



The Stag Man

Registry 750 / File 312-2026

REGISTRY 750 - INTERNAL FILING REGULATIONS

The classification of a file follows three stages.

OCHRE. The phenomenon is dormant or is being kept dormant. Intervention is not required. Observation at irregular intervals is sufficient. An OCHRE file remains open without follow-up measures.

INDIGO. The phenomenon is active. Intervention is necessary and, according to the records, manageable. Special forces are requested; execution is documented. With INDIGO, the file ends regularly.

VIOLET. The phenomenon is out of control. Damage control. A VIOLET file does not close cleanly.

You are managing file 312-2026 as 750-31. The classification at the end will result from your decisions.

HOW TO READ THIS FILE

- This file is non-linear. Follow the links.
- At each section, you choose what to do next.
- Tap a choice to jump to that page.
- There is no correct path. Some paths end badly.
- Use the margins for notes. You are the analyst.

OPEN FILE >>>

Fictional case file for offline reading and annotation.

<https://7fz.de>

CONFIDENTIAL

Case Status

Entry 02.05.2026

You have been sitting at your desk since half past eight when the office phone rings.

The display reads: Police Inspection 4.

A brown file folder has been lying in front of you since morning. Internal mail, no cover letter, bearing the stamp of the Visual Inspection Office. You haven't opened it yet.

You pick up.

"Bittner, Police Inspection 4."

The voice is young. Controlled, but there is an underlying tension. Bittner speaks of a missing person case she is reluctant to hand over. Her superior sent a memo to the Visual Inspection Office yesterday. Consequently, the case was sent to your registry this morning.

You look at the brown folder in front of you.

"I have it right here on my desk, unopened," you say.

A short pause on the other end.

"Yes," says Bittner. "And I think you shouldn't just file it away."

You reach for a pen. Bittner rattles off the key data as if she had been forced to memorize it.

>> Continue

Konrad Vorholz. Forester. 58 years old. Last contact nine days ago, early in the morning. A short conversation with his sister, with whom he lives in the forest lodge. After that, nothing. The service vehicle was found at Forest Path 14. Unlocked. The key was still in the ignition. Two search operations with dogs and drones yielded no results.

Bittner is silent a moment too long.

Then she says: "It's the file from 1997."

You ask what that's supposed to mean.

"My father was the recording officer back then. I can give you his notes if you come. They are in his cabinet at home."

You ask why her father doesn't give them to you himself.

On the other end, Bittner takes a shallow breath.

"My father died in 2018."

You hear her hang up. A second of dial tone. Then you hang up yourself.

The brown file folder is still lying before you. This is the first decision you make today.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Open Forester Vorholz's file folder

>> Examine the folder physically more closely

>> Call Bittner back

Case Status

Haptic Examination

You don't flip the file open immediately. You examine the folder itself.

It is standard office material, brown cardboard. But something about it triggers your instinct. You lean forward. The cardboard smells faintly, but distinctly, of ozone and wet, deep-seated earth.

The stamp of the Visual Inspection Office bears today's date. Yet the staple holding the seal on the inside is deeply rusted. Rust that takes years to eat into metal. You run your thumb over it. A fine, rusty powder sticks to your skin.

Something about this file is not just old. It is wrong.

You wipe your thumb with a paper tissue and throw it in the trash. Then you turn your attention to the content.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Open Forester Vorholz's file folder

>> Call Bittner back first

Case Status

Vorholz Personnel File

You open the personnel file. It is thinner than you expected.

Konrad Vorholz, 58. Forester since 1992. Same district since then, no transfers, no long-term assignments. Three promotions, no complaints. Unmarried, childless.

Residence: forest lodge on the edge of town. Registered in the same household: his sister Helene Vorholz and her son Mattis, 14.

A quiet file. Then you notice two things.

First: the annual leave. April 14th to 28th, every year, for 30 years. Without exception. Not approximately this period. Not mostly. Exactly those 14 days. You read the line a second time.

Second: a handwritten note in his predecessor's handover protocol. Dated May 12, 1997.

"V. has inspected the inventory. Completeness confirmed."

You look for the inventory list. There isn't one.

The predecessor was named Theodor Brand. Brand disappeared on April 19, 1997, in the same forest district. The file was closed back then with the note: "presumably a wildlife accident, cause of death not conclusively determinable."

You read that twice. "Presumably" and "not conclusively determinable" don't go well together. Especially not in Registry 750.



WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Open Village file folder

>> Open Predecessor file folder

Case Status

Site Description

You open the site description.

Low mountain range district. 412 inhabitants, 38 percent of them over sixty. Main village, three outlying farms. Forestry, hardly any tourism. The district identification in the file entry is blacked out in several places. Not made illegible. Blacked out. Carefully, as if someone was afraid of leaving the coordinates exposed.

