

RISES OF RENOWN

WHEN WILL YOU RAGE II



EDITED BY
BILL BRIDGES

/// RITES OF /// RENOWN

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BILL BRIDGES

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Preface

Bill Bridges

Rites of Renown: When Will You Rage 2 celebrates 20 years of *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*. Each of the authors has dug down deep into the well of memory, remembering what it was like when they first encountered the Garou, when the werewolves' noble, tragic struggle against the Wyrms — and their own Rage — was fresh and new to readers and roleplayers.

The Garou, despite the ravages of time and earth-destroying corporations, are still with us. There are new discoveries to be made, new tales to be told of glory, honor, wisdom — legends of great renown. Herein are many such stories about Gaia's warriors, tales of their struggles, loves, losses, triumphs, tragedies, dreams, downfalls, fantasies, foibles — all the things that made us stand up and take notice when the Veil hiding their culture was first breached by White Wolf 20 years ago.

This book was made possible by the loyal fans and backers of the *Werewolf: the Apocalypse* 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition Kickstarter campaign. The state of the Garou Nation is strong, with more books and stories yet to come.

Rites of Renown begins as it did back then: with the raw confusion of the Change. Aunt Luna both blesses and curses her wolf nephews and nieces, forcing new Garou down a path beset with fear and madness. If they can make it to the other side, they'll forge deeper bonds with their packmates and the spirits than any of us poor, ignorant humans can ever know. But it all comes at a cost: the never-ending war against the ultimate annihilation of everything, the Wyrms' triumph over nature and life. A war that must not be lost.

Night falls.

The moon rises.

Once again, the acrid air is heavy with hate, and a question hangs in the haze: "When will you rage?"



Throated

Devin Grayson

Wait!

Just wait a sec.

This is about my sister?

Yeah, that's right, we're twins. And no, before you ask, we're not identical twins, dumbass, that would kind of preclude the whole her being a girl and me being a boy thing, right? No wonder you're flunking biology.

But yeah, you're right, it's true; Adine was in the psych ward. She was committed—by our parents, no less—three and a half weeks ago after scratching up her face and jumping out our second story bathroom window. And it's true that she wasn't exactly herself when she did that, but what no one seems to understand is that my sister isn't crazy.

My sister is a werewolf.

No, I'm serious, hear me out. I mean, okay, maybe she's a little crazy, but not high-security-lock-down-Mental-Health-Research-and-Crisis-Response-Pavilion crazy.

Yeah, they actually call it a "pavilion"—I know, right? I found out the place is run by a drug company called Magadon, a subsidiary of Pentex, and that once someone's been committed, only the head psychiatrist can decide if they ever get out again. Like, ever. I found out lots of weird shit this week. I found out that the guy Adine and I have been calling "Dad" our whole lives isn't actually our biological father. I found out that you don't need to get bitten by a werewolf to turn into one. I found out that people will believe the absolute most stupid, lamest things as long as the explanation doesn't include the supernatural. And I thought I'd found out how to break into a high-security sanitarium and keep a werewolf from attacking, but those last two were from research on the Internet, so, you know, whateves. You get what you pay for, right?

I wanted to break in so I could get her out of there. Look, I don't know if you have any siblings or anything, but Adine and me, we're close. Maybe it's the whole

twin thing or whatever, but we've done everything together for as long as I can remember. We beat *The Legend of Zelda* together, we started school together, we built a tree house together in our backyard and excluded everyone but each other from the obligatory secret club. She's funny and she's tough and she's my best friend, and it's fine if you want to stand here and try to give me grief about her, but before you try any crap on her, you'd better listen to this story.

See, I tried the direct approach first—just walking in through the front doors of the pavilion and demanding to see her—but they weren't allowing any visitors for her. I thought maybe if I could just get to her, she could go all monster again and smash us both out of there. But a) I couldn't just get to her and b) I realized that it was maybe not such a good idea for her to go half-wolf when I'm with her, since she might accidentally take my head off. I wasn't quite sure how the whole thing worked, and I don't think she does either. One minute she's hogging the bathroom mirror trying to get her Goth on with her face powder and black eyeliner and hair dye crap covering every square inch of counter space to either side of the sink, and the next minute she's freaking out and screaming that her eyes are burning and her skin is blistering and her scalp is on fire and she's clawing at her face making this weird kind of growling noise and then—I swear to god, I was standing right there just trying to get to my comb—she turns into this giant half-wolf, half-human thing and just fucking jumps out the window, lands on all fours, and lopes off into the woods behind our house. I ran out after her and chased her through the trees and then around town for a few hours, but eventually I lost her and after a while Dad caught up with me in the Prius and made me go home with him. A grocery bagger named Swayne Collard found Adine crouching next to the garbage bins behind the Stop & Shop the next morning, all fucked up with her clothes torn to shreds, surrounded by gnawed up bones and plastic wrap and bloody Styrofoam trays. That's when they decided she was crazy-crazy.

They also talked about how she's been depressed and having nightmares and how she always goes on about death and how her behavior is all antisocial and shit. All of which is true, but that's just Adine, you know? She doesn't mean anything by it. And what they totally refused to talk about was the gigantic wolf-monster thing that'd been running around town the night before, even though I personally saw her cause two car crashes, knock an old lady over and rip the tail pipe off of Mr. Dennison's Chevy while he was still in it, idling at a red light. When I begged him to tell my parents about it, though, he just seemed super freaked and kept saying he didn't remember what had happened and that all he'd seen was maybe a big dog running loose in the street behind his truck. Um, yeah, try two hundred and fifty pounds. How do you call that a dog? Maybe I'm the one who's fucking crazy.

Anyway, breaking in...the good news is there's no fence. It's just this gigantic eight story building with all these weirdly narrow vertical windows and auto-opening double glass doors out front that lead to a second set of buzz-in only glass doors that lead into a reception area which looks all cozy and shit but is actually monitored up the wazoo with everything from live guards to cameras. The receptionist I talked to the first time I tried to get in had this big, gooey smile that totally fucking dissipat-

ed the second I questioned her no-visitors pronouncement, and I have no doubt that she and anyone else who sits behind that counter could kill you with their bare hands and/or summon a posse of armed guards at the push of a button. In other words, the front door was out.

They have an inner courtyard, though, where the prisoners—I'm sorry, patients—are allowed to wander around when the weather's nice, and since they're an inpatient facility they have this enormous kitchen that I decided was my best shot. See, the doctors and nurses all know each other, right? Plus, none of them are fifteen. But the kitchen staff? I'm thinking those people don't rate a second look. So I remember that this dude Adine used to party with, Celio Ruiz, has this older brother who works as one of the dishwashers there—Cordaro, he used to go to this school—do you know him? Well, it turns out the hundred dollar bill I stole out of my mom's jewelry box plus the two fifties I borrowed from Jim and Dave respectively—I'll pay them all back, but this was for Adine—was enough to convince Cordaro to meet me a block away from the pavilion and lend me his entry pass for his day off. He tells me he already reported it missing and to just drop it somewhere in the pavilion when I'm done with it and they'll let him in manually for his next shift and someone will eventually find it and give it back to him and that way when they ask him why he accessed the building in the middle of the night he can say he didn't have it and it's all on record that he's not lying and everything. I told him *gracias* very much, works for me. The hand-off goes smoothly—he also brings me a hair net and a mint-green apron he swiped from the laundry which is covered in worrisome dark stains that he swears are just chocolate pudding—and next thing you know it's three in the morning and I've got the keycard and a little bit of a disguise and slightly less than half a plan—oh, and a water pistol filled with holy water I swiped from the church on Franklin, which I read on the Black Dog Game Factory forums can stop a werewolf from attacking.

No, I know, I thought that was vampires too, but it was a worth a shot, right?

So anyway, boom, there I am standing outside the delivery entrance the kitchen staff use trying to grow a pair. I take a deep breath, throw on the apron, swipe Cordaro's pass, push on the buzzing door when the swipe pad light turns green and just like that, I'm in.

Only, like I said, the place is massive. Also, Cordaro thinks the wards all have locks his keycard won't access, and really the only places you're allowed to go with the mint apron on are the back storage area, the kitchen and the cafeteria. When I get there the kitchen is empty and only half-lit, though Cordaro warned me that people show up as early as four to start breakfast prep. So I find a door that leads out to an interior hall full of administrative offices and put my back against the wall and sidle down the hallway all ninja-style, watching for cameras. I figure the patient rooms won't be on the first floor, so when I find a fire stairway, I duck into it and slow the swing of the pressurized door so that it won't make too much noise as it closes behind me. And just as I'm congratulating myself on my stealth, I see the interior access control panel to the right of the door. That's right, I have totally fucking locked myself in the stairwell.

Critical fail.

I run up the first flight of stairs, but sure enough, you need a keycard to access the second floor. And the third. I'm in a cold sweat and breathing hard by the time I hit the fourth floor landing, but I think it's more from fear than exertion. Just as I'm contemplating going back down to test for some kind of manual override (I mean, there's gotta be a fire protocol, right?) something really weird happens: the lights go out. All of them.

I'm trying to figure out what's going on when dim blue emergency lights come up in the stairwell, suggesting that a generator's kicked in somewhere, which in turn suggests that the main power is out. And that suggests that the door locks, access panels, cameras and all that other shit are temporarily down. I test the fourth floor door with my shoulder and it opens. I wish I could take credit for this genius part of the plan but it's just totally random luck.

At least, that's what I thought at the time.

Anyway, I check the water gun in the front pocket of my hoodie, ditch the apron and hairnet—which I never actually put on because, seriously, gross—in the stairwell and slide into the dark of another hallway, this one way wider than the one downstairs and tiled all the way up to the ceiling. The floor is slick under my sneakers and I can barely see but I know I've gotta take advantage of the freak blackout while I can, so I open a random door near the stairwell and squint into the murky room until I can make out a couple of beds and I call my sister's name.

I hear sheets rustle and take a step or two into the room, but then some dude sits up in the dark and asks if I was sent by Sierra Open-Sky. He's not Adine, obviously, so I'm all like uh, no and I leave, but I don't close the door behind me.

I've only just started to peek into the second room when I hear footsteps racing toward me and this nurse comes booking down the hall—I mean, she's in a flat out run—and for a second I think this is it, I'm gonna get arrested. I start to try to explain that I'm just really worried about my sister—trying to play on her sympathy or whatever—but as soon as she hears my voice she screams like I'm some kind of axe murderer and practically throws herself through the stairwell door. And in hindsight, I should have realized right then and there that something was really, really wrong, but all I could think about was Adine having to sleep in that bogus place, so I kept going.

The next three rooms I look into all have people in them, too, but these guys are so drugged up or tranq'ed out or whatever that they don't even wake up when I check them out. And by then I'm at the end of the hall where it opens up into this dingy, square rec room. I can make out a piano and a couple of easels and some couches and a bunch of old, thickly padded chairs and see dim blue floor lights illuminating three other hallways—one right across the rec room from me, one to the left and one to the right. I'm halfway across the rec room, heading toward the hallway to my left and cursing softly because I keep bumping into side tables and lamps and shit when I see them.

They're coming toward the rec room too, from the corridor straight across from the one I started in, only they've been a lot more thorough than I have; it looks like every door in their hallway is wide open behind them, plus which they aren't sneak-

ing around. They don't have to. Because two of them look like Adine did that time in the bathroom, only bigger. I'm talking full-on monster here; the fur, the teeth, like seven feet tall, just your worst fucking nightmare come to life, okay? And then one of them is a fifty-something blond guy in khakis and a dark t-shirt who looks like a total badass just because he's clearly running around with those other guys, and the last one is a wolf—an actual fucking wolf.

Honestly, I've never given my death a lot of thought, but I guess I figured it'd be from old age or a heart attack or a car accident or, you know, something normalish. But to get eaten, or have my head knocked off my shoulders or be all slashed up until my guts start spilling out my mid-section or whatever? I think about my mom seeing me that way—any of those ways—and it freaks me out even more. I mean, seriously, think about it for a minute. Someone you love is gonna see you when you're dead, right? To ID you or whatever? Like honestly, that's what I'm thinking about as I crouch down behind one of the overstuffed chairs and hold my breath. It's only a small step up from pissing myself, but at least I don't go all bat-shit freak-out like that nurse I passed. I listen as they cross the room and honestly, I don't know what the fuck I would have done if they'd noticed me. I was too scared to even come up with a plan. I just keep holding my breath and listening until I hear them start opening doors in the hallway to my left and then I'm up in a crouch and about to dart off into the hallway to my right when I see a beam of light cut through the darkness in front of me. I dive back down behind the chair just as six gun-and-flashlight-wielding security guards come running across the middle of the rec room, shouting for the werewolves to freeze. Six. I don't know about you, but that seemed kind of excessive to me. Didn't have time to worry about it, though—the next thing I hear is gun shots, and I know I'll probably never get a better chance to get the fuck out of there.

I jump up from behind the chair I've been cowering behind and am running for the eastern hallway when the screaming starts. I've heard people scream before, but this one stops me in my tracks. It's a scream of terror, of pain, of warning; it's harrowing. Something thuds into the wall behind me and rolls. I look before I can stop myself—it's a head, a fucking human head. It's hard to make out details with nothing more than the dim blue emergency lights to see by, but there's something weird about it. I mean, weirder than the fact that it is no longer attached to its body. Alien-like, you know, or demonic. The bleachy, antiseptic smell of the pavilion is pierced by the hot, coppery stench of blood and I'm caught between the urge to retch and the impulse to run when I hear Adine cry out.

Have you ever had an out of body experience? It's kind of like in dreams where you're watching yourself do something you don't remember deciding to do and that you don't really feel like you have any control over. I see myself standing in that dark hallway looking down at the head and knowing with gut-churning certainty that I'm not gonna make it out of this place alive, and at the same time I see myself turning around and running toward the werewolves and the shooting and the screaming and the me standing in the hallway is like, are you fucking crazy? just as sensation starts to come back into the body that's running and I feel my heart pounding and heat splashing up my neck and smell my own skanky fear sweat and see my sister sitting up in one of those ugly, bleak little beds with two dead guys on the floor in

the doorway, one without a head and both of them looking less and less human every second and more and more like... I dunno, demons or something, just totally fucked-up. And they're not even half as scary as the ones who are still alive—the security guards, I mean, four of them, who are the same six-foot tall, gun-wielding vomitus demonic putrefying abortion creature thingies, and they're fighting with the werewolves—these eight feet-tall muscle-bound fang and claw flashing motherfuckers with gore-splattered pelts, there're two of them, because, remember, the third one's an actual wolf-wolf, which is busy ripping off the IV tubing that's attached to my sister's arm with its teeth while the fourth one, the human-looking dude, is studying me with way the hell more calm than the situation warrants and I don't know what to do, you know, because as terrifying as the werewolves are, I'm instantly sure that these other things are ten times worse, plus I'm completely unsure of anything that's going on has to do with Adine.

So I just stand there like an idiot for a second, which is pretty much as long as it takes for one of the werewolves—the nine foot tall motherfucker with thick gray fur glistening with fresh red blood and claws the size of ice skate blades—to take a gunshot to the shoulder and just epically wig the fuck out—I mean, shit starts going down, so fast I can barely keep track of it. The werewolf with blood gushing out of his mammoth shoulder lets out this roar of pure fucking rage—I can feel it vibrating all the way up through my spine, it's louder than a jet turbine—and he leaps at the thing that just shot him and fucking eviscerates it; one long swipe from throat to groin and then this wet spilling out of thick, viscous blood and tangled stringy guts. It happens so fast that the demon-thing that's being ripped open has time to see it happen; there's this second where he looks down at this ragged, bloody trench where his torso used to be and then he just puddles down to the floor. Game over. The other werewolf, the one who's still working on a kind of methodical slaughter as opposed to his flipped out friend, he's got one of the other gunmen by the wrist and he's squeezing so hard that, I swear to god, you can hear the bones crunching into dust, and the demon-guy whose wrist is being pulverized is shrieking as he drops his gun and one of his security guard buddies is trying to save him by charging at the werewolf who's holding him, but right then the super pissed off one just fucking scoops up the charging security guard by the back of his head, just--thunk!—he's got the whole back of this demon thing's skull in his massive paw and—wham!—he's smashing the guy's whole fucking head into the shrieking guy's face and it's like this cosmic collision of planets, these two demon heads just bashing into each other at a thousand miles an hour and the brains and shit go everywhere, like all over the cooler-headed werewolf and me and the one demonic security guard dude who's still on his feet and Adine's bed and the wolf and the crazy older dude who's, like, softly chuckling to himself or something and I fucking lose it, I just puke my guts out all over my sneakers and the last security guard standing, he turns to run out of the room, but the manic werewolf dude roars again and I don't even see him move, but he's on that guy in a heartbeat and you won't believe me, but he's got one giant mitt on the dude's head and the other on his shoulder and I'm watching again, waiting for him to maybe eat him or something when there's this horrific rending sound and he just fucking rips the thing in two like a goddamned paper doll.

I've only just had time to drag the back of my hand across my mouth to wipe off the vomit when the crazy-ass brain-and-blood-soaked ten foot tall werewolf bounds toward my sister's bed and before I know it I'm drawing the water gun from out of the front pocket of my hoodie and I hear myself screaming, "Get away from my sister!"

And I shoot.

I shoot him with this thin steady stream of holy water, targeting his massive chest area and hoping for, I don't know, steam, you know, like an acid burn, or some kind of recoiling howl of pain, but instead his chest fur just kinda gets...wet...or wetter, really, since it's already soaked in blood, and he looks down at it, and up at me, and I know I'm dead, I'm so fucking dead, but just as he lunges for me, all teeth and claws and baleful, piercing yellow eyes, the human dude puts a hand out in front of him and says, stop, and he does. He just stops. He stops and he looks at the fifty-something dude, who turns to me with a wry smile, reaches his free hand out for my water gun and asks, "Holy water?" all casual-like.

And then it's quiet. It's so weirdly quiet I'd swear I made the whole thing up if there weren't still these six thrashed corpses on the floor and brain matter splattered all over us. I can't find my voice, so I just nod and let him take the water gun out of my hand. He brandishes it at the crazy gray motherfucker with a chuckle and the crazy gray motherfucker—the eleven foot tall monster who just decapitated, eviscerated and pulverized his way through the room—I swear to god, he rolls his eyes. And then the human dude turns his attention back to me.

"That was incredibly stupid," he says. "Brave. But stupid."

I glance over at Adine. She's dreamily petting the wolf, who has jumped up onto the bed with her. They're both watching me with curiosity and then Adine kinda smiles and says, "Hi, Ari," all weak and sleepy and shit.

Right then the fifty-something dude steps in between us and looks me right in the eye. His eyes are green and like—I don't know, you know when you can just tell someone's totally smart? They're like that, all mirthful and sparkling and shit. There's something kinda familiar looking about him, too. Just in a general way I can't place.

"You want to sleep through this next part," he tells me. And suddenly I do. I mean, I am freaked out and sweat-soaked and covered in demonic brain matter, plus I've got more adrenaline pumping through me than a Kodiak on crack, but I totally want to sleep, I do. I have never been so fucking tired in my whole entire life. I'm so tired my knees buckle under me and I hear him saying "bring him with us" just as these strong, furry arms scoop me up and then everything goes black.

And I dream.

I dream about blood. I dream about an insane, bloated, giant maggot circling the earth—the whole globe—and squeezing so hard that the planet splits in two, but instead of lava in the center it's blood, blood spilling out in waves across the universe, blood soaking the stars, blood like the red sea, dividing the universe in two, blood rushing through the galaxies and separating everything; on one side a world of spirit, on the other one of body, the spiritual and the corporeal torn apart, blood the schism between them.

I dream about the blood of birth flowing from between the riven legs of the Mother, Gaia, and what she births is the reintegration; children of both worlds. She calls them the Garou, and they're not split, they're whole. They're whole but they wear two faces; one of wolves and one of man, every kind of wolf and every kind of person. And Gaia sets them down against her broken body and she starts to heal.

And I dream of us. Not you and me, but all of us. The Garou are not alone. They share the planet with us, with people. And we are locked in our own heads and careless with our gifts and empty, empty and insatiable. We can't cross the curtain of blood, we don't even know it's there, but we know that something's missing, and we're starving for it. All we have is the material, so that's what we accumulate. We produce more, destroy more, consume more; we alter and pollute and exploit and it is never enough. And we keep growing, our numbers ever increasing, our reproduction totally thoughtless and unchecked.

I dream of the Garou fighting. They've grown angry. Some have come to resent us. And there is no point arguing with us, because we don't understand anything. So they start to argue with each other. And before you know it, their claws are bared, their fur is flying, and once again there is blood, so much blood that Gaia finds herself wading through it, searching, pulling out the slaughtered cubs—these dudes are so pissed off they're murdering the cubs—and nurturing them back to life among the branches of the great World Tree, high above the warring and the brutality and the persistent division of absolutely fucking everything.

I dream of an enormous spider spinning webs that catch and separate and name everything.

I dream of an untamable wild, endlessly expanding and impenetrable with new creatures and concepts too crazy to label.

I dream that these cubs in the tree are the Children of Gaia, and that when they're grown, she returns them to our world and urges them to bring the Garou back together. But the Garou don't want to listen, they're more divided than ever. So the Children of Gaia keep trying. They try to unite the Garou. They try to unite us. They try to reunite the physical and the spiritual with every breath they take. They are healers and activists and demonstrators and eco-warriors and I am their kin.

I dream about the woods behind our house and how they smell like Pine and—what?

Kin.

You know, family.

Well, you're totally making me jump ahead here, but when I wake up I'm in the woods with my sister and the wolf and the human dude. And he's telling me he knows there's a lot to take in, but the most important thing to understand is that I'm safe, that no one's gonna hurt me—no one will ever hurt me, actually, because we are never alone. We are never alone and he's been watching all this time because it turns out he's our biological father. I had no idea about any of this, but I guess our mom was kind of a major activist before Adine and I were born—I knew she was a hippy, but I thought she just recycled and shit—but apparently about fifteen years ago she was doing relief work in Spain, dealing with this mining dam rupture that, like, pol-

luted this big river there and totally killed all these fish and birds and crops and trees and shit. Anyway, he was volunteering there too, like supervising the cleanup efforts or something and making sure the locals had enough to eat and everything and they hooked up. This was before she even met our dad—I mean, the guy who’s raising us. Anyway, bio-dad took off for the Amazon to deal with the major deforestation going on there, and Mom came back to the states, met our dad-dad, got married and had us.

And I don’t think she really ever knew he was a werewolf or anything, but our dad who’s raising us is way more low-key when it comes to the eco shit—I mean, he goes along with it, for her sake, I guess, but he’s the one who would let us have chocolate sometimes instead of carob or like, throw away a plastic bag every now and then—our mom has this fucking rack for drying them on, you know, so you can use them over and over and over again. We do all that kind of green shit, except for Adine, who kinda started rebelling against it when she got into all her emo shit, like the makeup and everything, which Mom says is full of toxic chemicals and totally hates it but is always all like, “you’ve got to pick your battles!”

Anyway, so yeah, my bio-dad’s a werewolf, only he says some Garou—that’s what they call themselves, like in my dream—some of them are more comfortable hanging out in human form and some as wolves and some in-between and everything based on how they were born or something, and he’s, obviously, one of the human ones. A Homid, I think he called it. And he’s also a Ragabash, which is kinda like an astrological sign for a Garou only it has to do with the moon instead of the stars and that’s not even important except that he says I probably get some of my quick thinking and wit from him, which is kind of cool, I guess. Oh—and this is important—those security guards at the pavilion who got all decapitated? They weren’t just, like, innocent people—remember how I said they were all demony and shit? Well, they’re something called Fomori, and that’s who’s running that whole place, the nurses and everything, they’re all corrupted by the Wyrms, which is that massive maggot thing I saw in my dream, and it’s gone all crazy and shit and, like, the primal forces of the universe are all totally out of whack and the Garou should be fixing it but they’re all busy fighting with each other and that could totally happen to you—the Fomori thing, I mean; they start out as people just like you and me but then they get possessed by these things called Banes because of some, like, basic evil or emptiness inside them, which, I mean, I’m not in any position to see into your soul or anything, but it would be fair to say that you’ve got some issues, right? I mean, like this whole thing now... You know you only do shit like this because you’re hurting inside, right? Like maybe someone hits you at home and you feel all helpless or whatever, I don’t know. I just know you gotta check that shit, ‘cause look, you don’t wanna wake up one day and find yourself slavishly serving the avatar of entropy or whatever, right?

I’m just sayin’.

But anyway, look, I’ve been talking this whole time and you’ve probably got places to be and other kids to torture and all. So, you know, you might as well get this over with. I’m not a werewolf, after all. I’m just what they call Kinfolk. And this, by the way, is why I could even look at the Garou in the hospital without losing my shit like the other people there. You wouldn’t be able to handle it; your brain would just

be all like oh FUUUUCK and you would not even understand what you were seeing. That's how scary they are.

Oh, shit, I just remembered! He told me something else, too, my bio-dad, and this is actually the most important thing of all...See, everything I just told you, you can't know any of it. It's like, top secret. Like, I'd tell you but then I'd have to kill you top secret. And, I mean, I'll probably get a pass 'cause I'm a werewolf's kid and everything, but you...No, no, I get it, I know you're cool and you're not gonna say anything to anyone, but if my sister found out you knew all this shit, I mean...well, like I said, I'm not Garou, so I don't know all the rules like she does, but I think she'd probably have to rip your throat out.

That's a thing, by the way. They do it so much they have a name for it. The Garou, I mean, they'll be all like I throated that little bitch! Isn't that cool? And they probably mean it literally, too, which just makes it even cooler.

Hey, look! There's my sister now! We can just ask her what's supposed to happen to people who know too much about the Garou...

Adine! Over here!

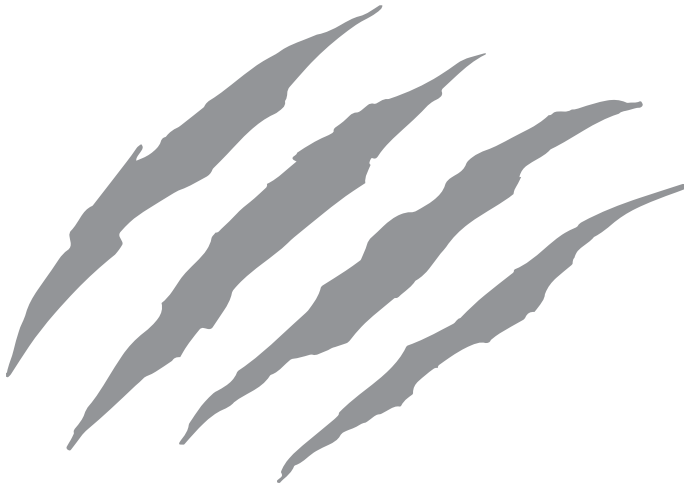
Wait—where're you going? Weren't you gonna kick my ass? Cause that's what you said, right? This was just ten minutes ago, dude, I haven't forgotten. You were all like, Your sister's a Looney Tune and I'm gonna kick your fucking ass. I mean listen, I'm sure my sister has wanted to kick my ass more than a few times, right? So don't worry about her, she'll probably think it's funny. She might even help.

No? You don't want to meet her? An actual werewolf?

Oh, I know you were just kidding, man, don't even sweat it! It's all good.

Yeah, okay, see ya Monday. Later!

Asshole...





Unwind

Sam Inabinet

Remember when you were a kid you would walk through the woods and it was all alive, all talking and singing and moving and working and doing, all around you, all the time. Not like faces in the tree bark or little cartoon zip-a-dee-doo-da birds singing every little thing gonna be alright – just stone and wood and water and wind doing what they always do, and if your head was quiet and clear you could see what they were doing and hear them explain why. You could just open yourself up and the world moved through you, like you move through it.

At first it was just woods all around except for the hills out back of our house. Never go there because there are poisonous snakes and spiders and scorpions, and sometimes talk of a mountain lion. When there was no school you could head out in almost any direction and go all day before you had to cross a big road or stream or ran into a farm or ranch or construction site. Construction sites were fun because you could find cool things there to use in experiments and rituals and stuff. Just make sure the guys working there didn't see you. But best of all you could just wander without going anywhere. Out where you couldn't see any people or buildings, or hear any noise, you could unpack your head, unwrap everything and let it all air out. You notice things too, stuff that people get wrong all the time. Like birds singing. Birds don't really sing, they just talk a lot. It's the wind that sings. You could make up songs, or sing the times-table and gazintas to the tune of songs on the radio. Out there you could really belt it out, with no one around to complain or tease you for being a dork. Out there you could unwind and ponder the big questions.

Like where babies come from. I mean, I know where babies come from. Before I could even read I was given a book with pictures that showed all about the sperm and the egg, and the cells splitting up, and growing big in the mommy's tummy, and all that. I already knew where babies came *from*, but how did they *get there*, is what I wanted to know. And I couldn't get anybody to answer that one, so I tried to work it out scientifically. Something from deep inside the daddy's body has to get deep inside the mommy's body, but how? The most obvious solution seemed to be

surgery, and you hear about how that is done sometimes, but this was something that had been going on since the caveman times, at least, and how would they know to do something like that. So it had to be something simpler, more natural. What do mommies and daddies do all the time? They kiss. Of course! The sperm swims through the spit when they kiss, and that would explain why no one would talk to me about it, because it is kind of gross when you think about it. When I realized it at first it didn't seem likely to me that a tiny sperm would know how to get to where the egg was, what veins to turn at and what not, but out there listening to the stone and wood and birds and wind, that part didn't seem so far-fetched after all. The theory made sense, it fit the known facts, and it was a very good reason never to spit on anybody. Especially girls. Unless you really liked them, of course.

One time I set up three cinder blocks in a sort of trilith and put my coolest action figures on it and called it my pagan altar. I'd sing the times-table to it and put on the cape from my Halloween costume (Batman!) and dance around and act goofy, and one time I took my clothes off to dance because I read how that was how they did it in the olden times. But it got cold and I was afraid someone might wander by and see me so that didn't last long. A little later on it became my mad scientist operating table; I'd bring old jars and bottles from home and see how many different colors and textures of mud I could concoct. Once I got a half-dried squirrel-square from off the highway and dissected it on the slab. It was fun poking around in what was left of the guts, but I started to feel bad for the squirrel and just gave it a decent burial, all attempts at revivification abandoned. I didn't get out to the altar much after that. And the few times I did someone had left what usually looked like a dead cat on it. I never recognized any of them as any of our cats, but we had cats go missing around that time, and later I heard that a lot of people had lost cats in the surrounding neighborhoods. They figured it was normal for living out in the woods and said they'd be happy when the whole state was finally paved over and safe. I laughed the first time I heard that, and thought they can't possibly mean it, not really. But the woods *were* starting to get scary.

Once when I was out running around, the ground moved under my feet. Not by itself, like, but when I stepped one place it would give a little, like when you walked onto an in-ground pool cover, and at some parts you could take one step, and it would go down a bit, and then the next step would feel kind of solid and then the next step would give and the spot you had just stepped off of would rise up a little, sort of like when you walk over the middle of a teeter-totter. And the soil, which looked like it had been turned recently, would crack a little. I backed out the way I had come, and went sideways, stepping gingerly forward and backward to figure out the perimeter of this thing, and what it could be. At one point I tripped over a wide pipe sticking out of the ground. The inside was black and smelled of smoke and I could hear open space at the end. I got back up and kept on testing the ground. It was a space with no trees that had been cleared off, dug up and packed back down, and then the leaves and twigs and stuff spread back over, I could tell. Then I knocked over a bush when I backed into it and almost fell into the hole that it was hiding.

There were stairs cut into the soil, with broken bits of plank to even them out, but they weren't set very well and would tip enough to send you sliding down on

your butt like in a cartoon haunted house. But I knew how to walk carefully so that didn't happen to me. Down below, there was enough room for me to stand up straight, but I was still little then and anyone bigger than me would have to hunch down in there. The ceiling was made of sheets of corrugated aluminum, held up by posts and rafters of 4x4s. There was an old folding cot with a stained and reeking futon, a stack of magazines with pictures of cars and girls on them, glass tubes with bowls on the end that had been burnt black, a boom-box, chip bags, moon pie wrappers, crushed soda and beer cans all around. At the far end was a fire pit under an aluminum cone that led up to the chimney I had tripped over.

The place stank of all kinds of smoke and big kids, the mean ones. I thought about taking one of the glass tubes for my experiments but didn't want to touch anything. My heart was pounding so hard it almost hurt, and when I thought that maybe some big mean kids would come in and I'd be trapped there, my tummy knotted up so hard it did hurt. I scrambled out, and away.

Looking back, I think it was really the woods themselves that were scared. They were disappearing faster and faster. As I got bigger and roamed farther around, I could see that they didn't really go on forever. Whatever direction I went in, I always came to a new tract of housing projects or else a space that was getting cleared to build on. By the time I was big enough for junior high I had mapped out our perimeter pretty well and by that time we were completely enclosed by suburban sprawl all the way around except for the hills. But the woods were shrinking and we all knew that someday these endless rows of cookie-cutter homes would be everywhere, right up to our front gate, and then we would be one of those old families with the house at the end of the road that looks different than everybody else's, and all our new neighbors would treat us like neanderthals just like people from the city always had. Sometimes we would hear the buzz of a dirt-bike nearby, and later find tracks cutting across the corners of our property.

As new neighborhoods kept going up, the city kept redrawing the district zoning lines, so Pop was always complaining about how he had to go to a different place to vote every year. And the schools and bus routes kept changing so that somehow I always ended up being the new kid each year, even though it was mostly the same kids over and over, and my family had been living in the area before almost everybody else. I got picked on a lot. And home wasn't much better, on account of Pop always calling me a sissy because I was always getting picked on, and Mom didn't much want to talk to me after I told her about the cats. Even though they always said I could always come to them with my problems, whenever I did they just got mad at me. My sister was littler than me so she was no help. And it was getting so you couldn't run around the woods being a dork without some older kids finding you and chasing you around and calling you names and beating you up if they could catch you.

Which brings me to the time I had to bring my sister out in the woods with me. Mom and Pop got tired of us being in the house and made us go out to play. I tried to explain to them that it wasn't safe out there anymore, but they just told me to stop being a sissy and *GO*. So we went. At first I just took off running and left her behind, but then I heard her crying and ran back and said I was sorry until she stopped. I tried taking her to some of the nicer, safer places, where you could listen to the wind or a

brook and tried to tell her how to open up and listen to what they could tell you, but she wasn't having none of it. She just kept whining about the bugs and sticker-bushes, and saying she saw a snake everywhere she looked.

Then we stumbled upon one of the mean kids digging a really big hole. I guess they had to keep building new underground hideouts all the time, especially after a big rain, on account of they would flood or cave in or whatever. He didn't seem to notice us at first, but then my sister asked what he was doing and I told her to shut up. My belly was already starting to tighten. The kid, who had long scraggly black hair, looked up at us, and smiled. But it was a mean smile. An I-got-you kind of smile. And he answered her question.

Older kids made these places to get away from it all, he explained, getting back to digging. Out here they could do what they wanted, without any mommies or daddies or teachers or pastors or pigs messing it up for them. And they knew no one would tell on them on account of the rules of their club: For telling anyone about their hideout, they would punch you in the stomach; for telling a kid where a hideout was, a punch in the face; for going into a hideout without being in the club, a kick in the stomach; for telling a parent or a cop where a hideout was, everyone in the club got to kick you in the balls as many times as they wanted. Saying this to me and my sister, all matter-of-fact, like it was normal.

My stomach had twisted up into a big old granny knot. My sister said that he was stupid and she was telling. I told her to shut up. She said she wasn't afraid of him, so I made her shut up and grabbed her arm and we ran away. But I looked back before we were out of sight and saw that the kid had stopped digging and poked his head up out of the hole and was leering at us with that I-got-you smile.

A year or two later we were out again, crossing one of the dirt paths that regular people took through the woods, and a couple of moms were walking along it and called us over. They asked us if we knew anything about a hideout and I said no but my sister said yes. They wanted to know where it was, and said we had to tell them, which was true because they were moms and we were kids. My sister pointed them toward the one that she had seen, but I knew about a newer one somewhere else. I told them about the rules of the club and they said don't worry, nothing would happen to us, so I told. I had also reasoned that since I wasn't ever in the club, the rules didn't apply to me. My sister said, don't worry, if they came after me I could just beat them up. Right. Big help there.

Don't worry. Tell that to the knot in my stomach.

I never heard any more about the hideouts, but the knot stayed with me. The older I got, the more school sucked and that knot wound up tighter with each passing semester. Everyone called me names, which didn't bug me too much on account of I didn't know what most of them meant anyway. Nobody wanted to be my friend, which I didn't mind much either, since I'd always liked being by myself. I got poked and pinched and slapped, and my books knocked out of my hands, and tripped down the stairs a lot, but like I said I'm pretty sure-footed, and I learned to keep my center of gravity low, so before long attempts to trip me failed more often than not. I also learned to keep my elbow or knee inside my locker door because once in a while between bells

a hand would shoot out from the river of kids pushing themselves through the hall and slam my locker shut. One time it broke my middle finger, and while it was in a splint everyone would claim I was flipping them the bird whenever I lifted my hand.

And nine times out of ten, when I looked around, there was that scraggly black hair hanging in front of the gotcha leer. And my stomach would coil up another turn.

Worst of all, though, was when Mom and Pop started bowling on Fridays, and guess who was always lurking near the snack bar at the lanes. I begged to be left home, there were great TV shows I was missing, but they didn't think I was responsible enough to look after my sister by myself so there I was. I'd try to read or do proofs or work out formulae and he'd hover over me whispering insults and threats, but smiling and buddying up to me whenever anyone looked our way. The snack bar guy seemed convinced that we were good friends, and before long Mom and Pop started to think so too. I tried to tell them what was happening but Pop would just laugh and say he was glad I finally got a real friend.

This guy'd do things like tell me that the word "fantastic" means "like shit" and then when Mom came back to the bar between frames for a soda he'd smile at her and say "You look fantastic!" and she'd go well aren't you sweet? Then give me the why-can't-you-act-like-that look and walk away. I thought I'd just let her have her compliment while he gave me his gotcha leer and snickered. I'd stare at a cardboard basket of greasy fries and feel the pit of my stomach squirm. Later I tried to tell her what he had said before she came over, and she said that I was just being mean and she didn't want to hear it.

After a few years I finally made some friends, or at least got me a peer group, newer kids who had started a Junior Mathletes club and were getting taken to some of the same churches Mom took us to. We had a good team, went to regionals a few times and even ended up winning more titles for the school than any of the sports teams. But the sports trophies were kept in a locked glass case at the front entrance while the Junior Athletic League plaques lined the corridors where they could easily be vandalized or stolen. This was a while back, before people realized they would always need at least one nerd friend. Most got picked on, same as me, and we concocted schemes to evade or confuse our tormentors.

We also had fun analyzing the language used against us, full of terms we weren't allowed to ask about at home and naughty secret meanings for lots of ordinary words or phrases. Like I say, this was back before all the schools had computers, and the Oxford Unabridged in the library was no use since all the pages with the most important words had been pulled out long ago, so we had to deduce what we could from the usage we heard. Among our conclusions: "Shit" was a sort of all-purpose pronoun that could refer to any thing, person, event or situation in either positive or negative ways; "Gay" referred to anything the speaker personally thought was distasteful, annoying or uninteresting; Ethnic slurs, in spite of having a large and very specific vocabulary, were completely interchangeable – no matter who you were talking about, they would always be stupid, or dirty, or lazy or cheap. At this time I still looked naïve enough on the outside that I could actually get away with pretending not to know the word "nigger" and had some fun watching bigots squirm when they realized they had been caught trying to explain themselves.

When I was with my fellow Mathletes my abdomen unclenched a little and I could stand a little straighter, feeling the safety in numbers. But those times were few and far between. We didn't hang out much outside of Mathletics meetings and without them I felt as exposed as ever, easy prey to the blind shoulder slam or hip-check in the halls between bells. The gotcha leer haunted me at every turn, closing in for a jab or shove and hissing "Dork!" or "Pussy!" or "I fucked your sister!" and then disappearing into the crowd. I wondered what he was doing in our grades – he was huge, looked like an adult, should have started shaving already but hadn't.

When we went regional three times in a row Pop got me a second-hand movie camera. I took it out to the sunken spot where the first hideout I ever found was, and set it on a tripod. I had my hair parted in the middle and wore a trench coat and a fake mustache. Using a cardboard tube with a string coming out the bottom as a microphone, I walked back and forth and talked into the camera with an English accent: "Here we find what are perhaps the only remnants of a once-great civilization. It was within these hidden subterranean vaults, such as the one which once occupied the very ground beneath which I am presently standing, that the young men of the clans would meet, cloaked in secrecy bound by dark and bloody oaths, to conduct their affairs far from prying eyes and ears. Here, huddled within the very earth itself, they were free, free to bang their heads in time to their heavily metallic music, free to drink their cheap watery ales, free to smoke their 'weed' and their 'rock' and their 'crystal' and drool with thwarted desires over the pages of their muscle-car girlie magazines..." I only ever showed it to my family, though, and then only once. Mom chewed me out for wearing my good trench coat in the woods and Pop popped me a good one for taking his tripod without permission.

