception. Nothing makes sense; all I get is static and a strengthened headache. The woodpecker hacks away.

I close my eyes and let a slow, warm breeze brush through my hair.

“Think, damn it,” I breathe at last. “How did you get here?”

WE, THE WATCHED ADAM BENDER

My clothes are damp and feature spots of mud, but nothing is torn. Stranger still, my body aches, but my skin shows no signs of cuts or even bruising. It's like I just up and decided to spend a night in the woods—but forgot the tent and sleeping bag. Was I drunk? I can't remember anything about last night.

Frantically, I search my pockets. No wallet, no keys, no cellphone... only thing in there is a crumpled-up brochure.

"You have to be kidding me," I groan, tossing it on the grass.

Unless...

I snap up the ball of paper, carefully unfurl it. Emblazoned across the top are miracle words: "National Park Visitor's Map." Better, someone's drawn two circles in Sharpie—one around the end marker of a trail and the other around a station labeled "MONORAIL." I must have used the map to get here. But why?

Sitting isn't doing me any good, and the headache's starting to subside, anyway. I'm sure things will come together as soon as I get home—if I can find it.

Shut up, you couldn't have honestly forgotten—

No, I didn't forget. I couldn't have. I'm just disoriented still. This is what happens when you sleep outside on the grass all night. I don't know what hallucinogen I did last night before coming here, but I'm never doing it again.

Ok, so where's the trail?

I stare into the wilderness. Could I actually have taken a trail to get here? I was too wasted to remember anything, but sober enough to stick to a path?

Wait. Is that—?

The tree on the other end of the clearing—something's

WE, THE WATCHED ADAM BENDER

scratched into its trunk. I stagger to my feet and limp the rest of the way. My socks squish.

Graffiti—some idiot decided to take a pocketknife and carve the numeral “7.” The whole thing is senseless and illogical, but it confirms civilization is nearby. I squint into the vegetation and pan slowly, left to right. My eyes land on a path—overgrown with weeds, but a path nonetheless.

The density of green is overwhelming. And the birds—the damn birds are everywhere, all singing for mates. Too bad I’m not here on a hiking trip.

What the hell is wrong with me? I’m lost in the woods, don’t have the slightest idea why, and what do I do? Make jokes! Make stupid jokes! If I’d just concentrate I might be out of this mess already.

Or—I don’t know—at least maybe I would have built a hatchet to protect me from the forces of nature.

A new sound: trickling water. I dash for the source and almost run right through a stream. Splashing and guzzling ensues.

The ripples fade. I don’t recognize the youthful eyes staring back at me, but a touch confirms the gaping mouth and patchy beard are my own.

The bushes on the other side of the stream rustle and snap, and two large deer tiptoe out into the open. They stare at me, bodies frozen stiff. I take one more hit of the cool liquid and rise to my feet. “Enjoy,” I say with a wave toward the water. The doe, apparently alarmed by my suggestion, turns around and bolts back into the shrubbery. The buck continues to stare.

WE, THE WATCHED ADAM BENDER

I force a grin. He runs after her.

Oh God—now I'm talking to animals. If I don't find humans soon I'm probably going to end up completely insane. But all I can see is the green and all I can hear are the birds. Who's to say I actually woke up in the place circled on the map? I could be anywhere. Is this really even a trail?

Shut up. Keep going. Follow the trail.

Winged insects hiss in my ear and bite my arms and face, apparently attracted to my sweat and extreme body odor. The further into the vegetation I push, the more the bugs seem to attack, the more they foil my pitiable attempts to distract myself from the present.

This is insane. I don't know where I am, I don't know how I got here, and I don't recognize my face. I can't afford to rest—I have to keep going until I find somewhere I can get help and sort things out. I'll be ok if I just keep moving.

Maybe I shouldn't have got going so fast—should've looked around where I woke a few minutes more. I might have found some answers right there. God, why didn't I think of that? Maybe I should turn back.

No, right now, all that's important is survival. I should probably call it a miracle I woke up at all. I might have been on the brink of death. And if that's true, I'm not going to waste a second chance at life scrounging around for hints to my past. That's like—I don't know—selfish or something. Screw that.

It's too much like a dream—the disorientation, the pressure to reach a conclusion that never comes. But as hard as I strain, I just can't get my eyes open any wider, can't find

WE, THE WATCHED ADAM BENDER

that safe, cozy bed. Like it or not, this is reality, and I'm getting the feeling it won't get cut short by an alarm clock.

My eyes lift to the horizon and swerve nearly 90 degrees with the path. It turns away from a strange blue patch of light—a surreal end of the forest. Curious, I drift off the beaten trail and through the thin layer of trees.

The cliff drops more feet than I have time to estimate, but below and far beyond is a shore-side metropolis. The skyscrapers and white-speckled ocean are as familiar as *déjà vu*, but I can't attach a name to the picture. My eyes ride an ivory-toned structure from the city edge back to a large, tin-roofed building about a mile below.

The monorail station. The map was right.

I return to the trail, trot along it with renewed energy. The path slopes down the mountainside. I glance up at the sun to get an idea of the time, but dark clouds have invaded the sky.