You leaf through. Since 2018, more than half of the spruce population has been lost to the bark beetle. Reforestation is sluggish. The dead trunks are standing, or they are lying, depending on the slope. The forestry authority has divided the district into two precincts because the paths are no longer continuously passable.

Then follows a paragraph that someone placed in the site description, even though it doesn't belong there.

In interrogation protocols from the past 70 years, one word appears repeatedly in statements from people over sixty: "Stag Man." In statements from younger people, it does not. No one explains it. No one asks.

Earliest record: 1953, transcribed from a parish register. The parish register itself can no longer be found.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Open Predecessor file folder

>> Call Bittner back

Case Status

Case Brand 1997

The predecessor's file is significantly thinner.

Theodor Brand, forester, born 1939. Disappeared on April 19, 1997. His service vehicle was at Forest Path 14. Exactly where Vorholz's will be found 29 years later.

The search operation lasted 14 days. On May 3, 1997, Erich Schwermann found the deceased in the forest. Schwermann was 55 at the time. He was wandering in the restricted stand, looking for mushrooms. The police report calls him "conspicuously calm."



Not unusual for someone who has just found a body. But in the context of Registry 750, not meaningless either.

Brand lay among young spruces, not far from the old boundary stone. No puncture wounds. No gunshot. No traces of a wildlife accident. Cause of death: open. The investigation was closed after three weeks.

You leaf further and come to the last photo.

Next to the body lies an antler. 14 points, measured. In the handover protocol to Vorholz, this antler is no longer mentioned. It has been considered missing ever since.

The recording officer in 1997 was Police Chief Master Franz Bittner. The father of today's case worker.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Call Bittner back

>> Prepare departure

Case Status

Phone call Bittner

You call Bittner back.

She answers on the first ring. As if she had been waiting, her hand already on the receiver.

"Bittner."

You state your name.

"I know."

In the background, it is absolutely silent. No radio, no voices, no open-plan office. Either she is alone, or she changed rooms before picking up.

You ask about 1997.

Bittner is silent for a moment. Then you hear her closing a door somewhere.

"The official file is with you. There's nothing more in there. That's the problem."

You ask about her father's notes.

"Those are private. Three notebooks. I didn't include them in the official case."

You ask why not.

"Because I don't send them via internal mail. And because I don't want someone to read them who will just turn them into a memo."

This is the first sentence that doesn't sound strictly police-controlled. There is real fear there.

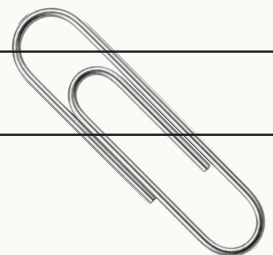
You ask if she read the notebooks herself.

A pause.

"Not all of it."

You wait.

>> Continue



"I read the parts I needed to find."

She gives you the name of an inn in the village where a room will be reserved for you. She doesn't speak the name Vorholz. You can tell because she hastily skips over the place in a sentence where that name should be.

"See you tomorrow evening, then."

She hangs up before you can answer.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Prepare departure

Departure

Drive to the District

The next afternoon, you set off.

Three hours of federal highway, then country roads, then a forest path that maps no longer recognize because it has been rerouted several times in recent decades. You follow it anyway. The navigation device is silent, speaks up again, then remains silent for a longer period.

From the second hour onwards, the landscape changes. First hills. Then higher slopes. To your right, spruces stand in rows, gray, without needles. Entire slopes dead. The bark beetle has been working here for years, thoroughly. It looks like a massive, silent cemetery.

It rains in patches. You turn the windshield wipers on, then off again.

Just before reaching the district, something happens that you would have dismissed at home as a "perception error." You drive through a field of rain. Heavy rain, for several kilometers. In the middle of it lies a stretch of road, exactly 40 meters long, where it isn't raining. The wipers run screeching dry over the glass for one stroke. Then the heavy rain hits the glass again with a crash.

The weather report shows continuous precipitation.

You brake automatically.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Stop and examine the dry spot

>> Ignore it and drive on to the village

Departure

The Empty Spot

You reverse the car until you are standing in the 40-meter-long stretch again. You turn off the engine.

Outside, the rain patters onto the asphalt in front of and behind your car, but above you, not a single drop falls. You step out.

The air here smells extremely dry, metallic. Like just before a thunderstorm, but stale. You squat down and place your flat hand on the road.

The asphalt is bone-dry. More than that: it is warm. As if the heat of a midsummer day were stored deep in the stone, even though it's May and the thermometer barely shows eight degrees.

You look up into the gray cloud cover. Nothing physically blocks the rain. It simply falls... *around* this cylinder of space. It feels as if reality is holding its breath at this spot.