In my senior year I went on a date. Sort of. I had known this girl for years, we were usually in the same home room since our names started with the same letter, and had worked together on the yearbook in tenth grade. We weren't real good friends or anything but we got along okay. And the date wasn't even our idea. Around a year earlier, all my fellow Mathletes had started telling me that I should ask her out, but I didn't because I already knew she didn't like me that way. But they kept telling each other stories about her and me, about some great love affair that we were having in secret, and teasing me about had we done it already and what was it like, and like that. I tried to explain how it really was with us, and hoped they would forget all about it over the summer and go back to normal. But all they forgot was that they had just invented this whole affair as a joke, and I went through most of senior year with a "girlfriend" that I was too embarrassed to talk to.

None of the Mathletes had been to a school dance before, but for some reason decided that they wanted to at least try it one time. This was one of those ones where the girls ask out the boys instead of the other way around, and even though neither of us wanted to go and never said anything about it to each other, somehow word got round to our parents who apparently felt this needed to happen no matter what. So I had to go and pay most of my paper-route savings for clothes that felt wrong and looked stupid and that I would only ever wear once anyway.

When we showed up at this thing with a group of her friends and mine, she looked as miserable as me, and told me that this wasn't her idea, but something her

friends were making her do. We talked a little and came to the realization that we had both somehow been railroaded into a relationship that never existed. I thought that should make things easier between us, but something was still wrong. She kept asking me how I felt about cats, and when I told her that I liked cats just fine, that my family had always had cats, it just seemed to worry her more. We took a picture together, and everyone laughed at how she was taller than me. Then she left with her friends. And my friends left without me. After they had gone, I could feel that gotcha leer burning into the back of my head, but didn't want to give it the satisfaction of turning around to look, so I went out and dry-heaved for a while behind the dumpster, even though I hadn't drunk any alcohol.

After that I started to notice how even the kids I thought were my friends didn't want anything to do with me. Conversations would end as soon as I showed up. Whenever I tried to talk to anyone they always had something more important they needed to do right then. I carried a thick stack of books to guard my midsection, and shuffled through the halls like a hunchback. I asked Pop to teach me how to fight but he said that was no way to solve my problems, that I had to work things out on my own. He talked about stuff like honor and self-control and tried to explain that boys would push and shove and call each other names just to test each other to see how tough they were and find each other's weaknesses, but when I told him this wasn't about that he'd just say stop whining. Then he'd start talking up Uncle Luke, who'd killed a bunch of gooks overseas back before I was born and was no sissy. But Pop didn't know that I remembered overhearing the rest of Uncle Luke's story back when I was little, how the army dishonorably discharged him because they didn't like the way he killed gooks and put him into a mental hospital that he escaped out of, last anybody heard.

Outside I tried to sword-fight with branches, practiced punching and kicking tree trunks, which was stupid, and grappled with shrubs. I ran and hid if I heard voices or dirt-bikes. Once I took off into the hills, thinking I would like to get stung or bit or mauled and just die there. But they had turned the place into a dirt-bike track.

Late in my senior year I finally tried to take that look off that kid's face. He had just knocked my books out of my arms, and said something, something that he had been saying to me for years. But this time I knew what it meant, and I knew that in some sense or another that it was true. He didn't melt away into the crowd, just stood over me and leered, daring me to do something. So I balled up my fist, wound up and swung as hard as I could. It was pathetic. My fist bounced off his face and it felt like my wrist was sprained. For a split second the look on his face didn't change, but then he staggered back and covered his face with his hands, howling that I had attacked him for no reason. I was sent home on suspension, and an appointment was made for the next day.

Vice Principal Tunelson's office smelled like potato chips and was smaller than I always imagined, but he had me and Mom and Pop sit on plastic cafeteria chairs in the center of the room so we couldn't get too cozy. That guy was there, of course, only now he had a black eye. And not even on the side I hit him on. He was half-sitting half-leaning on one corner of the desk and they had been talking and laughing like old friends but then stopped when we came in. But he was still allowed to keep

his place at the corner of the desk, like the office was half his. Thinking of how much time he probably spent here, perhaps it almost was, and he and Mr. Tunelson really were old friends.

I wanted to make it clear from the beginning that I understood about honor and self-control, that I didn't care about being called a cat and/or a vagina or being told that I was more interested in my own gender than anyone else's, that I knew to keep my elbow in my locker and my knees bent on the stairs, and that I wasn't whining about any of that. I wanted them to understand about the cats and how everyone I knew had been told lies about me and this had been going on for years now, but they couldn't hear any of it because by that time they were all yelling at me to shut up.

Mom and Pop told Mr. Tunelson they were really, really sorry, that they didn't know what was wrong with me, and that they had always tried to raise me right. But he waved them off and said he sympathized and that was all well and good but that any sort of violence could not be tolerated in the school. Any sort. That was what he said. And the kid leered. Gotcha.

I was told to look him in the eye, to look at his face and what I had done to him, that he was a person, that he had a name and it was Matt Rodgers, that we had been friends once and did I really want to throw that away over some childish name-calling? What could he have possibly said that was bad enough to warrant this?

They were all looking at me. Was this my chance to talk? I wanted to be sure I got this out and got it right so I took a deep breath, even though my stomach had turned to rock and seemed to be pinching the air out of my lungs. I explained about how my sister had been acting meaner and snottier over the last year and about the time a couple Thanksgivings ago after we had eaten and were sitting around the table talking, and she was telling about the slumber party she had just been to at Sally McClendon's, and Sally's big brother and Matt Rodgers were there and kept bothering them even though they kept telling them to leave them alone and bumping their player so the music skipped and pouring their drinks into their sleeping rolls and saying that they had wet their beds (and why were they even allowed to be around a little girls' slumber party anyway? I asked) and when it was my sister's turn at one of those light-as-a-feather-stiff-as-a-board games they started doing something down where she couldn't see, with a pen or a marker she was told, and going like Can't you feel that? I can't believe you can't feel that! so that when he said "I fucked your sister" I knew that in some way it was true and that even though I knew it was wrong I had to –

They were all still looking at me so they didn't see the look on his face. I had run out of breath and wished there was a way to shift the rock in my stomach around to make room for me to breathe. Mom started crying, then apologizing between sobs but I couldn't tell to who, and Pop apologized to Mr. Tunelson for letting a family matter become a school incident and Mr. Tunelson apologized to them for having to put them through all this but it was time to talk about what this was really all about. I was told to wait in the hall.

Apparently what it was really all about was Pop had lodged a complaint with the city about the dirt-bikes cutting across our property and the noise from the hills but

a whole lot of kids in the school thought that dirt-bikes were really cool and so did most of their parents so there was some talk of starting up a dirt-bike club and this would make money for the school somehow. But they needed to get some kind of zoning thing passed to make it okay to ride in the hills and couldn't when there were complaints on file but if I went to the Rodgers home and apologized to him in front of his whole family that was somehow going to make everything all right all around. For them. Gotcha. Schools could get away with stuff like that back then. Maybe things are different now. I hope so.

On the way back home Pop kept his elbow hooked over the back of his seat, ready to make with the back-seat back-hand if I made a sound. He grumbled a lot and the only part I could make out was "too old for this" but I couldn't tell if he was talking about himself or me. Mom stopped crying and just got quiet and cold and vacant. Next morning my sister beat the snot out of me.

And so that Friday Pop drove me to the Rodgers'. We took the road out through the housing project in front of us, got on county, then turned into the next neighborhood, just a few miles over. And through that out into the older part where there were still some woods around. So we had been almost neighbors this whole time. And his family was one of the older ones, from before the suburbs rolled in, like ours. I guess this was supposed to mean we were supposed to have something in common.

Pop wasn't staying, wouldn't go inside, wouldn't even get out of the car. I felt like some sacrificial thing he was shoving over the rim of a volcano, and had trouble standing up straight when I got out.

Their house was big, with tall doorways and high ceilings, and might have been kind of fancy back in the old days but was now run-down, with shingles missing, paint peeling all over and most of the windowpanes filled in with plywood or sealed with duct tape. There were some dirt-bikes and at least half a dozen cars and pick-up trucks in the front yard, some in various stages of dissection.

The woman who let me in said she was Matt's mom and responded to everything with a sharp piercing laugh and a grin stretched so tight it looked painful. The place seemed full of people, too full. There were some grans, lots of aunts and uncles, some young men that seemed like they could be older brothers, and no dad that I could pick out. Everyone smelled of smoke and booze and peanut farts, and everything they said to each other was either an insult or a threat or both. You-know-who was there too, of course, with a full gloat on. He had me right where he wanted me.

They served a dinner but I don't remember what it was. I didn't eat anything. For the past few days I couldn't keep anything down, nursing a bowling ball in my middle that squirmed whenever I tried to eat or move or think or feel. I played with what was on the plate a little for show, and when I looked up he was smirking at me from across the table and mouthed something that might have been: But I thought you liked cats. Mostly the women fussed over me about what a gentleman I was. I guessed for them if you didn't talk or do anything, that made you a gentleman. Before long, though, I managed to catch the sarcasm in their voices.

After the dinner they brought out the baby, and I realized that that was the real reason so much of the family was here, that baby. Many didn't seem to know about what

happened at school or why I was there that night, but most of the men knew, because they were giving Matt heck for getting his butt kicked by a pussy like me. I watched carefully whenever they ate or smoked or drank or back-handed each other, and was pretty sure some of them were left-handed. But it was time for the ritual, where the baby got passed around the room and everyone had to hold the baby, at least once, especially the women, who really wanted to, and the men, who really didn't.

The baby was, just, really disgusting. She was fat and dirty and diseased-looking and couldn't focus her eyes on anything but lashed out constantly and shrieked at any sort of noise or movement. And smelly – I've smelled babies before, but there was something really wrong with this one. They had dressed her up in some kind of lacy frilly things that were too small and wouldn't stay on right, and hadn't even washed her first. No one wanted to hold her for very long, even the women, who after only a few seconds of shrieking and thrashing and kicking and stinking were ready to hand her to someone else. It was like the sound and the smell created a field of repulsion that made anyone it reached automatically turn around and find something else to pay attention to.

I had to hold it too, and while I was I noticed that the repulsion effect seemed to include me as well. As long as I was holding the baby no one bothered with me, no insults, no sarcastic comments, not even a leer. Except for the mom, who had finally caught on that the diaper needed changing and was demanding a volunteer, and looking at me because I had it then. I used to change my sister's diaper sometimes, and since any time I spent with this thing was time I didn't have to deal with anyone else in this place, I got up and followed the mom into the baby's room. When I left the living room the repulsion field went with me and I heard them behind me, the women saying that I wasn't holding the baby right and didn't know what I was doing and the men saying you could tell I was a pussy by how easily I took to doing womens' work.

On the way the mom put her hand on my shoulder and told me not to worry about what had happened at school, that it wasn't a big deal, kids play games like that all the time and we all turned out alright didn't we, and she remembered that sleepover and how my sister, Britney, wasn't it?, acted, and everyone knew all about her and why would I stand up for her because wasn't she really just a bit of a slut anyway?

In the baby's room were a pair of grans in matching rocking chairs, and when the granddad heard the word slut he started saying that all women were sluts, each and every one, and the whole time I was changing the diaper and thinking what kind of chance would a kid have growing up with people like this around all the time he named every woman he ever knew or met or heard of and how they were all sluts. He really seemed to like saying that word. When I was done I turned toward them and saw that they were both leaning over the arms of their rockers, faces close together, and he was winking and saying to the grandma "You were a little slut when I first met you and you're still a slut, ain'tcha?" and she was wrinkling her nose back at him and they looked like they were about to kiss.

Well, this was about as much as I could stand. I grabbed their heads and smushed their faces together until I heard the small bones crunch. Then I turned to the mom,

whose strained grin had twisted down into a grimace under a blank wide stare, and explained to her that the slumber party wasn't here it was at the McClendons' (and she didn't even have any daughters my sister's age, not that I could see anyway) and that my sister's name wasn't Britney and I took a handful of her hair and gave it a sharp jerk and there was a muffled click inside her neck and she crumpled. Then I picked up the baby and headed back into the living room.

One of the drunk aunts had wandered into the hall and when she saw me she started to say something, probably about how I wasn't holding the baby right, so I tried the same thing with her but her wig came off in my hand so I elbowed her jaw into her nose and that shut her up. Since the baby was crying real good now I had crossed the living room to where Matt Rodgers was before anyone bothered to look and see that I wasn't holding it right, by the left leg and all. I spun Matt Rodgers around and he already had the look on his face loaded up and ready to shoot at me.

I said to him "You fucked my sister?" and swung it as hard as I could at the side of his head. The crying stopped right away and I did it again and again yelling "Well, I just FUCKED your sister UP!" except the words wouldn't come out right. I never saw Matt Rodgers's face without that leer until now, and had never seen him flinch or cringe or cower until I was hitting him over and over with something so soft he shouldn't even have felt it at all, you would think. As soon as the crying stopped all the men in the room turned and saw what I was doing and tried to tackle me and hold my arms but I swept them off of me and after a few more tries they didn't try anymore. I kept swinging and swinging until there wasn't anything left to swing but a fat little leg. Matt Rodgers was on the floor by now, twitching and gurgling. He shouldn't have been hurt that bad, not really, but seemed to either be crying or having some kind of spaz attack or was just choking from the mess in his face.

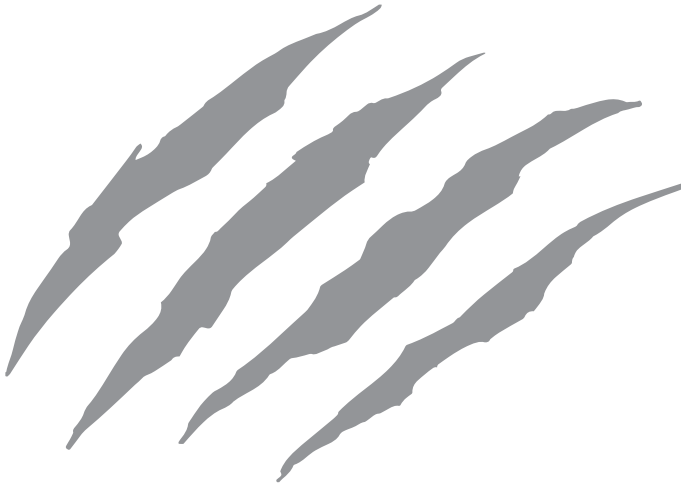
I went into the kitchen for a spoon to scoop Matt Rodgers's eyes out with and maybe like an icepick or something to pierce his eardrums with. But I couldn't get my hands to work right, couldn't grasp any utensils at all, and just ended up trashing the kitchen. I got on top of him and found that I could do what I wanted to with my fingernails – eyes, and ears, and I even got most of his tongue out without using pliers – which surprised me since I usually keep my fingernails gnawed down to the quick.

I didn't want to kill Matt Rodgers, you understand, but I thought it would be good for him to live the rest of his life alone inside his head without any sight or sound to distract him from thinking about what he had done. That's why I was heading out to the garage, to look for some kerosene or lawn mower gas or something to burn him all over with so that nobody could tap out Morse code on his skin like with that mangled vet in the Metallica video, when I heard engines turning over in the front yard and noticed that the house was empty.

When I got outside I was seeing red – like real actual red, from blood dripping into my eyes because I had scraped my forehead on the door-jam, but I didn't pick up on that at the time. One of the uncles or older brothers had tried to take off in one of those monster pick-up with the big tires, but was blocked by the other vehicles and when he tried to roll over them caught the wrong angle and just flipped over. Some

others managed to get their car on the road but ran into a ditch just a few hundred yards away. Most were fleeing on foot. I was able to run them all down before any of them got close enough to the new housing for anyone there to hear their screaming.

After that the woods were completely silent and it felt so good to just get out and run that that's what I did. It felt like that big wound-up knot was unraveling, slackening and spooling out behind me the farther I went. So I ran. I thought it might be time to go home and have a good long talk with Mom and Pop, but then it occurred to me that Tunelson might live nearby. In fact, I was sure I could smell him. I think I remember eating something along the way, but have no idea what it might have been, or whose. Inside my belly, the knot finally uncoiled and reared its head up and together we sang at the moon with one voice.



The Lost

Mike Lee

Nick didn't hear the car until it was almost on top of him. It had been raining most of the day, and he was tired, tired and soaked to the bone. The wooded hills and the curving, country road muffled the sound of the engine and the hiss of tires on wet asphalt until the car was coming around the bend to Nick's right, and there was no time to hide. He'd just started back across the grassy field, towards the shelter of the tree line some ten yards away; too far from the shoulder to be a hitchhiker, but too close to the road to escape being seen.

A cold spike of adrenaline shot through his veins. For a split second he froze, his gaze darting about the field for some place to hide. *Don't let it be a cop*, he thought, his heart in his throat. *Please, God, don't let it be a cop.*

The hissing of the car's tires swelled over the background whisper of the rain. *Run*, his instincts said. *Hide*. But the rational part of his mind knew that was the worst thing he could do. Instead, he hitched the straps of his backpack a little higher on his shoulders and walked on through the grass, as though he had every right to be out hiking in the middle of the country on a miserable April day.

All at once, he felt the dull, familiar ache start in his bones. His gums tingled painfully. Nick clenched his fists and kept walking, fighting the change, concentrating on the sound of the car at his back.

And then it was fading – not slowing, but disappearing up the road to Nick's left. He let out a shaky breath and glanced over his shoulder to see a rusty old Buick receding into the distance, its outlines already blurring in the misty air.

His palms stung. Nick slowly unclenched his fists, revealing four small punctures in each hand. His fingernails, smooth and rounded once more, each bore a small, bright dot of blood. Grimacing, he wiped his fingers against his soaked jeans, then turned his face up to the sky and focused on the drops of cold water splashing against his cheeks. His heartbeat slowed, and the bone-deep ache receded. As soon as he felt normal again he wiped his eyes and jogged back into the trees.

Amélie and Sara were waiting where he'd left them, huddled together in a shallow depression just a few yards inside the tree line. They had pulled off their sodden packs and were sitting on them, facing one another, bent low so that their heads were nearly touching. Amélie had pulled off her work gloves and was braiding Sara's auburn hair to pass the time. They froze at the sound of his footsteps, searching for him through the dripping foliage with narrowed, predatory eyes.

Sara caught sight of him first. At fourteen, she had the keenest senses of the three of them, no matter what shape she wore. Her face was pale and freckled beneath the ragged trucker's cap she wore, with a pixie nose and a small, pointed chin. She had eyes like polished emeralds, luminous and fever-bright.

"You were gone a long time," she said worriedly. The stained Army surplus coat she wore was two sizes too large, its sleeves rolled back into thick cuffs and its torn hem hanging down past her knees.

"There was a car," Nick replied. "I was off the road, though. I don't think they even saw me."

Amélie did not seem reassured. She went back to work on Sara's braid, finishing it quickly and wrapping an elastic tie around the end. Her thick mane of dark, curly hair was tied back with a black do-rag, letting the rain fall unhindered on her forehead and full, round cheeks. She had mocha-colored skin and huge, brown eyes, and at nineteen was the oldest of the three. "Do we know where we are?" she asked.

Nick glanced back the way he'd come. "The sign along the road said we're fifteen miles from Pineville, so I guess we've made it to Kentucky."

Sara wrapped her arms around her narrow chest and hunched her shoulders against the constant, dripping rain. "Can we stop now?" she asked, her voice muffled by the folds of her coat. "You said we could rest when we got to Kentucky."

Amélie and Nick exchanged looks. "I know. But let's see if we can get a little bit further," she said. "Just until we find someplace to get out of the rain, okay?"

"I'm *tired*," Sara replied. "My feet are *killing* me."

Nick sighed. "You could change, if you want. Then you wouldn't feel tired. I could carry your pack for you."

"No," she said, staring glumly into the trees. "It's lonely being the only wolf. I mean, I know you and Amélie would be close by, but –"

"It's okay," Nick said. "I know what you mean."

Amélie bent and picked up her pack, then grabbed Sara's as well. "Not much farther, okay?" she said. "We'll stop as soon as we find someplace safe."

Sara's gaze fell to her grass-stained sneakers. After a moment, she nodded reluctantly and pushed herself to her feet. Nick was already moving, thumbs tucked into the straps of his backpack, his expression hidden.

Amélie had been saying more or less the same thing since Nashville, and they hadn't stopped running yet.

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They found the old house just as evening was coming on: an old, sagging shell of a place, crouched beneath a pair of gnarled oak trees a few hundred yards off the two-lane country road. The place had been abandoned for decades, by the looks of it. Creepers climbed two of the four walls, their tendrils working beneath the peeling clapboard and twisting them out of alignment. The windows and doors had been boarded up, but someone had broken in a long time back and the back door sat half-open, its surface painted over with faded layers of graffiti.

Drifts of plaster, rotting lath and broken glass covered the wooden floors inside, and the whole place reeked of decay. But as luck would have it, the living room was free of leaks, and the stone fireplace seemed intact enough to risk a fire. Nick went searching through the ruined shed out back and found enough dry wood and tinder to get a decent blaze going. Amélie and Sara went back outside and made sure that no light leaked through the window boards to catch the attention of passing cars.

They made their little camp in the meager circle of orange light cast by the fire. Shirts, jeans and socks were piled close to the hearth to dry. Amélie and Sara sat apart, both dressed in threadbare t-shirts and shorts, sharing out the last of the trail mix they'd shoplifted from a truck stop in Monterey while Nick poked and prodded at the fire.

Amélie had been on the road the longest, so they followed her rules, and for the most part it had kept them out of trouble. She was from a town called Houma, in Louisiana, and from what Nick could gather she'd been on her own for a little more than a year. She didn't talk about how she'd changed the first time, or what had happened. There was an unspoken rule that no one talked about what they'd been like before, or the lives they'd left behind. Nick could understand that. Sara suffered from nightmares, and there were times when he'd catch Amélie staring off into space, her dark eyes tormented by something only she could see. They all had memories they were desperate to leave behind.

They had found him just a few days after his first change. Amélie had told him later that it was one of the few times she'd broken her own rules. She'd learned the hard way to avoid big cities, but she'd seen the news – *Germantown Man 'Torn Apart', Medical Examiner Says – Son Still Missing* – and guessed what had happened. So she'd given in to the wolf – another broken rule – and tracked his not-quite-human scent to a filthy, run-down park in south Memphis.

Nick had been half-mad by the time she'd found him. His clothes were in rags, and he still had his father's blood beneath his nails. He babbled questions for which she had no answers. But she listened, and did not judge, and when the fear and anguish had run its course, she had left Sara with him and gone to Goodwill to find him some new clothes. Then she told him she was heading for the mountains, to find someplace safe and try to figure things out.

He left Memphis with them later that evening, walking east up Highway 1 in a pair of battered, old engineer's boots. Memphis wasn't his home any more, and never could be again.

For the better part of a month they hiked and hitched their way across Tennessee. Amélie taught him everything she knew about surviving on the road: where to

sleep, when to eat, and how to watch out for trouble. They slept on the ground, and went hungry most of the time, and kept the wolf at bay as best they could. *When you give in to the wolf, people die*, Amélie warned them, and she was right.

But trouble found them from time to time, despite their best efforts. Once they stumbled into a trio of hunters in the woods outside Humboldt, and it had nearly ended in blood. The men were drunk, and armed, and thought they'd have a little fun with the runaways. Nick lost his temper and started to change, and it scared the hunters so badly they ran for their lives.

The next time had been in Nashville. Sara had gotten sick on the road, and wasn't getting any better, so Nick had talked Amélie into going into the city to see a doctor. They'd wound up in a homeless camp near downtown, and within days the atmosphere of the place had grown tense. Amélie had wanted to leave, but Nick had talked her out of it, because they'd finally found a doctor who would see Sara without asking too many questions. That night, the camp turned on them. Nick awoke to Sara being dragged from her sleeping bag, screaming in terror. Men grabbed his arms, and a heavy blow crashed into his head. Blood trickled down his neck, and when the change came over him there was no stopping it. The next thing he knew, Amélie was shaking him roughly, and there was the sound of sirens in the air. He was covered in blood, and so was she. Even Sara had lost her battle with the wolf, and was stumbling dazedly through the camp. Then Nick had seen the bodies, and the pieces of bodies, and knew they had to run. They had gotten away only moments before the first police cars arrived.

It was two days before any of them realized Sara's fever had broken during the change.

After that, they stayed as far away from people as they could manage. They stuck to two-lane highways and winding country roads, following a route marked on a grubby map in Amélie's pack. It was the hardest two-and-a-half weeks in Nick's life. They slept little and moved often, darting into the woods at the first sound of an engine. Each night Amélie would reassure them: once they made it to the mountains, everything would be fine.

Then, just outside Knoxville, the law caught up to them. It was late at night and miles from anywhere, on a twisting country road that must have been a favorite place for speed traps. They walked right up on the patrol car, parked out of sight just past a blind turn, and before they knew it a loud voice was telling them to drop to their knees and put their hands on their heads.

The cop, it turned out, was one of the bad ones. Nick knew they were in trouble when the deputy didn't call in the incident on his radio. He prepared himself for a beating – if there was one thing his Dad taught him, it was how to take a blow – but the bastard took an interest in Amélie instead. He dragged her, kicking and screaming, into the back of the car – and then her cries turned ragged, and guttural, and deep, and it was the deputy's turn to scream. Nick and Sara could only watch, helpless, as blood splashed the interior of the car.

They gave up on east Tennessee after that and headed north as fast as they could. Amélie thought they would be safe once they crossed state lines, but Nick wasn't so

sure. They'd killed a police officer this time. Every cop in three states would be on the lookout for people like them. It felt like a noose was being slowly drawn about his neck.

The crinkle of plastic brought Nick out of his reverie. Sara was handing the empty bag of trail mix back to Amélie. "Isn't there anything else?" she asked. "What about that bag of beef jerky?"

"Honey, we finished that days ago," Amélie said. "There's nothing left."

Sara looked stricken. Nick jabbed at the fire, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. "You could change," he told her. "There's no one for miles, and the rain's tapering off. You could maybe find a rabbit to eat."

"A rabbit?" Sara grimaced. "No way. I couldn't."

"You could," Amélie told her. "I know it sounds kind of gross right now, but it's different when you're the wolf." Her dark eyes shone in the firelight. "It's exciting. The chase..." She closed her eyes. "Even the kill. It's... amazing."

Sara tucked her knees under her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs, her expression a mix of hunger and anxiety. "Will you come with me?" she said at last.

"Sure I will," Amélie said. She glanced at Nick. "You should come, too. You need to eat."

Sara clambered to her feet. "I'm going to change," she said, stepping tentatively into a hallway that led to the house's ruined bedrooms. "Nobody watch!"

Amélie chuckled, shaking her head. "We'll be here when you're ready."

They listened to Sara's careful steps receding down the hall. Nick sighed and leaned his makeshift poker next to the fireplace. "What are we going to do?"

Amélie shrugged. "I don't know, between the three of us, I bet we can catch a rabbit or two. Maybe even a deer —"

"That's not what I mean. Once we get to the mountains, what then?"

Her expression turned somber. Amélie stared at Nick for several long moments, and then went to join him by the fire.

"We leave the roads behind," she said softly. "We go so far up that no one will come looking for us. We stop running."

Nick leaned forward. "And then what? We live up on some mountainside for the rest of our lives, like animals?"

"If there's one place on earth where wolves can still survive, it's in the mountains," Amélie said.

"We aren't wolves."

"We aren't human, either," Amélie told him. "Not anymore."

"Then where does that leave us?"

"I don't know, Nick. I've been too busy trying to stay alive to give it much thought."

Nick started to reply, then thought better of it. Fire crackled hungrily in the hearth. A sharp, strangled cry echoed from the darkness down the hall.

After a moment, Amélie sighed. “I don’t know why this happened to us. I told you in Memphis that I didn’t have any answers.” She wiped tears from her eyes with a savage sweep of her hand. “But there’s a place for us in this world, Nick. There has to be.

“Back in Houma, when the change first happened, I went and hid in the bayou for a week. I was scared, but worse than that, I was *ashamed*. I thought I was some kind of freak.”

“A monster,” Nick said.

“Yeah. And I fought it. I fought the wolf for a long, long time.” She drew a shaky breath. “But that just made it worse, in the end.”

“So you ran.”

She nodded ruefully. “It seemed like the right thing to do. And it was. It led me to Sara, and to you. Now I know I’m not alone.”

Nick smiled. At the same moment, a low, rumbling growl echoed from the far side of the room.

Sara stood at the end of the hallway, her golden eyes gleaming like polished coins. Gone was the nervous, frightened girl from Mississippi; in her place was a majestic creature, lean and powerful, robed in a mantle of thick, snowy-white fur. She filled the room with her presence, cold and primal as moonlight. Even the fire in the hearth seemed to shrink from her glory. Silent and graceful as a ghost, she padded across the living room and disappeared into the ruined kitchen beyond.

The sight of her sent chills down Nick’s spine. His heart began to race, one wolf calling to another. The ache started in his bones, and he bared his teeth in a hungry grin. Amélie was already pulling off her clothes, her skin luminous with heat.

Outside, a low howl rose into the overcast sky.

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Later, in the hours just before dawn, Nick dreamt that a mockingbird had gotten into the dilapidated house and was flying around the living room. From time to time it would land on him, chirping insistently, its feet plucking at his clothes. He tried to shoo it away again and again, but every time the bird would just dart into one of the upper corners of the room and glare at him with a single black, beady eye.

The dream was still with him when he woke, just a few hours later. The fire had gone out sometime during the night, but the tang of wood smoke still hung heavily in the air.

The three of them lay in their sleeping bags in a rough semicircle around the cold hearth. Nick blinked at the stained ceiling, and was surprised to find he was well rested, despite the long night’s run. Sara had caught the scent of the deer, and the chase had gone on for miles before the pack had closed in for the kill. The grisly climax was nothing like he’d expected. It had felt right, like nothing he’d ever known in his life.

Yawning, he slid from his sleeping bag and reached for his clothes. The girls were stirring as well. Amélie rose on her elbows, a frown on her face, her dark eyes sweeping the room.

Sara stretched languidly within her sleeping bag, and let out a loud, contented yawn. "I had the weirdest dream," she said.

Amélie stared at her. "Was there a bird?" she asked.

Sara paused. "Yeah. A really irritating one. I was trying to sleep, and it wouldn't shut the hell up."

Nick pulled on his shirt. "Same thing happened to me. Must have been a real bird. I bet it's nesting in the attic somewhere."

Amélie glanced from Sara, to Nick, and back again. "You mean neither one of you feel that?"

Nick gave her a bemused look. "Feel what?"

But Amélie was already scrambling from her sleeping bag and pulling on her jeans. "Pack up," she said, in a voice that brooked no discussion. "We've got to get moving."

Within half an hour they were headed east through fallow fields and dense woodland. Amélie led the way, moving with purpose, as though summoned by a call that only she could hear. Sara and Nick exchanged worried glances as they walked, but they kept their questions to themselves and followed along.

They walked through the day, scarcely pausing for rest. The fields quickly gave way to broad, rolling hills, covered in forests of oak, chestnut and pine. From the hilltops they could see the ancient line of the Appalachians just a few miles further east, their flanks wreathed in streamers of mist.

The closer they got to the mountains, the less Nick expected to see signs of civilization, but the opposite proved true. Twice they crossed two-lane roads that looked freshly cut through the wilderness, the black lines of asphalt winding like snake tracks between the hills. Traffic bustled up and down both roads: not just cars and trucks, but tractor-trailers loaded with construction equipment and massive earth-movers. Most of the trucks bore the logo *Harold and Harold Mining, Inc.* Towards the afternoon, just as they were reaching the foot of the mountains, they head a deep, crackling rumble, almost like thunder, off to the south, followed by a turgid, rolling cloud of pale brown dust that stained the southern horizon.

Once in the mountains, Nick soon lost track of time or direction. Amélie led the way unerringly, climbing ridges and navigating deep, shadowed hollows without hesitation. As they went, the atmosphere around them began to shift. The roads and the vehicles receded with each step, along with all the other signs of modern life. The land grew darker and more wild, the silence beneath the trees heavy with the weight of ages. It was like walking into another world, a sensation made all the more wondrous and disturbing by its proximity to human civilization.

The next thing he knew, it was early evening. The sun was at their backs, and the shadows were deepening beneath the trees. Amélie had led them into a deep, gently sloping hollow, lined with ancient stands of oak trees fed by a rushing mountain stream. The faintest of trails wound its way up through the great trees. Amélie's pace quickened as she followed it, and Nick sensed that their destination was just ahead.

The trail led to a tiny, overgrown clearing perhaps a third of the way up the hollow. Trees crowded closely about the space, creating the illusion of a chamber

shaped by nature itself. Carvings were etched into the boles of the old oaks: strange, angular symbols unlike anything Nick had seen before.

At the far side of the clearing, outlined in the fading light of day, rose an irregular slab of glossy, black stone.

Amélie paused at the edge of the clearing, her eyes wide with wonder. There was a strange stillness about the place, a kind of ominous reverence that calmed the mind and quickened the blood at the same time. "This is what the bird wanted us to see," she said breathlessly.

Sara gave her a dubious look. "The bird? From our dreams?"

"It wasn't a dream," Amélie replied. "It just seemed that way to you and Nick, because it could only get through to you while you were asleep."

Nick shook his head. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"It was a spirit," Amélie said. "A *sending*. My grandmother told me about them when I was a kid. She was all into that kind of stuff. Drove my momma crazy, but *nannan* was the real deal."

"And you could see this spirit, even when you were awake?" Nick asked.

"I couldn't see it, but I could *feel* it." Amélie reached out and plucked at Nick's shirt. "Just like that, tugging at me all day long, guiding me here."

Sara peered into the clearing. "Where is it now?"

Amélie took a deep breath and entered the space, her hands folded at her waist. She crossed the tiny clearing in just a few steps, edging through the briars and the weeds, until she stood at the foot of the great stone. After a moment, she reached out and touched her fingertips to its polished surface. "It's here," she said wonderingly. "Here, in the stone."

Nick scowled. None of it made any sense to him. He and Sara joined Amélie at the stone. Close up, he could see that it was covered in the same angular characters, their surfaces worn by the passage of time. Stranger still were a series of figures carved along the sides of the stone. He could make out humans, and wolves, and creatures that combined aspects of both. There was a broad-shouldered human with wolfish features and claws, and a massive wolf with huge, fearsome jaws. And then there was a giant of a beast, a vicious, snarling wolf that walked like a man. The sight of the creature sent a strange chill down Nick's spine. He ran his fingertips over the stone's surface, feeling a faint tingle against his skin.

"Look." Sara knelt and pushed aside the grasses at the base of the stone. "There's something here."

There was a collection of objects laid at the foot of the ancient rock. Nick and Amélie knelt to get a better look. There was a small, glazed bowl, hand-turned and painted a rich blue, covered by rectangular packets of waxed brown paper tied with twine. A pair of sealed mason jars full of clear liquid sat in the grass to either side of the bowl. It all looked as though it had been left there only a day or two before.

Nick and Sara gave each other a glance and reached for the packets. They undid the knots holding the twine and carefully unwrapped the stiff paper. Inside Nick's parcel were wide, flat strips of dried meat.

Sara unwrapped hers. "This one's full of leaves," she said bemusedly.

Nick leaned over and studied the leaves. He gave a tentative sniff. "That's tobacco." He glanced at the jars. "And I'll bet that's something a lot stronger than tap water."

"Never mind that," Amélie said. "Look at this." She held the bowl up to the light.

There were a number of small objects in the bottom of the bowl. A small, fragile-looking photograph of a rural family, their stern faces hardened by a life of poverty and struggle. A lock of iron-gray hair, tightly braided and tied at both ends with a length of satin ribbon. A locket of dull, reddish gold, its surface polished by generations of hands.

"These are offerings," Amélie said, clutching the bowl against her chest.

Sara frowned. "What? Like some kind of ritual?"

"No," Amélie said thoughtfully. "More like a plea."

"For who?" Nick asked. "For us?"

"For someone like us, I think." Amélie studied the figures carved on the stone. "Some of the hill folk keep to the old ways, just like the Cajuns back home. They learned it from the Cherokee, and passed it down from mother to daughter, and father to son." She set the bowl carefully onto the grass. "Someone's got a fearful need, to come all the way up here and leave these gifts behind."

"A need for what?" Nick asked.

Amélie reached into the bowl, drawing out the slender lock of hair. "I don't know," she said, turning the braid between finger and thumb, "but I mean to find out."

Nick stared at the braid. "Put it back," he said softly. He rose and backed slowly away from the stone. "It's going to be dark soon. We should find a good place to camp."

Amélie turned. "Put it back? Why?"

"It's got nothing to do with us," Nick replied. "You said yourself that it was left here for someone else."

"Someone like *us*," she pointed out. "But whoever they were, it looks like they've been gone a long, long time. That's why the spirit came looking for us instead."

"Well, the goddamn bird made a mistake," Nick snapped. "'Cause we're no help to anybody." He held out his hand. "Come on, Sara, let's get out of here."

Sara started to rise, but Amélie laid a hand on her arm. "Nick, can't you see? Forget about the meat and the tobacco. Forget about the moonshine." She held up the lock of hair. "*This* is a gift. Someone here needs us."

"You can't believe that," Nick said in a choked voice. "Not after all the things we've done. We're *monsters*."

Amélie rose smoothly to her feet and went to him. "We are what we are, Nick," she said gently, touching her fingertips to his cheek. "I don't deny we've done terrible things. The question is, can we be something more than that, even if it's just for one night?"

Nick squeezed his eyes shut. Tears coursed down his cheeks. “This is going to end in blood,” he said hollowly. “You know it will. When we change, people die.”

Amélie nodded gravely. She put her arms around Nick and drew him into a fierce embrace.

“I think that’s the idea,” she whispered, resting her head against his shoulder.

• • •

The wolves coursed through the dark wood like phantoms, graceful and swift, and the forest fell silent at their passing.

The rain from the day before had worn away the trail, but not enough that their keen noses couldn’t track it. They were looking for a woman of late middle age, old but still healthy and reasonably spry. The scent on the hair spoke of wood smoke and bacon grease, sweat and dirt and the sweet-salty tang of blood.

The trail led them down from the hollow and along a series of ridges, running north-by-northwest under the light of a huge, golden moon. Nick’s blood sang with the joy of the hunt. There was no fear, no anguish, no inkling of doubt. There was only the night, and the moon, and the raw earth beneath his feet, and the glimpses of his pack between the tall trees.

They smelled the people long before they caught sight of them. The wind was blowing from the west, and Nick caught the scents of cigarette smoke and cologne, of sweat and synthetic fabrics, of treated leather and the metallic tang of gun oil. The last gave him a moment’s pause, one predator recognizing another. He whuffed a quiet warning to his pack mates and angled towards the source of the scent, a few dozen yards down the ridge slope to his left. Amélie and Sara kept going, loping through the woods to the north and forming a loose semicircle with Amélie at the midpoint.

Nick nosed his way carefully down the wooded slope, constantly sampling the scents carried on the wind. He smelled wood smoke and the tang of hot metal, as well as the bitter reek of gasoline.

The trees thinned out about halfway down the slope. Nick saw an old house and the sagging remnants of a small barn, and a fenced-in chicken coop nearby. Further down the slope, on the far side of a dirt track that passed for a road, lay a fenced pasture with a few cows and an irritated-looking bull. Nick watched the silhouette of the bull’s horned head turn this way and that, sensing danger in the air.

There were a trio of black SUVs, their flanks brown with dust, parked on the dirt track between the pasture and the house. Nick counted four men in light jackets and cargo pants standing around the vehicles, smoking cigarettes and talking to one another in low voices. A magnetic placard attached to passenger door of the lead SUV read *Harold and Harold Mining, Inc.*

Nick edged slowly from the trees at the back of the property. Unlike Sara, his pelt was shaggy and black, with highlights of dark red around his shoulders and neck. Nearly invisible in the darkness, he crept up to the house and onto the weathered boards of its wraparound porch.

The windows of the house were open to let in the night air. Nick caught the scents of eggs and meat, bread and fresh milk. He didn't need to look inside to know that the old woman had been interrupted as she sat down to supper. He could smell her close by, along with the scents of four men. His lip curled at their smell. One in particular reeked of infection: a kind of strange, chemical foulness that wasn't remotely human. The scent of it set his teeth on edge.

A man's voice drifted through the open window. "Mrs. Pettimore, we're talking about a lot of money here. It's at least three times what your property is worth, and if you don't believe me, I can have an assessor up from Pineville tomorrow to give you his appraisal."

"I don't need nobody from Pineville to tell me how much my land is worth." The woman's voice was brittle with age, but hard and unyielding as stone.

"Well, think what you can do with that kind of money. Think of what it would mean for your grandson. From what the doctors told me, he's got a long road ahead of him."

"And you think I don't know you had a part in that?" the woman's voice cracked like a whip.

"Your grandson loved to race cars, Mrs. Pettimore," the man said reprovingly. "An accident was bound to happen, sooner or later. If I were you, I'd count my blessings. This money will give him a real chance to walk again."

"You can go to hell, Mr. Frost. You and the rest of your company men. I know what you've got planned for Briar Mountain. I've heard tell of what your people have done to the mountains down south. You blow the tops off with dynamite and fill the hollers with your slurry. Everything dies for miles around. If you think that's gonna happen here, you got another think comin'. There's been Pettimores on this mountain for near two hundred and fifty years, and here we'll stay."

