

Tommy Muldoon

The Officer

WHEN TOMMY MULDOON PULLED up to the dockmaster's office, he found a pair of senior officers standing outside. His stomach sank as he unfolded his lanky frame from his squad car. Despite his best efforts, he'd failed to shake off the new guy stench, and his fellow officers constantly foisted their grunt work off on him like he was still a rookie. He tried to avoid that as much as possible. But dispatch had said he was needed, so here he was.

He scanned the area as he approached. It was a quiet day beneath leaden gray skies, the silence broken only by the forlorn cries of the gulls. Nothing to see but one of the dockworkers, pale beneath a bushy mustache as Deputies Hasserfurth and Dingby took his statement. Dingby scribbled in his notebook as Hasserfurth peeled off to meet Tommy halfway.

"Afternoon," said Tommy. "What do we got? Dispatch says there was a disturbance?"

"Trespasser," said Hasserfurth curtly.

"They need three officers for a trespasser? Seems like overkill to me."

"Yeah, well, this ain't no normal squatter."

The big man shifted from foot to foot. His eyes skittered away from Tommy's, sweat beading on his upper lip. His demeanor set off every one of Tommy's internal alarms. Hasserfurth was usually the sort to call him "son" and send him for coffee so the big kids could do the real police work. But something had shaken him so badly that he'd forgotten his routine. Deep down, Tommy felt the urge to scoff – afraid of some drunken bum? – but he wasn't about to miss this opportunity.

"Got him cuffed yet?" he asked.

Hasserfurth blanched, and that was answer enough.

"I'll do it," offered Tommy.

The big man agreed with disconcerting speed, but now Tommy was committed, and there would be no backing out without losing face. Besides, he was curious, and the job had to be done.

He followed Hasserfurth's directions past the dockmaster's office and through tight corridors of stacked shipping crates toward the end of the docks.

As he emerged from the maze, a blast of stinging wind off the water hit him in the face. He shivered, gritting his teeth. It felt like the temperature had dropped a good ten degrees in a matter of seconds. Odd, but then again, he didn't really understand all that weather nonsense. He'd take cold hard facts over wobbly science any day.

A large sailboat sat at the end of the pier, rocking against the sudden wind. At first, Tommy thought it had been painted black – a strange color for a boat – but as he drew closer, he realized that the entire craft had been covered in jagged writing of some sort. When he was a kid, his cousin had been obsessed with Egyptology, and she'd written "hieroglyphics" all over her bedroom walls. Got into tons of trouble for it too. The scribble on the boat reminded him of that, but something about it made the back of his neck crawl.

The writing was so unsettling that it took him a moment to realize someone had been bound to the mast. What sort of intruder tied himself up? This looked more like a kidnapping. What was wrong with those deputies, leaving a helpless man in this condition?!

"You there!" he shouted, the wind sweeping up his voice and snatching it away. "Hold tight; I'm coming!"

He scrambled onto the rocking boat, his grip smudging the scrawl on the railing, eyes locked on the still figure secured to the mast. White male, estimated 6'2", lanky build. The strange writing covered him too – lines covering his clothing, his face, even his hair. Tommy didn't know what it all meant, but his gut told him it wasn't good.

He reached the limp figure, hoping against hope that he wasn't too late. The body was warm, the thin chest rising and falling with steady breath. Unconscious, not dead. Thank the heavens!

With quick efficiency, he hefted the unconscious, sigil-covered man over one shoulder, carrying him off the sailboat. As he passed Hasserfurth and Dingby with his sobering cargo, Dingby crossed himself, but neither of them said a word.





IN THE CAR, THE MAN WOKE LONG enough to refuse hospital care, and although Tommy was of the firm belief that the fellow should be checked out by a doctor, it didn't feel right to disregard the man's wishes. Instead, they headed back to the station. Tommy settled the stumbling man in an interrogation room and ran to fetch hot coffee and blankets.

On the way back, he saw Sheriff Engle coming out of the room. Tommy respected the sheriff. Too bad that respect didn't go both ways, although maybe Engle's presence indicated that he knew Tommy had delivered when his supposed superiors were left flat-footed.

"Sir?" called Tommy.

The sheriff gave him a nod.

"Muldoon," he rumbled in a deep bass voice. "Nice work at the docks. Sounds like that was a messy business."

"Could have been messier, sir," replied Tommy, stalwart.

"Well, it wasn't, thanks to you."

With that dim praise, the sheriff turned on his heel as if to leave, but Tommy wasn't about to let this opportunity slip through his fingers. He fell into step next to his superior, still juggling the blanket and coffee.

"I've been hoping to talk to you about a case," he said. "Well, *cases*."

"I'm listening, son."

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"I've been reviewing cold cases during my off hours, and I'd like your permission to reopen a few," said Tommy. "No offense to the officers who covered them – I think they did a bang up job – but I see some links between them that bear investigation. I submitted a request through your secretary a few weeks ago, but I haven't heard anything back yet."

Engle stopped in his tracks, fixing Tommy with a piercing gaze.

"I got your request. And the second one too," he said. "I put them off for a reason. You're a bit too green to be taking on that sort of workload, but I'll tell you what: get that fellow from the boat to talk, and I'll sign off on it."

It was better than Tommy had dared to hope for. He jerked to attention, nodding like his life depended on it.

"Yes, sir!" he exclaimed. "I won't let you down."