A sudden pressure builds up in your ears. You hastily get back in, start the engine, and drive out of the anomaly. Only when the rain drums on the metal again do you realize your heart is racing.

You note the incident in your mind. It belongs in this file.



WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Continue to the village

Departure

Arrival in the Village

The village lies in a hollow.

A main street. A church. An inn. A gas station. Three farms. The houses are well-kept, the front gardens pedantically trimmed. It is a weekday, 4:40 PM. There is no one on the street.

On a bench in front of the inn sit two men in their mid-seventies, caps pulled low. They look at you briefly and immediately look away. One murmurs something. The other answers without opening his mouth much.

You don't understand a word. You don't know if it's because of the dialect or because they don't want to be understood at all.

Bittner is waiting next to the entrance door of the inn. Late twenties, uniform, slender. In the dull daylight, she looks younger and more exhausted than on the phone. She nods briefly and hands you a flat envelope.

"I won't give you more than this today," she says.

You take the envelope. It's not sealed. Just glued shut.

"The landlady knows. The key is at the counter. Breakfast from seven. If you need anything, send me a message. I won't come uninvited."

She doesn't wait to see if you have any more questions. As she leaves, the two men on the bench have stopped talking and are staring at the ground.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Spend the evening at the inn



Departure

Evening at the Inn

The dining room is half empty. At one table, three men sit over their beer glasses. No one looks up as you enter. Not out of rudeness. Out of years of practice.

The landlady is in her mid-fifties, slender, with a face that can be friendly without promising real warmth. She brings you dark soup and bread without asking for an order.

"You're here because of Konrad."

Not a question. She waits to see if you disagree. You don't.

She nods once and sits down opposite you, as if the chair belonged to her as much as the counter, the glasses, and the smell of old grease.

"Helene is a good one. Raised the boy alone. The father was gone early, you know that."

You don't know. You nod anyway.

"She says Konrad stayed in the forest. He knows the forest. That's true."

The landlady glances briefly at the three men. One minimally raises his glass without taking his eyes off the tabletop.

"You should visit Erich Schwermann. No one asks him anything anymore. He's 84 now. But he found Brand back then."

She places both hands flat on the table.

"If he lets you in, he'll let you talk."

She doesn't say the name from the old interrogation protocols: Stag Man. Only in this moment do you realize that you haven't spoken it either, as if there were a physical resistance on the syllables.

You finish your meal without speaking further.

>> Continue

Later, in your room, you open the envelope Bittner gave you. Inside are three copies from her father's notes. Not complete sequences of pages. Only excerpts. Pencil writing, almost faded in some places.

On the last copy, a sentence is written at the bottom, pressed hard, alone on the line:

It must remain where it is.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Proceed the next morning

First Conversations

Order

You wake up early. Half past five, without an alarm, with the shallow, rapid breath of someone who was watched while sleeping.

Three targets lie before you today.

Helene Vorholz. Forest lodge on the edge of town.

Erich Schwermann. Row house on Church Lane.

The forest. From Forest Path 14, where Vorholz's service vehicle was found.

You have the day. Perhaps it's enough for all three. Perhaps not. You only know that the order will appear in the report later, and in the realm of Registry 750, orders are rarely incidental.

Where do you start?

WHAT DO YOU DO?[**>> Visit Helene Vorholz**](#)[**>> Visit Erich Schwermann**](#)[**>> Walk Forest Path 14**](#)

First Conversations

Forest Lodge

The forest lodge lies at the end of a gravel driveway, squeezed against the tree line. Wood, stone base, a shed, an older station wagon. In the shed, you see tools and a covered trailer.

Three men's shirts hang on the clothesline. Large enough for a man of Vorholz's stature. Washed. Fresh.

Helene Vorholz opens the door even before you raise your hand to knock.

She must have heard the car. Or simply felt that you were there.

56. Slender. Short hair. Red eyes, but not crying. Not today. She shakes your hand, firm, ice-cold, without smiling. A greeting with which one survives funerals.

"You're the one from the authority. Come in."

In the dark hallway stands a boy. 14, dark hair, very quiet. Mattis. He doesn't look at you directly. He looks at a spot diagonally behind your right shoulder, where no one is standing. He nods once. Then he goes into his room and silently closes the door.

Helene leads you into the kitchen. On the table are a bread basket, two cups, a pot. Three place settings. She clears away the third one without addressing it.

You note that it was set. You also note that she doesn't explain for whom.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Begin conversation

First Conversations

Conversation with Helene

Helene explains it completely monotonically.

Konrad is in the forest alone every year in April. Eight, nine days. Sometimes longer. He knows the forest, has his tent, has his supplies. He leaves the service vehicle behind because he walks the last stretch. She never reported him, all these years, because he always came back.