Wood creaked. Fabric rustled as Mrs. Pettimore leaned forward in her chair. "And you listen here," she said coldly. "All of you. We've got kin up in these hills that don't take kindly to people like you. Folk you never, *ever* want to meet. So I'll tell you for the last time – you take your money and go back where you came from, while you still can."

Silence fell inside the house. Finally, Frost let out a low chuckle. "Unbelievable," he said. "Un-fucking-believable. I tell you what, you hillbillies never cease to amaze me. You want to do this the hard way? Fine. Tom, get the doc."

Mrs. Pettimore let out a yell. There were sounds of a scuffle, then a crash as a chair fell backwards against the floor. "Get her on the couch!" Frost ordered. "Careful, careful! These old bitches bruise easy. We don't want to the locals thinking this is anything more than a good, old-fashioned heart attack."

Heavy footsteps headed for the front of the house. Nick followed along down the side porch, low and close to the wall. He understood the old woman's plea clearly now. He knew what she wanted them to do.

People were indeed going to die.

A screen door opened at the front of the house. "Hey! Doc!" the man named Tom called out. Down by the dirt track, the passenger door to the lead SUV opened, and a man in jeans and a work shirt got out. He was about fifty, with a lined face and a balding head, and deep-set eyes behind wire-rimmed spectacles. There was a small, zippered nylon case in his right hand.

Nick watched the man come closer, clambering slowly up the slope. His heart began to race. His lungs pumped like bellows in his broad chest, drawing in huge gulps of air. The world took on a hard-edged clarity, vivid and dreadful at the same time. His lips drew back in a silent, exultant snarl.

As the doc reached the porch, Nick lunged forward, fanged jaws gaping and legs pumping as he barreled around the corner of the house.

There was a company man standing on the porch with his back to Nick, right in his path. Nick hit him behind the knees and knocked him off his feet. Scarcely breaking stride, he adjusted for the impact and kept going, aiming for the doc. To his right, Tom stood in the doorway, his eyes widening in surprise.

Nick leapt. The doc's eyes went wide. Instinctively he raised his arms to ward off the attack, and Nick bit off his right hand at the wrist. The hand and the case it carried went spinning off into the darkness.

The doc fell back, screaming in agony. Nick hit the ground and bolted off into the darkness. His nerves were afire. Throwing back his head, he loosed a joyous hunting howl into the night sky.

Angry shouts rang out from the porch, followed by a wild fusillade of pistol shots. Bullets snapped and hissed through the darkness where Nick had been. Red teeth bared in a dreadful grin, he was already running full-out, down the slope towards the SUVs and the men standing around them.

Whoever the company men were, they reacted to the sudden attack with speed and skill. They hesitated for only a moment before dashing to their vehicles and reaching for the weapons stored inside. But a moment's pause was enough to doom two of them. As Nick raced down the slope, a streak of silver-white burst from the shadows to his right and leapt onto a man pulling a shotgun from the first of the SUVs. His scream turned to a choking gurgle as Sara's jaws closed around his throat.

More shots rang out from the house, this time punching holes in the side-panels of the SUV as the company men tried to hit Sara. Another of the men stepped clear of the second vehicle's open door, readying a cut-down assault rifle. Nick crashed into him at full speed, knocking the gunman backwards onto the SUV's back seat. Nick lunged forward, claws scrabbling for purchase, and bit down hard on the man's skull. Bone crunched, and the gunman went limp.

Bullets thudded into the side of the SUV. He snarled and spun as one struck him in the hip, but the bright flare of pain ebbed almost at once, the wound knitting shut with impossible speed.

Then came two thunderous blasts at close range. The rear windows of the SUV shattered, and buckshot buzzed like hornets through the interior. Nick caught sight of a man running along the side of the vehicle, unloading a pump-action shotgun as

fast as he could. Pellets stung his chest and shoulders. Furious, he drove his muscular body through one of the blown-out windows and landed on the company man's chest. His teeth sank deep into the man's right shoulder. With a single savage twist of his neck, he dislocated the gunman's arm. A second twist, and the limb tore free.

Nick leapt free from the company man's thrashing body, licking blood from his chops as he searched for his pack mates. He heard and smelled Sara on the far side of the SUVs, finishing off the fourth man who'd been watching the vehicles.

He turned his attention back to the house. The doc lay unmoving on the ground a few feet from the porch. On the porch itself, the company man Nick had bowled over was leaning against the porch rail and fumbling a new clip into his pistol. The man called Tom still stood in the doorway, pistol in hand. His head was turned away from Nick as he shouted at the people still inside.

Neither of them saw Amélie until it was too late.

She sped around the corner of the house in a blur, a long-legged streak of lean muscle and night-black fur. Her long, pointed ears, more akin to a jackal than a wolf, were laid back against her narrow skull. She hit the gunman on the porch without a sound, knocking him backwards and breaking his neck with a single, savage bite.

Nick was already moving, charging up the slope, as Tom jerked around and saw Amélie. He brought up his pistol and fired three quick shots. The first blew fragments from the porch rail. The second clipped Amélie's tail. The third struck her hind leg, knocking her sideways with the blow.

Amélie sagged as the wounded limb gave out beneath her, and she let out an agonized howl. The sound turned Nick's blood to ice.

And then the rage took him.

Nick bellowed in fury and sped straight at Tom. He knew the peril of the company man's gun, but all he could think of was reaching him and tearing him limb from limb. Fire blossomed in his chest, spreading quickly through the rest of his body. His bones seemed to melt in the heat, shifting and stretching like taffy.

Tom's eyes went wide. He brought his pistol around, but it was as though he were moving through sand. Slowly, slowly, the muzzle of the gun drifted towards Nick's chest.

Nick reared up, hitting the porch steps at a full run. His shoulders and the back of his head hit the porch's rickety roof so hard that the old planks burst like kindling.

Tom's gun barked. A line of searing pain raked down Nick's side. Unlike the other shots, this one didn't fade.

Nick swiped at the company man with a huge, claw-tipped hand. The first blow missed, tearing the screen door from its hinges and sending it clattering across the porch. The second blow smashed the gun from Tom's hand, taking a couple of the man's fingers with it. Gore splashed against the doorframe – not blood, exactly, but a black stew of viscera that stank of pollution. The company man backpedaled, bellowing obscenities, seemingly less concerned about losing his fingers than the pistol they held.

Nick followed the abomination. It was only when he had to wrestle himself through the doorway that he realized he was standing on two legs. He had transformed into the fearsome wolf-giant he had seen on the black stone.

Bullets crashed into the wall and doorframe around Nick. He paid them no mind. Tom had retreated a few steps into the house's cluttered living room, and was reaching under his jacket with his uninjured hand. As Nick watched, Tom drew out something that looked like a straight razor with a gleaming, obsidian blade.

Wood splintered as Nick shoved his way into the house. Bullets chewed into his side, but they felt no worse than bee stings. Tom gave him a madman's grin as he advanced. The razor made hissing arcs through the air between them.

Nick wasn't impressed. He thundered forward with a roar. Tom slashed with the razor, but he was slow, too slow. Nick caught the company man's wrist and squeezed. Bones shattered like glass, and Tom's hand bent at an improbable angle. The man shouted, full of thwarted rage – and Nick struck him on the side of the head. The open-handed blow, like a grizzly's slap, crushed Tom's skull. The company man twitched once, twice, and then went still.

There were only three men left. Two were company thugs, their faces masks of terror as they struggled to reload their pistols. The third was a thin, sallow-faced man in an expensive suit, cowering in an overstuffed chair next to the couch where Mrs. Pettimore sat. Of all the people in the room, she was the only one not staring at Nick's terrifying form. Instead, she reached under the couch cushions and pulled out a small, nickel-plated revolver. Without so much as a pause, the old woman raised the gun and shot the suited man in the temple.

The two company men spun at the sound, and watched their boss slide bonelessly to the floor. It was a fatal mistake. Nick let go of Tom's wrist. Both men were dead before Tom's body hit the floor.

Silence fell. Mrs. Pettimore and the werewolf stared at one another. The air was thick with gunsmoke and the smell of spilled blood.

The old woman looked up at the monster. Her eyes shone with a mix of wonder and fear.

The pistol slipped from her hand and made a muted thump as it struck the floor. She took a step forward. "I knew it," she said. Her lips trembled. "I knew you'd come."

Mrs. Pettimore took another step, her house shoe tracking through a spreading puddle of blood. She reached for him, tentatively, as though he were an animal of the wild.

A low, warning rumble rose in Nick's throat.

The old woman paused. He could hear the pulse racing through her veins.

Outside, claws clicked across the porch. Nick heard Amélie utter a pained whine. In an instant, the old woman was forgotten. He ducked his head and dashed outside, moving almost too quickly to see.

Sara stood over Amélie, licking at the wound in her hip. Amélie raised her head as he stepped onto the porch, the old boards creaking under his weight.

At the sight of her, all anger fled. Nick lowered himself to one knee, and, as gently as he could, he took Amélie in his arms. She shuddered for a moment, then relaxed, nuzzling the side of his face with her long snout.

Nick heard Mrs. Pettimore coming to the door. By the time she reached the porch they were gone, disappearing back into the depths of the trees.

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They returned to the house late the next day, after the wolf had lost its hold over them. Amélie leaned against Nick, a dark stain on her jeans over her left hip. The wound had not been as bad as they feared, but it had not healed, either. Her face was drawn with pain.

By the time they arrived, the SUVs and the bodies of the company men had disappeared. In their place was a pair of old pickup trucks and a battered station wagon, parked haphazardly along the dirt track. Men and women, most dressed in work shirts and overalls or jeans, stood in groups on the porch and in the side yard, talking in low voices.

Nick looked down at Amélie. “Are you sure about this?”

She managed a weak smile. “Not really. But I’m not about to go walking back up the mountain now.”

He nodded. With a deep breath, he glanced at Sara and took her hand in his. Then, moving slowly, they stepped out into the open.

The mountain folk noticed them at once. Nick heard whispers, and saw a lot of shocked faces. Nick’s heart was in his throat as they limped by. He made a point of nodding respectfully to the men and women he passed.

They closed in behind the three in a silent throng as Nick helped Amélie onto the porch. As he did so, Mrs. Pettimore came around the corner. Their eyes met, and Nick saw hers widen in recognition.

For a second, no one spoke. Nick felt the eyes of the crowd on him – kin of Mrs. Pettimore from all over the mountain, drawn by the news of what happened the night before.

Nick felt the wolf stir inside him. He clutched Amélie to his side, more to reassure her than her. “I-I’m sorry to trouble you,” he managed to say. “But my friend is hurt, and we could use some help.”

The old woman studied them closely. Then she nodded to a pair of young men, who hastened forward to take Amélie gently by the arms and help her into the house.

“Ain’t no trouble, child,” Mrs. Pettimore said with a smile. “That’s what kin are for.”



Scar Tissue

Teeuwynn Woodruff

Indria awoke on the floor of her bedroom, screaming and yanking on her own hair. Shivering and covered in sweat, fleeting memories of her nightmare dissolved. Something about a falcon clawing at her left arm and chest while a second bird picked its way through her scalp and into her brain.

Scrabbling up from the floor, Indria staggered to the one mirror in her third floor walkup. She ran her hands up her left arm. The same three, long silvery scars ran from her shoulder to her elbow. Pulling off her old grey sweater, Indria traced the five long, thin scars that raked from her left shoulder down to her right hip. The scars ached like they always did after one of her nightmares — but her head hurt worst of all. Feeling through her randomly chopped, silvery hair, Indria traced the jagged scar in her scalp — the one marked by the black hair that grew from it.

Splashing water on her face and under her arms, she tried to avoid looking at her own face. There wasn't really anything wrong with it, but sometimes her icy eyes and sharp cheekbones seemed to reflect someone — or something — else.

Walking quickly back to her kitchenette, still dressed only in her sports bra and shorts, she gulped down half a carton of milk before noticing the time. “Shit,” she growled. She was already 30 minutes late to work.

Pulling on the nearest t-shirt and fuzzy black tights, Indria rushed down the stairs, unchained her bike, and took off through the streets of Seattle. Hitting Pioneer Square, she zipped deftly around the beggars and tourists before stopping at the old warehouse that now housed Flashline, the tech startup she coded for. Locking her bike, she nonchalantly sauntered towards her desk — as if she had only gone for some coffee or hit the bathroom. Too bad her boss, Callum Dean, didn't fall for her act. He might be a dick, but he was a smart one.

Callum squinted up at Indria — even with lifts the little control freak was still a few inches shy of Indria's 5'10”. “You're late. Again.”

“I was just in the —” Indria began.

“Just in your bed sleeping one off?” Callum interrupted. Callum turned to his computer and tapped a key. Indria saw herself locking her bike and hurrying towards the main office door. The video was time stamped. Of course.

Indria sighed and edged toward her own desk in the echoing brick building, clattering keyboards and chattering co-workers already setting her teeth on edge. Indria wasn't what you'd call the social type. Being around people freaked her out after a while. Of course, so did being around herself.

“No, no, no,” Callum wagged a finger at Indria. “You're taking a personal day. And by personal I mean a Get-Your-Shit-Together-Or-You're-Gone day. I don't need to deal with any late neurotics. I've got enough neurotics around here who never even leave the office. At least they get something done.”

Indria didn't bother answering Callum. Turning around she walked just as casually back through the doors and grabbed her bike. She didn't start shaking until she was out of Callum-cam range. Callum and his Napoleon complex might be a pain, but he was right about one thing — Indria was going to lose it, and she didn't mean just her stupid job.

More and more often she felt like she was screaming in her own brain. Either that or she could barely stay awake, collapsing on her bed and more often than not waking with nightmares clawing her mind to shreds.

Indria peddled wearily home, staggering up the stairs as if she had just pulled an all-nighter at work. She didn't even bother with fixing the bed's twisted sheets before collapsing into it and immediately falling asleep.

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Lake Sammamish was strangely still, as if captured in a photo. Naked, Indria stepped slowly into the frigid waters of the glacial lake east of Seattle. Even walking hip-deep into the lake she didn't cause a ripple in the water. Looking down, she saw the gibbous moon reflected in the still waters, illuminating her own form in a silvery glow.

As she watched, Indria saw the water ripple for the first time. Her reflection rippled and changed, transforming into an icy white wolf with a jagged black scar along the top of its head and other dark scars on its front legs and body. The scars oozed an oily, black substance that so disgusted Indria she stumbled backwards and fell into the lake.

She woke with a start, her own scars burning. Curling into a tight ball, she fell back into her dreams.

She was back standing at the edge of Lake Sammamish, clad only in moonlight. The long thin lake ran north to south and Indria guessed she stood about midway along its length. Cautiously, Indria moved towards the water, terrified of seeing the same beautiful, poisoned wolf once more. But before she could reach the water, a falcon dived down scratching and pecking at the dark hair on her scalp.

Growling, Indria swatted at the bird of prey, but she stopped when she saw its silver wings. Plucking one of its own feathers free, the falcon flew off as Indria

caught the feather. She stared at it, lost in its beauty and the sense of despair that flowed through her — colder than any glacial lake.

As tears streamed down her face, Indria felt a number of large birds fluttering about her. Claws closed on her limbs and the birds — giant owls — lifted her silently into the air and over the lake. Indria caught glimpses of the scarred silver wolf running along in the water's dark depths before the owls deposited her gently in front of an extremely small dark green cottage situated near the lake's southern end, just by a large marshy area. The owls circled several times, dropping mouse bones in front of her. The dream began dissolving around her, just as Indria realized the bones spelled out the words, "Achak Editon."

This time when Indria awoke, her bed was bathed in the light of the setting sun. Feeling along her scars and running her hands over her scalp, she sat up. She saw a small silver glimmer of something tangled within her deep-purple and pink, tie-dyed sheets. (What could she say — they were on a serious sale.) Plucking up the object, she stared at the long silver feather, so clearly etched in her mindscape along with the great silver falcon that had attacked her.

Her dreams had left Indria an unattractive, sweaty, itchy mess. Squeezing into the tight shower in the corner of her "ultra-efficiency" apartment, she scrubbed herself hard. She could still feel the owl feathers fluttering around her and feel the wolf running underneath her skin.

Leaning against the shower door, she let the steam seep into her bones. Sighing, she turned off the water and turned back to the shower door. Written in the steam were the words, "Achak Editon." Indria stared at the writing, already beginning to fade in the dissipating steam. She didn't remember drawing the words in the steam, but who else could have?

Towelng off, she pulled on a short black tunic and boots and braided her hair, tying the silver feather into the braid. Grabbing her tablet, she typed "Achak Editon Sammamish" into a search engine. The only reference she could find was a psychiatric abstract on bipolar disorder and possible connections to Jungian symbology. The document was written by Dr. Achak Editon.

Well, her boss seemed to think she was losing it, and although she would rather clean her floor with her tongue than agree with him... Indria sighed and began searching the internet for more information on Dr. Editon.

Several creative and pseudo-legal hours later, she located an address for Dr. Editon. It was already past 9:00 at night, but she couldn't stop now. Pulling on an old leather jacket she couldn't even remember buying, she headed for her motorcycle, since it would take her too long to bike from the city to Sammamish.

Avoiding I-5, Indria took the backroads as much as possible, only forced onto the highway when she had to cross Lake Washington. Half an hour after leaving her Ballard apartment, she found herself at the south end of Lake Sammamish. Unfortunately, her GPS couldn't find Editon's address, so she parked at the western edge of Sammamish State Park.

Breathing deeply the cool, moist air, she felt drawn farther north and west, as if she instinctively knew where to go. After a few minutes of walking, she found a

small footpath winding through cedars, ferns, and rocks. Passing through two towering mossy rocks, Indria found herself near the door of the same dark green cottage from her dreams. The tiny house perched no more than a dozen paces from the lake. A small dock ran into the water, a canoe tied to one of the support posts.

Squaring her shoulders, Indria walked to a small wooden door. Carved expertly into the wood, an owl and a wolf chased each other in a circle. Before she had a chance to knock, the door opened. A small man with weathered tan skin and short graying hair looked up at her. The man looked to be in his fifties and was dressed in some sort of robe made of a patchwork of tanned skins and furs. The air smelled of sage, garlic, soot, and damp fur.

“You took long enough getting here. I bet Archimedes here three rabbits that you’d come before the spring equinox,” the man grunted as he turned and walked into the house. Indria ducked under the door frame, following the odd man inside.

The room she entered was packed with stacks of books, maps, and sketches of humans and wolves as well as more imaginative images of creatures that were part wolf and part man — werewolves, she supposed. Some of the maps were tacked to the walls. Each map, whether of the world, a country or state, had strange symbols marked on them along with arrows and circles targeting specific areas.

Seating was at a premium. One battered leather chair and a wooden bench faced a river-rock fireplace with a large cavity hollowed out above the mantle.

“Come on and get it out, Archie,” the man sighed. “You know you want to gloat.”

Indria was beginning to worry that this man, presumably Dr. Editon, was perhaps a little too close to his professional area of interest — crazy people. Her opinion wasn’t exactly refuted when a Great Horned Owl poked its head out of the hole above the mantel. The owl fluffed its feathers and hooted smugly, an expression Indria didn’t know an owl could make before today.

The owl, Archimedes, had tufted ears that looked like they could belong to a cat instead of a bird.

“They’re called ‘plumicorns,’ you know. Sounds more like a mystic creature or some genetically altered fruit than ear tufts, if you ask me,” the man said as he settled into the old leather chair.

“Um, I’m looking for Dr. Achak Editon,” Indria began.

“No, lost one, you are looking AT Dr. Achak Editon,” the man corrected. “And from the feel of things, you’ve gotten your Homid butt here just in time. So, we better get to work.”

“Work? You mean a therapy session?”

“You could call it that. But we’re really more in crisis intervention mode. We need to integrate your two selves as well as your past and present before the future tears you apart.”

Indria sunk onto the bench by the fireplace as Archimedes retreated back into his rocky home. “Let me guess. I’m still dreaming?” Indria asked.

“Nope. At least not yet. But we’ll get to that in a minute,” Dr. Editon replied. “Now, shut up and listen. You’ve got a lot to re-learn and little time to do it. And Archimedes doesn’t like noisy guests, so he might yak up a nice pellet on you if you ask too many questions — and I think his last meal was skunk.”

Indria scooted to the far end of the bench and glanced nervously up at the owl’s home.

“Good. You’ve learned something already. But you’re going to find what I’m about to tell you just a teeny bit hard to believe. But after the lecture you’ll go straight to a practicum and that should go a ways towards convincing you. Hopefully, it will also start to heal the rift in your mind and soul. Miles to go and all that.

“My specialty is in mental integration in Garou and other two-natured beings. Garou who do not recognize their true nature often express the suppressed wolf/human split by developing disorders such as schizophrenia, multiple personalities or bipolarity.”

“Garou?”

“Explaining too much just isn’t worth the effort. You need to integrate yourself. I’m just here to facilitate and get paid. I take most types of insurance, but we’ll have time to do the paperwork later. If you’re still alive.”

“Still alive?” Indria sputtered.

“Moving along... There are many creatures in this world most humans only recognize in their subconscious minds. Garou — werewolves — are just one of these. There are many tribes of Garou. For example, I am a Silent Strider while you are a Silver Fang.”

“Let me get this straight... you’re saying you’re a werewolf? As in Lon Chaney and *Teen Wolf*?” Indria asked. “Where exactly did you get your MD? Are you sure I’m the crazy one here?”

Dr. Editon pointedly ignored Indria’s questions. “Oh, human media never gets these things right. But we can go with that for now.” Glancing up at the ceiling, Dr. Editon tsked. “Almost ten already. You really need to go. There’s a place you can begin to heal your poisoned mind — Fremont.”

“Fremont, as in the Seattle neighborhood? Couldn’t you just have called or texted me if I just need to go talk to someone else there? It’s a lot closer to my home,” Indria said. “Has anyone told you you’re nuts? How do you know about me?”

“Yes, of course. I wrote a very nice paper on myself. And I know about you because I’ve been watching you for a while. It was important you come for yourself. And dreams don’t accept text messages — or at least not on my plan.

“As for Fremont. You can Google the one in this world, but you need my help getting to the Umbral Fremont. Don’t worry, once you get your memories back you shouldn’t need my help with that again.” Editon reached over to a small round table resting between his chair and Indria’s bench. It was probably the only thing in the room that wasn’t covered in clutter — just a plain grey cloth with a strange symbol of three lines twisting over themselves and a single small slash above.

Dr. Editon yanked the cloth off the table, revealing a beautiful silver bowl on a tripod. The bowl was filled with water with a glass top resting above it. Moonlight streamed into the room from a large skylight in the vaulted ceiling. The silver bowl reflected the light in a way Indria found almost hypnotic.

“Are you hypnotizing me?”

“No. Just helping your soul remember how to travel.”

Indria’s eyes felt drawn to the water and her mind was already shivering with the light within. “So... how do I remember myself?” Indria whispered, still staring at the glittering bowl.

“You’ll need to journey to Fremont to find the Bane lurking there. That Bane gathers and hordes lost memories. Eventually, it feeds on them or sells them to other Banes who use them to corrupt the former holders of those memories.”

“Uh... ew? How do you know my memories haven’t already been eaten or corrupted?” Indria couldn’t tear her eyes from the water to look at Dr. Editon.

“There is no smell of Wyrn taint in your soul, although your scars stink of it — but that is, of yet, superficial. Your memories are out there... for now.”

Dr. Editon paused. “Assuming you destroy the Bane, you must follow whatever creature escapes from its assumed form. It will lead you to a being who has something critical to your success. I haven’t been able to see who or what is so important — and time runs short. Not to mention I still have two seasons of *Fringe* to catch up on — and no spoilers.”

Indria’s eyes opened wider as she stared into the waters of the tripod.

“Relax and feel the gibbous moon open up a door into your soul. Feel for that fuzzy place in yourself and slip sideways onto the path of the moon.”

Indria tried concentrating, then deep breathing, and finally just letting her mind wander where it would. Her boss... the dreams... her scars. As her mind touched on her scars a tingling shivered through her body and up to her scalp. Her mind felt as if it was splitting where the jagged scar cut across her head. At the same time, a doorway opened in the reflected moonlight. Indria stepped through.

• • •

The world shimmered for a moment as if Indria had walked through a waterfall of light. She realized she was still at Dr. Editon’s small cabin. But now a large, burnt red wolf and the horned owl were her companions. Staring into the wolf’s eyes, Indria immediately recognized Dr. Editon. Looking down at her own body she saw it was glowing a faint silver, like the moonlight reflecting on the lake.

The wolf stepped towards Indria and opened its enormous jaws. Gently, it wrapped its jaws around Indria’s unscarred arm. The world blurred again and Indria fell to her knees, her mind twisting in on itself.

As she regained focus, Indria felt the soft caress of feathers across her back. Looking around, she found herself alone at the bottom of a hill by a large lake. The lake danced in her eyes as if it were alive.

Looking backwards she saw a road leading steeply uphill. Directly above her ran a freeway or large road of some kind, the pillars supporting it running up along the small road beneath. Indria could barely see the buildings on the sides of the small road as a dirty fog clung to them with a deathly intensity. The pillars and underside of the highway glittered in contrast with dewy webbing wrapped around and across much of it.

Despite its beauty, Indria felt disturbed by the glittering webs. Her scar prickled and the scent of corruption rolled across her in waves, running downhill in a foul stream.

Taking a steadying breath, she stalked up the hill, glancing nervously at the webbing. But nothing within it moved. As she approached the top of the hill, she saw the road ended at a “T” intersection with another small road. But what lay just beyond that was what mattered — the source of the corruption.

The road she had just walked up ended in a large dirt cave, still covered by the highway that continued beyond. However, no shining webbing covered this part of the bridge. Instead, a large statue of a giant troll, one eye covered by its stringy hair, crouched under the bridge. Only the top third of its enormous body emerged from the ground. One of its hands clutched a stone car, caught in the act of crushing it. This was the Fremont Troll. Like a zillion folks before her, Indria had posed on the troll’s back with friends, grinning for the camera. But in this other Fremont, the troll didn’t strike her as a cool sculpture.... In fact, she was fairly certain she could hear it breathing and see a pool of corruption gathered beneath its giant nose and slash of a mouth. As she watched, a slimy glob of corruption blobbed out of its nose and landed in the sticky pool.

Indria crept toward the creature, unsure of what she was looking for. Were her memories in that pool of corrupt snot? Or somewhere behind the troll, hoarded like a dragon’s gold?

Just as she reached the edge of the sticky, contaminated pool, reeking of decay and despair, Indria’s choice was made for her. The troll picked up the crumpled car and swung it at her. Instinctively ducking, she barely avoided the crushing blow.

Rolling over and up again, she saw her body was shimmering more than ever, even causing the troll’s eye to glisten. The troll tried to smash her again with the increasingly crumpled car. Again, she barely avoided death by de-car-petation. Okay, now she was seriously losing it.

If Dr. Editon wanted her to defeat this thing, why hadn’t he given her a weapon of some sort? She backed up as the troll started pulling the rest of its massive body out of the ground, corrupt snot still globbing from its nose.

Grabbing a broken beer bottle someone had left under the bridge, she stabbed at the troll’s free hand as it scabbled in the dirt. She managed to scratch the troll, barely drawing blood, but as she pulled the bottle back for another useless attack, a few drops of the troll’s blood fell across her face.

She fell to the ground, a confused flash of memories crashing into her soul. Wolves howling. Brothers and sisters on the hunt. A glowing change within herself. And, finally, a darkness so terrible the memories shivered and lost their luster.

But now Indria knew how she could fight. Growling, she let her lupine nature flow through her, ignoring the burning pain running along her deep scars. The light shining from her brightened for a moment as her body shifted to a form that was half-human, half-wolf. Now even her fur shone silvery bright — save for her scars, now black as the troll's corrupt pool.

Indria leapt forward with newfound strength, her silver claws reaching out, aimed at the distracted troll's one eye. Bounding off the crumpled car, she reached the troll's face and slashed viciously across its cheek and deep into its eye. Corruption flew from the ruined eye, splattering her with filth. No memories awoke within her this time — only the wailing of lost dreams and stolen lives.

Now half out of its hole, the troll tried to swat her like a gnat. She easily scrambled to the top of the troll's head and drove her claws deep into the top of its skull, finding it surprisingly spongy and weak. She began slashing away, cutting easily through the curdled innards.

The troll tried to stop her, swatting at her with the car and trying to catch her in its free hand, a low, bubbling moan growing louder with every swipe of her claws. In her new form, avoiding the troll's clumsy attempts to defend itself was far easier, despite the increasingly nauseating olfactory insults coming from its entrails.

With a final wretched moan, the troll slumped forward, a river of oily fluid pouring from its nostrils. Indria leapt off the collapsed troll. As the last of the fluid emptied from the creature, a wispy greyish-black thing slipped out too, speeding past her. She instinctively reached out to stop it. Was this the Bane Dr. Editon had talked about? Did it have her memories?

The Bane attempted to flow around her, but her claws slashed ribbons of goo out of the creature. Bits of the goo splashed into her face, filling her mouth with an intense bitterness. The Bane bits wiggled and squirmed, digging into her tongue and making her gag as their malicious odor filled her mouth and nose. Biting and spitting, she fell to her knees as a swarm of memories overcame her.

A white wolf facing down other Banes. A noble warrior, fur shining in the light of the full moon. Then another memory of that same wolf, bowing before another Bane and accepting a gift from it — a gift that twisted the wolf into something rotten and horrible, a burnt soul no longer able to look outside its own pain and greed.

Next Indria saw herself confronting the warrior while other Garou watched. None of the others seemed to see his corruption even as the Garou, in human form, raked into Indria with claws laced with venom and corruption.

The memories dried up and Indria stared after the Bane's fleeing form, when she heard a new sound coming from the troll's body. A lump was rapidly growing where the troll's eye had been. The lump grew larger, pulsing as if something was trying to break out of it.

Tensing for another battle, Indria watched the lump burst open, an enormous falcon ripping free, a ragged silver bag clutched in its claws. The falcon was the largest she had ever seen, and its feathers were painted in colors she couldn't even attempt to describe.

The falcon dropped the bag and Indria caught it on its way down, even as she could feel herself changing back to her human form. The silvery bag was obviously worn, but intact. A small drawstring made of woven falcons' feathers kept it shut. Indria looked up for the falcon. It sat on a small tree with icy leaves. Looking back at the bag, Indria released the feathered rope and opened it. A small tornado burst from the bag, surrounding her and lifting her up, suspended within a whirlwind of memories.

Feeling her own memories blow into her mind and soul, Indria remembered. She was Garou. She was Silver Fang. She had been cast out of the Snoqualmie pack, her memories, identity, and pride stolen by one of her own — the pack's leader, Argon Fortaleza — the white wolf she had glimpsed in the Bane's goo. Somehow, Indria had sensed the Wyrms' corruption that was slowly, but inevitably, taking over her pack leader. Indria just couldn't recall why she had realized this while the rest of the pack remained unaware. But she had challenged Argon to a duel and she had lost, cast out of the pack with the Wyrms-tainted scars twisting her physically and mentally, splitting the two parts of her nature so she could never be whole.

Indria snarled. It was time to find her pack and make them see the corrupt being that led them for what he was — a traitor to all Garou — especially the noble Silver Fang line.

The falcon gazed intently at Indria until it seemed to sense she had re-absorbed her lost memories. Nodding once, it took off, flying swiftly to the South, leaving a scent trail Indria was sure she could follow. It was time to meet the person — or creature — Dr. Editon had told her was the key to healing herself and, hopefully, her pack.

Smoothly changing into her wolf form, a bright silver creature with ice blue eyes and the same black scars marring her otherwise beautifully lethal form, Indria loped back down the hill to Lake Washington.

Staring at the moon beginning to fade in the pre-dawn, she shifted back to human once more, reveling in her body's reborn abilities. Squinting at the silvery falcon feather from the bag, she released her will and felt drawn back into the physical world.

After her experiences in the spirit world, the physical world looked and smelled blunted. She could no longer see the disturbing webs on the bridge or the fog blurring the houses along the steep road. Jogging back up the road just as the dawn light crept over the Cascades, she was startled to find the Fremont Troll exactly the same as it always was. No signs of the battle from the night before marred the famous statue.

Shaking her head, Indria opened her senses and breathed deeply. The falcon's trail was still there — fainter than it had been in the Umbra, but strong enough for her to follow. Since her bike was still at Dr. Editon's, she jogged up the street until she found a cab parked outside a 24-hour diner.

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Half an hour later, the cabbie dropped Indria off at Sea-Tac airport, where the falcon's scent trail had led her. She chose a door and headed to the arrivals area, drawn by the faintest tang of the falcon's dwindling scent.

The arrivals area was fairly quiet at this early hour with only a few overnight flights arriving and some stranded passengers and airport workers around. Even the shops still had their grates down.

She prowled up and down the arrivals area, searching for the being the falcon and Dr. Editon had led her towards. As she passed a family restroom, Indria heard a strange, wounded cackling noise. Indria paused at the door, concentrating. She could still hear that hurt sound, and a feral odor wafted up at her from under the door.

Slowly nudging open the restroom door, Indria looked inside. A woman was curled up under the changing table attached to the wall. She had dark hair and tan skin. Her tee shirt and khakis looked old, but it was the blood running out of her mouth that really startled Indria.

Indria locked the door and started to crouch down to take a closer look at the woman when the wounded girl leapt at her, snarling, “Wyrml!” Indria’s head slammed into the sink before she began to instinctively battle back. The woman was on top of her, attempting to choke off Indria’s breath. Indria could see the woman’s form blur, shifting towards an animal form — not wolf. Something more feral. A wild dog or hyena?

“You betray your own people? And you accuse *us* of depravity?” The woman spat at her. “Did you beg for your own corruption?”

Indria got her feet beneath her and shoved with all her might, sending the woman flying back. The woman landed lightly on the changing table, crouched and ready to spring at her once more. “Dr. Editon didn’t say I’d need to fight more Banes,” Indria snapped.

The woman paused. “Editon? What do you know of him, wolf-bane?”

“He sent me here to find myself — and my people... er... wolves,” Indria replied.

“If Editon sent you here, why are you riddled with Wyrml scent?”

“Because the leader of my pack has gone over to the Wyrml. You smell it on me because he scarred me with his tainted claws,” Indria said. She yanked up her shirt, to show the woman the scars running across her body.

“Hmph. That’s a new one,” the woman said as she leapt off the changing table. “I’m Kammy.”

“Indria.”

“Well, why didn’t you just say so?” Kammy muttered, pulling a beat-up cell out of a pocket. “Yep, that’s the name Dr. Editon texted me. He didn’t say you’d stink of Wyrml.”

“Well, if there’s a deoderant for that, let me know. In the meantime, can you help me?”

“Editon gets freaked about getting extra charges for his phone service. He *really* should have told me more. Technophobe. And, yes, I can help you,” Kammy replied. She let out a strange, high-pitched giggle. “I’m not Garou. I’m Ajaba. But, at least for today, we’re on the same side. We both want to defeat the Wyrml and its minions. Here.” Kammy reached into another pocket and pulled out a souvenir snow globe.

It had a miniature waterfall with a hotel perched on the cliff above and “Snoqualmie Falls” stamped in gold across the base.

“Uh, thanks,” Indria said when Kammy handed her the globe.

“You’ll thank me and mean it if you can get close to the Garou who sliced you,” Kammy replied, pulling a short, black-handled dagger from yet another pocket.

Indria tensed as Kammy approached with the weapon. “Look, you have to trust me, kid, If you want to have a chance,” Kammy muttered. “Show me one of those scars.”

Cautiously, Indria pulled up her shirt again and Kammy leaned down with her dagger.

Glancing up at Indria, presumably to make sure things weren’t about to turn violent, Kammy cut into one of the scars near Indria’s left hip. Blood welled up and Kammy caught some on the flat of her blade.

Kammy stood up and opened the bottom of the snow globe. She shook a few drops of blood into the water, before snapping the souvenir shut. The water turned briefly red before fading in the rush of snow swirling sluggishly in the globe.

Kammy held the snow globe out to Indria. “The snow will swirl faster the closer you get to him. Smash it within ten feet or so of the Bane-traitor and his taint will be exposed for all to see. His own corruption will expose him. The rest is up to you.”

Indria grabbed the globe and immediately felt a blazing pain burn shoot through her scars. She dropped to her knees, her breath sucked out of her by the pain.

“Whoah, girl. Easy,” Kammy’s voice reached out through the pain. A few moments later the pain blew out, leaving Indria shaking in its wake.

“Did the globe do that?” Indria whispered.

“No. I don’t think so. I think those scars are more than skin deep, wolf-girl. And they don’t like you doing any healing. If I were you, I wouldn’t waste any time trying to find a way to purify yourself. And the only way I know to do that is to find the Garou who did this to you.” Kammy folded Indria’s hand more firmly around the snow globe. “You better go.”

Indria stared at the slowly swirling snow in the globe. “Snoqualmie it is.”

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After picking up her motorcycle, Indria drove straight to Snoqualmie Falls. She pulled her bike off the road about 50 yards before the tourist parking for the Salish Lodge and the man-made overlooks sporting a stunning view of the Lodge and the falls crashing into the ravine below.

Taller than Niagra Falls, Snoqualmie Falls was much more narrow. Indria glanced at the snow globe in her hand. The snow had begun to swirl faster, just as Kammy said it would. The falls, and her pack, were close.

Indria worked her way carefully down the steep ravine — something she wouldn’t have attempted off the path before. But she was gaining confidence in her body, in her self.

That confidence almost killed her as a second, brain-rending spasm struck her. She curled into a ball around a strong sapling on the steep rocks of the ravine and hung on as the pain ran its course. When the pain ebbed away, she realized she was soaked by the ricocheting spray from the falls. A little more cautiously, she worked her way down to the riverbed itself.

Once off the treacherous slope, she checked the globe again. The snow was swirling thickly, as if a blizzard had struck the miniature falls within. As she walked towards the falls the snow only increased its frantic speed.

When she had reached the very base of the falls, she had to squint to see past the sopping mist surrounding her. Stretching her senses, she could just make out the scent of wolves within. There was only one choice — in.

She worked her way slowly along the cliff face towards the falls, looking carefully for a way past the deadly sheets of water. When she had almost given up hope, she saw it. There was a place, about 15 feet up, where the cliff face receded a few feet. She tried to shift form, as she had in the Umbra, but the pain immediately assaulted her. Something about her festering scars wouldn't let her shift.

Shaking her head, she scabbled for purchase on the wet rocks. After only a couple near-fatal slips, she reached the dent in the rocks. She was right, this was a way through. Pressing as hard as she could against the cliff face, she sidled behind the falls.

Once she was in the cave on the other side of the falls, it was surprisingly quiet. The pounding water now sounded more like a giant white noise generator than a tremendously powerful natural phenomenon. But she could now hear the voices of other powerful natural phenomena — werewolves. When she looked at the globe, she couldn't even make out the falls within. It was all just a white blur of snow.

Creeping forward, she slipped around a slight curve in the rock walls. About 30 paces beyond she saw them. The Silver Fangs. Her pack. And her leader — Argon — the wolf whose traitorous actions she had glimpsed in the Bane's stolen memories. Just the sight of Argon took her breath away. She could feel pain burning up and down her scars like lightning bolts in her skin. Her head vibrated and all she wanted to do was go home and stay at home forever. Give up. Abandon ship. Close up shop.

But she mustn't. She couldn't. The rest of her pack needed her, even if they didn't know it. And Indria needed to help herself. She couldn't let Argon's corruption dominate her body and soul any longer.

She worked her way quietly up a large rock, breathing through the pulsing pain in her scars. At the top, she paused before leaping down towards Argon and the assembled pack.

Just as her feet touched the ground, Argon spun around and slammed his outstretched palm into her chest. The blow sent her flying for the umpteenth time in the past 24 hours. She slammed into a cave wall and came to rest at the bottom, gasping for breath.

"The traitor has returned," Argon said, walking slowly towards her. All she could see of the Scandanavian Garou were a pair of enormous black work boots. "Come to tell more lies about me?" Argon murmured as he crouched over her.

Indria looked into Argon's eyes. They were a gorgeous, icy blue, but she could see dark lines of corruption piercing the whites. The other werewolves, some in human form and others lupine, gathered behind Argon. Every face she looked to reflected one of the many emotions she turned on herself — pity, hatred, contempt, revulsion....

"Come to die, little fool?" Argon whispered.

Lifting the now burning globe, she said, "I'm not the one who's been fooled, Argon," She hissed, smashing the globe at his feet.

The souvenir scattered to pieces, the snow within bursting into a cloud of vapor that grew and swirled around Argon. Batting at the snow, Argon shifted into wolf form, to Crinos, and back to human once more, his screams shifting with him. As the snow dissolved, the pack fell back. Argon began to claw himself apart, peeling back layers to reveal a foul, pestilent creature beneath his proud skin. Whatever Argon once was had been eaten away by the Banes he had favored over his own pack.

The Garou snarled and backed away as one creature, horrified by who they had put their faith in and what he had betrayed that faith for. Indria alone crept forward, seeing a thin, wiry chain wrapped around Argon's corrupt talons. Reaching out, she yanked the chain away. As she pulled, the chain broke, and with it Argon's body. The leader's powerful flesh melted into mist, like the water from the falls themselves.