"Good," rumbled Engle, continuing down the hallway alone.

Tommy took a moment to savor his triumph before hurrying back to the interrogation room. It wasn't until he reached the door that it occurred to him to wonder why the sheriff was so interested. Most of the time, Engle

only stuck his neck out for potential political capital, and Tommy didn't see that here. At the most, this was attempted kidnapping. All that writing was certainly creepy, but goosebumps weren't a crime. He frowned in thought, but that curiosity would have to be tabled for now. Engle was long gone, and even if Tommy chased him down, he probably wouldn't get answers anyway.

He opened the door to the interrogation room to find the man from the docks standing right on the other side, eyes wide and blankly staring. The writing on his face had smudged, leaving black streaks across the skin. Against this dark backdrop, the whites of the man's eyes gleamed as they locked onto Tommy's.

Tommy yelped in surprise and nearly dropped the coffee, but he managed to avoid spilling more than a couple of drops.

"Holy—" he caught the oath before it escaped his lips. "Glad to see you up and moving, but you sure gave me a fright. Buddy? You okay?"

The man startled, his gaze focusing. His mouth worked for a moment as if trying to remember the motions of speech, but finally he forced out a faint yes.

ARKHAM CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT
SHERIFF'S OFFICE



"I've got coffee and a heavy blanket. Figured you must be cold," continued Tommy.

It didn't take long to get the fellow settled at the table, long fingers curled around the paper cup. Tommy slid into the chair opposite him, keeping his expression calm and open. The chap had been through a traumatic experience, and Tommy had found that providing a calm, safe space helped victims more than anything.

"I'm Tommy Muldoon," he said, pulling out his notebook and a pen. "What's your name?"

The man hesitated before spitting out a jumble of consonants. Tommy recoiled. Was that Russian? His pen hovered over the paper, but he had no idea what to write. The alphabet didn't contain some of those sounds. One of the few intact glyphs on the man's arm caught his attention, and the pen jerked in his hand as if desperate to duplicate it, instinctively connecting the writing with the clotted noise he'd just heard. Shaken, he put the pen down, trying to remain calm.

"Okay," he continued. "Can you tell me what happened?"

He braced himself for another spate of the bizarre speech, but it didn't come. Instead, in a convulsive moment, the man reached over and grabbed his arm.

The room vanished, and Tommy was once again on the sailboat as it rocked on a stormy sea. There was no land in sight. Rain pelted his face, stinging his skin. Disoriented, he threw an arm up to protect his eyes, trying to think with a mind numbed with cold. How had he gotten here? He couldn't recall. There was no

past, no present, just the boat and the wind and the icy water.

Lightning flashed, silhouetting the mast. Tommy could see a man tied there, his body limp and covered with black, crawling symbols. He had the vague sense of déjà vu—he'd seen this before. But he could figure that out later. Someone needed help.

He staggered across the heaving deck, holding onto the railing as the boat dropped out from beneath him, cresting a giant wave. It took every bit of his strength to avoid being thrown overboard, but somehow he managed to reach the slumped figure. The lightning sparked again, illuminating a gruesome sight.

The man was long dead, his face shriveled into a gruesome mask. The skin was leather-tough, stretched so tight that Tommy could see the outline of the skull beneath. Writing had been etched onto the skin, the ink still clinging despite the spraying water.

The corpse lifted its head and spat out a series of gurgling noises that hit Tommy like a hail of bullets. The noise and the horrid sight of that clacking jaw drove him back, recoiling in horror.

The boat heaved, the deck dropping from beneath his feet. He flew, disconcerted and tumbling.

He jerked up, surprised to find himself on the floor of the interrogation room, his cheek wet with drool. Had he fallen asleep on the job? Mortification filled him as he looked around, desperate for answers. The blanket sat crumpled on the floor, one end absorbing the puddle of coffee that had spilled off the table from the upturned cup. The man from the ship! Tommy jerked to attention, confusion transforming to alarm. Where had he gone?





He scrambled to his feet and ran out into the hallway. The man was nowhere to be seen; could he really have disappeared so quickly? Sheriff Engle ambled toward him, a piece of paper in hand. Tommy's stomach sank. He didn't want to admit failure, but there would be no avoiding it. Better to rip the bandage off now than delay the inevitable.

"I signed your request," said the sheriff. "Keep me informed of your progress."

"Where'd he go?" demanded Tommy. "I lost him; did you see him?"

"Lost who?"

"The fellow from the boat!"

"What boat?" Engle's eyebrows knitted, but then he relaxed, the corner of his mouth quirked. "Ah, I get it. Looks like you had a bit of a nap there, Muldoon. You might want to change that uniform. You got drool on the collar."

Tommy flushed, embarrassment warring with confusion. Had he dreamed up the man altogether? He was fairly sure at least some of the day's events had happened, even if he didn't know where to draw the line between nightmare and reality.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we just talked about this. The man tied to the mast..."

"Sounds like one hell of a dream to me, kid." Engle handed him the paper. "Don't make me regret authorizing this little project of yours, you hear me? You'll burn yourself out if you don't take care."

The sheriff clapped Tommy on the shoulder and left him there in the hallway, numb with confusion. No matter how Tommy tried to put the pieces together, none of them fit. He would just have to add that to the list of mysteries to solve.

Lips pressed into a grim line, he marched down the hallway.

Time to get to work.