"This time it's longer," she says. "Yes. But he's an adult. He's a forester. If he wants to stay, he stays."

She speaks without haste, almost mechanically. She answers follow-up questions specifically. Sometimes with dates, sometimes with a detail you didn't ask for. She seems as if she had rehearsed this sequence in her head for years.

You ask about Mattis.

"The boy is attached to Konrad. He's in puberty, doesn't talk much anyway."

She says it too quickly. An answer that was already waiting as a shield.

Before you leave, she says something else. She stands by the window, her back to you, staring into the black treetops.

"You can let the file rest. If you want, I'll write a statement for you. That we, as relatives, do not wish for a search at this time. Then we will all have our peace."

The word "all" hangs in the room a moment too long, too heavily.



WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Accept the statement, depart

>> Maintain suspicion

First Conversations

Observations

You do not accept the statement. You say distantly that you must process the file regularly.

Helene only nods without answering. She accompanies you to the door.

On the way out, you see three things that you will note down immediately as soon as you are back in your secured car.

First: in the shed, behind the trailer, a second door. It's just leaning against the frame. On the ground in front of it, fresh tire tracks that don't match the station wagon. Narrower. Deeper.

Second: Helene's hands as she holds the door for you. Fingernails bitten extremely short. On two fingers, soil, dark brown, loamy. It rained in torrents all day yesterday. She couldn't have been in the garden this morning. And the garden is paved anyway.

Third: absolutely no sound comes from Mattis's room. No breathing, no chair moving, no fabric rustling. Not even when you linger in the hallway for two seconds longer, ostensibly to check the fit of your shoe.

Helene does not look at you during this.

That is not the same as not noticing it.



WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Choose next step

First Conversations

Schwermann House

Erich Schwermann opens the door only a crack.

84, tall, bent, trousers belted high. He looks at you for a long time. He isn't looking for your ID, but for something deep in your face.

What it is, he doesn't say.

Then his shoulder relaxes minimally, he opens fully and steps aside.

The apartment is oppressively cramped, clean, extremely cold. On the wall hangs a photo of his late wife in a wooden frame. Next to it, a topographic wall map of the forest district from the seventies. Marked with pencil. In several places angrily crossed out, re-marked, crossed out again.

He sits down. He points to the chair opposite. On the table lies a worn, lined notebook. It is closed, and you have the impression that he does not intend to open it in your presence.

"You're the fourteenth or the fifteenth file," he says, his voice like dry leaves. "I've stopped counting. But I'm still here."

He doesn't mean you personally. He means the agents, the investigators, the cases. He means that he has outlived them all.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Let him talk

First Conversations

Schwermann's Account

Schwermann does not open the notebook. He doesn't have to.

He quotes from memory, with the dead fatigue of a man who has said these sentences to himself in the dark too many times.

"I found Brand in 1997. I was 55. Looking for mushrooms, up in the restricted stand. I shouldn't have been there. Not because of the mushrooms. Because of the slope."

He looks at his trembling hands.

"Next to him lay the antler. Fourteen points. I didn't touch it. Thank God. I didn't know why. But I didn't touch it."

He swallows hard.

"Konrad arrived with the police. He was 28 then. He took the antler. I told him he should leave it. He said he knows what he's doing."

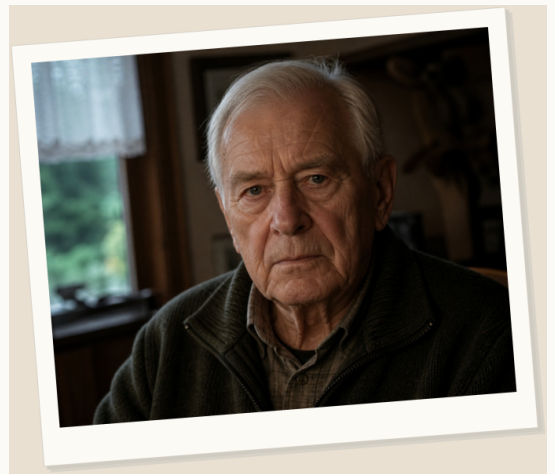
Schwermann drinks a sip of water. The glass doesn't tremble. But he moves extremely slowly, as if he had to consciously control every muscle contraction.

"It wasn't pride. I would have seen pride. It was curiosity. Konrad wanted to know what happens when you reach into the abyss."

A pause, in which the cold of the room creeps into your limbs.

"As long as someone carries it, it's quiet. That's how I understood it. When no one carries it, it searches. Not for the next best person. Not always. But it searches for someone who is close enough. Someone who knows what he's taking. Or someone who is young enough not to know what he's taking."