At the same time, Indria felt the pain in her scars wash away, replaced with a renewed sense of calm. She took a breath as the final bits of snow and mist disappeared. The first free breath she had taken in years. The pack looked at her as one beast. She tensed for an attack that never came.

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Indria crouched above the falls, looking out at the river and the trees beyond, the green of the cedars and pines and the many colors of the autumn leaves. The pack was hunting tonight. Shifting into lupine form, she paused to look at herself in the reflection of moonlight on water. Her silver fur shimmered, except for where jagged streaks of black zig-zagged across her head and chest. Scar tissue.

Indria turned away from the water and toward her pack.

Why Old Wyrms Devours His Tail

Rustin Quaide

Whereas the actors of old leased their bodies to the gods, gods nowadays are made to measure for pre-actors to wear.

—René Daumal, *A Night of Serious Drinking*

The bar smelled of stale beer and cigarette smoke. A jukebox played old 1950s rock and roll. Men and women danced, swaying together in happy exhaustion. Outside the Full Moon Bar and Grill, the myriad stars of night shown down onto the snow-laden landscape that covered the woods and mountains near Pemberton, British Columbia. Inside, Charlie Corbet finished telling his story to the traveler.

“...so *hupal* aided his earth children, and gave Nuū and his daughter the power to seal the scarred lands with their singing.”

The younger man, in his thirties, listened intently, writing some notes into a small journal. He had curly brown hair with red highlights, and a thin face, with deep crevices about the eyes. Aeden MacGowan hailed from Ireland and had heart. He was a professional story collector, traveling the globe from the Urals to the Amazon to find those who still knew the ancient legends and tales.

The older man sipped at a beer, quenching his throat. Charlie was big, and wide, originally hailing from the Makah Reservation at the tip of the Olympic Peninsula, but had left the States for Vancouver Island.

“Grandfather’s done,” Jenny Springwater said. She seemed to materialize behind them, a beautiful woman of twenty-four with long dark hair, walking over with two beers. “You’re fortunate. He won’t even tell that story to the members of the

Council. Only to kin. It's an old story, older than most Wakashan legends. Oh, the language is Makah, but it's older, believe me."

Jenny had driven her grandfather to the Full Moon Bar and Grill to meet Aeden, who had come down from Alaska. She picked Charlie up on Marktosis Indian Reserve No.15 in her old Ford pick-up and made the trek to Victoria. They had taken a ferry to Vancouver on the mainland, and spent the night with cousin Bobbie in Burnaby, and then driven over six hours the next day, the drive made difficult by a winter storm that suddenly struck as they passed through Squamish on Highway 99.

It was Aeden's repeated calls that had brought Jenny and Charlie Corbet there. Aeden had first called Jenny from Alaska a month ago, having received her number from Annie Asiak, whom Jenny knew from the Aboriginal Arts Office. Jenny was a wood carver and weaver (when not working part-time at the health clinic), creating masks from the cultural traditions of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples, and making baskets celebrating the whale hunts, legends and stories of the Ahousaht First Nation. This initially involved instruction from the elders, but now she was beginning to be noticed by art collectors and museum curators. She began carving when she was eleven, and took to it swiftly with a sure hand.

Jenny, at first, mistrusted Aeden, a disembodied voice on the phone pleading for her grandfather's stories. She called Annie to see if he was okay— no mean feat, as Annie was now in Iqaluit, and could only be contacted via her brother who worked for the *Nunatsiaq News*. Annie's confirmation (he was fine and friendly, but could be intense), added to the polite but insistent voice of the Irishman on the phone, as well as her grandfather's curious hunch, resulted in their finally meeting.

"He spent the week on the couch," Annie told Jenny on a wavering phone connection. "The elders didn't trust him at first, but he got old Alignak talking and drinking whiskey with him, and he came home dead drunk. The next day, Aeden ate all my aspirin, but he remembered Alignak's stories verbatim. I didn't think he could remember his own name after that bender."

The Full Moon Bar and Grill was off the main road, on private land. Finding the turn-off in the blinding storm was almost impossible; they had to backtrack twice. It was owned by an old couple of the Nazco First Nation, but operated by their children. The son of the owners was certainly *cann tiqun*; he wore the wolf coat. Most of the regulars were from the First Nations, but not all. The Full Moon Bar and Grill gathered them — to talk, drink, and exchange gossip and news. Many patrons were old, some young, but even children ran about the bar. It was a chaotic, noisy affair, but somehow it worked.

The traditional wooden wolf mask above the entrance was the sign for the brothers and sisters of the pelt that this was safe ground.

"I'm gathering all our stories," Aeden said to Jenny with a smile, sipping on his beer. "I've been collecting them for fifteen years now, and I needed to come here, to get these last ones."

"All of them?" Jenny asked, intrigued. Aeden was handsome in a rough, film noir sort of way, and in person she found his Irish accent intriguing.

“Storytelling is an old tradition among us. I was born under a gibbous moon, so collecting our legends comes natural.”

“The Irish blood?” She chose her words carefully, weighing his responses.

“That too, Jenny, but I was referring to my Fianna heritage.”

Jenny sighed with relief. She suspected. Now she knew. He was a skin-changer.

“You’re safe here,” she said. “This whole place is kind of a meeting place for us. It was sacred ground before the whites came, still is. My older brother, he came here to Pemberton, they had this festival a few years back, and told us the place was still around, only kind of disguised as this mountain bar. He came for Nine Inch Nails, Death Cab for Cutie. They performed at Pemberton.”

“I’m not the best person to talk to on new music.”

“Tom Petty. Heard of him?”

“Full Moon Fever. Yes I have.” He gave a smile and chuckled.

“What made you start doing this? Collecting the legends, I mean. I thought about it. I even wrote grandfather’s story down, when I was sixteen.”

“We’re few and getting fewer, Jenny,” Aeden replied. “My own teacher said this would be a good idea, and he started me off. Rynn Ap Bleidd, Galliard to the Fianna. From Wales, but took to Connemara, near Inverin, where I was raised. He told me we were becoming lost, all of us. That we were forgetting our ways. You go in the cities and you see them. Young kin, no traditions, no heroes, no past. Some of them don’t even have a tribe. They band together and form their own. And our people, we’re taking a terrible beating. It’s been getting bad out there, but these last eight years or so....”

Jenny nodded. When you took the shape of the ancestors, you could sense, vividly, that the earth was under assault. In the day-skin it was dulled, but if you followed the strangeness of the seasons or watched the news, you knew.

The old man finished sipping. “Time’s short,” Charlie said. “You’re carrying too much weight in those stories. Others will be happy to lift them from you.”

“I gave them the slip in Anchorage,” Aeden replied, and then regretted he had said anything.

“Who?” Jenny asked. “Gave who the slip?”

“Red Douglas. Night Prowler. Big old Black Spiral Dancer who’s taken an interest in my hobby. He’s not the only one.”

The mention of the Black Spiral Dancers brought a silence to their end of the bar. They were the taboo brethren, who had fallen from their kin to leave the Wyld and embrace the Wyrms, the force behind the world’s corruption. Charlie had called the Wyrms “Old *kaca-yak*”, a spirit with reptilian intelligence and the ability to shed its skin and keep growing.

“Maybe grandfather and I can escort you when you leave,” Jenny said.

“I don’t think so, Jenny. See, I’m takin’ these stories and going deep, deep into the ancestor lands.”

“You’ll need some help,” old Charlie said. “None of the paths are safe anymore, the way they used to be.”

“Yours was the last story, Charlie,” Aeden said, draining his beer. “I’m goin’ tonight. Appreciate the offer, but it hasn’t been a safe trail.”

“I just gave you something beyond price,” Charlie said. “I’d like to make sure it gets to the ancestors.”

“I’d be lyin’ if I said I wasn’t worried,” Aeden said. “Red Douglas and the others are very determined. You can find the paths from here?”

“Oh yeah, I’m *č’uč’uwasit*, the pathfinder,” Charlie said. “Believe me, I can smell the way to the ancestral lands. There’s an old caern near here, built by the *Puku’bis*, a pathway to the spirits. My grandson told me the way. This place, here, is under its protection, but it lies deeper in the woods. You will not be able to find it. I will.”

Aeden’s trouble was that he was neither a follower nor a leader. For now, he would accept Charlie’s lead into the spirit realms that hovered like mist about the old earth, opening in those areas strong in the old power.

He put some bills on the table and the three filed out into the night.

Outside, the world was still and white. A halo hung around the full moon. Their breath went up in little clouds as they stomped their feet and rubbed their hands. Inside, a gust of laughter was heard, and then Buddy Holly and the Crickets began singing.

The wind blew over snow embankments. After some muted discussion, they agreed to set out then and there.

Until that moment Aeden wasn’t completely certain about Jenny, but after her grandfather began the passage of skins, she followed.

Her eyes remained set on him, and he noticed the dark grey of her new coat, and a curious white spot on her forehead, repeated on her left forepaw. He dropped his humanity and joined them, his heart only growing in the process.

Three wolves shot out into the great pine forest about them, blanketed in the deep snows of winter. The feel of the crisp snow crunching under their paws was good, and the scent of resin and pine needle was familiar and intoxicating. The cold and stars splashed over them in welcome relief. They took to moving swiftly in single file, Charlie in front. He knew intuitively where the paths to the otherworld lay, and which places to avoid.

The conifer forests of the Coast Mountains grew deep. At one point they startled a herd of black-tailed deer, which took off westward, leaping with a frenzied grace

over fallen logs and bare winter branches. Within the three travelers a sort of wild instinct took over, and for a short time they playfully chased the deer, exalting in their lupine power, finally outrunning them and returning to the path. They smiled at each other shyly with wolf grins, exalting in the fellowship of their small pack.

Time wore on. They made their way upward, slowing their pace, until, on a hilltop, they beheld the caern, which marked the boundary between worlds.

They climbed the old Wendigo hill built of granite, and, in anticipation of the journey ahead, they began howling. They could feel the power of the rock through the pads of their feet, a dancing electric charge, and knew the spirits were near. Charlie, smiling in his gray and white-coated form, spat out a sharp tooth onto the flattened, top rock of the caern. The tooth, crafted and containing the old power, began to spin and halted, pointing northwest through a break in the great pines.

The way had been made before them. The hidden path opened wide, and they shot through, entering the near-lands and the trail that would lead, at its end, to the dreaming grounds of the Ancestral Lands, the Umbral Realm where Aeden would deliver his stories.

The spirit world revealed itself slowly, changing as they ran down the trail only Charlie knew, its edges shimmering around them, coalescing into a Glen, a pocket of pure mystical nature. The trees and snow and stars were the same, if not more intense, with small details of sight and smell suddenly amplified into dreaming clarity. There was a presence in all things, a trembling in the night air. In time, their ears folded, each hearing a distinct humming, almost a singing, in the very earth about them. Charlie continued his wide lupine smile, and Jenny's eyes lit with wonder. Aeden heard faintly the ancient sound of a master harpist strumming, but to Charlie and Jenny it was a distant piping that came to them, playing melodies deep and sad.

It was only when the music dimmed that they sensed they were being followed. They all heard something first, the sound of feet crunching in snow. It was far off, at the periphery of things, and may have been back near the gateway through which they had entered the trail, the sound rippling over into the Penumbra from the material world.

They moved on, not overly concerned, but their glances let each other know that they were all aware of the distant sound.

When they entered a meadow, Charlie's nose caught it first, a smell of rot and wet fur, carried by the winds behind them. Shooting his head back, their eyes followed, and they saw, entering the clearing, a man and two brooding shapes — the severed kin in hybrid form, half-wolf and half-man. Not the Black Spiral Dancers but Skindancers, those lost Kinfolk of the true werewolves who had taken to forbidden rites to wear the wolf skin themselves. They were the lost, abandoned by the tribes, severed by choice from their families, and easily recruited by the most desperate Wyrms as foot soldiers. Even the Black Spiral Dancers despised them.

“Those Without Memory,” is what Charlie called them, *lakaxi*, orphan-people.

The man, dressed in a long duster and cowboy hat, was holding a spear, but otherwise resembled an old cattle rancher. Half of his face drooped in a perpetual sneer, the result of a seizure.

“I have a proposition for Aeden,” he yelled, waving at them. “I’d like to buy his stories and set them up in a safe depository.”

The madness that carried with the man’s voice struck Aeden like a cold wave. At first he thought this was some kind of test from the spirits.

He looked at his companions. Charlie Corden had grown, his head was larger, he stood higher, a primal wolf, howling a challenge that echoed through the near-lands. The echoes of his challenge halted their pursuers, and for a moment everything was still.

Then Charlie shot off, racing towards the newcomers.

There would be no negotiation.

Charlie leapt on the first Skindancer and seized him by the throat, knocking him down and thrashing him with his powerful jaws. It was an awe-inspiring and terrible sight, and the night snow was soon speckled with blood. Charlie’s foe plunged cutting talons into him, and they fell down in a frenzy of growls and snapping sounds, rolling in the snow, but Charlie never lost the advantage.

Aeden stepped sideways, and took the middle-form of the wolf-people, the horrific werewolf shape of legend, feeling the power growing in his arms and legs, and attacked.

He was met by the second Skindancer, a woman clad in midnight fur, and the two fell on each other, tearing and biting.

His foe was swift, dodging his attack, and circling him like a dust devil. She plunged into him with a brutal ferocity that knocked him down. Aeden felt sharp teeth crunch down on his left hand. Pain shot through him, and he howled in deep pain.

Next, the Skindancer disengaged from his hand and shot forward, her teeth clamping about his throat, and he saw as in a dream his foe’s head bearing down for the kill. The pain was sudden and cold, and he struggled to breathe.

Suddenly something snapped and they were both struck by a sudden impact. Jenny, now in the half-shape, was on his foe’s back, digging in with her teeth and nails.

This allowed Aeden to rise and regain the initiative. A moonbeam, filtering through the pine branches, fell across his face, and startled him, shaking his memory. This gave him the second he needed — his song-keeper lore surfaced, a mighty weapon given to him only after he deciphered the poetic meaning of ancient trees in the lore of his ancestors.

He uttered a word, carefully taught to him by the master bard Rynn, a word wrought in spells of power handed down when the Fianna tribe was young. Its pro-

nunciation was anathema to the foes of the Wyld, and was the gift of *Tele-mon* to her children before the corruption was widespread, when the Celtic tribes crossing over into Britain beheld Stonehenge in wonder.

“*Bleddo*,” Aeden whispered, pronouncing the word long and soft, as if it were plucked from a dreaming song.

His foe went blind. A black mist was before her eyes. The Skindancer growled, uncertain, and a note of panic and death crept into her throat.

Aeden and Jenny grabbed her by the neck and smashed her head into the ground. Their foe lashed out, frightened and maddened, trying to compensate with scent and sound, but they tripped her, and ran circles about her, attacking and weakening their prey until she fell, bleeding and dying, a sacrifice onto the red snow. Her wounds only enticed them, and the blood lust allowed for no quarter.

At the last Aeden took her head between his massive hands and twisted it, until the soft sound of breaking bone told him their task was finished. The body went limp and dropped, resembling a broken baby rabbit brought by a house cat as an offering at the feet of its master.

They looked over at Charlie. Jenny’s grandfather had snapped his foe’s neck in two with his powerful jaws, and was wringing his lifeless form like a rag doll, a crushed scarecrow offering to the great mystery of the place.

The man with the spear had not been idle. Seeing the rest engaged, he struck, moving over the snow. The spear thrust into Charlie, striking at the withers below the shoulder blade.

A yelp of pain escaped the great wolf, and then the man was on him, driving the spear down until it exited through the chest. The old wolf slumped down, slowly, and the man pulled the spear out, looking at Aeden and Jenny.

“I work for Orpheus Oracles, a Pentex subsidiary,” the man said, as if addressing a fellow speaker at some dreary convention in the exurbs of nowhere. “We deal in the electronic transfer of knowledge. Name’s Gil Cabot. I’d be willing to fix the ol’ man here in return for your stories.”

Aeden looked at him, and slowly advanced. Jenny crept counter clockwise, until they were on either side. The man held the spear before him, brandishing it with a strength that seemed incompatible with his age.

“This is a mighty powerful weapon,” Gil Cabot said in an accent that could have hailed from Montana or Alberta. “Given to the first Black Spiral Dancers as a talisman against the Wyrms’ foes. You see, I know all about you, Aeden. A good businessman studies the competition. I’ve been following you. In fact, I’m a story collector myself. I’ve been in advertising and sales, but mostly, I collect stories. Now, I know this looks bad, but I have a proposition that’ll keep your legends alive, and safe, under lock and key in our modern facilities cut from limestone mining caves in the Midwest. These caves have natural temperature control — no humidity — and a team of archivists who can retrieve anything on 12-hour notice.”

The man's voice, rising higher and tinged with a dull insanity, echoed off the hills and trees of the spirit lands.

Jenny caught something in the wind.

Suddenly, it appeared, some space behind Gil Cabot, a dark shape, prowling softly, hardly breaking the snow on its raised haunches. Another half-wolf, huge and menacing in the silent hunt, stalked behind the man.

When Jenny growled a warning to Aeden, the huge werewolf leapt onto Cabot, bringing him down.

Gil Cabot half-turned, lost control of the spear, regained it, and branded it defensively just as the newcomer bore down on him.

The spear pierced through the great bestial shape, but in a frenzy of pain and madness the half-beast fell on Cabot and tore the man's head clear off with a swipe of a curved hunting knife held tightly in its fist. The head sailed through the air, landing in a bank of snow at the meadow's edge.

The wounded werewolf slumped down, and then began pulling the weapon out from below the fore chest. A puddle of blood grew below.

Gil Cabot's head was still talking.

"We'd keep your shape-skin oral traditions safe in electronic and paper form in our automated filing systems, while using our new Orpheus II-program to meet customer demand through our interlocking satellite communications system. Orpheus II is more powerful, using a yoyabyte-based storage system, and has new features such as an Ur-language translator matrix..."

Aeden walked over to the injured werewolf.

"Red Douglas?" he said, recognizing the Black Spiral Dancer who had approached him in Anchorage, and earlier, in Turpan, China, when he was gathering the different Asian traditions. The skins were off, and the large man was on the ground before him, convulsing.

"Aeden," came the reply. "If you'd stayed at the grill, I could have met you without that lunatic. You're a hard man to find."

"I thought you'd be with him," Aeden said, indicating the disembodied head.

"That nut-job?" Red Douglas laughed in pain. "No, but I made the mistake of talking to crazy Cabot some years back. He wanted Pentex to possess all your stories. I told him his bum was whistlin' in the wind. See, if they could access them, those stories you have, they could find more weaknesses, even incorporate your legends... inject their interpretation into them, sort of cannibalize and sell them back to the young, while hooking the tribes. It's kind of an advertising trick, or like the British selling opium to the Chinese... selling legends and history as a drug, altering the legends to meet corporate policy. They have a whole pharmaceutical and marketing division..."

Red Douglas began coughing, and the scent of death fell over him like fine snow.

“Why did you follow me, then?”

Red Douglas tried to talk. Blood came out of his mouth in gushes. He beckoned Aeden over.

“Aeden, you blather and breathe in the stories, but you’re slow on the uptake. I’m a traditionalist... wanted the lore of my people, the Black Spiral Dancers... to live on, even among our enemies, untainted. When the final war comes... we die also... Here....”

He handed Aeden a smooth obsidian rock, carried on a chain about his neck.

“Won’t hurt. Contains... legends of our people... take it to the dream lands, to the Council of Legend... you... hard man to find....”

The man’s skin was becoming bleach white, as the coldness of death embraced him.

“Help me in one last thing....”

Red Douglas pointed, indicating the head of Gil Cabot.

Aeden lifted the Dancer and took him over to where Gil’s head lay, imbedded in the snow, spewing advertising tunes and slogans and giving a sales pitch to a board of directors, sight unseen. The Black Spiral Dancer listlessly dragged the bloodied spear behind him.

“Wolf stories three to a bottle... Three gods, three gods, three gods in one,” the disembodied head continued. “Dignity Diapers: because age knows no deadlines. May cause vomiting, dizziness, psychosis and suicidal thoughts and tendencies. Four out of five Doctors prefer Gorza Cola to the leading brand. It’s the special sauce. Dandruff ruins dates. Are you a victim of Bad Breath Syndrome? Luxurious seating for our valued costumers. Because we can squeeze a god into a bottle.”

Red Douglas picked up his right leg and let out a stream of piss that rained down on the head. Hot steam rose while Gil Cabot kept babbling white noise and static into the spirit lands. Then Red Douglas thrust the spear, leaning on it for weight, through the skull of the gibbering head.

“Erectile dysfunction...space-age polymers... she won’t know the difference... our complimentary appetizerssss....” The head continued talking as the weapon bore into the top of the skull.

The roof of Cabot’s mouth crushed downward as the spear drove through the hard palate and into the packed earth below the snow.

The head went silent.

Red Douglas slouched down. He laughed once, in triumph, and then his body fell into a spasm, and he died. The only noise that followed was the wind hissing over the snow.

Aeden lifted, aimed, and threw the cursed spear with Gil Cabot's attached head far into the pines. The weapon felt wrong, and the shaft against his fingers seemed to bite at his skin. Presently he heard twigs and branches snapping as the spear and its guest plummeted to an unseen destination.

Jenny was helping her grandfather up. Charlie clung to her. They were both in human form, as Aeden had met them at the bar.

"My last victory," Charlie said with pride in his voice. "My dreams told me I would come here to die, helping in this last great thing, saving the lore of the ancestors."

Aeden came over, now the traveling human Irishman, and they sat on either side of him.

"The Dancer, he gave me this," Aeden said, showing the black stone to Jenny. "I wonder if it's tainted?"

"No," the old man whispered. His hand had fallen over the smooth black rock, feeling it. "The Dancers, they may be sick, but they're your kin. Came over the water, with the Whites. My friend George, he called them the *qikak*, the fever people, because they had forgotten what it was to be healthy. But even they carry their legends... that man with the spear with those motherless half-pups... he would have swallowed their stories also. The rock, the rock of the Dancer is not tainted...."

"Let us bind you, grandfather."

"No. Too much dark power in that spear."

"That man, Corbet, said he had some kind of antidote," Aeden said. "I'll check his clothing."

"Any antidote he has would be addictive." Charlie looked at Aeden. "Always a cost when you deal with the Blight People. He was stuffed full of bad spirits, I could feel him leaking their power before we saw him."

Charlie took some deep breaths.

"Let me be with my granddaughter."

Aeden walked off. A snow began to fall.

"I'll tell you how to find the Circle of Elders," Charlie said to Jenny, and then whispered in her ear.

Next, with his granddaughter supporting him, Charlie walked painfully over to the nearest pine and sat with his back propped against it, and held Jenny's hand in silence.

She stayed at his side. The snow continued to fall, and he gripped her hand harder. Then, after a time, he closed his eyes.

She brushed his hair, caressed his face. Jenny didn't know how long she stayed with him, but Charlie slowly sank further down and his breathing grew fainter and fainter. The snow rose, and their tracks were soon covered. Once, he smiled. His eyes

shot open and looked at her with recognition, and then closed again. She pressed closer. His hand began to grow cold, and some minutes later she heard a last faint hint of breathe escape his lips and the snow stopped and she knew her grandfather had passed on, taking the snow power with him.

A faint ray of light fell on them, and she sensed morning had come to the Glen in the near shadows of the material world. She whispered goodbye in his ear, and then rose. Her eyes were thick with tears, and the early morning light was blinding.

“Let’s go,” she said.

“Should we bury him?” Aeden asked, emerging from beyond a grove of young firs.

“This place will look after him,” she said. “On the way back, if we make it, we’ll collect grandfather.” Then she noticed Aeden’s hand. He had packed snow on it, but the cuts were deep.

She pressed her hands over it.

Aeden had watched them for hours, from a spot between the great conifer trunks. He knew he was responsible, knew she would understand that, and for once found words useless. Silence was a language of its own.

He looked over the meadow. The dead were largely covered in snow, now resembling white knolls rising from the earth.

“Who were they?” Aeden wondered, looking over where the two slaughtered Skin Changers lay.

“Don’t matter,” Jenny said. “They cut their ties to kin and family on purpose, killed our brothers and sisters to get their pelts and obtain our power. They’re right and wrong ways to gain power, Aeden, and by their actions they have severed themselves, willingly, from the community. It would be more of a tragedy if they were abandoned pups and were co-opted. They weren’t. They do not deserve names.”

“As Mr. Edgar Allen Poe, the bard of Baltimore and Richmond would say, ‘Nameless here for evermore’.”

“They don’t deserve any epitaphs, either,” Jenny said bitterly. A hard wind blew against them, and when it settled, the sky was clear.

In the early dawn light Jenny saw an eagle fly through the meadow, landing near Charlie’s body. The eagle hopped over to him. Charlie looked like he was sleeping. Then the eagle shot upward, and her eyes followed its path into the early morning sky.

They continued. Aeden felt his hand tingling, and noticed it was healing as they moved deeper on the Glen. Before the sun reached the noon spot it was whole. The power that had healed him seemed to vibrate through his whole body, and he felt lighter.

After some hours, when the sun was higher in the sky, Jenny broke the silence.

“I was lucky to have Charlie as a mentor,” she said, at first so softly Aeden could barely hear her. “He was the one who taught me our legends, and the traditions of the coastal nations. He kept an eye on me, and after I inherited the wolf skins, he was the one who told me about our great people, the Wendigo. Only that wasn’t his name for us.”

“All of us, Jenny, we all have many names,” Aeden said.

“Charlie always said to be mighty careful in your choice of enemies.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning our ancestors were mighty foolhardy, mighty brave and mighty stupid to take on the Wyrms as an enemy. Oh, wolf changers are powerful folk, got powerful magic, mean fighters, but let’s face it, there never were enough of us.”

“We’ve won our battles, our songs are full of them,” Aeden replied irritably.

“Yes, the Glass Walkers, the Stargazers, the Get, every tribe and clan can claim some hero who trashed one of the Wyrms’s children, took down a Black Spiral Dancer chief, wrung the life out of a Pentex executive. We win here and there. But I wouldn’t bet on us. Not in the long run. The cards are stacked. Never gamble with anyone who knows a card from both sides. That’s what Uncle Vic said. And the Wyrms, the blind, stupid, gnawing, monstrous Wyrms, ever hungry, discovers everything, in its single-minded purpose knows everything, in the end will defeat everything. Everything.”

“How do you know?” Aeden asked. “The Wyrms is ensnared in the Weaver’s nets.”

“Cause it’s entropy,” Jenny said. “Cause science isn’t wrong when they say the universe will wind down, after billions of years it’ll stop expanding, and the stars will go out and matter will break down, and the Wyrms will swallow all in the end. The Weaver, the Wyld, all of it. I guess the Wyrms will swallow itself in the end, when everything’s eaten.”

“In your description of the Wyrms eating itself, you’ve described a rather potent symbol, used by the ancient Egyptians and alchemists, and even early fantasists like E.R. Eddison,” Aeden said. “The Worm Ouroboros. It’s a symbol of renewal, often depicted as a snake or dragon devouring its own tale, but it’s more hopeful than your meaning. The serpent that eats its own tale is very cosmological — that which devours itself *renews* itself.”

“I think that which devours itself, devours itself,” Jenny said. “Unless the Wyrms has some sort of dark matter the astronomers keep talking about it, and in some chemical process of entropy can create something. I just don’t see old Wyrms creating anything; its purpose is to break down creation. Hell, it was just trying to eat your stories, devour our legends, our heritage.”

Aeden had no reply.

“I went to North Island College, even went to Vancouver to hear some of the astronomers lecture,” Jenny continued. “The Universe has a life span. The stars go out,

decay, like a dark cancer, and even the universe dies. The sun expands. The earth's oceans evaporate. Then the sun shrinks, dies, earth is a cinder, if not devoured. See, we think the Wyrms are confined to the earth. It's much bigger than that. It's burrowed its way into everything."

"Then you're saying what I'm doing is useless, collecting the songs and memories of our people?"

"No," she replied angrily. "Hell, if it keeps you going, more power to you. Maybe it'll give some hope. Some hope to the young ones, growing up without the traditions of our people. Maybe it'll be a salve, for a while. It's no more useless than my mask carving and weaving. But we're being hunted to extinction. Grandfather was a warrior. He knew he would be brought down helping you, but he went. Because a warrior answers the call. Not many warriors left like grandfather. And even if we weren't being hunted, something would get us. A meteor, like what finished the dinosaurs. Disease. Evolution. Big animals don't survive. It's the small ones, the rats and such that have the advantage, if you look at it. We're going the way of the gorilla, the whale, the poor old elephant hunted for its tusks so some old fool can get a hard-on devouring the ivory powder. But don't feel too bad. Humans won't last either, in the long run."

"A victory won in a losing struggle is still a victory," replied Aeden. "Oh, I hear what you're saying. We are in a fight for survival. That's why I collect these stories. I hope our tales, our identity — *us* — will rise above these times, and survive in some place, to give hope to our children's children."

"If there are any," Jenny said. "It might be our time to go. Charlie knew this was his time."

"Even if it is, and we perish, going down against the Wyrms, the tales will live on here in the Umbra," Aeden said. "And the earth, and the stars, they will remember our songs. And the people that come after us, whenever they need bravery and skill against an overwhelming foe, they will come and listen and gain inspiration. From here, our tales will come to them in their dreams. To all who fight our fight. That is what Rynn tasked me with, to collect them and surrender them to the Great Singers. You ever hear of the Council of Legends?"

"Not by that name. We call them the *dade'iqsu'badax*, the old grandparents. Sometimes, they come to us in our sleep, but Charlie said this was happening less and less."

"I was told, by a Glass Walker in New York and a Get in Austria, as well as an Uktena elder, about the Council," Aeden said. "They are the great ones, the wise wolves, the preservers of memory. They meet on the borders of the dreaming lands. The sages among humanity speak of an Akashic Record, where the memory of all things is kept in the ether, or in a library in some luminous realm that holds all the knowledge that ever was. That may be. It goes to figure our people have it also, deep in the spirit lands, some *Tír na nÓg*, a place where all our stories and tales of our triumphs and tragedies are preserved, forever."

“You believe that?” Jenny asked,

“Yes. And Charlie must have also. See, when I compare the old tales, I get the outline of the Ur-tale, the first wolf song. The oldest tales all hint at a time before the Weaver went crazy, and drove the Wyrms mad and the Wyld on the defensive. Our trinity once worked in a harmony, but when the Weaver began spinning her webs and choking creation, the Council was formed by the greatest of our spirits, to preserve our knowledge and to aid in the struggle. I can’t find all of it, but I’m convinced the clues are in the stories themselves, the clues that will cure the Weaver and restore the balance.”

“Charlie said a people’s riches are in their memory,” Jenny replied. “I’m really angry right now, not at you, even though you led us here and he died so you could continue. I’m angry because he died, because I lost him. He helped me so much, Aeden. And he trusted you. Charlie didn’t have much trust in the changers that weren’t of the First Nations — kind of thought you had lost touch with much of the Wyld, coming here and attacking the Croatan and Uktena and Wendigo like drunken brawlers.”

“Trust is a hard bridge to build,” Aeden replied. “Especially over such a bloody river. How do you know the way?” He realized that with Charlie gone, Jenny had taken the lead.

“See way up in the sky? *Chezann* spirit is guiding us. He is the eagle, up there. He circled over grandfather when dawn broke. Charlie might have summoned him, or the ancestors might have sent him.”

Aeden saw the eagle, soaring effortlessly westward, and deeper into the dreaming lands. The sky was a turquoise blue, and the clouds moved across her like Noh-players on a great stage, to the sound of the wind in the pines and the creaking of ancient trees.

They continued, for far longer than Aeden had imagined was possible. The Glen seemed endless and the great day passed into a midnight blue and star-lit night. Their senses became more astute, and the earth again tingled below their feet. A great full moon rose, and the shadow of the eagle led them by a trail deep up a mountainous path. Great pines grew about the trail, but thinned out as they climbed.

“There has to be an exchange,” Jenny said, breaking the silence of some hours. “If you give the Council the legends you’ve collected — and I take it there are accounts of our more recent battles they may not have heard of — then they have to give something in return. The law of reciprocity is honored among the ancestors. Hopefully, they can give us some weapon, something important, for our battle.”

“I hope so. I don’t know.”

“You better demand! The Ancestors have a responsibility to their children. It’s near the final hour, and the Wyrms only gets stronger and the Weaver crazier. The Wyld is being pummeled everywhere.”

The eagle screeched. Ahead, the Glen dissolved into the blanket of night and a moon path snaked away from the pristine wild and into the dark. Here, the nearer realms ended,

and the great journey deep into the other realms began. Aeden was thankful now that he had let Charlie and Jenny accompany him; he would have never found the Glen or this lunar road alone, despite all the advice he had received over the years.

On the path they felt a synergy of sight and sound melding, and taste and touch forming to become a single sensation; he distinctly heard the sound the deep green of pine needles make; and felt the light of the moon caress them in a soft, silken vibrating light. At times it became too much, and his heart thumped wildly in his chest. Then he would breathe deeply of indigo night air, and the senses would separate a bit.

How long they trod the moon path was hard to determine. At times, they slipped into wolf shape, at times they walked as man and woman. They shifted shapes together simultaneously, their hearts in silent communion. The eagle, now a fiery bird of volcanic feathers, led them.

The path soon turned and they were again in a deep wood, this one even more primal than the one before, climbing upward. The eagle now soared over a spot above them in great sweeping circles.

Finally, they saw great rocks that crowned the top of the mountain and, sitting in a circle, thirteen great wolves. Behind them, the full moon, a larger moon than either of them had ever seen, illuminated the night, bathing the hills and trees in lunar beams that gave everything the appearance of an Indonesian puppet-play.

The eagle cried out.

“We made it,” Jenny said. “You were right. The Council, one member from each tribe. And three empty places, for the vanished ones.”

“Almost as if they took a short walk, and will return shortly,” Aeden whispered in awe. The spaces for the missing tribes — the White Howlers, the Croatan and Bunyip — still carried strange scents, of wolves once known but now forgotten, memory traces, like they had only just left and would soon return.

A silver wolf, the nearest of the Council, came down and looked at both of them. Her coat seemed made of stars, and her eyes appeared forged from the fires of the earth.

Aeden prepared to address the ancestor with a traditional greeting, but Jenny strode before the great wolf defiantly.

“Is there an exchange?” Jenny asked. “Aeden is giving you our stories — past and recent, bitter and sad — but our people need help. Grandmother, your children are dying.”

“There will be a gift of knowledge,” the silver wolf said, speaking within their hearts. *“A few secrets will be parted to the Gatherer of Legends, who has traveled far to bring the Council the tales he has collected — he has lost friends along the way, and endured many dangers to gather them. But the greater power we will give to you, Jenny Seeking Wisdom. It is you, and those with you, who will fight the last battles and need our help the most.”*

Aeden felt a blow to his pride, but let it wash off of him.

“Do not feel ashamed, Gatherer of Wolf Lore. You will be our emissary to Jenny and the younger ones, gathering their tales and bringing them here, and giving them our council, when and where you can. Your place, for the most part, is now with us in the Ancestral Lands.”

Then the silver wolf spoke a secret into Jenny’s heart, and gave her the Coat of Seasons.

“This is in recompense for your grandfather, and will help you and your companions walk undetected through the mica and copper and circling eyes your enemies have set in the earth and heavens to find you.”

Jenny took the coat and thanked the Grandmother profusely. Then she took Aeden’s hand and looked down for some moments.

“I’ll come back,” Jenny finally said to Aeden, breaking the silence. “When I do I’ll tell the last tales, our people’s last battles against the Wurm.”

She kissed him suddenly and was gone. He saw a dark wolf shooting through the night, down the mountain, towards the nearer realms that touched the earth where her grandfather waited.

Then he felt the eyes of the Council upon him.

The greatest of the wolves, white in the light of the full moon, bounded before him.

“Your story,” he demanded.

Aeden swallowed and began. “The bar smelled of stale beer and cigarette smoke. A jukebox played old 1950s rock and roll. Men and women danced....”

“Not yet,” said the great wolf. *“That will be last.”*

“What do you want to hear, Father of Song?”

“Tell us,” the great wolf said. *“Tell us your story. Tell us all your stories, Aeden Ear of Memory.”*

Aeden looked up at the ring of wolves, black and silver, gray and brown, and white against the huge full moon. His memories, his encounters with Silent Strider elders in Cairo, the contests the Black Furies set before him before revealing anything, the down-and-out Bone Gnawer camp in the outskirts of Paris, where he heard their histories — all of the tales and ballads and songs began pounding out from his heart, which had proved too small a vessel to contain them. Where to begin? The Shadow Lords? The Get of Fenris? The Stargazers? Each tribe contested with the others, each fought to be heard.

The eye of the silver wolf caught his, stilled his mind, and calmed the waters until the words came with a rhythm and exactness of their own.

Songs, lupine and human, lay as prizes in those still waters. He would gather them all, and sing them all, until the moon changed many times in the ancestral place. Nearby, the poem of the Stargazers came to him, very old, like a salmon swimming upstream to Finn Mac Cool in the time of myths and legend. Aeden reached out, and took it in his hands, and it melted into his very being.

Presently, he began.

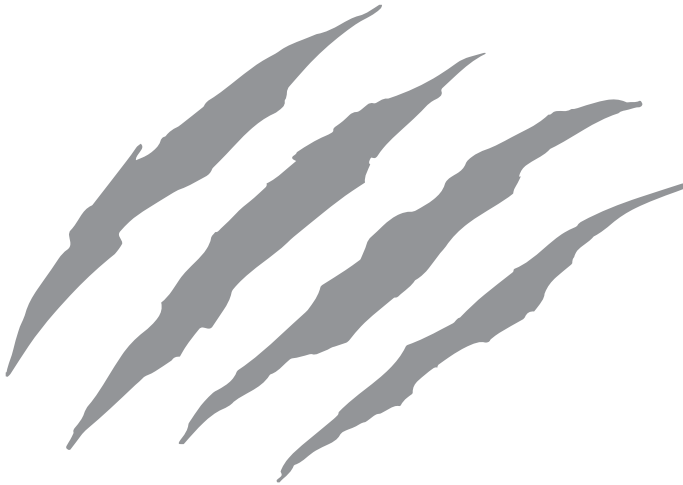
“I was the seeker of the Garou slain,

Searching for wisdom in the Wyld’s pain.

I was the fire of wolf desire — and I

Howled pure with the Talons through the northern sky....”

The ears of the Thirteen pricked up, and listened.





Hairshirt

Matthew McFarland

“Send in the first one.” He hadn’t bothered to learn their names. He knew the pack had five members, one of each auspice, and he approved of that. He also knew that they were a mixed pack — all from different tribes. The Unlidded Eye sighed. Such packs were becoming more common now that few septs were purely in the hands of their rightful tribal owners. His father, a renowned warrior in his own right, had told the Eye stories of the Shadow Lords thundering down from their homes near mountain caerns, calling down lightning and misery on their enemies. How absurd, the Eye thought, would such a war party have looked with some scraggly Bone Gnawer bringing up the rear? Or a Glass Walker, stubbornly clinging to Homid form, tapping away on a fetish smartphone?

A fetish smartphone. “Gaia’s mercy,” muttered the Philodox. “My father would turn in his grave.”

The other werewolf in the room, curled up on the floor in Lupus form, raised her head. She was the sept’s Master of the Rite, and she was there to make sure that whatever punishment the Unlidded Eye decided was a fair punishment she was equipped to mete out. The other Garou called her “Amanda Laughs-Menacingly,” but in wolf tongue the name was a half-chuff, half growl. The Unlidded Eye wondered where the “Amanda” part had come from, but then, he had little room to talk about odd names.

The first werewolf entered. He didn’t look nervous. He looked brash, like a proud warrior. The Eye’s first guess was Fianna, based on the features and the red hair, but he’d learned not to guess out loud. “Sit.”

The boy — he couldn’t have been more than 17 — sat in a folding chair in front of the Eye’s makeshift desk. The Unlidded Eye knew that many of the werewolves here thought he was a bit too human in his methods, but he was unabashedly hu-

man-born, and preferred to take notes while he listened. The boy glanced at his legal pad and sneered, his split lip starting to bleed again. This morning his face had been unrecognizable, and now a few angry scars and the lip were all that remained of that injury.

“Tell me your story.” And the boy began.

Sonny-Boy:

They call me Sonny-Boy because when I got here, I picked a fight with an older full-moon, he kicked my ass, threw me down that cliff over there and yelled, “How’s the view, sonny-boy?” The name stuck. So, yeah. Sonny-Boy, Ragabash of the Motherfucking Bone Gnawers, cliath.

Now, I’m not the pack leader, but I goddamn should be. You can tell Mustafa I said that, too. Yeah, this isn’t a Gnawer sept, originally, but the Uktena held it the longest — I guess the Croatan before that, but that’s a sore subject — and then the Fangs, and now it’s this bowl of mixed nuts. So why shouldn’t I lead the pack? Anyway, if I’d been leading the pack we wouldn’t have gotten our asses kicked and that Chinese girl would still be alive.

We went into town because one of the elders had a vision or read some Tarot cards or talked to a spirit or whatever, and said that someone in town was going to Change soon. Since we caught it early, they figured, send the Kid’s Table — you know I put that forward as our pack name, but they didn’t like it — let them get some chops. We roll into town just after lunchtime. The kids were getting out of school, and it’s pandemonium like you’d expect. This big yellow bus is rolling out of the parking lot, and I’m thinking, how come buses don’t have seatbelts? Fifty kids in a bus, you’d think they’d want them to buckle up?