My mind replays the awakening, the futile scan for meaning. I scream wildly. A bird returns the cry.

Calm down, damn it. Take things one step at a time. Just make it to the city and the haze will clear. You're hungry and aching—of course you can't think straight. Of course you can't—

My surroundings snap me back into the present like a well-timed slap to the face. The path has opened up into a field—no, a cemetery. Cold fog seethes around the graves and down my spine. The stones all have the same stark contour, but they've chipped individually with age. A granite soldier

WE, THE WATCHED ADAM BENDER

watches over them, a menacing hawk perched on one outstretched arm. Below his boots are words: “These soldiers gave their lives for Unity. They will be remembered for Heroism in a time of Great Civil Strife.”

I glance upwards, freeze under the hawk’s icy stare.

The train station can’t be far. This is a graveyard; there’s got to be at least a parking lot nearby. If I can find that, I can find the train.

I pick a random direction and move on. Every advance through the white curtain reveals another hundred tombstones, and the taste of stale death comes with every inhale. It’s irritatingly quiet—even the birds have shut up. I need to get out of here.

I’m running. My ankle screams, the world blurs, and I’m face-first in the dirt, caught in death’s shadow. Something cold licks my neck—my eyes bolt skyward and watch several hundred liquid daggers scream into my face. I scramble to my feet and sprint through another marble row.

The storm grows torrential, and the rain’s static drone amplifies my lungs’ wheezing. My legs give out just as I reach a crumbling flight of stairs and a war-torn chapel—shelter. I keel over and spit thick yellow mucus into the grass.

The chapel’s rotten doors are two times my height and at least ten times my age. I push hard and tumble through. The fall sets fire to my arms and legs, pierces them with jagged shards of red and yellow. The windows blew out long ago—all the color’s dropped to the rock floor. I clench my teeth and tug at the glass.

The old church smells of mildew and I can see why:

without glass, the rain comes through the windows in buckets. I lumber down an aisle that zigzags between twenty-or-so off-kilter pews, and find a seat somewhere the middle that's as far from the water as I can get.

God—what happened to this place?

I pull out the map and trace my path to the cemetery with a spare finger. The monorail isn't far. As I figured, there's a parking lot nearby, and the train station looks like a quick jaunt from there.

The glossy paper reflects a blinding lightning flash into my eyes. Stupid storm. Why did this have to happen now? Dramatic effect?

Suddenly, my right sock is wet and sticky.

Oh, my ankle's bleeding. Great. Must have cut it when I fell down. Probably aren't any tissues in here.

I bend over, use my hand to press my pant leg against the wound. Hope this helps.

It doesn't make sense. None of this makes sense.

I tug at the map and scan it for any additional information about my whereabouts. But there's nothing – just a big forest called National Park.

My stomach rumbles. When was the last time I ate? The pain seems to intensify the more I focus on it, and the more I ache, the more attention I seem to allow. I can feel acid in the back of my throat, demanding.

“You know what?” I say aloud for whatever reason. The train station is probably sheltered too. There's no point wasting more time here. Anyway, I'm already wet and gross. I'll get myself cleaned up when I make it to the city.

A peculiar quiet takes hold of the church the second I stand up. I glance up at the window. The storm is over—or at

least slowing down for the time being.

“Please, don’t start up again,” I pray as I reach the stairs back into the graveyard. There’s still a sprinkle, but it’s a vast improvement from five minutes ago.

My ankle burns with every step, but I grit my teeth and limp through the graves like a fresh zombie. Several hundred tombstones later, I find more cracked marble steps. They descend into a parking lot.

I scratch at a red mosquito bite. Too bad I didn’t wake up next to can of repellent.

The lot is empty, but a large yellow sign with the word “MONORAIL” and an arrow gives me direction. One marker leads to another. This one’s vandalized with the word “SUCKS,” sprayed in red over a crossed-out “RAIL.” Once I get over the cleverness of it all, I continue on through a giant, grass-covered metal pipe. I plod into the dark and dank passageway; it twists a few times before finally opening into light.

The monorail station stabs through the pastoral beauty of the land. Only the unkempt ivy twisting over its dark metal surface keep the structure rooted in the forest. Jet black stairs climb from the earth into the blue sky just beyond, but their entrance is gated and watched by a tall, clean-shaven man standing erect in navy blue uniform.

“Good afternoon,” he greets. “Put your arms in the air.”

I follow his advice and he starts patting down my shirt.

“You don’t look well. Why are your clothes torn?”

“I tripped, fell through some bushes.”

“You’re early. The train won’t be here for another two hours.”

WE, THE WATCHED ADAM BENDER

“I didn’t have a choice.”

He stares me cold in the eyes, calculating. Then with a quick turn he pulls open the gate.

The steps clank under my feet and the wind whistles loud in my ears. A whirring camera attached to the overhang meets me at the top and then swivels away. The station is as empty as the parking lot. The only sign of life comes from some stenciled graffiti on the wall, an eerily realistic jet black silhouette of a man with fiery red eyes.

I slump against the wall and gaze vacantly at a tight entanglement of trees just beyond the tracks. I’m awake.

NEXT: MONORAIL