You wait for him to continue. He continues, whispering now.



>> Continue

"That is all I know for sure. I haven't gone into the forest since 1997. I'm fine this way."

He doesn't call the phenomenon by name. He says "it." And you notice that he places the word with a tiny pause each time. As if the thing out there had ears.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Choose next step

First Conversations

Forest Path 14

Forest Path 14 branches off north of the village.

The spot where Vorholz's service vehicle stood is marked with faded barrier tape. The ground is wet and compacted. There are no fresh tracks. The rain has softened everything that might have been here.

You leave the path after 200 meters and dive into the forest stand.

Dead spruces tower like bony fingers into the sky. Between them, young birches, thin, white, almost insolently alive. The forest is brighter than it should be. The canopy that could stop the sun is missing above. And yet, it feels oppressive down here.

You stop and listen.

Birds, far away. A woodpecker, somewhere. Wind in the dead trunks. The crowns move, but without sound. That is physically impossible.

You clap your hands once. Softly. No echo.

You clap again, louder. Again, the forest swallows the sound completely.

Instead, exactly two seconds later, a short sound somewhere to the side. Like a thick bone snapping back under immense pressure after someone has bent it.

You didn't bend anything.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Call Vorholz's name

>> Leave the forest immediately



First Conversations

Retreat

You go back the same way. Instinct screams at you not to run.

At the level of the barrier tape, you notice it: the ground is drier than it should be. The rain from two days ago didn't reach here, even though the slopes all around are muddy dark. A perfect, circular island of dryness, like the imprint of an invisible column.

You have a measuring tape in the car. You don't get it.

You get in.

Before turning the ignition key, you look into the forest once more. No one is standing between the gray trunks.

Nevertheless, you lock the doors with a hard click before driving away.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Choose next step

First Conversations

Calling the Name

You call his name.

Only once. Not loudly. Into the densest group of dead spruces.

"Vorholz."

For four agonizingly long seconds, nothing happens.

Then you realize you've been holding your breath.

An answer comes from the depths of the forest.

"Vorholz."

That is not an echo.

An echo would have been faster. Harder. Broken on wood and slope. This voice comes much too late. It is completely emotionless. It places the name in exactly the right spot, but it pulls the vowel horribly wrong, as if a thing deep underground had only just analyzed the word and were now clumsily trying to imitate human vocal cords.

You can't even tell which direction it came from. It sounded as if it were everywhere at once.

Your mind searches frantically for an explanation. Wind. Distance. A very strange animal. Your own acoustic expectation.

None of it is true. But your brain feverishly builds the illusion.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Call again, go deeper in

>> Leave the forest, take notes

First Conversations**Note**

Under no circumstances do you call again.

You walk back to the vehicle, slowly, controlled, without turning around even once. You intuitively know that turning around is the last thing you should do right now.

In the vehicle, with doors locked and engine running, you write two lines in your notebook, your hand slightly shaky.

First: Answer instead of echo. Delay approximately two seconds, possibly three. Acoustic source omnipresent.

Second: Voice not clearly human. Name recognizable. Emphasis deviating. Vowel shifted. Imitation.

You underline the second line hard.

Then you wonder if this can ever appear in an official report without you being declared unfit for duty.

Then you underline it again, digging deeper into the paper.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Choose next step

Second Phase

Briefing

When you return to your room at the inn, you don't turn on the ceiling light, but only the small desk lamp by the window. The shadows in the room seem unusually sharp. You take out four index cards. You've been writing things down this way since the academy. Not because it's faster, but because the mind needs structures when reality crumbles.

On the first card: Search the forest. Vorholz might not be dead. Perhaps out there voluntarily. Perhaps changed. Forest Path 14 is the epicenter.

On the second card: Seek out Bittner. Her father's copies are not enough. If there are three notebooks, someone knows more than what's in the file.

On the third card: Confront Helene Vorholz. She is protecting something. The empty eyes of the boy. The shirts.

On the fourth card: Request Special Unit (ZBE). Declare Status Indigo. Do not enter the forest alone again.

You place the cards next to each other on the table. You exhale.

Only after several minutes do you notice that the fourth card is lying a bit apart. Further away than the other three. Half in shadow.

You know you didn't put it there.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Search for trailer in the forest

>> Seek out Bittner

>> Confront Helene

>> Request Special Unit

Second Phase

Search

You start at the forest lodge but ignore the building. You drive up the gravel driveway only far enough that the car is hidden behind the first bend, and then you go deep into the forest stand.

You had seen tire tracks at the shed. Narrower. Deeper. Someone has been driving here repeatedly over the past few days.

You follow the pressed-down tracks.