Right, sorry. So we walk past the school. Mustafa insisted we walk. Easy for him, he’s used to it, right? We walk past the school and up towards a little red brick building that turns out to be a library, and there’s a playground out next to it, so I’m figuring a lot of those kids are going to come here and play pretty soon. Most of the time a high school isn’t far from the elementary school, especially not in towns this size.

Have I mentioned I hate the fucking ‘burbs? You get the worst Garou from the burbs. They don’t know shit. They grew up all surrounded by plastic and Happy Meals and... you’re from the ‘burbs, huh? OK, gonna stop talking.

Anyway, we’re at the playground. I tell Mustafa, let’s go down the road a ways and see if there’s a high school, because the vision that Tessa — she’s the elder — gave us indicated a younger person, like me. Mustafa says, no, we’re going to step sideways and look for spirit disturbance. I say, joking, like hell, man. Of course he wants to step across, he’s a Theurge. That’s where he’s the Man. I want to walk up and deal with people. We can find the girl the old fashioned way and no one has to go toe-to-toe with a Spirit of the Suburbs.

Seriously, you ever *see* one of those? They look like utter wimps, but then they pull out fists of asphalt and... no, we didn't see one on this mission. *Fine*.

We go behind the library and get ready to step across. Now, Mustafa's the Theurge, but Breakwater is just *amazing* at getting by the Gauntlet. Just... wow. You don't even feel it. So of course, Mustafa says, "I'll take us through" because he's a gigantic dick. And Breakwater just kind of opens her mouth like she's about to object, *finally*, and then shuts it. Mustafa starts pulling us through, but it's like wading through tapioca.

Seriously. The Gauntlet is *not* that strong in the 'burbs. I'm from Knoxville, OK? That's not a booming metropolis, but it's a city and the Gauntlet shows it. I could have done a better job with this. But we're sitting there, half-in, half-out, for like five full minutes. And then we get through, and it's just like every other goddamn suburb I've ever seen, no trees to speak of, but no buildings, either. I mean, they're there, but they're shadowy and skeletal and just, like, weak. So I say, "great job, Mufasa" because he hates that shit, and then he looks at me like he's gonna step up, but he doesn't because he knows I'd kick his ass.

Anyway, we look around, and no, there's nothing special. So then we have to step back *out* again. This time, Breakwater actually says something, which is cool, because then we slip right through the Gauntlet. And then we head down toward the high school, just like I said to begin with.

We get there and a whole bunch of kids are bunched up in the parking lot. There's a fight going on, which gets Smiley all jumpy. Smiley — that's Smiles-Like-Fox, our half-moon. Don't let him fool you, though, his name is Carl. I just have issues calling Garou by human names. It's like calling your dad going by "Billy," I dunno, a werewolf named Carl.

Anyway, Smiley — Carl — feels weird enough as it is being in the same pack as me and Breakwater, since he's old enough to be our dad. So we walk over to see if we can smooth things out. And we're, like, halfway over there when one of the kids in the fight just *blooms*.

I mean, you've seen it, but it never gets any less amazing. One second he's all of 100 pounds, the next he's eight feet tall and made of *rarr*. He doesn't lash out right away, he just stands there, and we look at Mustafa.

We're looking for a battle plan, right? Or a *plan*-plan. What we get is Mustafa, by himself, stepping forward and talking in Garou tongue. "Please, calm down, and no one needs to get hurt." Shit, I don't know where his First Change was, but it must have been in a burning hashish factory, right?

So Smiley and Breakwater head right and Dancer and I head left. We're thinking, surround the pup and tackle him before things get too crazy. But of course, the pup swings, and I'm thinking, Mustafa will blow up into Crinos form and take the hit, we'll tackle, lots of running and screaming but all will be well.

Mustafa fucking *ducks*.

Like, he jigs out of the way. Doesn't take the hit, just "whoosh." He's fast, I'll give him that, but remember we're in a crowd of high school kids. The pup lashes out with his claws, grabs this girl, probably all of 15, Chinese I think, and just.... I couldn't reach her. I was too far away.

Well. I mean, fuck it, we've all been there. She's dead. And *then* we all tackle the dude. Lots of running and screaming, but all is decidedly *not* well. He's probably just killed a classmate, and I know that screws with you. So we tackle him, and we sit on him until we get him calmed down, and then we drag his ass back through the Umbra and that's when those goddamn spirits came at us. We didn't lose anybody and that's a real mercy, but we all look like ground ass when we got back here, but we got back with a new Garou and everyone's jazzed. And then the higher-ups start talking about the Veil and punishment and they bring you in, and here we are.

• • •

The Unlidded Eye rubbed his temples as the Bone Gnawer left. Amanda glanced up. "*Punish young leader?*"

The Philodox shook his head. "Mustafa? No. Not yet, anyway. When you hear from a Ragabash, always get a second opinion." He made a note on his legal pad. "Send in the next one."

The next one turned out to be a girl not any older than Sonny-Boy. She had a careful way of walking and her eyes were wide and cautious, but the Eye recognized a warrior's attention in all she did. Her features and the tattooed glyphs on her back and arms marked her as Uktena. "Begin," he said, flipping to a fresh page.

Breakwater:

They call me Breakwater. I'm an Ahroun. I was born here at the sept. I know, I don't look like a mule, but as my friend Sonny would say, hee-haw.

I'm lucky, I guess. Some metis, they're born missing an eye or an arm, or with no hair. I heard about one up in Canada with a conjoined twin that regenerated whenever they try to cut it off. So I'm lucky. I'm just extra allergic to silver. Like, it would probably take *a* silver bullet to kill me. Hell of a way for a full-moon to work, huh?

I grew up here and they put me in the first pack they could. There was a big fight over it. The Wurmcomers — shit, I'm sorry! The, um, not-Uktena wanted Broken Ground to be the Ahroun for this pack, and the Uktena said, no, we want one of ours, and the Wurm-...uh, non-Native said, "Fine, what about Breakwater," and the Uktena said, "oh, we didn't mean *her*." So that's about where I rate.

I was excited about this mission. I don't get to go to town much, and I've never brought back a cub. So we walked all the way there, but Mustafa always knows shortcuts. Sonny didn't shut up the whole time about how much his feet hurt, but you know, you tune it out. We got there and nearly got hit by a bus. Sonny nearly walked

in front of it, and it didn't even honk. Carl — our half-moon, the Fianna — flipped him the bird as he drove by. Still no response.

We went to the library because Mustafa figured it would be better to step sideways behind the building, with no one looking. I offered to pull us through, but I don't think he heard me. We got through, and I didn't see anything really special right then, but Mustafa, right away, says, "No, we need to go back. Breakwater, take us through." So I took us back through, and we walked to the high school.

When we got there, I knew there was trouble right away. I could smell rage in the air. We pushed our way through a crowd, and I saw the cub. He was standing there in the middle of a bunch of people. His nose was bleeding and he'd peed on himself, and three big guys — I guess they're seniors, right before they graduate? — are pushing him around and calling him "faggot." He's *right* on the edge, but I'm thinking we've got him, we'll be OK.

Mustafa took a step forward and the kid lost it. I mean, he went into Rage. Burst right out of his clothes and lunged. Mustafa was right in the middle of trying to explain what was happening, but he didn't get a chance, and then he ducked out of the way. The cub caught a student instead, and squeezed her ribcage. I saw the jet of blood, and I figured I'd better do something before I lost it, too. The smell of blood... let's just say it had been a while.

I changed up to Glabro and tackled his legs. Carl stayed in human form and started moving the kids away as best he could. Mustafa changed to Crinos and punched the kid in the gut — there's no point using claws on a cub, the best you'll do is get him angrier and at worst you could kill him. I didn't see Sonny-Boy, but that's no surprise, you never see him until he's ready for you. Dancer jumped in and pinned the cub's arms, and we got him calmed down enough that he changed back.

Carl brought along a change of clothes because Carl's smart like that. He Dedicated them really fast, and then I brought us into the Umbra because there was no way we were getting home by walking. I think we vanished right as the cops were coming down the street.

But the Umbra was worse. I don't know where they came from, but the spirits were waiting for us. They looked a little like wolves, but you could tell they were Weaver-touched, too. As soon as we appeared, they started spitting wire webbing out of their mouths, but not at us — they were trying to make the Gauntlet too strong to get away.

Carl covered the cub. The rest of us started going into our "multiple opponents" strategy, but these things were too smart. One of them grabbed Sonny and spat wires in his face. They went under his skin, up through his scalp, and then Dancer kicked the spirit and the wires just came right through the skin. I went to Crinos. I wanted the reach. I grabbed one, broke what felt like a spine, but something under its skin clanked and I swear I heard gears, and then it started moving again. And then one of them spat wires at me and they went up my nose, and I felt something start to burn.

I... don't really remember anything after that. Next I knew I was up here, and Tessa was stroking my hair. I wasn't hurt.

I'm prepared to accept whatever punishment you see fit.

• • •

"I understand." The Eye nodded, and Breakwater left as cautiously as she'd come. He made a note.

"*Alpha now?*" asked Amanda.

"No." The Unlidded Eye looked back over his notes. "Let's talk to their Galliard."

Dancer was her name. The Eye bristled slightly; in his home sept, as in many others, "Dancer" was short for "Black Spiral Dancer." He felt a scar on his back ache as he thought of the last battle he'd fought with the Fallen Garou, and when Dancer walked in, he was prepared to hate her.

The name fit, he admitted. Dancer was slim, blond and athletic. From her features, the Eye might have pegged her as a Silver Fang, but he did not sense the pure breeding from her that all of Falcon's Children carried. *Pity*, he thought. Unlike most of his tribe, the Eye respected the Fangs as warriors and leaders. They were teetering on the edge of obsolescence, true, but that didn't make their accomplishments to date any less impressive. "You're the moon-dancer for this pack."

Dancer:

Yes. Sonja Free-Dancer, Galliard and Child of Gaia. May I sit?

I don't know what I can tell you. We came from the sept in the morning. It was a long walk, so it was afternoon when we got into town. It was a long walk, but it made me feel good to know there are still places that allow for long walks from septs. Do you understand? A sept, all this forest and water and hill, and the cabin where the youngest and oldest sleep. It's beautiful. And the caern! I dance there, when we howl to Luna—

I'm sorry. I would rather talk about something better than what happened.

Well, if I must. We walked into town. I heard children laughing and playing, and I thought to myself that I wished the cub we were sent to find was not among them. They sounded happy, and yes, I'm happy, but I miss my family and I wish so that I had not Raged when they were so close. But then Sonny said that we were looking for someone older, and we walked off to find the spirit world.

Mustafa took us across. It was good that he did that. He should lead. We arrived in the Umbra, though, and found that something was wrong. The Weaver was here, dug in much deeper than I would have thought.

In a city, you *see* the Weaver. You don't even need to step sideways. You see it everywhere. It's a spider web. And up here, near the caern, or just in the woods, you can see it if you look. Everything that has a pattern has Weaver, but here the patterns don't run wild. The trees and the leaves aren't covered in webs and you don't hear

the clicking of the spiders' feet. And in the suburbs, most of the time, it's not *bad*. You see the bigger spiders at places with lots of computers or in bigger buildings, but it's not *bad* just out and about. And this was a library! Libraries have spirits with patterns, but again, just because a book has a pattern doesn't mean it's—

Sorry. But the Weaver was everywhere. It was in the ground under us. In the buildings, in the sky. The suburban Umbra was meant to *look* like it usually does, with the thin structures and all, but it was a trap. Like a trapdoor spider's house. So Mustafa looked at Breakwater and told her to get us out, and she did. And Sonny spoke up, because that's what he should do, and poked fun at Mustafa, and Mustafa looked angry. Really, though, Mustafa was scared.

So we walked to the high school. I watched people walking, but I didn't see anyone walking in step. That happens when the Weaver digs in too deep. People get too in synch and they can't flow like they should.

We found the cub, and he Raged like cubs do, and he killed like cubs do, and we stopped him and took him into the Umbra. And then the Weaver reacted.

The spirits it sent weren't pattern spiders. They were probably wolf-spirits. Maybe wolf-spiders or wolf-spider-spirits. But they were more wolf than spider, but filled with the same wire as the rest of the town. They drew it out of the ground and spit it at us, and wounded Sonny-Boy. They wanted him because he is the most favored of the Weaver. Well, him and Smiles-Like-Fox, but he hides it well, because that's what he does.

Anyway, they attacked, and we fought back. We were all injured, but we all fought well, even the cub. I was composing a victory dance in my head on the way back here.

Who are you again? *Punishment?*



The girl snarled and started to Change. Amanda growled and gave a strange pant that seemed like a laugh, and Dancer turned and stormed out.

"Punishment," muttered the Eye. "I don't know." The more he heard, the more it seemed like the pack had successfully retrieved a cub. Casualties were to be expected — honestly he had expected more of them. Why was he here again?

"Send me Mustafa next." Amanda started let out a bark, but then the Philodox raised a hand. "No, wait." He looked over his notes. *Fox hides it well, because that's what he does*, Dancer had said. "Fox" was Carl Reynold, known as "Smiles-Like-Fox" to the Garou (or "Smiley" to Sonny-Boy). He was the pack's Philodox. What had Dancer meant by her comment? "Send me Carl first."

Carl was wearing a pair of gray flannel pants, a matching coat, a black t-shirt and a pair of expensive shoes. He flipped a pair of sunglasses off his face and ran a hand through his hair as he sat in front of the desk. "Let me guess," he said. "They're selling this as 'we rescued this kid and only one person died.'"

Carl Smiles-Like-Fox:

Smiles-Like-Fox, Philodox of the Fianna. Sorry, *fostern* of the Fianna. Yeah, I know. I'm a little older to be running around with these kids. The Change came late in life for me. I was an old fart of nearly thirty. Imagine that. It does mean that when they go off half-cocked, I can usually figure out what actually needs to happen.

No, I didn't want to be alpha. It's... kind of complicated. The Fianna have had a presence in this sept since right after white people arrived here. A Fianna kin on one of the boats fell in love with a Croatan werewolf, and then there were issues over whose kin the kids were, and then there was a magic stag or something... anyway, the sept has always had a few of us, and I grew up here in town before my company got big. So after the IPO I was going to retire here — yeah, at age 30 — and then the Change hit. So they stuck me with a pack of other young'uns.

That's my CV in brief. You want to know about today, I guess. My Christ, what a cluster-fuck. But look, you want to know whose fault it was, I'll tell you: Sonny's. Breakwater, Sonja, Mustafa, they all did their jobs and worked fine. Sonny was the one that fucked us.

OK, fine, I'll "remain impartial." Ready?

We walked down the hill to the town. I offered to drive; Mustafa said he'd rather walk. In retrospect, he was right — my car is big enough for the five of us, but if we brought back a cub, which we did, he'd have needed to ride in the trunk. So I brought a change of clothes, because that's always a smart thing to bring, and we headed to town. Must've been two-ish when we got to the school, which is right off the long path that leads up the hill to the sept. We sat down and rested a while, and Sonny wandered off.

Now, I do admit, he does that. That's not new. Part of it is his "I do what I want!" thing, and part of it is just that he's young and he gets bored. But we all sat down within sight of the elementary school. Dancer changed to wolf-form and ran off into the trees a little — the school has a little woodsy area right near it, which is nice. Mustafa and Breakwater and I just chatted a bit, probably twenty minutes. School let out, and buses started coming out of the parking lot, and then Sonny pops out of nowhere and the damn bus nearly hit him. It was his own fault. I waved to the bus driver to let him know that we were there, but I don't think he saw me.

I don't know where Sonny went, and he didn't say, and Mustafa didn't ask. Dancer joined us — back in Homid form, because it's impossible to go wandering around the 'burbs with your pet wolf and not attract attention — and we started walking toward the library.

Going to the library... I don't know who suggested that. I know Mustafa wanted to step sideways, but we were all of twenty yards from the woods at that point. We could have gone back up the path a little ways and done it there, been on familiar ground, and not had to worry about someone seeing us. I know Sonny wanted to go to the high school because... well, his *stated* reason was that the cub we were looking for was likely to be a teen or a young adult. That might be true, but I think he had other reasons.

But anyway, we went behind the library, Mustafa took us through, and the Umbra was kind of screwed up. I'm sure Mustafa will have a better description of it, but it looked like a movie set to me. Like, it was just a prop for anyone peeking through to see. That got us nervous, except Sonny, who's completely clueless about all things Umbra, and Breakwater took us back because she's got a knack for it. We started walking to the high school, and when we got there, there was a fight going on in the parking lot.

I got into a fair number of fights as a kid, here, and I know it doesn't take much to set a werewolf off, even pre-Change. I started walking over. I told everyone else to hang back.

OK, did you catch that? I *told them to hang back*, because I knew, I *knew*, that if we all went over there the collective threat of five Garou approaching would set him off. I knew that. The others don't, because they all changed as teens, when anything sets you off. But normal people can sense the threat from us, and cubs sure as shit can, too. I said to them, "hang back, I'll get him to come to us."

No one heard me. You know why? Because fucking Sonny was babbling about some stupid shit that happened to him when he was in high school. And then we were over by the knot of teens, because everyone was walking fast.

Well, the cub went nuts, just like I knew he would. He lashed out and attacked Mustafa, but missed and caught another student. She was probably all of fifteen. She had a letter jacket on that must have belonged to her boyfriend. And this kid just... crushed her. Dug his claws into her back and squeezed, and snapped her spine. Good god.

I turned away and I started screaming at the other kids to get clear. I heard the others, behind me, tackling the cub and taking him down. But here's the thing: I saw Sonny, out of the corner of my eye, *running*. He made a beeline for a car in that lot, closer to the school, and he smashed the back windshield. I saw him pull something out of the car, but I didn't see what happened after that. There was too much chaos. All I do know is that when we all stepped across, he got there late.

Right before we stepped sideways, everyone ran. I pulled out the change of clothes I brought and I said some words over them. It's not really dedication — that takes longer than I wanted to spend — but it makes the clothes good for maybe two shapeshifts before they shred themselves. I didn't look up, because I didn't want to see that girl's body. I just said "OK, go," as soon as the kid got dressed.

Breakwater took five of us across. That's herself, Mustafa, Dancer, me, and the cub. Sonny-boy joined us a half-second later. I know that doesn't seem like much, but there it was.

Those spirits attacked almost immediately. One of them jumped Sonny right away. A couple more went for the cub, probably figured him to be easy pickings. Breakwater got some of their wires shoved straight up her nose and she frenzied, so Dancer and I steered clear. Mustafa repelled them spiritually, I guess, as best he could, and the kid Changed into Crinos and started clawing at them, which was pretty impressive.

We lost that fight. Let's just be honest. They ripped at us until we were all on the verge of frenzy and then we ran, because shit, we didn't even know what we were up against. We got back to the forest where the Umbra started to look normal again, and then stepped back across and started to walk.

Honestly, this should have been better. This should have worked better. The others should have listened to me sooner, and we sure as hell never should have stepped sideways again. I know it would have been inconvenient to get out otherwise, but we could have made it work. And, look, I know the kids are saying, "oh, only one person died and for a First Change, that's pretty good," but I think there's a higher standard we could hold ourselves to. I think we could have gotten out without *anyone* being torn apart.

Punishment? Hell. I don't want to say anything else against my pack. But seriously, man to man, judge to judge, half-moon to half-moon, I can't figure out where the hell Sonny was or why he smashed open that car.

• • •

Carl stood up, nodded curtly to Amanda, and walked out. The Eye watched him go, and then looked down at the werewolf sitting on the floor. "New information."

"Two eyes see two sights."

"What?"

Amanda rocked back onto her haunches and then shifted up to human form. She had an old, purple-grey scar starting at her shoulder and running down to her stomach. She wasn't dressed, and the Eye realized that she probably doesn't take her Homid form often. "If two people see something, they always see it different."

The Unlidded Eye nodded. "*Rashomon*. I know it well." He turned up a fresh page on his legal pad. "All right, send me the last one."

Mustafa was younger than Carl, but older than the others. His accent had faded somewhat, but occasionally a slightly lilting vowel sound gave away his Indian heritage. Like Sonny, he wasn't wearing a shirt, but he wore loose-fitting cotton trousers and a curious bracelet, probably a fetish. He sat in the chair and waited for the Eye to pick up his pen.

Mustafa:

My name is Mustafa Spirit-Runner, Theurge of the Silent Striders and fostern. I am the alpha of our pack, which does not currently have a name or a totem. And I am to blame for what happened.

I see. I might have known that Breakwater would try to accept responsibility. She often does. As a metis, I suspect she is used to being a scapegoat. But this is not an unfamiliar concept for me, either. I am a Silent Strider. We are always strangers, and so always suspect. In this sept, though, I found a home. I challenged the caern

leader for the rank of fostern, and I learned, to my delight, that crescent moons are leaders here by tradition. I chose to stay and joined a pack for the first time. I even became alpha.

Perhaps, though, I have made some terrible mistakes. I will let that be for you to judge, Unlidded Eye-*rhya*.

You have heard, I'm sure, that I chose to have my pack walk into town. Carl offered to drive, but I am uncomfortable in cars, as is Dancer. When we arrived, Sonny asked to be excused for a moment and Dancer changed to her wolf-form and ran off into the trees. I sat with Carl and Breakwater and we discussed how best to approach this. We decided that investigating the local spirit world would be the best course of action, since the imminent Change of a werewolf often disrupts spirit patterns in a noticeable way.

Carl, as I recall, was about to make a suggestion, but then Sonny stepped out of the trees on the other side of the street and was nearly hit by a school bus. I did not ask Carl what he was about to say, because Dancer returned and I told her to take Homid form, quickly, before anyone saw her. And then we started walking up the street toward the library. I think that Breakwater was the one that suggested this, because she thought someone had seen Dancer shapeshift, but it is no matter.

We went behind the library, and I led my pack through the Gauntlet. We appeared in the Umbra slowly; the Gauntlet was thick and unyielding. That was troubling, but the spiritscape around me was false. I knew then that we had to return, so I instructed Breakwater to take us back. She has a rare gift for stepping between worlds, as I'm sure my pack has told you.

No sooner had we stepped back than Sonny-boy challenged me. He mispronounced my name, deliberately, and asked me if I intended to sit there, slipping in and out of the spirit world all day. I admit I allowed myself to grow angry, and I said, "well, then, where should we go?" He said, "to the high school, because that's where the cub will be," and then started walking. I could see that Carl was unconvinced, but I had no better idea, so we followed.

Sonny was right, of course, as you have been told. The cub was there. Carl said that someone should approach him alone, so as not to startle him, and I agreed, so I did so. But then I realized, too late, that the pack had followed, and the boy Changed. He lunged out, and I dodged his strike. I did so out of habit and reflex, and I can offer no other explanation. I am why that girl died.

We went into the Umbra because we knew police would be coming, but of course the spirits were already there. I knew that they would be. I told Sonny to get a computer or a smartphone, something technological, because I suspected that we could use these things against the Weaver-spirits. But he stepped across with us a second late, and they attacked him, and I never had a chance to test that theory. They attacked, and we fought, and then we fled.

I have no further explanation I can make. I can only say that we made it back here safely and with a new cub, but we have breached the Veil and left carnage be-

hind us. The situation in the town will require investigation, but we have lost any surprise we might have been able to use. I am truly sorry.

• • •

Mustafa got up and left without another word. The Unlidded Eye sat back and look at his legal pad.

“Punish?”

The Philodox stood up. “Let’s go out and talk to them.”

The two werewolves walked out of the room. The pack was standing around the fire circle. The sun was rising, and the fire was dying down. The packmates hadn’t spoken to one another all night, as the Eye had instructed them.

He motioned to them, and they gathered around. He cleared his throat quietly, and then spoke. “I was brought here because your sept wanted to find the truth of what happened in town. They wanted to be sure that their own biases didn’t get in the way. I respect that. Your caern leader is wise, and a good Garou, and I’m humbled he trusted me with this.”

“Every one of you,” he continued, “made mistakes today. For the most part, the mistakes were understandable. Most of you are young and inexperienced, and you made assumptions that were valid but turned out to be flawed. I can see no lack of wisdom in that, only lack of experience, and the two aren’t the same thing.

“And yet you want to be punished. You all asked in different ways, but you all want to be responsible. And I think it goes beyond wanting to shield your pack, because at least two of you are happy to see another packmate punished as well.”

Sonny glanced at Mustafa. Carl glared at Sonny. Mustafa simply bowed his head. Breakwater opened her mouth, as though ready to speak, but the Eye continued.

“So I will levy punishment. You will all learn the Rite of Contrition. You will all perform it at the girl’s grave. And you will all work to find and end the source of the Weaver’s infestation of this town, along with whatever assistance the sept can grant you.” He glanced down at Amanda, and she gave an affirmative growl.

“What was the girl’s name?” asked Sonny.

Dancer cleared her throat. “I don’t know.”

“Anna.” The other Garou turned to look at Carl. “Her name was Anna. I heard one of the other kids say it.”

Mustafa nodded. “Then that’s our pack name. Anna’s Blood.” The others nodded, and then they walked off, one by one, to different parts of the sept. Amanda left, as well, giving a soft bark over her shoulder to the Eye. Mustafa remained, sitting quietly.

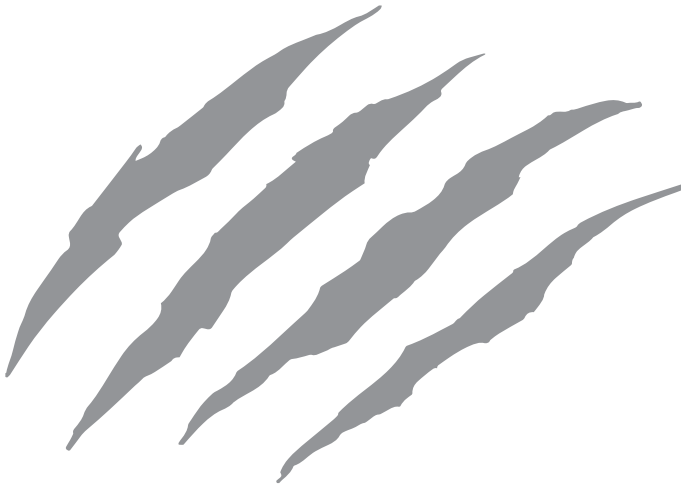
The Unlidded Eye walked over and sat next to him. “You know that choosing a pack name in penance has... implications.”

Mustafa nodded. "I do."

"You might never be rid of that guilt. It's guilt I'm not sure you deserve."

The Theurge looked up at the older werewolf. "But it isn't about guilt." He stood, and the Eye stood with him. "The mistakes that we made were not what cost Anna her life. It was our presence. We affect things in ways that we cannot foresee, simply by what we are." He rubbed the bracelet on his wrist, and the Eye saw the patterns on it changed slightly. "We don't want penance. Merely a reminder."

The Eye nodded. "Fair enough, Mustafa." He watched as the leader of the Anna's Blood Pack walked away, slowly, soberly. He dropped the legal pad into the fire at the center of the caern, and walked away. The matter was closed, now.



The Magadon Job

Eddy Webb

Marek Oja, Kicks-At-Dirt:

This is the story about how we got an Ahroun...

No, shut up. I'm telling the story. *I'm telling the...* Okay, fine, this is the story of when we met Liza. Happy?

Anyway, the Cleaners has always been an infiltration pack, working monkey wrenches and industrial espionage jobs in the Atlanta area. A Ragabash, a Theurge, a Galliard, a Philodox, and a partridge in a pear tree. Didn't have an Ahroun, and didn't need one — too loud and fighty. So when Amanda was all like "There's this Ahroun that wants to talk to us" in her weird Atlanta-but-not-really-Southern accent, I gave no fucks. Let the hulking muscle head find a pack that gets off on punching fomori and flexing at each other — I've got trash to dig through and shit to steal. For Gaia, of course. I told Amanda we should meet at our usual place. I figured an Ahroun wouldn't even know what a Starbucks was, and I hadn't been there since I dug around in their garbage last week.

So there I was, sipping the chai latte Amanda bought me and amusing myself by coming up with ten different ways I could break into the manager's safe, when in walks this brunette. She's all of five-foot-nothing with a thin black jacket, T-shirt, and jeans. I could see Chase giving her the once over with his eyes. Me? Meh. Girls do nothing for me. Now give me a nice, hard....

Okay, okay, stifle the breeder chatter, I'm getting there. She just wasn't what I expected, that's all I'm saying. Chase went to go investigate, and some flirting and a bloody nose later, he introduced us to Liza Forakis, deed name "Until-It-Stops-Moving," Black Fury Ahroun. Also, our client. There was the usual posturing where she tried to show how tough she was, while Claudius did his thing with his spirit-bonded smartphone so anyone listening would hear some inane complaining about Congress

or the Atlanta Falcons. Thankfully, when Amanda told her she was the leader of our pack, Liza calmed down. I expect the fact that Amanda was blonde, six feet tall, and, oh yeah, a *woman* probably helped. Chase got Liza a decaf, and we were able to get down to business.

“It’s my sister,” she said, wrapping her hands around the environmentally conscious disposable cup. “She’s been taken.”

Amanda leaned forward onto her elbows. “I’m sorry to hear that your packmate has been abducted, but we’re not really a ‘lost persons’ kind of team. I can get you the number of someone who....”

Liza glared at her, hard. “You’re not listening,” she snarled. And I mean, like, actually *snarled*. I didn’t even know you could do that in Homid. Anyway, she said “I didn’t say she was lost. I said she was *taken*. By Magadon.”

I let out a low whistle. Magadon. Maga-fucking-don. Medical subsidiary of global megacorp Pentex, and last place winner of the Friend of Gaia Award. They had their regional headquarters here in town, and we’d talked about hitting it. Hell, once Claudius was able to get us a partial set of floor plans, and I started drooling over the security system. It would be an amazing challenge, but Amanda always said it was an insane monkey wrench.

“It’s an insane monkey wrench,” she said to Liza. “The local Magadon branch is GenDiv, Genetics Division. This isn’t some suburban psych ward for troubled teens; this is their top R&D division. We’ll be lucky to get in the front door.”

“Let’s do it,” I said.

Everyone stopped and looked at me. I’m not sure why. I even managed to bathe that morning, and I had on my cleanest hoodie. “I’m serious,” I clarified, because being Ragabash, it’s an occupational hazard that people are always assuming you’re not serious. “Warrior Queen here had her friend taken, so we get her back. It’s just like any other job, except the package happens to be a werewolf.” I kicked my feet up on the table. “It’ll be fun.”

Amanda was about to speak, but Liza slammed her tiny fist down. I think the table cracked a little. “You urban tribes spend too much time talking and not enough time *listening*. She is....”

“Yeah yeah,” Claudius said, finally gracing the conversation with his presence and once again reminding us of his unfortunate handicap of being French. “Your tribemate. We get it. But I don’t....”

She ground her teeth, and I expected her to give Claudius a bloody nose to match Chase’s. “My. *Sister*. Kinfolk. My blood.”

Well, shit. I looked over at Amanda. The tall blond often had a hell of a poker face, but I’ve known her enough to see the moment of pain. ‘Manda lost her own sister to a Pentex First Team a few years ago. Classic case of wrong place, wrong time, but ‘Manda took it real hard. It’s why she put the Cleaners together. It wasn’t

a secret or anything, but she didn't really talk about it much. She looked at me and nodded, letting me know she wanted the job. I figured Chase would jump on the slim hope of a little Litany-skirting make-out time with Liza, so I didn't bother asking him. That left Claudius.

He drummed his fingers on the table, something he always did when he wanted to look like he was thinking but was really avoiding the question. "Down to me, huh?"

Amanda nodded. "You know the rules. It's unanimous, or we don't take the job."

He kept drumming his fingers. Buh duh duh dum. Buh duh duh dum. I slid my feet back off the table and grabbed his hand to get his attention. He has really soft hands. "Come on, *priyatel*. What does Cockroach say?"

Claudius shrugged and reclaimed his hand to tap at his phone a few times. I don't know why he always talked to our totem spirit in texts, but then again, I never really understood how Glass Walkers worked. But I had a hunch about how it would play out. I heard the little *ping* from the phone. "He says to go for it," he muttered.

Amanda let out a long breath. "Okay, then. The four of us will start to work on a plan, and then..."

"Five," Liza said.

Amanda blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Five," she repeated. "I'm coming with you."

Chase Reese, Greases-Palms:

The five of us went back to Amanda's apartment to do some research. Marek can babble about locks and sensors and pressure plates, but every security system or defense plan has the same weakness: people. A person has to be involved, and people are fallible. Work the person, and you can work the system.

In this case, the person I had to work was Dr. Seraphina Sanderson, regional head of Magadon GenDiv. She was a good geneticist, but she was mainly known for being one of the primary designers behind MagNet, the online medical network and digital record service. MagNet has been around for a while, but thanks to some creative lobbying by Magadon, Obamacare snuck in a rider that required any facility utilizing Magadon pharmaceuticals to use MagNet as its primary data provider. She had all the qualifications for middle management: egocentric, ruthless, obsessed with power, and more than a little paranoid.

"They have Umbral dampeners," Claudius suddenly announced after fourteen hours of staring at laptops and tablets. Liza had gone out to get some food, leaving Marek to whine about being bored and the rest of us to do our Glass Walker thing.

Amanda set her iPad down. "You just made that up," she said, rubbing at her eyes. "What time is it?"

“I am, and I *did* just make it up, but that’s because I’m brilliant and can make up words.” He pointed at one of the three monitors he had arranged on the coffee table. On the screen was a 3D wireframe display of an office building, with certain parts outlined in red. “What else do you call a device that cages a Weaver spirit, corrupts it, and forces it to endlessly weave, making the Gauntlet thicker and thicker?”

Amanda came over to look at the screen. “My god. They have Umbral dampeners,” she muttered. “Six of them. The whole place is covered from an Umbral incursion.”

“Guess that leaves out a smash-and grab,” Marek said, bouncing an old tennis ball off the wall.

“Guess so,” Claudius agreed. “Do we have a Plan B?”

Amanda crossed her arms and started pacing. I don’t know the story on how she got the name Three-Steps-Ahead — you’ll have to tell me that one over drinks some time, ‘Manda — but it’s well-deserved. She has an amazing ability to take a lot of bad news and pull out a plan that ties everything together. After she paced the room a few times, she uncrossed her arms and looked at me.

“Chase, I need someone to get inside.”

“Isn’t that Marek’s job?” I asked.

She glared at me. Usually this was the part where she got to be all self-satisfied and clever, but something about this job was eating at her. “No,” she snapped. “You’re going to walk in the front door.”

So that’s how, 24 hours later, I was standing outside Magadon with nothing more than a pocketful of faked Pentex credentials (courtesy of Claudius) in the name of “Senior Manager Wade Francis,” and a smile calculated to cover my sheer terror. My cover story was simple and classic: tour the Magadon facilities on an information sharing assignment to learn all about MagNet and Magadon operations. It would be nice if walking up to the bad guy and asking about her plan worked for once, but I know Amanda: there was a second or third reason why I was charging the front gate while Marek took the rest of the pack somewhere else.

The lobby was one of those dreary glass and steel affairs — even the reception desk was fronted by a slab of brushed steel with the Magadon logo etched on. I gave my fake name to a bored-looking guard, and he told me to have a seat and wait. I flipped through a couple of Magadon advertisements cleverly disguised as medical journals, and within a few minutes Dr. Sanderson came out to meet me.

When I was researching her online, her headshot looked like it was stamped from a female doctor template: pale skin, glasses, black hair pulled into a bun. But the woman who came out looked like the fantasy naughty librarian version of her. Her business suit was form-fitting, with the skirt slit a little too high and the dress shirt unbuttoned just a touch too far. Instead of sensible shoes, she wore black high heels that were tall enough to do interesting things to her legs, which were covered

in dark stockings. Hell, even her glasses looked provocative. She walked over to me, one foot deliberately in front of the other. Each step sounded like a gunshot in the massive, empty room of glass and steel.

“Mr. Francis?” she asked. Her voice was soft, sensual, and promised things that such a boring question should not offer. I nodded and stood up, offering my hand to shake. She ignored it and spoke a crisp “Follow me, please” before walking back the way she came. The rear view was just as wonderful, and at that moment, I wanted to jump on her, pin her down, and do terrible, wonderful things to her.

That’s when I realized I was under attack.

I had heard stories about fomori with pheromone-based weaponry. Some inspired fear in their victims while others encouraged crippling fatalism. Dr. Sanderson might be sporting a “lust” variety to keep me distracted and off my game. I shook my head to try and clear it as I followed after her.

She walked through an archway sporting a metal detector. I didn’t have any weapons on me — Amanda had insisted on that point — so I smiled and started dumping change and keys out of my pocket, stalling to give me an extra moment to think before I ran out of debris and walked through.

And the damned alarm went off.

The guard at the reception desk jumped up, grabbing a pistol that looked heavy enough to be a serious threat. I put my hands up, trying to play the part of the confused corporate stooge, as he shouted into shoulder-mounted radio. “Canis Alert! I repeat, Canis Alert! First responders to the front lobby!”

Dr. Sexpot somehow vanished in the chaos, and I was already pissed at myself for getting suckered by that lust fomori or whatever she was, so it was easy to use that anger and switch to Crinos. My well-tailored suit got ripped to shreds as I clawed it open, making room for my hulking, gray-furred form.

The good news was that front desk guards don’t seem to be trained to deal with Delerium — his eyes got wide, showing the whites all around. The bad news is that in his terror, his finger clenched on the trigger and shot me in the leg before he dropped the hand cannon and ran out of the front door.

I screamed and dropped to the ground. I’ve been shot before, but this burned like crazy. I heard the sounds of heavy boots coming from down the hallway that Dr. Sanderson disappeared down, so I grabbed the pistol and ran-slash-limped through the glass wall at the front of the facility.

I ran into the parking lot, ducked behind a van, and dropped back to Homid, hoping to sneak out. The blood trail from my leg wasn’t going to help me much, though. The guard’s pistol was the only weapon I had, so I quickly ejected the magazine and looked at the loads before tapping the dedicated earpiece that we used on missions. I rattled off a series of code phrases to Claudius, which basically amounted to “Tripped an alarm in the front lobby. Had to leave in Crinos. Possible First Team response.”

As I heard a squad of men shouting orders to each other and crunching over the glass in the parking lot, I added “And tell the boss they’re packing silver.”

Claudius Vachon, Floating-Point-Error:

Ending on a cliffhanger? You *are* a good storyteller, *mon ami*. I guess I don’t blame you ending there, though, since all you did was drop Blur of the Milky Eye and crawl under some cars until the First Team went back inside. It’s not very dramatic that way, is it?

As Brave Sir Reese was valiantly hiding from the First Team, I relayed his message to Amanda, Marek, and Liza while we washed windows. You see, Marek’s genius idea was to get us to dress up as window washers where we would eventually make our way up to the top floor. The idea was so corny I had to laugh. He may be a master thief, but he’s shit at disguise ideas. Plus, this is a high-security building, and we were just going to go through a *window*? He argued that when companies go high-tech, they forget the low-tech vulnerabilities. Amanda went with it, though, so there we were, dressed in drab overalls and baseball caps, trying to get the ancient motor working on the platform we were precariously balanced on.

“I still think we should have risked the Umbra,” Liza muttered. Even though she was on the other end of the platform, the dedicated earpiece I gave her picked up every bitter grumble.

“You had your chance to object to the plan last night,” Amanda countered, keeping her voice low and focusing on inching the platform higher up the side of the building. “You can’t change your mind in the middle of the plan.”

“I *did* object to the plan last night, and I object to it now,” the Black Fury countered, raising her voice. I put a finger to my lips, and she bared her teeth at me, but lowered her voice again. “Besides, these clothes make me look ridiculous.”

“Your height makes you look ridiculous,” Marek muttered.

Amanda smacked him on the back of the head, and he shut up. She stopped the platform and turned to me while Marek started digging in his bag. “Is Chase okay?”

I shrugged. “I don’t hear screaming. I’m guessing he’s fine.”

“Then we go on. He knows what to do now.”

Liza started up again. “If I ever left a packmate behind, I would...”

Amanda suddenly turned, grabbing the Ahroun by her shirt and shoving her against the railing of the platform. The whole thing wobbled with the impact, and I grabbed the railing myself to keep from falling over. “Rule number one: Never lose your cool on the job. Rule number two: During the job, we follow my orders. You signed on for that arrangement. So your choices are calm down, shut up, or get the hell out.”

Liza bared her teeth again, but raised her hands in surrender. “Fine. We do this your way.”

I stopped looking at the pending fight and started looking around the platform. “Hey, where’s Marek?”

Amanda let Liza go and turned to look. A large circle was cut in the glass of the window we had stopped in front of, and Marek was gone. She shrugged and picked up the bag he had left behind. “He’s fine. We go on.”

Liza growled again. “I can’t...”

Amanda turned to her again and clenched her fists. I didn’t *think* she was going to throw Liza off the platform, but I grabbed her arm, just in case. “No time, boss. We’re on the clock.”

She turned her back on the Ahroun and climbed in the window. I tried to ignore Liza’s muttering as I pulled myself through the hole. At least it was in Greek this time.