They lead via an overgrown private path into a stand that the official map lists as a reforestation area. Nothing grows here anymore. Only dead trunks, twisted as if in agony.

After 1.4 kilometers, the tracks end at a clearing.

In the middle stands an ancient trailer, propped up on four concrete blocks. A tarp lies over it, camouflaged with fir-green branches. It looks like a ritual hiding place.

As you approach and briefly place your hand on the rusty metal, it is warm. Not from the sun. Warm, like skin with blood flowing beneath it.

In the ground in front of the trailer, in a perfect semicircle around the door, you see a bone-dry strip. All around are deep mud puddles. The semicircle is untouched.

A human would have left tracks here. An animal as well.

But there is nothing.



WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Approach

Second Phase**In Front of the Trailer**

You walk extremely slowly around the trailer.

A door on the long side. A dirty window on the narrow side.

Inside, an unhealthy, flickering light burns, presumably kerosene.

As you stop, you notice what's wrong: the birds are gone. They were there just a moment ago. Now you only hear the silence, which is so massive that it feels like pressure on your eardrums.

No rain falls up here. You hear it rushing down in the valley, but the clouds above the trailer seem to physically recede.

No sound comes from the interior. No breathing. No scuffling.

Then the wood of the side wall cracks once, as if something massive were expanding inside.



WHAT DO YOU DO?**>> Look through the window****>> Knock and enter**

Second Phase

View Through the Window

You wipe the dirt from the glass with your sleeve.

Inside: a narrow, claustrophobic space. Table, bench, bunk, lamp. On the bunk lies a man on his side, face to the wall. Shirt, trousers, boots, everything absurdly tidy. Motionless.

But he is breathing. An inhumanly slow rising and falling of the shoulder.

Vorholz.

On the table lies the antler. Fourteen points, unnaturally sharp. It lies on a cloth, exactly centered. When you look at it, your eyes water, as if the angles of the bone strands were optically contradictory.

A cup stands on the bench. Next to it, a second one. Someone comes here. Someone provides for him. Someone prays here.

You have your service camera with you.

You can photograph the window through the glass and flee. Or you can open the door.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Photograph, depart

>> Rip open the door and enter

Second Phase

In the Trailer

You press the handle down. The door is unlocked. You step into the stench.

It smells of old kerosene, cold stew, and... ozone. Like after a lightning strike. You breathe extremely shallowly.

Vorholz lies on the bunk facing the wall. His shirt is perfectly clean. And in this filth, that is the most terrifying thing of all.

You speak to him. Nothing. You approach and reach for his shoulder. His eyes are wide open. He doesn't blink.

You place two fingers on his neck. 29 beats in half a minute. Roughly 58 per minute. His blood crawls.

Then you look at the table. The antler.

From up close, it isn't bone. It isn't even organic. The surface swallows the sparse light of the lamp. Some spots resemble polished horn, others oily rock that writhes when you don't look directly at it. The fourteen points are razor-sharp. The thing presses deep into the cloth beneath it, heavy as lead, and the fabric doesn't spring back.

You see your own breath hanging in the air.



>> Continue

Inside here, it is colder than in a forensic freezer.

You pull out your notebook to force the facts to stay. Only while writing the words "second cup" does your gaze fall on the bunk. There is only one bunk. Whoever brings the clean shirt and sits here with Vorholz... doesn't sleep here.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Touch the antler

>> Barricade the door and wait for rescue

>> Leave the trailer immediately

>> Request Special Unit (ZBE)

Second Phase**Retreat**

Your survival instinct triumphs over protocol duty. You leave the trailer without touching anything other than the door handle.

You pull the door shut and hear it click. You take three steps backward, raise the camera, and photograph the closed door. You don't know why, but you need proof that you left something between you and it.

On the way back through the dead forest stand, you hear no birds. You hear no wind. But you feel a massive pressure on the back of your neck, as if the forest were staring at you.

Only on the federal highway does the normal rain catch up with you again.

Back at the registry, you don't load the images onto your monitor. You remove the memory card, seal it in a lead bag, and attach it to the report. Not out of diligence. Out of pure self-protection.

In your report, it says: Trailer localized. Vorholz comatose. Antler artifact sighted. Second person likely involved. No recovery carried out as personal danger could not be ruled out.

You read the memo. You don't change a word.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Set file status

Second Phase

Barricading

You lock the door from the inside. You slide the heavy bench in front of it.

You stand in the semi-darkness and listen to the walls creaking, as if you expected the construct to be crushed by something large at any moment.

Vorholz continues to stare lifelessly at the wall. The antler rests on the table, like a dark wound in the room.

You reach for the radio. "Registry 750, this is 31. Declare status INDIGO. Request radio silence until further notice. Movement could trigger escalation."