The room we were in was an empty temporary office, one of the ones that visiting executives use to plug in their laptop and hold meetings. These offices are great for the B&E specialist: no one cares about them, they often sit empty for weeks at a time, and the ethernet jack requires at least low-level access to the company network so Senior Vice President John Q. Pentex can check his email. Plus, with more companies moving to wi-fi, some IT people forget to keep up-to-date on the wall plugs. I pulled my netbook out of my jacket pocket and unwound a small ethernet cable while Amanda and Liza started changing into their work clothes. I didn’t look, because I was too busy being the keyboard god that I am, and because both of you are looking right at me as I’m telling this story.

A few minutes later, I found what I was looking for. Project: Jane Doe was transferred to Lab 7 a couple of days ago. Lab 7 was in the basement, in pretty much the furthest point from us that was possible. “It’s never easy,” I muttered as I pointed it out to Amanda, who had changed into a black turtleneck and close-fitting slacks, and was tucking her hair into a black cap. Liza was in similar attire, with the addition of a couple of guns strapped under her armpits and a short klaive on her back.

“If it was easy, we wouldn’t have to be the best,” Amanda muttered as she looked over my screen. “And it looks like we can get there going through only three checkpoints if we take the executive elevator.”

“That would require a significant feat of codebreaking, ‘Manda. No mere hacker could hope to crack the security algorithm and get past those checkpoints.”

She looked to me pointedly. “So how long will it take you?”

“Please, *mon amie*.” I nudged her aside and plugged a small plate into the USB port that allowed me to rewrite RFID chip signals, with a little help from the Gaffling I shoved into it a while back. “I cracked it when I got bored waiting for you two to finish with your makeup.” I ignored the growl of warning from Liza as I slapped five blank ID cards onto the plate and handed two of them to Amanda and Liza. “Just use them as little as possible — the more doors we unlock, the faster Security will catch on to us.”

Amanda nodded and motioned to the bag, now sitting open on the floor. “Pack up our gear. We need to make up some time.”

We got moving. Things were actually pretty smooth most of the way — even though the building was on a heightened alert, the three of us were able to move through disused and off-hours parts of the building to make our way down to the ground floor. There were a few guards in the way before we made it to the underground labs, but Liza took care of them in suitably painful yet non-fatal ways. Eventually we made it to the floor Lab 7 was on, and two minutes ahead of schedule.

“This is going too smoothly,” Liza muttered.

Facepalm. You *never* talk about how smooth a job is going. *Never*. And sure enough, around the next corner were two lab techs standing by a soda machine and talking. Amanda pulled us back around the corner, and I could just make out what they were saying.

“So Jane Doe is done?” one of them said.

“Almost,” the other replied. “Just a few more tests, and Dr. Sanderson said we can terminate her and autopsy the corpse.”

I didn’t hear what the first one’s reply was, because at that point Liza ran past me around the corner. In Crinos.

Remember rule number one: Never lose your cool on the job? Yeah, that just went out the window.

Liza Forakis, Until-It-Stops-Moving:

I am not too proud to admit that I don’t recall much of the scene. I know that the endless irritating comments and insults from the urban tribes had stoked my rage, as much as they claim that was not their intention. Hearing these men talk so dismissively of the life of my sister, the life of my Kinfolk, caused me to lose control. I remember changing and running, and my claws itching to split their flesh. I remember screams, although I cannot recall whose they were.

I remember quite clearly the feel of their blood in my mouth. It was salty, with an aftertaste that reminded me of all the metal surrounding me.

My head cleared when the screaming turned to ear-splitting alarms. The pain gave me enough focus to come back to Homid. Amanda was shaking me, while Claudius was pointedly looking away. I was covered in blood, but most of it belonged to the two men who had dared to speak so casually of the death of my kin.

“I am back now,” I growled to Amanda. “Why is there so much noise?”

“You. Someone down the hall saw your little display here and hit the alarm. Claudius knocked them out, but too late.”

“And why is he refusing to look at me? Is he insulted?”

Amanda cleared her throat. “You forgot to dedicate your clothing.”

I looked down. Indeed, I had forgotten to perform the Rite of Dedication on the clothing I changed into. The shirt barely hung on by the collar, and the pants were split but surprisingly whole. My weapons, naturally, had been dedicated. My priorities were still clear.

“We don’t have time for false modesty. We need to find my sister.”

“Down this hall and to the right,” Claudius said, still refusing to look at me. “We need to move, now.”

So we ran. I removed the cumbersome scraps of the shirt while I ran, much to the continued discomfort of Claudius. We encountered no more resistance, and soon we arrived at a heavy door marked “7.” Amanda waved her card at the door, and it opened.

What I saw inside made my heart turn as cold as ice. My sister was there, but she was Kinfolk no longer. The First Change had come upon her. She laid there, more wolf than woman, her dark fur only barely hiding painful bulges and twisted limbs. She had been strapped to a metal table with thick, heavy bands of silver, but the bands were too small, holding her in place as her body kept trying to change. Machines circled around her, and a spray of tubes and wires radiated from her flesh. I watched as blood left her body to be replaced by unknown, unholy chemicals that pulsed with their own inner life.

“Simone,” I whispered. I didn’t even know if she could hear me, but still I reached out to her.

“Don’t touch,” Claudius warned. “We don’t know what defenses they have on her.”

I wanted to scream at him, to rip his head off, to rend his skin, but I knew he was trying to help, so I forced myself into calm. There is validity in Amanda’s first rule. “What is happening?” I asked. “What are they doing to her?”

Amanda waved her pass at the door again, and an ugly red light appeared next to the frame. “Fuck, that card’s done.” She threw the card at Claudius, who ran to the door and started using his technological fetish on it. While he worked, she turned to look at the machines attached to Simone. I could see the pain on her face. “I’m not entirely sure, but between this and what I skimmed from Claudius’ research, it looks like they’re trying to isolate what makes us werewolves. They managed to artificially induce the First Change in her somehow.”

I waved my hands at her. “This is not change. This is not *natural*.”

Claudius yelled from the door. “*Mon soeurs*, I hate to interrupt, but this door is not going to close. Forget what I said about traps — we need to take her and go. Now.” As he finished, a beeping came from his tiny device. “Fuck. Make that faster than now.”

As he talked, I channeled my fury, my anger, and my disgust at my sister’s predicament, and I changed into my warrior form. I reached down to grip the silver

restraints off of Simone, preparing myself for the burn. The intense pain was there, but I also felt the sickening twist of Wyrms taint. I pulled and twisted the silver as it seared my flesh. I howled in rage, in pain, in frustration, in loss. I could smell my decaying flesh burn, sickly sweet in my nose. I pulled and pulled and pulled.

And they would not budge.

I fell back onto my knees, my arms shooting with agonizing pain and blood oozing from my wounds.

“First Team is inbound,” Claudius said. “We need to go.”

“We’re not leaving.”

Surprised, I looked up. Amanda stood next to Simone, looking down at her. I had expected her to agree, to tell me that we had to leave my sister behind. Instead, she just... looked at her. But I don’t think she saw her. I think she saw someone else.

After a long moment she turned and nodded slightly to me. I understood. We would die here. That was fine by me.

“Switch to Crinos,” she told Claudius as she did the same. “I want to see if they’ve hit their anti-Delirium drugs. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Oh no, Miss Butcher.” I was still trying to get up in spite of the pain, but I was able to make out a woman in glasses and business dress standing in front of a few hulking men in armor carrying heavy guns. “Your luck ran out the moment you entered this building.”

Amanda Butcher, Three-Steps-Ahead:

I don’t know about Chase’s taste in women, but Dr. Sanderson didn’t look that great to me. She looked twisted and broken, like a porcelain doll of a librarian melted and scorched from a house fire. But then again, maybe it was just because I didn’t have the right brain chemicals to find her attractive.

“You knew we were coming,” I said accusingly. The words felt strange in Crinos — they always did — but it was true. She knew my name, they were ready at the front door with Garou sniffers, and the men in tactical gear behind her weren’t running or gibbering, so clearly they were doped to the eyeballs on Delerex to keep them from experiencing the Delirium.

Sanderson stepped to the side, allowing the First Team better access to the room. “I suggest you change back into your human form and come along quietly.”

I waited a moment, weighing the options, and then changed back to Homid. Luckily I remembered to dedicate my clothing, so I looked like I did before the change. I immediately started talking before the squad of fomori paid too much attention to Claudius or Liza. “How long did you know? Did someone sell us out? Who is the rat?” I pointed to Liza. “Is it her?”

Sanderson laughed, and it was as ugly as she was. “Is this the part where I tell you everything about my nefarious plan? I don’t think so, savage.” She motioned to the men to get my partners.

“How about I tell you mine, then?”

That stopped her. She put her hand back up, and the First Team stopped. “I had assumed this was just another valiant attempt for you monsters to destroy our property in your misguided efforts to thwart progress.”

I laughed at that, even though my heart felt like broken glass. “The ‘mindless monster’ propaganda falls a little thin when we’re standing this far in your secure headquarters. No matter how this plays out, it’s not going to look good on your resume. ‘Feral monsters nearly acquired Project: Jane Doe’ isn’t the kind of bullet point that gets you promoted. But if you could tell your superiors about the security holes in your system, shift blame to another department, I bet that would work for you just fine.”

She made a show of considering my request, but I knew I had her. I might not be as good of a talker as Chase was, but I know what it’s like to overthink problems.

“Fine,” she said. “I suppose you want your lives in exchange.”

“Just his,” I said, pointing to Claudius. “The woman is already injured, and she won’t leave anyhow. Neither will I.”

“Is he your... partner?” she asked, making the word sound oily.

“I work with him. I don’t fuck him, if that’s what you mean. All that matters to you is that he gets to go, and you get two more werewolves to experiment on, along with the information in my head.” I nodded sideways to Liza, not taking my eyes off of Sanderson. “But she’s going to heal in a minute, and once she does, she’s going to try to rip your throat out, and then you’ll have four dead werewolves and a one-way ticket to running a sperm bank in Cincinnati. Better make your choice.”

She hissed — honest-to-Gaia *hissed* like a snake — and then pointed to one of the First Team members. “You. Take the man outside and return to me. I’ll need your help strapping them down.” He nodded and grabbed Claudius by the arm, who had switched back to Homid. Claudius looked at me like I was crazy, but I just nodded to him to go. He nodded back and left quietly.

“There,” she said. “Your man is safe. Tell me.”

I crossed my arms. “I won’t go into the problems with your technical security, except to say that you should get into the habit of turning off your ethernet jacks. What’s more interesting is your store of Delerex.”

She sneered. “Yes, Delerex Lupus-7. I’m hardly surprised that you know of its existence. It’s why my men are still here.”

“But you’ve been experimenting with a new drug, Delerex Lupus-12. You’ve been trying to find a formula that doesn’t make your men into idiots but still keeps their immunity to our Delirium intact.”

The sneer faded, but she tried to play it cool. “The drug is effective. You see that it works.”

“Of course it works. And it’s standard procedure to have a First Team at high-security Pentex facilities. It’s standard procedure for a First Team to have Delerex on hand at all times. And First Teams always get the best weapons.”

“Again, hardly clever. You are boring me, girl.”

I smiled again, but this time there was teeth in it. “I also know that Delerex Lupus-12 has a safeguard in case a First Team goes rogue. The files were hidden pretty deep in your personal system, but my hacker is very, very good. He showed me the file you wrote. Nasty piece of work. It’s a binary poison — safe enough on its own, or as safe as any Wyrms toxin can be, but deadly when combined with a particular gas.”

I took a step towards her, and she stepped back involuntarily. I could smell the sickly sweet perfume she wore. “All I had to do to get your people to shoot themselves full of their own death was to march a werewolf right up to your front door. Then we punch through a few security doors with a hacked card, drawing you here while my thief steals the other half of the poison.”

“What?” Sanderson and Liza both spoke at the same time, both with a sense of disbelief. Liza was starting to stand back up, and the First Team turned their guns on the hulking werewolf, but she just stared at me.

I reached up, tapped the earpiece, and said one word. “Now.”

Marek suddenly appeared in front of the First Team, flipped them off, and pulled the cap off of a canister the size and shape of a thermos, covered in biohazard stickers. The room immediately filled with white smoke, and I reached up to the cap on my head to pull the balaclava over my face. I had stitched a thin medical mask over the mouth — just because the gas wasn’t fatal if I didn’t have Delerex in my body didn’t mean I wanted to breathe Wyrms shit. I tried to reach Sanderson, listening for her coughs in the confusion. By the time I could get close to her, though, she slammed on a button by the door just as a First Team member with a gas mask was lining up a shot to my face.

“Amanda,” Liza growled. “The restraints.”

Before I could respond, something heavy landed on me, throwing me onto the ground and knocking the air from my lungs. Liza’s sister had jumped onto my back, knocking me flat. I could feel her claws ripping into my back as I struggled to get upright. Then I heard a deafening explosion right above my head, and the weight vanished. I changed back to Crinos and rolled over as Liza jumped over me and onto the First Team member.

Simone’s distorted Crinos face stared at me with glassy eyes. The hole in her forehead went clean through, and I could see where her brains had splattered on the wall opposite. Liza sister’s was dead, just like mine was.

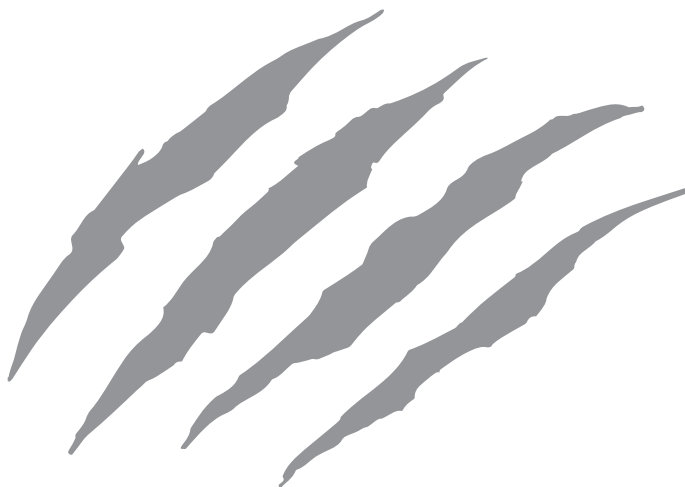
So I broke rule number one.

I sliced the guts out of the shooter while Liza ripped his head off. The rest of the team was dead on the floor from the binary poison, but we both hacked the bodies into tiny pieces until our claws were caked in gore. We left massive bloody footprints as we ran out of the lab.

The clean-up for the job was pretty simple. After Chase slipped away, he called the CDC and reported a toxic spill as well as numerous incidents of illegal human experimentation. Marek had gotten Claudius free of his escort, and the two of them banished one of the crazed Weaver spirits so we could step sideways and get the hell out. Sanderson was arrested, and the incident covered up as Pentex SIGs paid the right people to keep the news quiet. A few conspiracy blogs and a couple of monkeywrench forums picked up the story, but by and large the branch was quietly shut down.

I explained this all to Liza after the fact, the whole plan. I didn't tell her the details because I didn't know her, but that didn't mean I didn't trust my pack with my life. They all played their parts, but I didn't play mine. I had failed her. I had let emotion get in the way of the job. I didn't plan for all the variables, and now Liza's sister was dead. All I could offer her was a new family, with us. With the Cleaners.

That's the real story of how we got an Ahroun. And how I learned to forgive myself, just a little.



Tears on a Tainted Blade

Sam Chupp

“I’m gon’ kill you, Runner,” Yard said, and threw a girder of rusted Pittsburgh steel at him. Had it been anybody but Runner, the Ragabash would be dead. But Runner was used to dodging concrete and steel in another way while he ran over his city, dodging death and shaving the edges off probability.

Eking out a living free-running in the slim margin where meat met masonry, Runner leapt up and pressed hard off of it with his feet, skittering to the side as it passed by. The girder clanged into a small forest of rebar, turning over and smashing down the stalks of iron like blades of grass. The noise from the crash threatened to shred his eardrums, but he remembered to open his mouth and swallow.

Turning, Runner sized up the situation, never stopping his movement. Yard was huge, strong, hated everyone, and Runner had broken into his territory, cut across his lawn. Not a good idea on a good day; on a day when he was already pissed? It was suicide. One day, maybe even before he turned 20, Runner might learn not to break the rules. That day was not today. It was clear that Yard had woken up on the wrong side of the junk pile this morning.

The city was in a slow motion free fall into destruction and irrelevance all around them. The last steel mills had gone dark ages ago. The faint attempts at preserving the past had failed and even the mill museum he was headed for across the way now stood abandoned, gates open like a slack-jawed rotting corpse.

Teach had him running messages to nearby caerns, scouting missions, patrols, ranging out from the Mill and coming back in big long ellipses. Sometimes the patrols were even fun. Except when a fellow big as a chest freezer decided that today was it for him.

Runner vaulted to the edge of a boxcar that had been flipped over on its side and ran up the corrugated steel wall there, one hand planting at the top of his climb to arc himself up and over the rim of a building, feet following in a graceful curve as an oil drum spanged off the sheet metal wall. Yard missed.

“Gon’ kill ya,” barked Yard from below. No time to stay and chat. Runner’s shoes landed on roof paper, his hands reaching out for a steel pipe to grab and fling himself across to a nearby building. There was no time to shift.

He cursed as the heat from the pipe bit back into his hands, a sizzle sound as his hands became hot, bleeding meat, and no time to stop himself. He fell then, a sickly feeling, into gravity, his old enemy’s grasp, snatching him down. Fuck.

He twisted as he fell, tried to right himself, tried to grab a fire escape as he plummeted past, tried to do anything to slow his fall.

Relaxed like Sunny had taught him, so long ago. Funny thing, thinking about Sunny at a time like this. The street was rushing up to meet him. What a fuck-up he was, he thought. Why the hell had the pipe been hot? It’d never been hot before.

He passed out as he slammed into the asphalt, but woke up briefly as he saw Yard standing over him, his blurry vision at a crazy angle like a bad TV movie camera shot.

He heard Yard unbuckle his coveralls and they dropped down, and felt something warm splash on him as the man pissed all over his dying body. Anger at the humiliation boiled over him but he couldn’t tell his body to do a damn thing about it.

“Fuck you, Runner. Last time you run,” Yard grunted, as Runner felt the dark take him.

• • •

Yard turned away from the still form of the dying boy.

“Hello there, Yard-dog.” The man in the baseball hat said, smiling a gold-toothed smile.

“Go ‘way, Sunkmanitu.” Yard growled at him. The name he gave did not fit, precisely, but it would do. At least, it had when he had summoned him a long time ago. Yard’s hand went to the pipe-stone pendant he wore around his neck, under his white wife-beater t-shirt.

“Told you to nev’, ev’ come like that again.” The spirit wore the form of a human who had been nice to him, Conroy. Conroy had ruined his honor with the People. He could not kill Conroy when the time had come.

The kindly-looking old man sat down next to Yard, ignoring the blood and mess on the floor next to him. The spirit spoke the Garou tongue, making it easier for Yard

to understand him. “And I have warned you about being polite. Why don’t you offer me a bite... of whatever it is you’re eating?” He asked, grinning.

Yard shook his big flat head as if a fly had buzzed him, then let his eyes begin to change from dark circles to red gold irises, his teeth from blunt human to sharp canine; the wolf coming out in him.

Sunkmanitu just grinned back at him. “Down, boy. I’m here about our compact.” He tapped the pipestone pendant around Yard’s neck for emphasis.

“I shit on you.” Yard growled. “Shoulda not done that deal.”

“Ah, but you did, remember? Years of peace living in the human city, protected by happenstance and luck. Great warriors of the Garou walked right past your lair and you never knew. Why, that Silver Fang Uriah Izeksen spent the night not far from here, when he was chasing the Cundrani, and he never even sensed you. And I have given you protection from your Red Talon brothers. No unhappy surprises for you, eh?”

“No, Sunkmanitu.” Yard growled. Fists clenched. “Until today.”

“And I see you dealt with it admirably. Now. Remember our deal. Get to the Mill, Yard. There’s a visitor in town.”

“Who?”

“The Silver Fang, Silvestri.”

“What he here for? Hunting?”

“No way to know. But I think you should get to the Mill, across the veil, and hunker down. I can protect you there.”

Yard looked left and right, eyes open for any intruders. A bus could drive by any moment, or truck. He wanted to destroy this one, leap on him, rip his guts out.

“Yard! Hurry, someone’s coming!” Sunkmanitu cajoled.

The sound of tires rolling across broken asphalt made up the huge man’s mind, and he turned and began to jog across the street to the ancient steel mill structure there.

• • •

Sunkmanitu grinned at how easy it had been to manipulate the Red Talon.

He bent and placed his hand on the fallen Ragabash’s forehead, sensing the boy’s secret locked deep away inside his soul.

This one would live. With a grin, Sunkmanitu drew upon a potent spirit gift. The magic triggered the Garou's natural healing process in his breed form. Then, the spirit vanished from the street.

• • •

Not long after, Runner was not dead, but felt like death would be a step up. He could smell his clothes like a public bathroom on a Sunday morning, and the fact that Yard was a Garou was unmistakable. But he could stand. And, most importantly, his shoes were OK.

What the hell was an unknown Garou doing near the Mill Museum Teach had bought recently?

Runner turned and headed for Teach's office, taking off with a smooth, loping stride.

• • •

Teach had left word with the front desk that Runner was always to be made comfortable, as soon as possible, in a side room, even in the middle of the day. His staff had even given him a new t-shirt and gym pants taken from his clothes closet. "Teach & Argen", the name of his law firm, was plastered across his chest.

When Teach saw the young Garou, the cuts and scrapes, the stench of Garou urine faint on him despite his change of clothes, he paused for a moment to adjust his business casual blazer and run his hand over his bald pate, a finger going to his single steel ear-ring.

"Runner. What's up with you?" He said, trying to keep friendly affability in his voice. He walked over to the bar and brought out a can of cold soda for Runner: some kind of super energy drink that Teach couldn't himself stand.

Runner drank and spoke between gulps. "I... don't really know T. Look. Thing is. There was this guy..."

"What guy?" Teach asked.

"Some guy attacked me — do you know a guy named Yard? Anyway, he threw shit at me, forced me up a wall, and wham, I fell. Knocked out cold. Next thing I know..."

"Wait a second. Yard. Down by the Mill? Squat shouldered guy? Runs a junkyard?" Teach tossed the boy a can of deodorant.

"Yeah... you know him?" Runner said, spraying his pants with the manly perfume while Teach pulled out his tablet, looked Yard up in it. He found him, saw where he had been sighted in Toledo, Columbus, and Cleveland. "Possible Red Talon infiltrator" it said on the wiki next to his name.

The Red Talon, here? In Pittsburgh? Talk about getting far out of one's territory.

Teach turned back to the young man. He gestured to a plump, leather armchair. "Runner, I want you to sit down here and relax, OK? You've been through a lot. Just relax."

"You're not pissed, man?" Runner asked.

Teach shook his head. "I'm pissed, but not at you. This isn't your fault."

Runner settled back in the chair, breathing. "I don't even know...."

"There is a lot you don't know Runner. But the presence of another Garou so close to the Mill means that it's possible that my plans for it have been exposed."

"Plans? For what?" The young man looked up at him. Teach sat down on the chair opposite him. Expensive track lighting illuminated his forehead like a halo.

Grabbing his tablet, he fired off a message to his compatriots. "Meet me at the Mill." Then he turned back to Runner. Teach placed his hand on Runner's forehead and whispered one word. "Remember."

• • •

Sense memory flooded him. A rainy night, lightning striking. Turning up at the park, speaking with another's voice, speaking to trees and rocks as if they were people. Going to Dances-with-Rain's apartment, his voice strained, using a language he didn't even know. Struggling to stay in control of his own body. Feeling a great silver Falcon seize his heart in its talons. Screaming with fear and pain.

• • •

"Runner," Teach said. "We had to dull your mind, because you weren't handling the truth very well.

"There was a ghost..." Runner began.

"Yes. You didn't remember because Rain soothed that memory for you." Teach said.

"We're trying to... to build a caern?" Runner said.

"It will be free from the Great Lakes Moot. Our own place. Not governed by the Wendigo. I am trying to get an expert on past lives to help us — to help you. We'll be getting you to some Elders soon. I've asked for them to come."

A chime sounded in the bald man's blazer jacket, and he withdrew a small phone. Checking it, he swore. Spirits at the airport had detected the arrival of a Ga-

rou, not by moon bridge, but by small private jet. That meant one thing: Silver Fangs. They were wealthy enough to have such amenities.

“We have to hide you. There’s something going on, and…”

A plate glass window shattered, and a huge white-furred, half-man, half-wolf came through with it, the sound of the chartered helicopter which had brought him dimming as it moved away.

Runner dodged the rain of glass without thinking, and Teach buried his face in his jacket to avoid getting cut in the eyes. Glass shattered everywhere and Runner could not believe his eyes at what he saw. The creature bellowed rage like a gorilla in heat. It was huge, furred in a dirty white pelt with ice blue eyes, in full Crinos form, hunched over, ready for anything.

Teach pressed an evacuation security button tastefully hidden on the column next to a light switch, knowing that his people would quietly and efficiently leave the building as soon as possible. His eyes never left the intruder’s.

“Silvestri. The Silver Fang’s knight errant. Or should I say errored? You owe me a window.” He reached out with his will and addressed the mirror behind him. “Sheen, get the boy.”

Teach moved to face the huge, white werewolf, taking his left hand out of his jacket pocket. A shimmer passed through Runner and a mirrored ribbon materialized around his head.

“Hey!” Runner yelped. Without another sound, the Ragabash winked out of existence.

Silvered steel chimed as Silvestri drew his klaive from his back, grinning. “Your blood will paint the floor Glass Walker. Bring him back. Deliver the legacy to me, and I will overlook your intemperate plans for a new caern in Pittsburgh.”

“Fuck you.” Teach opened his palm and tossed something at the Garou warrior, something that increased in weight and speed as it slammed into him, sending the huge Garou sprawling long enough for the Glass Walker to shed his suit jacket, and pick up a slender steel cylinder on his desk.

Silvestri leapt up and started for Teach. Teach held the steel cylinder like the hilt of a blade and a monofilament wire with chained lightning dancing down its length became his weapon. Teach leaned forward to sling the monofilament at the Fang, the hum of current dancing through it, a lethal promise.

Silvestri slammed his clawed foot down hard on the edge of the high tech glass and steel desk and shattered it as he drove it down, sending shards of glass up to pierce Teach.

Teach covered his eyes, his arms embedded with glass, blood streaming. He kicked out, a move Silvestri anticipated but could not completely counter. This gave Teach a chance to slam the lightning blade down on Silvestri's left taloned pad, sending coursing power through him.

Only reflex saved the Silver Fang, as his own klaive came down to slap the lightning blade away from him, and continued the swing up to slice into Teach's right shoulder, biting into bone and sinew.

Teach was forced to change or lose too much blood to stand, but he leapt back in order to do so. A standing jump somersault, like Runner had taught him, took him over the ruined shattered glass desk and back to the edge of the broken plate glass window, behind his attacker.

Silvestri needed an additional heartbeat to shake off the electric assault, then whirled and leapt towards the edge, bearing down on Teach. Teach dodged to the side, slicing across Silvestri's thigh with the razor-sharp monofilament, which still sang with electricity as it built for another charge.

A Glass Walker, Teach had neon blue fur tipped with purple, eyes as red and glowing as LEDs, wearing a combat webbing harness. He felt his wounds keenly as his body shifted, and Silvestri roared in fury, sweeping his free arm in a club to slam Teach, hoping to knock the relatively smaller Garou off balance.

Teach bounced into a tastefully lit glass display. It would have knocked him senseless except that he had anticipated the blow. He reached up, fumbling on the shelf, and brought a large trophy down onto the Silver Fang's head. The winged victory statuette he'd received for pro bono work for the Red Cross happened to be made of silver, and sliced into Silvestri's lupine head like a hot knife into butter.

Sheen whispered in Teach's ear, "It is done." It meant the kid was safe. The Glass Walker nodded and spirit-spoke to the mirror spirit, "Get ready to catch me."

Silvestri staggered back, nearly sitting on a piece of black glass sticking out from the ruins of the desk, catching himself just before he did. He reached out to his blade, which he had managed to lose in the melee, and called it to his hand wordlessly.

The blade flew, but Teach was no longer where he had been once it met the Silver Fang's hand. Teach was running, running towards the open window, shaping the form of the great wolf, picking up speed, and leaping.

Silvestri cursed as he saw his enemy flee, cursed the Garou's lack of honor, his Wyrn-tainted ancestors, and furiously glanced around for a reflective surface to step sideways through. Most everything was covered in dust, blood, or both.

Teach dived into the abyss, escaping Silvestri's murderous wrath. He fell, trying not to tumble, until a shivering, shimmering ball of mirrored glass materialized in

front of him, moving down relative to his speed. Looking into his own eyes, Teach stepped sideways as he plummeted.

Silvestri cursed as Teach vanished.

• • •

Once in the spirit world, Teach felt Sheen's glass claws grab him by his harness. The harness bit into his lupine form, giving Sheen ample purchase to carry the werewolf without trouble. Even though the laws of physics did not apply, Teach instinctively switched back to his homid form, to make it easier for his spirit companion to carry him, wincing as the pain from his earlier wound made itself known. Sheen took him to the place he knew the others would be waiting for him: a high tower not far from the Mill.

Dances With Rain and Magnus were there, the kid, Runner, between them both.

"So much for a phased, measured approach." Magnus, the Shadow Lord half-moon, said grumpily to Teach. His midnight hair was cropped high and tight, his nearly ursine homid form tall and burly, covered from head to toe in black leather.

Teach nodded to him. "It's not my fault. Silvestri has pushed forward our timetable. I wonder how he found out about our caern building." Magnus shook his head. "Could have been that Strider that came through last month..."

The Galliard Child-of-Gaia, Dances with Rain, looked into Runner's eyes as she checked him. "Runner's memory braid is gone, Theurge." She stood in a free-flowing tunic and leggings with boots, her blonde hair caught up in a tight braid.

Teach nodded. "That was my doing, Runner. I need to tell you something. This is important, so listen carefully. Magnus, Rain, keep an eye out for the Silver Fang. I just came from a fight with him."

Runner regarded Teach warily as the other two Garou took up watching. Teach cleared his throat. "For some reason, you were born with the spirit of an ancient werewolf inside your soul. We don't know why. What we do know is that it is a very, very special soul, a Garou named Wind-howls."

"She was a moon-singer like I am," Rain said quietly, still watching. Her touch on his shoulder was very soothing and calming to Runner.

"Wind-howls is said to have made the first klaive. A weapon of power. A sword."

"Like this one." Magnus' basso profundo voice rang out, and showed him the drawn Darkshard, a black blade of curling fractal smoke, that he immediately slid back into its sheath.

"A blade of power to fight all that is Evil," whispered Rain.

Teach went on. “Thing was, boy, when you first changed, you were taken over by this past life. Wind-howls was very confused to be in your body, but in you she was. She asked for help in finding the blade, to make sure that it resides in the right hands.”

Rain’s soprano came next. “Now the moon is again three-quarters-full. And we were hoping to speak to her again soon. But certain others have pressed our hand. I fear Silvestri’s come to collect you.”

Runner shuddered.

“You do not want to go with him,” Magnus said without a tremor of doubt in his voice. “Their shaman will extract your past life and leave you a near-dead, ruined husk of a man. We are... well, we are Pittsburghers. Just like you. We were born here. We love this city, and we are allied together. We will stand with you if you ask it, Runner, even if the Silver Fangs come. We do so at great personal risk to our bodies and our honor.”

“Not to mention our office buildings,” Teach said wryly.

Rain interrupted. “The only peaceful solution to this conflict is to obtain Wind-howl’s First Klaive and make sure it never falls into Silver Fang hands.” She touched her pipestone bracelet.

“Will you let us call up your ancestor, and ask her for her help?” Teach asked quietly. All three turned to look at Runner.

He stared out over the unearthly landscape of the spirit world. “I reckon I will,” he said quietly.

“Prepare him, please, Rain,” Teach said. “You said you had a song you could use?”

Rain nodded. “Listen to my voice, Runner.” She began to sing a song of remembrance, softly in his ear.

“When he’s ready, we’ll go to the Mill,” Teach said, summoning Sheen to carry them.

• • •

In the spirit world of the Mill, a forge-bucket full of liquid spirit-fire bubbled, the center of a complex ritual working that had been taking place for months. This place was very nearly a Glass Walker caern.

The giant Crinos forms of two werewolves clashed below the glowing cauldron. One, white and thickly muscled, the other blood-red and sinewy.

“Truce,” Silvestri growled under his breath as Yard matched him blow for blow, grappling the Silver Fang. “Truce, I say.” The Red Talon had attacked him the moment

he stepped sideways. He had walked out of Teach's building, hailed a cab, and made his way directly to the Mill, knowing that sooner or later the other Garou would be there.

Silvestri had been told of the Rite of the Caern that the Glass Walker was planning for the topmost tower of one of the oldest steel mills in the United States, but could scarcely believe such a place would ever be used. Finding a Red Talon Ahroun who had been hiding in human lands waiting for him was not at all what he expected. Their fight had been quick and fierce, both of them evenly matched.

"I piss on your truce," Yard growled.

"We want the same thing, my good Red Talon."

"Do we?" Yard was trying to remember why he was here. Sunkmanitu wanted him to be. Which seemed ridiculous, now that he considered it. What possible good would his being here do the ancient spirit?

"You want the First Klaive, do you not?" The Silver Fang grinned.

The Red Talon narrowed his eyes.

"Our oracles have spoken. The spirit of Wind-howls has returned. There are three Garou in this Wyrn-eaten city who are summoning it. Now let's help each other, and I promise I'll give you the blade when we're done examining it."

In his Crinos form, Yard could barely express himself in the human tongue Conroy had taught him, so he switched from English to the language of the Garou. "Our people have a name for this Klaive. It is called the Great Failing. Why would anyone want to give up the use of fang and claw for human weapons?" Yard was getting angrier, just thinking about it.

Silvestri answered in English. "Oh, I know they are not quite fond of it. And you, you my good friend, you are in need of a restoration of honor with your people, are you not? Would it not gain you great honor to destroy the First Klaive at your tribe's next great moot?"

Yard wanted to rip out the Silver Fang's throat and feast, to redden his talons with his blood. But the idea of delivering the Failing to his elders was compelling. It might even buy forgiveness.

"What must I do?" Yard growled.

Silvestri looked past the Talon, saw the Shadow Lord moving towards him, darkling blade bared. The ritualists had arrived. The Glass Walker and the Child of Gaia would be here, with the new cub, and the summoning would be nigh.

"Get him!" Silvestri yelled, and flicked a throwing knife at the Philodox emerging from the gloom. The Shadow Lord turned to the side, narrowly avoiding the throw.

Yard turned to meet the Shadow Lord, who moved with an economy of motion to fight.

“I did not fancy entertaining out of town guests,” Magnus said gruffly. “You gentlemen should probably find your way back home.”

They moved as one, Silvestri and Yard, framing a two-prong attack. Magnus parried with the impossibly quick sweeps of Darkshard. As strong as titanium, the smoky blade bit into the Red Talon and swept across his guard to chime against the silver-steel of Silvestri’s weapon. Yard went low, seeking to hamstring the Philodox while Silvestri attacked high. A sweep of shadowy blade nearly took Yard’s nose off while halting to a stop just long enough to deflect Silvestri’s overhead strike.

Teach settled down silently on a platform high above the fiery steel chamber, with Runner and Rain next to him.

“Whoa, can that old guy really —” Runner said, but Teach silenced him. Runner nearly gasped when he saw that one of those creatures was Yard. It was unmistakable, his gait, his snuffling, snarling demeanor.

“Focus on me.” Rain said to Runner, who nodded, closing his eyes. She began to hum and held Runner’s hand, her pipestone bracelet rattling.

Teach drew Sheen near to him, commanding her to become a reflecting pool, then set the disk of the pool on its side. Teach whispered, “Come forth, Wind-howls. Come forth, Galliard of the first ones.”

Runner felt his eyes go dark as light emanated from them. He could not see but sensed that something else was using his eyes, a most peculiar feeling. “I am here, Theurge,” the ancestor spirit said with Runner’s lips, speaking in the Garou tongue.

“We have made the way ready for you. Will you summon the blade through this water, great Galliard? I lend my power and strength to this task,” Teach said over the sound of blade and claw against blade down below.

Runner reached his hand into the water, seeking after the weapon, across the miles, across the spirit world, hand shifting to a clawed paw, reaching. Finding something there, a cold shaft of bone, or stone, or wood, Runner closed his hand around the weapon, and drew it forth.

The First Klaive slid into his hand, and slowly out of the spirit-circle.

Teach grinned in triumph. “You have it!”

“I do.” Runner’s voice was oddly overlaid with a female Garou’s. “But it is a thing of spirit only. It must be forged anew. Sung into existence.” She turned to look at Rain, who nodded. Runner’s hand delivered the Garou blade into the Child of Gaia’s.

As she took it, she saw at once the taint that it bore, a look of sad confirmation on her face. "As I thought, it's very essence is foul. A thing deeply tainted. I've never seen the spirit form of a klaive before."

Wind-howls nodded with a despairing look on Runner's face. "Though I slew many enemies, I was betrayed by it. I was myself slain soon after. I... I sinned against Gaia. I took something peaceful, beautiful, and full of life, and turned it into a thing for killing, for destruction. It was tainted by the Wyrms before it ever struck Wyrms flesh."

Teach blinked in surprise. "You mean to say, all this time... every... every single klaive since..."

"They are all tools of the Wyrms in one way or another. They are instruments of hubris, Theurge." Wind-howl's voice said. "Sometimes it is necessary to fight fire with fire."

"Not this time." Rain whispered, and produced a vial of glowing pale liquid, unstoppered, and let it flow down the blade. "The tears of Gaia," Rain said, "Let this thing be cleansed."

"No!" yelled Teach.

The liquid spilled onto the platform, and down into the fiery churn of the crucible below. And the First Klaive melted like an icicle being doused by steaming hot water. The blade became nothing but a shapeless form on the floor of the platform, and even that began to trickle away like a bead of rain on a car hood.

"NO!" Teach said. "Dammit! We could've used that! Why did you do this, Rain?"

Rain stood her ground, looking to Teach's left to stare into the eyes of Sunkmanitu, who smiled back to her, invisibly. She looked back into Teach's eyes. "Just wait."

The pool of silvery liquid fell off the platform and landed on the mill floor below, between the dueling Garou.

Out of the small silver pool a Glade Child emerged, the original spirit of the First Klaive. The small but powerful spirit stepped between the fighting Garou.

The Red Talon froze, and honor demanded that the Silver Fang and Shadow Lord also hold. The Glade Child padded over to the Talon and curled up at his feet, circling until it became a moonstone circle, a spirit token of Gaia herself that then vanished into the floor.

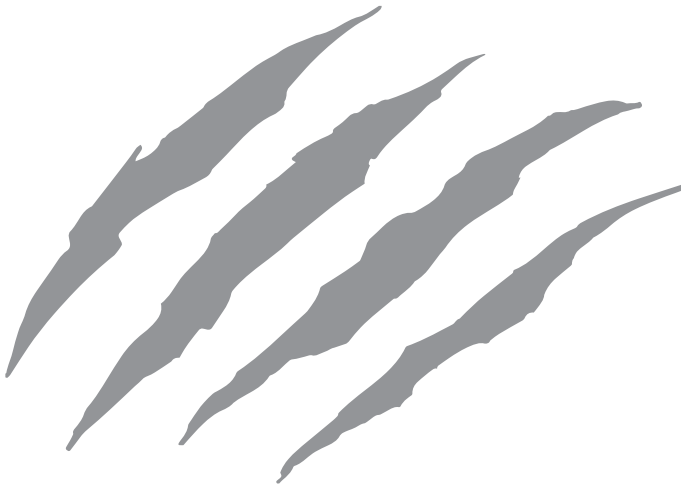
A spirit so ancient, it had gathered power for centuries. Now it was using the power of light and life to create spontaneously the Caern of Boiling Steel.

A shiver ran through Runner's body in recognition of what had happened. "Put away your weapons," cried the Galliard Wind-howls in the Garou tongue. "This is now a holy place."

And Sunkmanitu, the one also known as Coyote, laughed, and said to Rain, "Our bargain is over, we are even!" before bowing, and vanishing. Rain's pipestone bracelet vanished with him.

A sound like a hive of angry hornets the size of locomotives began to rise in the distance. Silvestri cursed and pivoted his warrior's stance. "Now is not the time to put away weapons, Garou, nor is it the time to fight each other. Now the rising tide of Banes come, to challenge this new caern. Now we must all fight against the Wurm, or this place will fall just as suddenly as it has started!"

Klaives drawn, Crinos-formed and claws readied, the Garou braced themselves to fight.



Straw Death

Ethan Skemp

Selma's pack was dead. And it would have been so much easier if she'd died with them.

The Dancers had been fucking clever about it. They'd come at the Fisher Kings outmatched and undergunned, just like you expected from fanatics. Picked a fight they knew they couldn't win, and let her pack think that it was just a fool's mistake. Let a couple get pulled down and torn apart, to make it look good. And then the survivors bolted for it, limping — limping a little too much. *Just like a whippoorwill*, she thought, *if it's whippoorwills that do that. Pretending they had a broken wing, and leading us away.*

When the Fisher Kings had torn off after the Spirals to finish them off, they'd run right into the second wave. Two fresh packs and the remains of a third in all, against Selma's one.