The crackle on the other end confirms receipt.

You sit down on the floor. Then the rain begins.

It hits the metal roof hard. But not everywhere. Above the table, exactly where the antler lies, not a single drop falls on the roof. The silence up there is absolute. Something is blocking the rain, high up in the sky, exactly above this artifact.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Wait seven days

Second Phase

Meeting Bittner

Bittner receives you in the back room of the police station. Neon light hums quietly, linoleum sticks to your shoes. Three well-read diaries lie on the table.

"Read 1997," she says dismissively. "Return the rest to me unseen." She leaves the room hastily.

You open the middle notebook. Her father's handwriting is erratic.

Brand did not die from an animal, it says. *An antler lay next to him. Far too heavy for bone. It almost sang when I stood next to it.*

Vorholz, then 28, took it. *"Otherwise, someone else will get it,"* he said according to Father Bittner.

In November 1997, only an isolated entry follows:

It must remain where it is. With one who knows how to satisfy the hunger.

You leaf on frantically. An entry from 1999: *At night, something stood at my garden gate. The dog didn't bark because he had disappeared without a trace the day before. It waited to see if I would come out.*

You close the notebook. Your pulse thumps in your temples.

Bittner stands quietly in the doorway, two cups of coffee in her hands. Her eyes are deeply circled.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Request Special Unit

>> Confront Helene

Second Phase

Confrontation

Helene is already standing at the door when you turn off the engine.

She leads you into the kitchen. No sound continues to come from Mattis's room. No sign of life.

You sit down and lay out the facts on the table. Brand. The antler. The 14 days.

At the word 'antler', her mask breaks. Not from shock. From terrible exhaustion.

"Konrad knows what he did," she whispers hoarsely. "He took the thing with him. After that, he realized you don't just put it back down. It takes root. In the head."

She scratches the wood with her bitten nails.

"Thirty years he carried it so it would stay down here. Thirty years it didn't claim another."

She stares at her son's door.

"My boy is fourteen."

The number echoes in your head. Fourteen points. Fourteen days. Fourteen years.

"If you take Konrad out of the forest, the spot will be vacant. And the thing hates vacant spots. It looks for the next one that is soft enough. Who is young enough."

She leans over the table.

"I am guarding my son. Don't you dare call what you're doing out there a rescue."

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Make decision

Second Phase

Escalation Level

You are sitting in the car again. Rain drums against the window.

The options are drastically reduced to three.

One. Accept Helene's sacrifice. Close the file. Look away. Mattis remains safe while the forest slowly digests his uncle.

Two. Request the Special Unit (ZBE). Crush the problem with force and bureaucracy. The ZBE doesn't ask about sacrifices; they extract.

Three. Drive into the forest alone. No witnesses. No protocol. An attempt to understand the anomaly yourself.

You grip the steering wheel.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Place file in abeyance and depart cowardly

>> Request Special Unit (ZBE)

>> Alone into madness

Escalation

Requesting ZBE

"Registry 750, status INDIGO. Requesting Central Recovery Unit."

40 minutes later, an unmarked gray van rolls up. ZBE Squad 4. Lead: Kraul. She is in her mid-forties, has eyes like granite, and wears a heavy Kevlar vest under her civilian jacket. Her two men are armed to the teeth, but the weapons look strangely bulky.

Kraul listens to the report. Not a word too many. Antler artifact. Risk of transfer. Carrier comatose.

"Two modes of execution," she says coldly.

"One: We extract the carrier and artifact together and bring both to Ground Zero from 1997.

Two: We only get the forester out and leave the thing behind. We seal off the area."

She waits. The decision is yours. The responsibility too.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Execution with antler (Merging)

>> Execution without antler (Isolating)

Escalation

Recovery Mode

You order execution with the antler.

Kraul nods briefly. The squad fans out. They don't walk like police officers; they prowl like predators.

After an hour, the radio reports: "Object secured."

Kraul turns to you. "We will transport both tomorrow at sunrise. At night, optics go crazy with such objects."

You order that you, as a representative of 750, will be present during the transport.

Kraul stares at you. Then she makes an imperceptible gesture to her lieutenant, which probably translates to: *If he goes crazy, shoot him.*

You spend a sleepless night at the inn.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

>> Accompany the transport in the morning

File Status

File Dormant

You let it rest.

You sign Helene's documents and flee the village that same afternoon. The fear sits deep in your bones.

File 312-2026 is transferred to the OCHRE inventory. No file numbers at follow-up offices.

Three weeks later, you receive an encrypted email from Bittner. It is short.

Mattis Vorholz has shaved off his hair. He spoke to a cashier at the supermarket yesterday. He sounded exactly like Konrad. Same pitch. Same vocabulary.