Now she lay in the dirt under a rusted El Camino on blocks, its bed full of salvaged car batteries. She had a wound that wouldn't close in her side, and the reek of leaking battery acid all around her. Her pack totem? Gone, probably; one werewolf is not a pack, and so Fisher would be free to go off elsewhere. If he was still around, he wasn't talking to her. It pained her Fenrir guts to crawl into a corner and hide — but there were too many of them, and still a chance she'd be taken alive. And whatever shame there was in hiding would be nothing compared to the degradations they'd have for her.

She hated the junkyard. She hated its acres of reeking metal and oily ground. She'd hated it, in particular, whenever Daryl called the pack over for a strategy meeting there, because she felt he was insulting them, but she knew her packmate too well to believe he was doing it on purpose. *Nobody* liked the junkyard. The place stank of rust and desperation, like the rest of the town all distilled into a pinpoint half

a block wide. Now here she was, lying in stinking chemical-soaked dirt, rusty and desperate herself.

Am I giving up?

All she had to do was hold out. She'd dragged herself under the car, and fallen into dream, and found a dreamer when she was there. She'd been lucky; she'd found a Silent Strider. Travels-With-the-Wind swore she'd find the other two packs of the sept for Selma, and then the Strider was gone, awake and on her way. Selma didn't linger in the dream after that, however more tempting it might be than the junkyard. Now there was nothing left but to run, to hide, or to fight a pack of Dancers on her own.

Tactically, the clever thing to do was to hide. When the Skybreakers and the Rust Paint Band came in, then she could fight and they would win. Running would be a fool's game — unless the Dancers thought so as well, and expected her to hide. The more time they spent looking for her hiding place, the more distance she could put between them. Fighting — it would be a brave death, but a useless one. She couldn't take out enough of the Dancers to make a difference when the other packs came, and she wouldn't be able to tell the others how her packmates died. But with two packs beside her, she'd be able to carve out her vengeance and, if lucky, be around to pass on the tale.

All she had to do was live. But as she lay in the chemical-soaked dirt under a ceiling of rust, she realized she had been composing her last song — the song she'd sing before Great Fenris.

I come before you, Great Fenris, in hopes my death was a worthy one.

She almost growled at herself. *Is it? Will it be a worthy death if I lie here in the dirt? Or will it be a straw death later on?*

She abruptly shook her head. The straw death: her grandfather had kept talking about it like that, as though he expected her to be burned on a pile of straw if she died at peace. As if many Garou had the luxury to die at peace these days. Weren't many Litany-breakers who suffered their people to tend their sickness. Weren't many lasting long enough to get sick enough to die from it. Her grandfather hadn't. She wondered if he was happy, wherever his spirit had gone.

From the northeast came a whistle. *Whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will.*

So they were here already. She couldn't smell anything over the battery acid, but she knew the scents that'd be following her. Their speaker, his reek of expensive body spray and excessive detergents. The sickening musk of their lupus. And blood. They'd smell of blood.

No good, she thought. They've been scouting. They know the best way to lose a tracker would be to run through this stinking junk. She closed her eyes. I can stand a chance if the Skybreakers and the Rust Paint Band get here. The Strider must've gotten through. How far will they be?

She focused again on the song, not even really conscious she was doing so. It wouldn't come together. When she stood before Fenris, would she sing of these last horrible hours? Could she sing of her dead brothers and sisters?

Her pack. Daryl, huge and rough and covered in burn scars. He died with a deed name he'd never answered to, a bar tab at Malone's that would never get paid off, and an army of friends who'd never know he'd be drinking with Mother Rat from now on. Val Dollar-by-the-Dozen, who'd looked at the war like a math puzzle and had always been pretty sure she could solve it. Val had sworn just last night that she was on the cusp of a pact to invoke the old spirit of Local Jobs without getting the Weaver entangled as well.

Sturn. It had taken Sturn the better part of the thirty years she'd known him to accept her as Valkyria. The man had thought like a relic, probably just to be perverse, even though he was ten years her younger. But Sturn Blood-on-His-Hands would be standing before Great Fenris now, tall and proud in his death, maybe telling him that she'd be along directly herself. Jace... Jace would be somewhere else, wherever Pegasus gathered her women. She said she dreamed of clean water and silver that wouldn't burn. Maybe that'd be her reward, paid for by those last silver bullets she'd sent burning into their Dancer attackers.

Ahmet. It hurt most to think of him. Ahmet had always been her closest friend, since they were cubs together. It had always felt as though they shared blood. He was one of the few people who'd ever made her laugh. When she took her husband on the night their child was conceived, she had secretly thought of Ahmet in the dark, calling to mind his easy grin and the smell of his sweat. It was the finest lovemaking she'd ever shared with Orson, to her shame. And he had died without ever knowing. They both had.

How do I sing of my pack to Fenris, she thought, when I outlived them all?

The whistle came again. *Whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will.*

My pack — I outlived my pack. My family — I outlived my husband.

Orson. The poor man. Good-hearted and strong, man enough to be a father to their child all but on his own. Never complained, no matter how much right he had. And he'd had plenty of right to. Selma had made a poor wife, by the way most people measured it. Never needing him. Never there for him when he needed her.

She'd been surprised how quickly he was gone. An accident, late at night, and she'd gotten to the hospital as soon as she could — but he hadn't pulled through. She had always suspected he might not have had the strength to hold on. His heart had been broken since the day he first realized that as good and strong a man he was, Selma didn't love him like he deserved. She pitied him.

Enough. She drove away the face of her husband. *I have a son. My son will live on.*

Arn. She remembered the smell of him when he was an infant, and... so little else. She had avoided him. Her son, her blood — her duty to the line. She flinched; shame came on her, a phantom pain. Her nails dug into the dirt.

• • •

“For God’s sake, Mom! You don’t take any interest in me for twenty years and now you want to tell me how to live my life?”

“I have one child, Arn.” Her voice had been so cool. “If had known he would be a homosexual, I would have made time to have another. Someone has to carry on the family name.”

“THAT’S what this is about? You’re worried I’m not going to give you grandchildren?” He held his head in his hands. “I can’t believe this. My God, Mom, it’s the twenty-first century, I’m *bi*, and for fuck’s sake, when the time comes we could even adopt. If I even *wanted* to have kids, and—” he choked a little— “do you even have any idea how afraid I am that— that I’d take more after you than Dad?”

“Don’t worry, Arn.” She shook her head. “You never took after me nearly as much as I wanted.”

• • •

Whip-poor-will.

So close, it started her. The crunch of boots on shifting, oily dirt. She lay still as as the boots walked past the El Camino, all casual and easy like an evening stroll. She couldn’t smell the body spray and detergent over the battery acid, but she knew it was him — the man with the shaved head and the roughly trimmed beard. The Dancers’ speaker.

“I’m a little disappointed, Thundertalker. As a Get of Fenris, I mean. I’m disappointed in you as a Get.”

Did he see her? No. His stride was slow, but he didn’t pause. His tone of voice — he was pretending to be disaffected, but a drum-taut tension lay underneath. He wasn’t sure if she’d escaped.

“You ran, Thundertalker. You ran, *Selma*. No Get ever wants to live that badly. Well, a few do... but then they wonder if they might be better off as... something other than Get. Do you take my meaning?”

The boots kept going. She thought she heard him sniff the air. Still he walked. Her heart heated up. The stink of the battery acid — it seemed to be working.

“We’ve welcomed a few of yours. Ours now. I don’t mean our tribe has some of yours — you already knew that. Our Hive. We have a few there.” He was maybe fifteen feet past the El Camino. “And yet, even though they realized they didn’t want to die just yet, now they’ve lost that fear again. You know?”

Keep walking, cocksucker, she thought. Keep walking, and when the others catch up, then I’ll break that salesman’s patter of yours. I want to hear you scream for what your pack did.

The thought of it gave her new fire. She recognized the warning signs, purged her imagination of the dreams of his pain. Not the time to Rage. Not here.

And then a rune at her wrist, tattooed under her skin, came alight.

Now?

She pulled her hand close, half-disbelieving. The birch-rune. The black had turned to red. She had mixed the ink with Arn's own blood, so that she would know. The child was born. A month before they'd expected, and she hadn't even known about the labor.

Arn's son. A grandson.

She shuddered. Slowly she raised her gaze from her tattooed rune-bracelet to her right hand. She held it in front of her, and stared at it. Shaking.

I'm afraid.

I... I don't want to die.

The Spiral-speaker's voice was farther away now. Upwind — if he couldn't smell her before, he wouldn't do so now. "It's strange, Selma. Sometimes I think the Get are closest to us. Do you know what I mean? In not being afraid to die, that is. Everybody is afraid to die. Except you... and us."

She closed her hand into a fist.

The voice was fainter. So was the whistling. She heard his speech clearly all the same. "I've often wondered about that. Are you that like us? When you want to die in battle, is that because you're so wounded and raw that death would be a release? Oh, we all go on because it hurts, because we don't have much choice in the matter, but when the blood spills, there's really nothing more to fear in death than there is in life. I think you might understand me here, Selma."

He mocks me!

No. He believes this. He is wounded and ashamed, like I am. He doesn't know how to live any other way. He doesn't know any other way to die. He is a Galliard and he doesn't know any other songs.

She stared at the birch-rune on her still-trembling wrist.

Only a Black Spiral Dancer would look at death and call it release. Even a broken animal wants to survive. A good death is glorious, but a good life...

I want to hold my grandson. I want to live. I want the straw death.

I want... why can I not speak?

She closed her eyes. The stink of the battery acid faded, and she drifted for a moment into the dim ocean of dream. She was alone, and her own voice came to her.

You are a Galliard. Put it in words. Everything you have to live for. Every vital gulp of air stolen on the doorstep of Hel, every heartbeat shared with someone you hold. The scent of your grandson. Of your son, now a man. The howls of triumph when your allies come and avenge your pack. Everything you could experience, ev-

everything you could achieve with even one more day. Everything you are. Everything you aspire to be.

Put it in words.

She closed her eyes, and waited for the words to come. In the dark, she felt phantom pain, and then determination.

And her lips moved in a whisper.

“Hail, Great Fenris, firstborn among wolves, king of valor.”

The diminishing noises to upwind suddenly stopped.

Whip-poor-will.

She rolled out from under the El Camino and slowly stood. “I stand before you in pride and humility. There is no greater honor in being your daughter, and every day of my life—”

More agitated. *Whip-poor-will!* Four paws running toward her. Close.

She took in a breath, sang louder. “I lived every day of my life striving to be worthy of your blood!”

“She’s here!” Shouts from all sides. “She’s broken! We got a broken one!”

She straightened up. She remembered the viper-spirit she’d held in her teeth, and what it had given to her. She called on the memory of its bite, and her blood thickened, burned within her, ran black and poisonous from the wound in her side. “I have failed people, but I did so for you. I have made my kin weep, but my tribe will sing in joy remembering what I did for you. I walk to you on a road of my enemy’s bones and blood and terror!”

The first one, skinny and matted, leapt up on the El Camino’s hood. He locked eyes with her. She tasted fear on the wind even as he bared his teeth. “Fffool,” came the guttural snarl, “schhowed yrrself—”

She let go of the wound in her side, raised her bloodied fist. The Call of the Wyld rang from her throat. “My scars are glory. My pain is wisdom. My death is HONOR!”

He seemed to understand, for a moment, before her Crinos claw tore his jaw from his head and sent him spiraling into the junkyard dirt.

Nobody was whistling anymore. They came howling and snarling and blaspheming. They came for her, and she ran into them, tearing at them, pulling muscle from bone, opening them up in rushes of blood and filth — and singing. She sang until the Rage boiled away her sight and her pain, until the oblivion of fury drowned her.

And even then, she sang a song for Fenris.

That Kind of Kin

Jess Hartley

I fucking hate Garou.

Okay, maybe not all Garou. I mean, there's likely hundreds — thousands even — that I haven't met yet. I've never even been to Europe, and to hear some of the tribes talk, that place is chock-full of werewolves. Statistically speaking, I'm sure somewhere out there, there's a Garou that isn't a pompous, self-righteous, megalomaniac ass.

But I sure as hell haven't met him yet.

Something about the ability to shapeshift seems to inherently instill a person with a better-than-the-rest-of-the-world attitude. I thought for a while that it was just that the changing blood only ran strong enough to shapeshift in people who were already jerks, like some sort of asshole-exclusive mutation. But over the years I've met perfectly nice folk who, once they went through their First Change, turned into the same sort of arrogant, egotistical ass-hats that seem to fill the roles of the Garou Nation. It's like they have to turn in their personalities in exchange for their super-secret shape-shifting badge, and they can't even remember what it's like to be human any more.

I don't know if it's the same for the wolf-born; I haven't had a lot of contact with them. I like to think that maybe it's different, that when a wolf shifts for the first time he's not cursed to leave the best parts of his nature behind. Maybe coming from a culture with an inherent pecking order makes it easier for them to transition into being Garou without becoming total douche-canoes. I hope so, anyway.

What can I say, I'm a fucking optimist.

“Damn, that hurts,” I muttered through clenched teeth as another bolt of lightning shot up my leg. So much for “do no harm”. Or maybe Theurges don’t take that vow.

“Don’t look.” The words sounded strange, but then most English did coming out of a lupine muzzle, and despite the lull we weren’t out of the woods enough for the big red werewolf tending to my wound to switch out of her war form yet. “Think of something else,” she ordered, half-sentence and half-snarl.

I *had* been thinking of something else. But my distaste for the Garou in general could only distract me for so long from the torment this one in particular was currently inflicting on me. Even my bad attitude had its limits.

“Leave it for now. It’ll be fine.” I tried to push the werewolf away, but her steely grip around my shin didn’t relent.

“Will Not.” She spoke slowly, enunciating each syllable carefully, as if speaking to a child. Which was, all things being the same, pretty much the way I was used to being talked to by the Garou.

Reason number 532 that I fucking hate Garou.

I struggled again, just as futilely, as Rowan McGregor (aka the big red werewolf) worked on my wound. It was like trying to wrestle my leg out of a bear trap.

“Bite Tainted.”

“Big shock there.” I looked over at what was left of the thing that had done the deed. It had been a horrific hybrid of wolf and spider before Rowan and her buddies had played tug-o-war with it. Now, it was nothing but a pile of mud-covered meat.

Course, the rest of us didn’t look much different.

Of the seven of us who had set out that morning to investigate a potential sighting of fomori holed up in one of the fire cabins in my forest district, four were scattered around the clearing we’d been ambushed in, along with a half-dozen or more of the bad guys. The wet ground and mud puddles had turned the battlefield into a mud pit of gore, with blood and body parts turning the churned-up ground into a red-brown slurry.

Only three of us were still moving, although none of us had completely escaped the Dancers and their minions. Standing guard was Sorrow, known formally as “His Father’s Sorrow, His Mother’s Shame”.

Yeah, that’s his real name. Nothing like blaming the offspring for the sins of his parents, and making him live with that reminder every minute of every day of his life. Like it’s not bad enough that he’s a frickin’ hairless mutant. Reason number 533 on my list of things I hate about the Garou.

A set of jagged slashes had shredded the back of Sorrow's tunic, revealing matching wounds beneath that were literally healing themselves as I watched. Even in Crinos, Sorrow was bald and bare-skinned, so he wore loose clothing to cover up the more blatant bits of his anatomy. Not that the Garou really cared; he was just metis in their eyes, and naked or clothed, that made him almost as much of a second-class citizen as me.

Almost.

The other Garou survivor was Rowan McGregor, aka the big red werewolf, who was (from the feel of it) currently jabbing hot poker into the torn muscle of my calf. She'd taken a bullet slug to the shoulder, but apparently the fomori hadn't been packing silver, so all that remained of the wound was a patch of missing fur and a spatter of blood in the surrounding area. And, I have to say, at the moment I was really envying her that.

Because, the third survivor of our little party was me, Brianna Hyland. Fianna Kinfolk, slow healer, and self-avowed hater of all things Garou. And the bite that spider-wolf thing had taken out of my calf was really taking a toll on me.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not one of those "oh, I wish I was a werewolf, they're so cool" kind of Kin. I grew up knowing that I was Kinfolk, that I wasn't going to change, and to be honest, I've never wanted to. I mean, the whole idea kind of freaks me out.

But watching Sorrow heal up those claw marks without so much as wincing made the fumbling Rowan was doing with her clumsy Crinos fingers around my shredded calf all the more difficult to endure.

"Must Cleanse. Then Heal."

I hissed in pain as she pulled the bandage tight.

I'd seen Rites of Cleansing before, even been a part of them when some "adventure" for the Garou had gone poorly. Unlike their hocus-pocus magic spirit Gifts, rites took time. I wasn't looking forward to sitting there in the bloody mud, surrounded by dead bodies, while Rowan got her "woogie" groove on — but I didn't have a lot of choice. I'd seen what happened when Wyrms-crap sank its claws into someone, and I had no interest in ending up like one of those misshapen monsters that had taken up residence in the fire outlook. And it wasn't like I could just walk away. I'd barely hobbled over to the truck after the spider-thing had bit me, and I'd been slow enough that one of the formori had caught up with me on the way. I hadn't had time to get my service pistol back out, and my shotgun had been twisted into a pretzel by one of the things that jumped us early on. If Rowan hadn't seen what was going on, and intercepted—and by intercepted, I mean, tore the fomori's head from its shoulders—I'd have been dead meat.

So, I hadn't had a lot of choices. I just sat there in the mud, like a good little Kin, and waited as Rowan began her magic song and dance.

Being servile didn't come easy to me. I just wasn't that kind of Kinfolk. My mother was a good Kin, popping out twelve of us kids (and suffering a handful of miscarriages) by the time she was forty. She died in childbirth with the thirteenth — my youngest brother, Liam — and nothing that the attending theurge did could stop her from slipping away.

I think she was just tired. Tired of being pregnant. Tired of giving birth. Tired of Dad and his family swooping in before she was even out of the birthing bed, and doing their woogie stuff over the babe she'd just produced. Tired of the Garou absconding with her children as soon as they'd undergone their First Change, and ignoring the rest of us like the unworthy non-shifting dirt they saw us as. Saw her as. Treated her like.

I could see it in her eyes, the day Liam was born. She was tired of being the slot machine that my father's side of the family kept plunking genetic quarters into, hoping they'd hit the Garou-baby jackpot. Tired of having no value except as a werewolf-making flesh factory. Tired of being Kin.

Just plain tired.

But, what could she do? She was just Kinfolk. Not a shifter. Not Garou. She was born to her fate, bred for it, trained into it, from the time she was old enough to keep the secrets and know her place. She had it beat into her, figuratively and literally, by her mother and her mother's mother (who had both also been "good Kin"). I don't think it ever even occurred to her that there might be another way.

I promised myself, as the theurge pulled the blood-stained sheet over her head that day, that I was never going to be "that kind of Kinfolk". And I'm not.

There are those who say I've failed Gaia because of it, but they can take a flying leap. I've devoted my life to the cause — just not in the same way my mother did. I may have refused to marry or mate with the "worthy Garou" that my father picked out for me, but that doesn't mean I haven't helped in my own way. I have worked my ass off to be everything they could have asked of me and more — everything but that.

I took the hardest classes in high school; worked in the evenings, and saved every cent plus applied for every scholarship I could get my hands on, to pay for a college so far away from home that I'd hoped he'd forget about trying to match me up with one of the up-and-comers in his sept.

Between classes and work, I taught myself everything else I could imagine would be possibly useful: tracking, orienteering, veterinary science, wilderness survival, and, of course, marksmanship. By the time I got my Masters, I could literally

take off from a trailhead and hike into the wilderness, and survive comfortably for a couple of weeks in almost any climate or environment. And, after I got the job with the Forestry Service out here in Oregon, that's pretty much what I did with my spare time: work, hike, work, shoot, work, and work some more.

Which, long-story-short, is pretty much how I ended up thirty miles from nowhere, crouched down behind a mint-green Forest Service truck, surrounded by blood and werewolves, and wishing to the high heavens that I'd not answered my phone that morning.

If I hadn't — or if I'd been less driven to prove that I was doing my duty by my family and their cause (just not as a brood mare) — I would be back home with a cup of coffee, rather than sitting in the mud trying to wipe brains and gore and God only knows what else off of my hands.

I could have been safe and dry, rather than bruised and bleeding in the middle of what had been the last battle for some of Gaia's warriors — and almost for me.

I could have turned my back, and pretended it wasn't my problem.

But I'm not that kind of Kinfolk, either.

Rowan's sing-songy chant cut off abruptly, pulling me from my thoughts. For a second, I thought she was just finished, that time had flown by faster than I expected it to. Then she slumped to the ground, Crinos form shifting to Homid as she fell. A rune-carved knife, as long as my arm, protruded from her back. The blade dripped with an ichor that hissed as it ate away at everything it touched: skin, flesh, the knot-worked vest that Rowan was so proud of. Even the mud boiled where the oily-black tar drip-dropped to the ground.

Everything froze for a second — one of those heartbeats of stillness where your muscles don't obey your mind as it screams to run, run, run — and then everything exploded into movement.

"Get the Kin out of here!" Rowan ordered over her shoulder.

The Kin. Not Bree. Not Brianna. Not even "her". I'd known Rowan for years, ever since I'd come to Oregon, and when push came to shove, I was still nothing more than "the Kin" in her eyes. Old habits die hard. I started to protest at being labeled like an item: the chair, the table, the Kin, but my mouth snapped shut at the sight of the black-red bubbles of tainted blood on her lips.

I lurched to my feet, pulling my pistol and biting back a scream as I forced weight onto my injured leg.

Sorrow started to move towards me, spurred by the urgency in Rowan's voice, but then caught sight of the weapon stuck in his packmate's back, and took several giant-werewolf-sized steps towards her. She barked commands at him, ordering him

towards me, but loyalty and duty warred within him, pulling the hairless metis back and forth into a state of immobility.

I blinked away tears of pain as I looked around the muddy clearing, trying to find Rowan's assailant.

It didn't take much looking.

At the edge of the forest, a monster stood, arms akimbo as if waiting for its presence to be recognized. It was a perversion of the Crinos form, a demonic werewolf that, like its minion that had gnawed my leg, was a nightmarish amalgam of arachnid and lupine forms. Faceted eyes gleamed from beneath beetled brows, over the top of an out-jutted protrusion that was more maw than muzzle. Its pelt was dark, but not the healthy black of a deep forest, or the clean ink of a night sky. Instead, it was an absence of color, of fitness, of anything good or right, matted and mange-ridden and laced in nauseating patterns with half-healed scars.

A jagged blade, the twin to the one that had struck Rowan low, was clenched in the monster's right fist. Its left hand was splayed, fingers and claws easily twice as long as they should have been, and dripping with ichor. The black ooze had eaten away its fur even further there, leaving the skin blistered and bleeding. The Dancer did not seem to notice.

Wincing as I shifted my weight to brace myself, I swung my pistol up and fired.

I know my gun. It is a .357 SIG Sauer, with a high capacity magazine loaded chock full of an even dozen of the heaviest hollow points available. I practice with it on a weekly basis, and have for years, to the point where, in an emergency, it's like an extension of my hand. A loud, explosive, reach-out-and-touch someone, bad-ass extension.

I emptied the clip into the Dancer, center mass. A blasphemous blossom of blood and gore exploded from the creature's chest, bone shards and bits of flesh protruding obscenely from the wounds.

It looked down at the mess that had been its middle, and then at me — and laughed.

My body reacted before my brain could, trigger finger squeezing over and over in hopes of putting more lead, more space, more anything between me and the monster. But the gun was empty, and the locked-down trigger barely rattled as I yanked at the immobile metal. It didn't make the noise an empty revolver would have, but the lack of bang was a loud enough message.

Click, click, click, click. That's gun-talk for "you're shit out of luck."

"Out of bulletsss, ape-ssslut?" Despite its form, the Dancer's voice was almost serpentine, rather than the guttural chuffing I was accustomed to from Crinos Garou. The

words snaked their way across the clearing between us, and made me feel like I needed to bleach my brain to rid it of the taint of their touch. “Oh, thiss isss sssso much fun.”

I fumbled at my belt for one of my spare magazines, cursing at having left my silver bullets at home. We were supposed to be fighting fomori. That means hollow points with stopping power, not light-weight, and often inaccurate silver. The right ammunition for the right target. Damn the enemy for changing the game plan.

“SORROW, GET THE KIN OUT OF HERE!” The strength of Rowan’s words finally broke through her packmate’s conflicted immobility. The hairless metis let out a wail that should have roused the dead. I swear, he howled so hard I could hear his bones creak and muscles shriek in answer to it. But I couldn’t pull my eyes away from the monster in front of me, to see what was happening behind.

I stared, transfixed, as the Dancer raised its sword. Its maw broadened into a mockery of a smile, a leering, drooling sacrilege of merriment. It cocked the weapon back over its shoulder, and, with joints moving in impossible angles, hurled it forward.

I dropped and rolled towards the truck, hoping against hope that the blade would miss.

Thrown swords don’t sound like they do in the movies. There was no whirling, no swoosh through the air. Just the meaty thunk as the Dancer’s wyrm-klaive struck home in flesh.

A thunk, but no pain, other than the firey protest shooting up my leg.

I heard a whimper from behind me, like someone had kicked a puppy, followed by a sickly splash. Grabbing the truck door handle, I pulled myself upright, looking back for the source of the sound.

The Dancer’s second klaive mirrored the first in Rowan’s back. She lay, inhumanly still, face down in the mud at her packmate’s feet.

For the first time, I saw the werewolf called His Father’s Sorrow, His Mother’s Shame standing straight upright, shoulders back rather than bowed with the weight of his parent’s wrong-doing. His muzzle was lifted defiantly, rather than dropped to his chest, his eyes ablaze with fury. His entire body seemed bathed in a silver halo, and his claws gleamed as if they’d been dipped in the molten metal.

“YOU!” he snarled, in a tongue that was unmistakable and yet nothing like human speech. “YOU DIE NOW!”

What followed happened faster than I can begin to explain, faster than I could even see. One moment Sorrow was beside me—the next he and the Dancer were locked in combat too fierce to be called hand-to-hand. They were tooth-to-skin, claw-to-belly, raking, biting, snarling in a fleshy tornado of destruction. I couldn’t

hope to move quickly enough to interfere, to tip the scales in Sorrow's favor in any way. So I did the smart thing. I opened the truck door, grabbed my tranq rifle and the box of darts stashed beneath the seat, reloaded my pistol, and hoped for the best.

Unfortunately, when dealing with werewolves, the best rarely happens.

In what seemed like hours, but was likely a moment or two, the snarling, writhing mass of mud-covered wolf-flesh fell silent and still. Sorrow's hairless body was on top, entwined in an unmoving knot with that of the black-pelted Dancer. I watched, hands shaking and heart pounding, waiting for the victor to move.

And, as Sorrow's shredded shirt began to slowly rise from the tangled pile of bodies, I allowed myself a glimmer of hope. Maybe he'd done it. Maybe the metis had overcome evil, vindicated his packmate's death and those of the other Garou who fell. Proven that, despite what the Nation thought of him, he was capable. Strong. Worthy.

That faint gleam of hope sputtered and sparked, resonating with places inside of me that I hadn't realized were feeling its absence. I wanted to cheer for Sorrow then, for what he'd accomplished, for what he'd proven.

And then, just as quickly, the spark was snuffed out as the Dancer kicked Sorrow's unresponsive body off from on top of it, and rolled to its feet. Still in the form he had been born in, Sorrow's corpse lay broken and bleeding in the mud, his head nearly severed from his neck, his belly raked open and internal organs shredded. Only the thinnest of sinew and gore still connected the parts of what had once been His Father's Sorrow, His Mother's Shame into a whole.

And that's Reason 534 I hate the Garou. Every time I start to have any kind of empathy for one of them, the son-of-a-bitch up and dies on me.

I chomped down the emotions that threatened to drown me to incapacity, and raised the muzzle of the tranq rifle in the Dancer's direction. The gun was unwieldy and awkward, but I knew my pistol just didn't have the power to deal with this thing. I wasn't sure the tranq darts would, but they were my last, best hope for survival.

"Sssave the Kinfolk, they sssaid... Yesss, I sssaved her... for lassst. Like desssert..."

The Dancer laughed, as the first dart whistled past its head, lodging in a tree a few feet to its right. "Your aim iss poor, wolf-whore." The monster reached out and snapped the dart off, leaving the needle still imbedded in the wood. "I ccertainly hope you're better on your back than you are sstanding upright..."

He gestured obscenely, making it clear the fate that awaited me before—and likely after—I joined Sorrow and Rowan and the rest in the not-so-Happy Hunting Ground in the sky.

“I wasn’t aiming for you; I was just getting my mark.” I answered, slipping the next dart into the chamber without taking my eyes off of my target. “And I’m not that kind of Kinfolk.”

“Not that kind, ssshe sssays...” The empty glass vial of the syringe shattered in the creature’s grip, cutting its gnarled fingers. Blood and glass shards fell into the mud at its feet.

“Nope.” I took a breath, deep but not ragged, my hands steady, as the Dancer took a step forward.

Its forked tongue lolled obscenely out of its muzzle, lapping at the crimson stream flowing from its injured hand. “Then tell usss, apessslut... what kind iss ssshe? Ssshee likesss to be on top? Bent over on her kneesss?”

It just never ends. Doesn’t matter which side of the battle they’re on, werewolves are jerks.

“Doggie style, then?” The Dancer chortled at its own pun. “I’m going to tear off that bald metis’ cock, bend you over and...” Drool began to drip from the monster’s mouth as it began to describe in excruciating detail exactly what kind of horrors its own Kin might be subjected to, and those it was looking forward to inflicting on me.

I listened, exhaling slowly. When my breath was gone, I gently squeezed the trigger.

“In your — ” Its words were cut short by the whisper of the dart’s fletching on the wind between us, and the soft “chunk” as it found its target in the monster’s mouth.

The creature’s reaction was more annoyance than pain. “You think some poison dart will stop me? I drink balefire for breakfast, Kinslut!”

It bit down hard, crushing the dart, and spat out the pieces. Bloody bubbles splattered on the creature’s brimstone-black muzzle, glassy shards and sparkling powder gleaming against the diseased flesh.

I gritted my teeth, hoping to hell my plan would work. Just in case, I slipped another dart into the chamber, and aimed for center body mass.

The werewolf reached for its throat. I could almost hear its flesh begin to sizzle from the inside out. Another emotion crossed the monster’s face, replacing its depraved arrogance with first confusion, pain, and finally fear.

“Not poison.” I took a deep breath, and whispered “Silver” as I squeezed the trigger again.

I was aiming for its belly, but the dart struck home lower, in the Dancer's left thigh. The creature's body convulsed as it swatted away the dangling dart. It made no difference though; the load had already found its way into the werewolf's system.

The Dancer fell into the bloody mud, raking at its thigh where the silver dust began working its way into the werewolf's system. But years of living in fear of being forced into the fate my mother had accepted so blithely had prepared me well for this encounter. I'd done my research. The hypodermic needles that I'd fitted the darts with were heavy enough gauge to deliver the suspended silver shavings quickly, and long enough to penetrate even the thickest pelt. And, unlike a bullet, once in a werewolf's body, they couldn't be torn out and their damage-dealing cut short.

But that didn't stop the Dancer from trying.

By the time it lay motionless, the ground was strewn for yards around it with scraps of its own flesh, and blood-matted bits of mangy black pelt. Its left leg was near severed by its own claws, torn arteries and femur showing clearly, and its death rattle emerged not from the blackened muzzle, but hissing out of the rends it had torn in its own throat to try to clear the first dart's charge. Only the forked tip of its tongue still moved, flipping and twisting in the mud like an earthworm trying to escape a hungry bird.

The monster stayed in Crinos, which could have meant a couple of things. Maybe it was metis and really truly dead. Or maybe it was homid or lupus or whatever fucked up breeds the Spirals have, and it was just faking it. I was betting on the first, just based on the mess, but I didn't take any chances. You can't with werewolves — they're just too damned resilient. So, I pulled my pistol and shot it twice in the head from a distance. Then, when it didn't so much as twitch, I hobbled up and emptied the rest of the clip into its carcass. I stood over the body to reload, hands shaking so badly I could hardly slip the new magazine in.

Rain started to fall as I limped back to the truck and hauled myself behind the wheel. The engine roared like a wild animal as I cranked it to life.

I had some hard phone calls to make, once I got back into cell service range. Someone had to know what had happened to Rowan and Sorrow and the rest. They deserved that much. For all their shortcomings, all their prejudices, they'd died in the line of duty, protecting the world from dangers most folks didn't even know existed. I might hate the Garou, but that part you've got to kind of respect, even if they are asses in how they go about it.

I didn't look forward to making that call. Garou don't take bad news well, and as the sole survivor, there was a strong likelihood that somehow this was all going to end up being my fault when fingers started getting pointed. It wasn't going to be pretty, and it wasn't going to be fun.

I could have ignored it, could have left the responsibility for telling the tale to someone else, or made them come looking for me to find out what had happened.

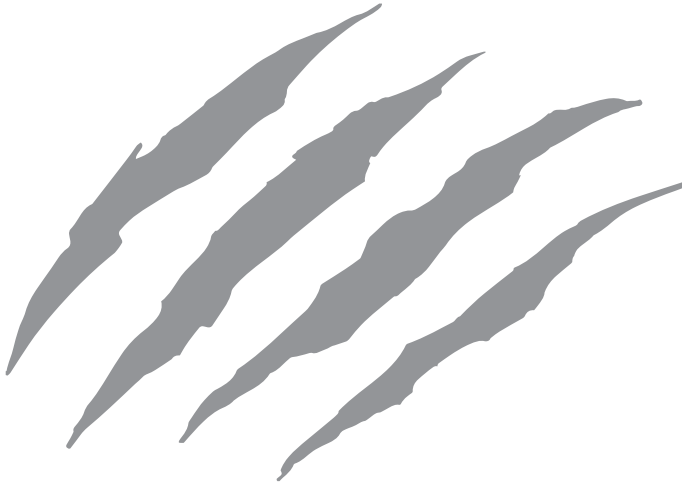
But I'm not that kind of Kinfolk.

I am, however, a bit of a vindictive bitch.

Forest department vehicles are designed to ford creeks, scale boulders, and cross washouts; I couldn't even feel it when I ran over the Dancer's corpse. Or when I backed up, and ran over it again. But it made me happy anyway.

As I turned the truck towards civilization, I allowed myself a small smile in the rearview mirror, as the Dancer's ruined body receded in the distance.

"And that," I said, as much to myself as to the creature's corpse, "is the kind of Kinfolk I am."





Moonshine

Jackie Cassada

We're survivors: me, Packy, Dobro, Giblets, ATM and Zeena the Warrior Maid. After 7 days of dirty fightin', backwoods sneakin', blood-lettin' and hard drinkin', the Thrice-Blessed, Gaia Lovin', Wyrn-Bashin', Mystifyin' Moonshine War is over. Oh, and then there's Trey, the three-legged, one-eyed pit bull that started this whole thing. He's a survivor too.

Let me start a little nearer the beginning. I know the six of us don't look like much, we're just a bunch of hillbillies from up in the mountains, down around Lick Skillet Creek. But we're still Gaia's warriors, maybe not her best, but we do right by her as often as we can. And we make a damn fine batch of moonshine, too. In fact, we brought some of our best to this here moot. Gaia's Glory, we call this batch – made from pure caern water and the best corn mash in five counties, grown on my family's farm down in the holler, just outside the town of Lick Skillet.

You asked for an accounting of what our pack, the Moonshine Warriors, got up to in the town. I hope we ain't in any trouble, because the folk down around our caern — heck, most of the hill folk in general — ain't like your typical human. First, most of the population of Lick Skillet is Kinfolk, and they know it, and their beliefs go deep. And the others that ain't Kinfolk are mountain born and bred, and the mysteries of the mountains run in their blood. The Delirium don't work on most of 'em, cause they know what's out there. Some of 'em think it's a lark to take a six-pack or two, hike on into the deep woods and look for Bigfoot or take pot shots at something they think is a chupacabra. They see a werewolf, and it's just another day in the woods to them.

Now I'm not saying we go around struttin' our stuff all the time. We're as circumspect and roundabout with our doings as the next Garou; we just don't sweat it if someone happens to see one of us making like Lon Chaney. Hell, they see that and they start lookin' around for the cameras, thinkin' there's a movie being shot or something.

So, back to the story of what happened down in Lick Skillet. I guess I ought to start by introducing ourselves. We're the Moonshine Warriors, a pack out of the Balsam Ridge Caern. My uncle, Whistles Down the Lightning, and his pack opened the caern just about a year ago, when a dream led him to the spot. He has his own place, down along the Tennessee border, though, so he needed someone to watch over the caern and maybe grow it some, attract other Garou to it. I'd just found a pack that could stand me, so Lightning told us to settle ourselves in and see what we could make of it.

"Consider it a test of your worth," he said, "cause there's something dark goin' on around here and we need this caern to counter it."

I tried to find out what it was that was so bad, but he couldn't tell me. He just told us to wait and see what transpired. I don't think he knew exactly what "it" was.

I said that the Moonshine Warriors were the only Garou that could stand me — I suppose I need to clarify. I'm Bone Gnawer metis, born and raised in my uncle's caern after my parents died not long after I was weaned. My uncle named me Path of Redemption, but I just go by Path. My pack — well, we're all a bunch of misfits in one way or another. Packy, our Ahroun and mostly leader, is Defends the Pack. He's a Fianna. We gave him that name when he held off a bunch of trash banes that had made a home near the old landfill outside of Lick Skillet so we could finish our trash pickin' — and clean the place up some.

Dobro is a Galliard — one of two with me bein' the other. He's rightly called Singer of the Battle March. We started up the Moonshine Band a few months ago when we found out that most of us could play an instrument and all of us could sing. We do holistic bluegrass and traditional ballads down in the town and sometimes over at the big Food Market. We've played trailer park bashes and high school dances and sometimes we take a road trip and play over in the next county. Anyhow, Dobro writes a lot of our songs, and picks out the arrangements for the traditional stuff. He's a Fianna and fights almost as hard as our Ahroun.

Giblets is another Bone Gnawer, related to me through my mother's sister, who is Kinfolk. My Uncle Lightning is her daddy, and you probably don't want to know how she got her callin' name. She's our Theurge, and a fine one at that.

ATM's our Ragabash and a Glass Walker. He came down from Richmond, Virginia, after a little spot of trouble — purely mistaken identity — involving some cash machines and a security camera that wasn't supposed to be working. Not that it was him who did it, but he decided that it was time to seek something a little bit closer to nature — and found Lick Skillet.

Lastly, we got our Philodox, Zeena the Warrior Maid, also known as Rides the Thunder. She started calling herself Zeena after watching the TV show a few times. She's another Fianna and a metis like me, only she's wall-eyed. I asked her once did it bother her when she was fighting and she told me, "Dude," — she's from Asheville so she talks like that — "I don't need my eyes to smell what I'm fighting!" And that was that. Course then she wanted to know if my club foot was a bother and I said, "Always, but at least it's only one foot!"

I know I'm taking my own sweet time about telling our story, but I keep rememberin' stuff I should mention, so I hope you'll allow me my poetic license plate. You might notice my pack moving around among you brothers and sisters, passing around some bottles. Feel free to take a swig — it's our latest batch of moonshine, this one made under a Theurge moon. It's got a little dash of sumpin' special in it that always happens under the crescent. Other moons do other things and they're just as fine in their own way, but Gaia's Glory is by far the best of the best.

Anyroad, the whole thing started about two months ago when I took a wander down into the heart of Lick Skillet to deliver a batch of fine drinkin' to the town bar — not that they can sell it officially, but folks in the know know to ask Travis — he's the barkeep — for the dessert special. Now Nights Tale, that's the bar's name, don't serve dessert — though they do cough up a mean bowl of pinto beans and fresh corn bread some days and some mighty good Eytalian sandwiches and chips and lots of peanuts in the shell. But not dessert. So if someone asks for the dessert special, they get invited around to the back of the bar where Travis checks 'em out one more time and if he thinks they're okay, he serves 'em some of our moonshine.

It just so happened that our band had booked in for the weekend, which meant Friday and Saturday nights cause the bar closes down on Sunday. That meant that we generally stayed in town at the Roadway Motor Lodge, the only motel in Lick Skillet.

After we got all set up and did our sound check, which took all of five minutes for us, I took a walk to the motel to pick up the liquidities and deliver 'em to Travis. I had two gallon jugs in my back pack and was makin' my way back to the bar when I heard the most hellacious soundin' moan that ever came out of a livin' mouth. It wasn't loud, but it had every bit of pain and sufferin' that anyone could ever imagine feeling in it — and then some. I pegged the sound as comin' from just off the road and figured that it must be some animal that got beat up on by a car and was moanin' away its last little bit of breath before goin' to Gaia. Then the critter moaned again and this sound was even worse than the one I just heard. That's when I knew I couldn't pass it up. The night had just gotten true dark and the Theurge moon was risin', and my eyes set themselves for low-light so I could see what was makin' the sound.