You print the email. You burn it in the sink of your apartment.

You know what happened. The forest didn't get the boy because Helene protected him. The forest simply redirected the uncle's mind into the boy.

You often wake up screaming at night.

FILE STATUS: OCHRE 1 - File dormant. Cowardice documented.

[RETURN TO COVER]

File Status

Observation Case

The Visual Inspection Office opens your seal. A photo from the camera is added to the file. File classified as OCHRE.

A little later, you receive a card from Schwermann: *Do not look at the photo often. If you do, do it in the light.*

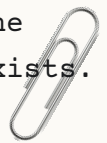
You ignore it and look at it three months later during a review.

The antler in the photo looks pin-sharp. Sharper than the rest of the room.

Six months later, you look at it again. The tips of the antler now protrude over the edge of the table. They have migrated further to the left.

Panic rises within you. The photo is changing.

You close the file and lock it in the steel cabinet. You know that the artifact is not bound to a place. It is bound to those who know it exists.



FILE STATUS: OCHRE 2 - File under observation. Loss of reality imminent.

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File Status

Execution at the Site

06:14 AM. The ZBE squad carries Vorholz. The antler rests in a lead box. It is so massive that the handles squeak.

06:42 AM. Ground Zero, find site of 1997.

The agents force Vorholz's hand onto the damp forest floor.

Vorholz opens his mouth, from which comes a sound like shattering glass, and collapses.

Time of death: 06:43 AM.

The antler remains lying in the mud. The forest is instantly deathly silent. No wind, no cracking. The singularity has closed.

Two weeks later, ZBE agent Kraul reports chronic back pain. X-rays show fractal-like, bony growths along her spine that look exactly like the 14 points.

You write the final report. Your own back itches burningly, right between the shoulder blades.

FILE STATUS: INDIGO 1 - Execution regular. Infection spreading.

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File Status

Execution without Antler

The ZBE takes Vorholz out and leaves the antler behind in the trailer. A fatal misjudgment of the situation.

Day eight after extraction: Helene Vorholz and her son Mattis disappear without a trace from the forest lodge.

Day nine: A landlady saw the car. Helene was at the wheel. Mattis was not in the passenger seat but was crouching motionlessly in the footwell, according to the landlady's panicked statement.

The antler remains in the trailer.

You know that the anomaly now has no fixed carrier. It migrates. The vacuum in the forest attracts everything that shows weakness.

You apply for your own transfer to the other end of the country. Denied.

FILE STATUS: INDIGO 2 - Carrier removed. Containment failed.

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File Status

Waiting

You remain in the trailer.

Day three. Vorholz begins to speak. Throaty, scratching sounds. Geometry translated into tones. You take notes, page after page, while blood drips from your nose.

Day five. The antler on the table pulses. It thumps exactly in sync with Vorholz's heartbeat. You measure his pulse. 56 beats. The antler expands microscopically 56 times per minute.

You notice that your heartbeat has also adjusted.

Day eight. Vorholz dies. The thumping of the artifact stops abruptly.

The ZBE breaks open the door and takes you out. You hand over the body. You hand over the artifact.

You keep the notebook with the strange sounds. You now read them every evening before going to sleep. They sound comforting.

FILE STATUS: INDIGO 3 - Carrier extinguished. Agent compromised.

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File Status

Report

You reach out your hand. The tips of the antler pull your finger in, magnetically, inexorably.

In the official report later, it says:

750-31 touches the antler. No immediate event. 750-31 does not pull the hand back.

Then your handwriting in the protocol changes.

I do not pull the hand back because it is stuck in the bone. It is merging.

Vorholz turns over on the bunk. He smiles. His mouth is full of soil.

He knows that I am taking his place, you write as your left arm slowly petrifies. *He is free. I am now the Stag Man.*

The report breaks off here. When the ZBE squad arrives three days later, the trailer is empty. A completely new artifact lies on the table. It has fifteen points.

FILE STATUS: VIOLETT 1 - Agent missing. New artifact manifested.

[RETURN TO COVER]

File Status

Answer

You call a second time.

"Vorholz."

The answer comes immediately. Much closer.

You call a third time. You know it's suicide, but a compulsion in your head makes your vocal cords vibrate.

At the seventh call, the voice answers from your own mouth. You speak the name before you can think it.

You run to the car. You drive back. You write the report and act as if nothing happened.

Two weeks later, during a routine examination: the doctor stares at your back. Dark, branching lines under the skin, visible only under UV light. They form the pattern of an antler.

You are suspended from duty. At home, you sit in the dark and whistle an atonal melody that originated in the forest. You don't stop whistling until your lips bleed.

FILE STATUS: VIOLETT 2 - Agent infected. Loss of contact.

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