Right in the moonlight, where Gaia's eyes picked out the white patches of fur, lay the most miserable lookin' pit bull I ever seen. At first I thought the dog was a tri-color, part white, part that liver color dog breeders call blue and part red — only then I saw that the red was blood, and growin' larger by the second. It looked like the critter was bleedin' out and in some ferocious pain. Now I had two choices: one was to send her on to Gaia a lot quicker than it would otherwise take and spare the critter some pain. The other choice was what I actually did. I uncorked one of the jugs of Moonshine and poured a slug in the direction of the dog's mouth, thinkin' that it would at least quench its thirst. Well, it did a lot more than that. As I watched, the wounds started healing — so I give the critter another slosh, and I took one myself just for good measure. Pretty soon, the dog scrambled up on its legs — that was when I noticed that it was missin' its right front leg — and started runnin' circles around me, rubbin' up against my legs and tryin' to lick my hands.

I reached down to pet him and he bellied up to me, wriggling around on its back in what looked like a gesture of submission and a plea for a good belly rub combined. So the dog, who I called “Trey” on account of the three legs, followed me to the bar. It was about time for us to start playing so when the rest of the pack gave me a look like “what have you picked up this time?”, I just shook my head and said “Later.” I put my coat down on the floor behind the drums and Trey gave a couple of turns and whuffed and then lay right down and stayed that way for the whole evening.

After the show, we went back to the Roadway and brought Trey inside. I told the pack what I had found. “I figured he’s a fightin’ dog that just fought his last fight and someone tossed him out to die,” I said. Giblets got down in the dog’s face and her eyes screwed up and her nose worked hard sniffin’ up and down the dog. She stood back up and said, “He stinks rotten.”

“We got a bathroom here,” I said. “We can put him in the shower —“

“Not that kind of bad,” she said, “though a bath wouldn’t be a bad idea. I mean I can smell Wyrms on him.”

Packy and Dobro both stood up and started toward Trey like they was gonna take care of matters but Giblets stopped ‘em. “Not like he’s Wyrms-bad, but like he’s been someplace really bad. It’s just kinda hangin’ round on him.”

“Maybe that’s the ‘bad’ your uncle was talkin’ about,” ATM said. “Maybe we should check it out.”

Since we figured that Travis was still at the bar closin’ things down, we called him on ATM’s cell phone, one of them Intel whatchamacallits that’s so special it’s crawlin’ with Weaver-critters in the Umbra. Accordin’ to ATM, Travis didn’t sound surprised when we told him about the dog. He said they was a dog-fightin’ ring down by the warehouses along the Swanahee River that runs by the train tracks. He said sometimes you’d find a dead dog or two either floatin’ down the river or dumped by the side of the road that ran through Lick Skillet. No one could put a finger on anyone responsible cause they was real careful to cover their tracks, ‘cept for dumpin’ the dogs, and dead dogs can’t bark, so they didn’t seem to worry about them givin’ away any secrets.

Now dog-fightin’ is a crime against nature, so far as I see it, and it’s give a whole group of dogs a bad name cause of it, but bad as it is, it don’t necessarily mean that dog-fighters are in league with the Wyrms. So we figured there was somethin’ special about this kind of dog fight and we decided that we’d find out what it was and see if we couldn’t put an end to it.

First, we needed to sleep. And I got elected to give Trey a bath, which he didn’t seem to mind as much as I would have thought. I guess it felt good to get the dried blood off his coat. He shined up real good and was a blue and white handsome specimen of a pit bull with ice blue eyes. He stood so steady you didn’t even notice that he was a tripod. And I reckon he decided he was mine, cause he slept at the foot of my bed all night.

We didn't have any dog food to give him, so when we went down to Cally's Diner, just a little ways down from the motel, we just ordered him an extra breakfast and he had scrambled eggs and sausage gravy and biscuits and a whole bowlful of milk. Then we took a trip down the road toward Asheville, stoppin' just outside the city where a line of warehouses and railroad tracks told a story about a time when a lot of freight went through these parts. Now it's all done by truck or plane, but the tracks are still there and once in a while a real live train comes through with a load of logs or coal or grain. The warehouses are either abandoned or else someone's turned 'em into junk shops, or antique stores dependin' on how old the junk is.

Giblets was the first to sniff out the warehouse that had the Wyrms smell. It sidled up on the river, like it had seen its share of river boat traffic in its day. There was a sign painted on one side — the side next to the one lane road that paralleled the river and the railroad tracks — that said "Smiley's Curiosities." Sittin' on a chair by the door, carvin' something that looked like it would be a wooden penny whistle was a grey-haired man with so many age lines on his face he should have been dead already. This, we found out when he greeted us, was Smiley.

First thing he did was catch sight of Trey.

"That's a right fine dog you got," he said. "If he had all his legs, he could hold his own in a fight, I'll bet."

"He don't need four legs," I replied. "He's got a strong mouth."

"That he does," Smiley said, before he fell silent. For a couple of minutes we all stared at each other. That is, Smiley stared at us and Trey, and we all stared at Smiley. Finally, Smiley reached around under his chair and pulled out a jug. He pulled the cork out with his teeth and offered it to us. Giblets grabbed it first and took a swig. I saw her jaw clench before she swallowed and felt just a shimmer of something sacred come out from around her and wrap around the jug.

"That's mighty strong 'shine," she said, handing it off to the rest of us with a nod to drink up. Personally, compared to the stuff we made, this was puny, but it tasted a little like it had just been made into medicine — and I figured that was Giblet's doing. We all lied about how good it was and that seemed to satisfy Smiley. "Come on down after midnight," he said, "and you might find something to keep you and that dog o' yours busy."

We said our good-byes and went back to the motel, takin' notice of the lay of the land around the warehouse as we traveled.

Back at the motel, we talked about what we would do. "We ain't gonna do no dog-fightin', that's for sure," Giblets said.

"No," I answered her, "but we still gotta go down there and check things out. At least some of us. I don't want to take Trey back down there.

"I don't know about that," Packy spoke up for the first time. He's not much of a talker, preferring to let his fists speak his mind for him, but when he has somethin' to say, we mostly listen. "If I was him and I'd met up with some folks what could beat the shit out of the ones that hurt him, I'd want to be there."

“Yeah, that’s right,” I allowed. “But how do we know he’s got them kind of thoughts in his head.”

“How do you know he don’t?” Packy countered.

“He’s smarter now than he was yesterday,” Giblets remarked. “In case you haven’t noticed, he’s done pulled the cork out of our last jug and he’s been helpin’ himself all morning.”

Zeena the Warrior Maid grabbed the jug away from Trey quicker than a frog’s tongue in a swarm of flies. Trey tried to stop her by slammin’ his paw onto her arm, but his missin’ leg got the best of him and he went down with a growl and what could only be a look of embarrassment that made us all laugh. He stood back up and shook hisself and seemed none the worse for wear. I had to admit, he did look a mite smarter than your average dog.

“So how’s about we do this,” Dobro said. “We leave Trey here — after puttin’ the ‘shine outta his reach — while we go down to the bar and get ready for tonight. We eat light, just some of the combread and beans, mebbe, at the bar and we do our gig. Afterwards, we go on down to the warehouse and see what’s what. If it looks like we’re gonna have some fun down there, we can send someone back for the dog.” He looked straight at me when he said it, cause the pack all know I sometimes have trouble with my club foot in a fight.

“That’s not fair,” Zeena the Warrior Maid stood up for me, like the Philodox she is. “Path was the one who found Trey and nursed him back to health. He’s got a right to be in on the action.”

“Whatever works,” I said, so as not to cause any trouble in the planning department.

So, with that plan firmly in our minds, we made Trey a comfortable bed in the middle of a pile of my already worn clothes, put the Moonshine in a sack and put it high up on the “entertainment” center—a big block of wood with a hole for the TV set in it and some drawers for clothes underneath — that come with the room. Then we went on down to the bar.

We had what might be called a stand up and holler night. We started our set around 9 o’clock with a rousin’ version of “Devil Went Down to Georgia,” and Zeena the Warrior Maid’s fiddle was never sweeter and angrier than it was durin’ that song. We followed up with a rockabilly version of “Man of Constant Sorrow,” with Dobro doin’ his best Buddy Holly meets Johnny Cash vocals. “Folsom Prison” came next, always a crowd favorite, and after that came “Ring of Fire,” and then it was back to the traditional tunes. My mind was back in the motel room, I guess, cause I stepped up for my solo and instead of doing my usual version of “East Virginia,” I started in on “Blue Ridge Mountain Blues.” The band looked at me kinda cock-eyed but we’d learned the song once upon a time and the chord changes didn’t hold no surprises. When I finally got to the second chorus, they understood:

I’ve got the Blue Ridge mountain blues

Gonna see my old dog Trey

Gonna hunt the possum where the corn tops blossom

On that Blue Ridge far away

We went into a long instrumental piece puttin' together about four bluegrass numbers and Irish reels and somewhere in the middle of that piece, I got this itchy feeling in my feet like there was somewhere I needed to be.

I told Dobro to cover for me. "I left somethin' back in the room I need to get," I said," which wasn't quite a lie but wasn't all the truth either. Dobro nodded and kept playin' and I slipped off the stage and headed out the back door. I shifted into lupus form to get to the motel faster and, well, you might as well know that when I do that, I look like a big fuzzy pit bull with bum left rear paw. That's the other part of my metis defect that I've never been too crazy about. But I kept to the shadows along the road so no one would see me traveling faster than any dog had a right to. Just as I reached the motel, I knew I'd been right to come. The hole that had been chewed through our door was the first indication. I looked around the room by stickin' my head through the hole and noticed two things right off the bat. First, Trey was gone. Second, so was the jug of 'shine and it looked like the "entertainment" center had done its last entertainin' in the process, since it was mostly lyin' across the double beds and the TV was not altogether in one piece anymore.

Without another thought, I took off for the warehouse. When I got there, the place was packed. About 50 or 60 cars and trucks were crowded into what was supposed to be the parkin' lot, which had seen better days and now was just a big dusty field. I changed back to homid form and slowed down to figure out how to get inside, specifically, how to get past the pair of rifle-totin' mountain boys in camo and GI issue boots. Even at a distance, with a row of cars between me and them, I could smell somethin' rank comin' off them. Wyrms reek is what I smelled — like the up-close-and-personal stench that Giblets picked up just a little bit of on Trey.

'Bout that time, Trey appeared out of nowhere and ahead of me, his mouth wrapped around the sack that had the jug of Moonshine in it. Doing some of the fanciest dodgin' I ever saw come out of a three-legged dog, he ran in between the gate guards and disappeared inside the warehouse.

I took off after him, yellin', "That's my dog! I'll get 'im!" and ran past the guards too. One of 'em made as if to stop me but the other one called him off. I guess they figured either I'd grab my dog and come back to pay the entry fee or else someone inside would take care of me. Sometimes the Wyrms' foot soldiers ain't the brightest thinkers, and that was fine by me.

Inside the warehouse, there was a cloud of smoke from cheap cigarettes, bad cigars and highly suspect-grade weed, all muddled up in a hazy mess that slithered through the room and created a filmy shade across the whole inside of the warehouse. In some places the smoke was so thick, I couldn't see anything but shapes of vaguely man-like creatures — and given what I knew now about the people connected with this enterprise, I wouldn't be surprised if the only thing some of 'em had in common with men was their shape.

I followed Trey around a corner and saw that he was headed down a ramp that went to a lower level of the warehouse. This was where the fighting took place, I figured, cause I could already hear the snarls of a pair of dogs goin' at each other. The other thing I heard was misery — pure and simple.

Trey took off past the fightin' pit and headed straight for a double rack of cages along the back wall, the source of the misery. All in all there were about 20 cages and each one held a dog, each one with a thick leather or oversized chain collar. The cages were barely big enough to hold animals that probably weighed in at over 100 pounds and I could tell that the lack of space just fed the dogs' restlessness, makin' them that much more eager to get out and do the thing they were trained for — fight another dog.

A couple of people, some of 'em owners getting their dogs ready for the fights comin' up, looked in my direction as I hurtled toward the wall of cages. "My dog got loose," I yelled in their direction. "I'll take care of it."

Without giving it another thought, I shifted to "mountain man" form for the additional upper body strength and started rippin' open the cages, freein' the dogs. I knew I had to work fast before someone realized what I was doing. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Trey bent over the sack he'd carried with him, his mouth worrying at the cork. Even over the noise of the room — the fight sounds comin' up from the pit, the crowd noises as people egged on the dog they'd put their money on or cursed the dog that was losin' — I heard the "thwump" of the cork as it popped loose from the jug mouth, sloshin' the Moonshine all over the floor in front of the cages. As the dogs leapt out of their close confinement or jumped to the ground from the upper bank of cages, every one of 'em stopped to lap up some of the precious liquor, most of 'em bein' thirsty as well as hungry.

About that time, I heard a couple of loud voices getting' closer to me. Words like "dogs loose" and "git that som' bitch" and "take 'im down!" filtered through to me just about the time the first blow caught me in the stomach.

About that time, as well, I remembered that this wasn't quite what the plan was and that the rest of my pack was — well — somewhere other than where I was. In fact, the only ally I had at the moment was a three-legged dog. I noticed that Trey had managed to plant himself between my legs facin' my back and he was growlin' louder than the start of the Daytona 500.

Okay, I thought to myself, so there's two of us. I shifted to wolfman form, figuring that I'd maybe gain an edge that way. Unfortunately, a couple of the people heading toward me had the same idea, only they didn't look like your normal Garou. Damn Spirals. And, sure enough, there were some Kinfolk and one or two of the more human lookin' fomori. And I smelled the stench of that Wyrms liquor Smiley passed around to us on the breaths of the ones that had gotten close enough to hurt me.

My pack knows where this place is, I told myself. Sooner or later, they will come after me. I may not be around to see it, but they will come. In the meantime, I got one thing I have to do — and that's take at least one of 'em with me when I go down.

I let out a howl of pure anger and that energy filled me with a boilin' hot hate. Between my legs, I heard my howl answered by Trey, and if you don't think a pit bull

can howl, you are sadly mistaken. I got my claws into the Spiral that hit me just about the time his claws raked my ribcage, openin' up a good-sized gash. I felt Trey lash out at someone behind me and heard a curse and a scream. Behind my opponent's ugly face I saw some others tryin' to muscle in to get a piece of me and all I could do was fight back as hard as I could.

And then I heard the other snarls and yelps, and more screams. At first I thought my pack had come to join the party. Then I realized that the Moonshine-driven dogs were turning on their owners, surrounding them and turnin' their training and anger into payback.

"There he is, in the middle!" I heard Packy's welcome voice above the noise. The cavalry had arrived. After that, nothin' else was intelligible, since Crinos ain't the best form for communicatin'. A few minutes later, my opponent went down, with my claws rakin' a nice tear through his neck — and that was the last I remembered until I woke up in the van on the way home. Giblets was lookin' wasted, like she'd been doin' nothing but healing the pack's wounds. "We got 'em," she said.

"Did we lose anyone?" I asked. She shook her head. "I don't see how we all made it, but we did." Then she punched me in the jaw. "That was a damn fool stunt you pulled," she said.

"It was the dog's idea," I mumbled around a jaw that was already sore, and then I realized just how stupid that sounded. Even if it was true.

"Sure," Zeena the Warrior Maid chimed in, "blame the dog."

At that point, I realized just how crowded the back of the van seemed to be. I raised my head up a little bit and saw most of my pack, with the exception of Packy, who was driving, and Dobro, who usually rode shotgun. I saw Trey, who had crowded in as close to me as he could and was lickin' some wounds that were in the process of healin' as he licked himself. And behind him, I saw the rest of the dogs that we had freed, and that had fought alongside us. Some of 'em were wounded, some weren't even scratched, but they all looked at us as if to say, "Now what do you want us to do?"

"We couldn't just leave 'em," Giblets said. "They'd probably have been shot or somethin' if we just let 'em go, bein' fightin' dogs and all."

"My brother's family wouldn't mind having a dog," ATM said. "It's a trendy thing now in Asheville to have a good lookin' pit bull, specially if it's friendly."

"I reckon we can find places for 'em with some of our Kin," said Dobro.

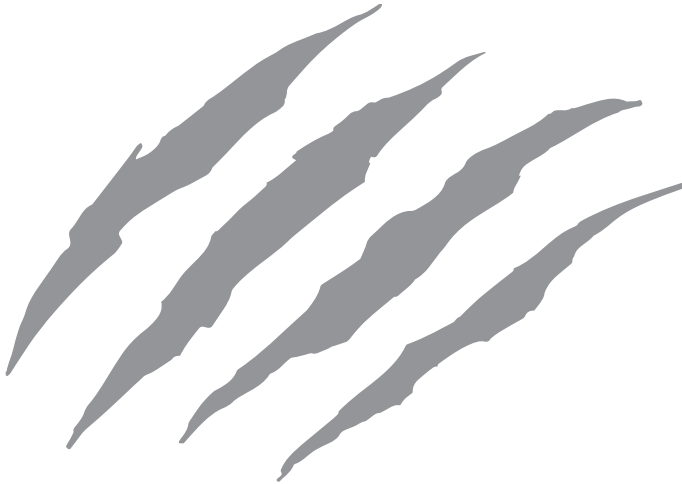
"They're pretty good at takin' down fomori," said Packy. "We might want to keep a couple with us."

And that's more or less what we did. We got back home to the caern and cleaned ourselves up. The dogs kinda wandered around until they found places to lie down and be comfortable. I guess the caern kinda calmed 'em down, cause there weren't no infightin'. They were just dogs.

We got in touch with my uncle the next day and spent the next seven days huntin' down the rest of the Spirals. Turns out that the warehouse had another lower level and that's where they had their Hive, with the center right below the fightin' ring. It took all of us and my Uncle Lightning's pack — and most of the dogs — to bust that place up and purify it.

I'm pretty sure we threw away the Garou rulebook over this affair, and I hope you all won't be too hard on us, but as you can see, there were a lot of exigent circumstancials surrounding what I just told you. Oh, and there's even something we learned from the whole affair. See, Gaia's work isn't just about savin' the earth. It's about savin' her critters, especially the ones we've fucked up so badly they don't know any better except to fight each other so we can get our kicks from their blood. Trey's got so much Moonshine in him that he's like another pack member, and the rest of the dogs are doin' alright.

I can't promise somethin' like this won't happen again, but I swear by Gaia's Glory that what happens in Lick Skillet will stay in Lick Skillet from now on.



Rhymes With Food Truck

Richard Dansky

I want to make one thing perfectly clear: It is not my fault the desk exploded. I mean, technically, yeah, I may have had something to do with the fact that the explosion happened, and yeah, I was sitting — squatting, really — on the desk at the time of said explosion, and yeah, maybe the reason the desk exploded could be traced, in a very few steps, back to something I said, but still: I'm not the guy who did the exploding.

I am, however, the guy who nearly got a tailfeather full of busted glass and chrome when what used to be a tasteful Swedish modern disintegrated into ump-ty-jillion bits of high-velocity shrapnel, but I'm telling you, I'm the victim here.

Right. Sorry. Should probably start at the beginning here, maybe give you a little context for the whole exploding desk thing, not to mention the giant pink puddle of goo it was sitting in by the time all the shouting was done.

And by "pink goo", I mean "critter innards". But I digress.

You see, it all started at a food truck. My food truck, to be specific. And before you say a damn thing, driving a food truck is nine kinds of great cover, the food I serve is healthy enough to make you crap granola, and worst comes to worst, a kitchen's full of nineteen kinds of implements of sharp, pointy or hot objects that can make a difference in a fight. So, yeah, I drive a food truck, and it's called Roadkill - gotta wave the flag for the species after all — and I do a hell of a business. Sometimes I hit the financial district, sometimes I do tech sector, and sometimes I go out to more industrial areas where people are brewing up all kinds of toxic crap, and then there's the folks who work in manufacturing, if you know what I mean.

Seriously. Nobody ever thinks twice about a food truck, except "when the hell is it getting here already".

But that Wednesday, I miscalculated. Pulled up in front of one of those shiny new buildings the techie types infest like fleas on a, nevermind. Anyway, I pulled up on schedule and in place, and everything went to hell. Not at first — there was a line fifteen deep when I officially opened for the lunchtime rush. Coders grabbing something quick, a couple of HR reps I knew from previous trips who'd decided my gluten-free veggie dumplings were suitably decadent for their starvation diets, folks like that — they lined up and I fed 'em quick as I could. Technically, it's a one man operation, but you're on a first name basis with Helios, you can maybe cut a couple corners in the kitchen in order to get folks fed faster. So I did. Until he showed up.

And by "he" I mean the fuzzball. OK, he wasn't *fuzzy* fuzzy, but work with me here. Custom suit, collarless shirt, slick-backed hair, light-sensitive glasses I could tell weren't factory spec — oh yeah, I knew he was a bowser before he got close.

Also, he kinda smelled like wet dog. Though that might have been my imagination.

Anyway, Fuzzball stands there for a minute, and the crowd just melts out of his way. I mean, I've got a six person line and they all just decide to be elsewhere or suddenly have to check their smartphones which have suddenly decided to go nuts or, well, yeah, I knew what was going on there. And when all the paying customers have run off, he walks up to the truck and stares at me.

"Hi," I said. "Welcome to Roadkill. What can I get you?"

"You can get out of here," he said, all pleasant-like. "I don't need you drawing attention to this place with this..." He sputtered for a second, and waved his hands up and down to try to take in the whole of my truck. Which, to be fair, was rad-ass purple, with the Roadkill logo in flaming orange and red and black.

"Truck?" I said. He glared at me, then slid the glasses down his nose a little and glared at me some more.

"Look," he said. "I've got a very delicate thing going here, Mister..."

"Roadkill."

He frowned. "That's the name of the truck."

"I named the truck after me. And you are?"

He sighed, all dramatic-like. "Timothy Cho."

I shook my head. "Real name."

"Fine. Wiolds-Big-Data. You happy?"

I snickered. "Seriously?"

"You have no idea of the sorts of things I can do," he sniffed. "And for the record, I've got something very delicate and very complicated going on here that your little birdie brain couldn't possibly understand that's going to lead to kicking a whole lot of Wyrms ass, if — and I'm making a big assumption here — if having your clown

car full of tofu parked out front doesn't attract attention from every scrag this side of Market Street."

"Listen, Eats-Shits-and-Leaves, this clown car has gotten me in and out of more Pentex-owned fabrication plants than you'd ever dream of because you might get your suit... and... oh, damn."

He'd pulled a quarter out of his pocket. A nice, shiny, sparkly quarter that caught the sun perfectly. "Look," he said, "I'm not a bad guy. And I'm happy for you to do whatever the hell it is you do, just as long as you do it far away from here." The whole time, he rolled the quarter between his fingers like a poker pro rolling a chip. I couldn't look away. I knew I was being played like a chump but it was so damn shiny and he just kept talking and...

"So that's it then, right? You're gone."

I blinked. The quarter was gone. Bayesian-at-the-Moon was staring at me over his shades, a smug little smile on his face. "You can't just chase me off. I'm scheduled with the building manager."

"The building manager's going to have a change of heart. Alternately, he's going to have a change of spleen. Now get out of here before I call the cops and tell them you've been using GMOs in your veggie wraps when you've been claiming organics."

"You bastard!" I sputtered. "You can't do this!"

"Oh, but I already did," he said, and walked away. Didn't even put the quarter in the tip jar, the prick, and even as I was watching him go, my smartphone buzzed and I looked down and my schedule was re-arranging itself so that it was clear I was most emphatically Not Coming Back Any More. A couple of crackles of lightning around the outside of the case told me all I needed to know about who'd made the changes, and then the building's rent-a-cop was tapping on my window and telling me there had been complaints and I had to move along.

I threw the guy an order of dumplings — what the hell, it wasn't his fault, and shut down. The whole time, I could see Cho watching me from the lobby, the smug bastard. Oh, this wasn't over, not by a long shot.

But, since I'd been booted during the middle of the lunch rush, I had a serious cash shortfall to deal with all of a sudden, and a truck full of all sorts of fresh goodies that were going to go bad if I didn't move them by suppertime. So while I stowed the gear and shut down the kitchen, I called my dispatcher and asked if they had anything that might work for a last-minute gig, maybe an industrial site or something.

"Got just the thing for you," she said. "Twin Rivers Industrial Park. They were supposed to get The Pig Deal today, but his fridge went on the fritz. So they'll take anything."

"Even me," I said, and she laughed.

"You asked," she said, and hung up.

And me, I grinned, and got behind the wheel.

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There's a particular psychic stink to a place where the Wyrms are in business, above and beyond the usual. Cross rotten meat with ozone by way of Jersey swamp-water and you begin to get the idea. I could smell Twin Rivers a mile before I hit their gate. Truth be told, it had been on my radar for a while, but the buzz had picked up a lot lately. That's why I'd been hoping to get @GarouAsshole to look at it, not that he'd let me get a word in edgewise.

But still. I was there now. Security at the front gate was ugly and sullen, packed into a uniform he clearly hated wearing and a little too eager to use the gun some idiot had given him to defend the perimeter. I ended up slipping him a twenty and an order of steamed buns, with an understanding he'd get more of the same every time I came back, before he'd open the gate and let me in.

"You'll want to head to the back," he told me, so I did.

"The back" was the main processing plant, hidden behind rows and rows of fat chemical tanks. Smoke tinged with purple came out of the stacks, and I could see big pipes leading out of the building and down into the ground. Sewage, no doubt. Another time, I'd be real interested in seeing where those came out and whose backyard they came out in, but right now I had bigger fish to fry, and a bigger doggie's tail to twist.

There was a line at the loading dock when I pulled up, hungry guys who didn't much care what they were eating as long as it was hot. I did a decent business, but my mind was on other things. Looking around that joint, I didn't see anything too bad - I mean, by Wurm-taint standards of badness - but something didn't feel right. Things were way too heavy for what looked like your basic make-crap-and-put-it-in-the-river operation. But there was nothing specific, nothing that I could point to as the source of all the whispers'n'warnings I'd gotten.

I was, I decided, going to have to do a little more recon. Otherwise Cho was never going to get off his furry ass.

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I parked the truck out front of the tech center bright and early the next morning. My schedule said I was supposed to be crosstown at the Aspen Commons office park, but as there'd never been an aspen tree within a hundred miles of the place I felt OK bailing. Instead, I put Roadkill in park, ducked out the side - get it, there's a little bird humor for you there - and took off. Putting the feathers on isn't so hard; it's remembering to take them off and going back to walking that's the pain in the ass. Believe me, you get a little lift under your wings and suddenly all the other crap that's going down feels like nothing.

Least until you see something shiny on the ground, which has always been, shall we say, a bit of a family issue. Or some roadkill. We're not real good holding back on that, either.

But anyways, the building across the street from Cho's little data haven was a little older and a lot more bird-friendly. No shiny smooth glass here, lots of classic WPA architecture with gargoyles and flagpoles and all sorts of stuff a right-sized bird could perch on while he was waiting for his buddy, the werewolf, to look out the window.

In the end, it took over an hour. I could see into Cho's office from where I sat, and the guy was focused, building what looked like n-dimensional network diagrams across a multi-monitor setup. I could follow maybe a third of it, and the rest made my head hurt. But Cho was into it, and that was a problem - I needed him to notice that the truck was there.

So I did something stupid, which is to say I took off. And by took off, I mean I flew right into that son of a bitch's window and plastered myself up against it, waiting for the sound of the THUNK to worm its way into his big fuzzy brain.

And when it did, and he turned around, I let myself slide down the glass with eyes all bugged out like in a cartoon. All that was missing was the violin riff, or maybe someone playing "Those Endearing Young Charms" on xylophone, badly.

Cho got it, or at least he got part of it. He jumped up out of his chair and went over to the window. I was gone by then, but that was the point - I didn't want him to see me, I wanted him to see where I'd parked. Which he did, and which immediately set him off. I swear, I could hear him across the street, over the traffic and through the glass, which was about half the effect I was hoping for.

The rest depended on my beating him downstairs. Fortunately, you gots wings, you don't needs no stairs. I was in the truck before he hit the street, serving up a reasonable facsimile of a guy who's been making dumplings and couscous for an hour.

He, on the other hand, looked like a guy who'd just found out that someone was wrong on the internet and had been forcibly kept from replying. "What the fuck are you doing here," he was shouting before he'd even cleared the doors, and then he got nasty.

I offered him a spring roll, which made him sputter for a second before he went to smack it out of my hand. Bad idea, really. It went spinning straight up in the air, and then straight down - with a little help - the front of his shirt, grease-staining it to hell and gone. He stared at it laying on the ground for a second, then stared at the shirt, then stared at me.

"Five second rule?"

"You utter bastard," he said. "I had that hand-tailored on my last trip to Shanghai. I can't fucking replace it!"

"Whoops," I said. "Shouldn't have offered the freebie, I guess."

"Freebie? FREEBIE?" He was getting red in the face, his hands flexing like they wanted to be wrapped around a skinny little bird neck. "Look, I told you yesterday. You are NOT supposed to be here. You keep pulling this grandstanding bullshit and the Wyrn—"

“Oh, yeah, right. You know there’s a whole bunch ‘o taint going down at Twin Rivers, right?”

He shook his head in aggravation. “I know all about Twin Rivers. It’s part of what—” It sunk in right about then. “Wait a minute. How the hell do you know about Twin Rivers.”

Now, I could have said, “I saw the name on your smartphone yesterday when you came down here to boot my ass out of prime lunch territory”, or “I read it off your monitor and maybe you should do something about those windows,” but I didn’t. Instead, I told him “Oh, I went over there yesterday.”

“You. Went. Over there?”

I nodded. “Caught the last of the lunch rush. Not real big into organics, but you take what you can get.”

“You. Went. Over there.”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Instead of saying anything, he reached into the truck and grabbed my shirtfront, then pulled. My face went down to level with his in a second.

“You listen to me. What I am working on is bigger than Twin Rivers. It’s bigger than this whole town. If I get it up and running the way I want to, I’ll be able to spot any Wurm activity for five hundred miles without leaving my desk. I will not let you put that in jeopardy by wandering over to some piss-ant toxic waste site where they’re not even bright enough to come up with a new flavor of toxic sludge to dump in the water.”

“I thought you guys hated toxic sludge,” I choked out.

“Big picture, birdie. You’re thinking small. And I can take a little toxic sludge if it lets me stop a whole lot more down the road.”

Instead of answering, I pointed. He turned around and noticed that we’d attracted quite a crowd. “Be a shame if this hit the news,” I said. “Might attract some attention..”

Cho snarled then, and shoved me back into the truck. “And let that be the last time I catch you peddling your fake locavore crap around here, you hear me?”

“It’s all certified,” I protested, but half the crowd was applauding and the other half was walking away when they realized they weren’t going to be able to order. Wilds-Big-Data was already headed back inside, but it was clear he’d won this round, and that I needed to get moving.

And looking at the business card I’d pulled out of Cho’s pocket while he was half-strangling me, I knew just where to go.

• • •

Officially, the functioning plant at Twin Rivers made industrial solvents, which was a nice way of saying “We get rid of bodies here”. Tanker trucks moved in and out of the compound all the time, sticking around just long enough to load up before rolling out again. I sat on a power line and noted license plates, memorizing them for later use. The crew that I saw close to the plant was mostly human, which was to say that most of them were close enough to human that the Bane infestation wasn’t immediately obvious. The rest worked in Accounting.

Most of the plant was production floor, with an adjunct building for office space. That’s what I was really interested in. Well, that and getting back to my truck in one piece. The execs worked in there, the guys who knew where all that crap was going and what was in it, and there was only one thing that would get them away from their desks long enough for me to take a look at what they were doing.

Free food.

I’d hired a kid, someone I knew off the local dronecore scene, to drive the truck up to the building and deliver a goodie basket. If I knew desk jockeys, they’d be on it in no time flat, leaving their cubes unattended and their password protection hopefully disengaged.

I’d made it a really big freebie basket.

Right on cue, the truck pulled up, a little jerkily. Kid wasn’t so good at driving stick, I guess, but it didn’t matter, because he stepped out with the box of free *nosherei*, argued with the security guard out front for maybe a minute, and then stepped into the building. A minute later, they must have made an announcement or sent out an email or something, because the top floor emptied. Lots of portly, pasty dudes shoved their chairs in and headed for the elevator, which was exactly what I’d been hoping for.

I let the last one go before I flapped over. Big shock, they’d left a couple of the windows open - probably wanted to smell the chemical stink from next door, if they were as Wyrmy as they looked to be - so I squeezed in and got to work.

The shift into full human shape took a second, but it was necessary - hunt and peck typing is a pain in the ass if you’re literally hunting and pecking. I picked a desk at random where the screensaver hadn’t kicked in yet, sat down, and started pulling up files.

What I saw made me wince. The stuff they were cooking up at Twin Rivers wasn’t just industrial solvent, it was going to be used as fracking fluid. Which meant all that Wurm-tainted goo was going to get moved all over the country to get injected into bedrock, and from there it was going to make its way into aquifers. And ground water. And tap water. And eventually, kids.

Well, the hell with that. I bundled up a bunch of the most damning stuff, popped it onto a USB drive, and got ready to head out. Across the floor, the elevator made that elevator dinging noise it does to warn you it’s just hit your floor, so I did one more thing, then birded my way out of there.

Add some data, leave a business card. It's about the same, right?

Right.

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Security was tight at Cho's place. There were three layers in place - human guards, electronic protection, and some nasty spirit trickery going on. I could go into detail as to how I got past it all, or I could just tell you that I did, that I left the USB key on Cho's desk, and that I got out of there without touching anything else. The temptation was there - letting a guy like me loose in a place with that much shiny chrome and glass in it is like letting Donald Trump loose in a mint - but I was good. I exercised restraint. And I got the hell out of there before I pushed my luck, which has got to be some kind of first.

• • •

Morning came, like it does, and asked for a cigarette. I didn't have one, but I did pour out a perfectly good mimosa from the deck of my place as a nod to Helios, whom I liked to think appreciated that sort of thing. Then I grabbed a rabbit out of the fridge, had some breakfast, and went looking for my truck.

The kid whom I'd paid to drive it was named Bernie, and he lived a few miles further out of the city center than I did. Like I said, I knew him through the dronecore scene. He knew everyone in every band, even if he didn't play himself, and I respect that kind of thing. So we hung out a bit, and as his scene chasing left him perpetually short of cash, I used him for odd jobs whenever I could. He asked smart questions, knew when to shut up, and got the job done.

It was a good arrangement. I'd given him the truck for the evening - he could cook pretty well himself, so he could take the truck to a rodeo or wherever and make some extra scratch that way - as a thank you for the Twin Rivers assist, and we'd agreed I'd pick it up from his place in the morning. Hell, I didn't even ask him to gas it up.

The truck was where it was supposed to be, parked out front of the place he'd inherited from his parents when they passed a couple of years back. He'd added a few touches - more band posters, more bookshelves, more potted plants - but that was about it. Nice neighborhood, little blocky a-frames sitting on neatly trimmed lawns, everybody's grass golf-course green and neat.

Not the sort of place you expect to see doors kicked in. But his was.

I cursed and hit the ground running. Was up on his porch in two steps, in the door in another three, all the while calling out his name to see if Bernie was OK.

In hindsight, this was a mistake.

Something exploded into the wall next to my head as I hit the front room, a jagged, bony barb attached to what looked like a warty, pink tentacle. "Hoo huh hahh hah humm heehhh" someone said as I dodged splinters, and then it sunk in that I was in real trouble.

The tentacle pulled back out of the wall and whipped back to the right. I followed where it went and realized what I should have known all along - it wasn't a tentacle, it was a tongue, and it was popping right back into the mouth of one of the bloated, pudgy middle managers I'd had Bernie feed the day before. He wore tan khakis and a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, his eyes bulgy and his hair thin.

His grin, though, that was a mile wide, 'cause he was standing over what was left of Bernie.

"What the hell?" It wasn't a question, but the guy wasn't big on subtext.

"I said," he croaked, "You should not have come here."

"Ah. Hard to talk with your tongue in the wall, huh?"

He ignored me. "Your sidekick was easy to follow. He told me you'd be coming, so all I had to do was wait. And once we're done with you, we'll deal with your annoying employer."

I circled left and he matched me. "Employer? I think I'm offended."

"Don't lie to me. We know he accessed the data you stole. The files automatically ping our server when read. None of you can hide."

"Oh no," I said, with a notable lack of terror. "I guess you've got us now."

In response, he lunged forward, his tongue exploding out of his mouth again. I ducked under it, grabbing a potted cactus Bernie always kept on a side table as I did so. In the instant it took him to reel his weapon back in, I jammed the cactus onto it with both hands, then let go.

Momentum carried it back into his mouth even as his eyes got even wider and froggier. He said something that could have been "Oh shit," give or take a six foot distended tongue, and then a carefully tended houseplant covered in spines slammed into the back of his gullet. He went down like he'd been shot, and I took that as my cue to go. Bernie... I hated leaving Bernie, but there was no time. Not when the bad guys were on the move.

I thought about flying, but I needed the truck. So I piled in and hit the gas, and tore out of there before any of those distant sirens I was hearing got any closer. With luck, the cops would arrive while Mr. Toad was still sucking down his cactus sandwich, making the dead body his problem. I had other things to worry about, like what if Hopalong back there had already sent friends. I was going to need to get Cho's attention, and get it fast.

Which is why I screamed into town at world record speeds for a food truck, stripped my tires doing a high-speed park in front of his office, and leaned on the horn.

He was downstairs before I'd stopped honking, knocking a rent-a-cop out of the way in his hurry to get outside. The USB key was in his hand, and he was holding it like it was radioactive cheese.

“Where did you get this,” he demanded as soon as he got within bellowing distance of the truck.

I hopped out to meet him, mainly in hopes of preserving the vehicle. “Twin Rivers. Executive office. I thought you’d be interested.”

“Interested? Do you know what this is? Do you know what they’re doing? Do you know how big this is?” He was making big hand gestures now, a sure sign of Interested Garou.

One eyebrow cocked, I looked at him. “What, they’re not just dumping a little toxic sludge in a creek?”

He sputtered. “They’re hitting twenty states with this stuff! It’s worse than Athabasca! It’s—” He stopped, caught himself, and stared at me. “You knew that, didn’t you?”

“Actually, I—” I didn’t get to finish. He grabbed me again, and this time my feet left the ground. Goddamn light bird bones, I tell you.

“Come on. I’m going to show you something.” And he marched me back inside and upstairs to his office, where that glorious three monitor setup on that beautiful Swedish modern desk showed the full perfidy of what was going on out there.

“You see this,” he said, jabbing a finger at one screen as he let me go. “This is the full shipment schedule for the fracking solvent. And this is the invoice for the trucking company they’re using, and this—”

“Uh-huh. So, you gonna do something about it?”

“Do something about it? I have to—” He stopped, blinked, and looked at me. “You’re not surprised by any of this, are you?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“You’ve already seen it.”

“Yup.”

“You broke in last night to put this data in front of me, which means you stole it from Twin Rivers in the first place.”

I nodded, and noticed he was taking a step closer to me with each piece he put together. By this point, he was right in my face. “Tell me you weren’t followed.”

“Followed?” I shrugged. “Don’t think so. Then again, they already had your business card.”

Cho stared at me, even as the change took him. Crinos and drop-tile ceilings don’t mix, but that didn’t stop him. “You gave them my business card?”

I took a step back, realized I was up against the desk, and let myself do a little backwards hop up onto it. Like I said, light bones.

“I had to get your attention somehow,” I said.

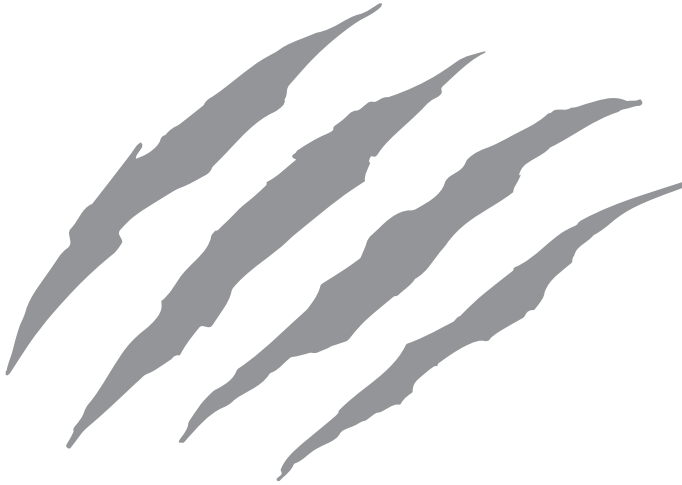
Cho — no, Wiolds-Big-Data — growled. “Oh, you have my attention.”

“And I figured if they came out here, you’d finally take them—”

That last word was going to be “seriously”, but I never got to say it because that big, meaty, hairy fist came down, and the desk went boom, and then things got interesting. And by “interesting”, I mean “I dodged until the bad guys actually showed up and stormed the office, at which point he stopped trying to kill me and started trying to kill them, and we got along great after that, and eventually we shut Twin Rivers down.”

So it all turned out great in the end. Except for Bernie, and for my truck, which somehow “accidentally” got totaled during the fight.

And the desk, which he still wants me to pay for. But fuck that. I mean, seriously. Swedish modern?



Gryphon, in Glass and Steel

Aaron Rosenberg

She's pretty, I can tell that even from up here. Dark blond hair cropped and mussed from the chase, big scared eyes behind narrow, steel-frame glasses, full unvarnished lips currently in that little 'O' of shock and fear, nice chest heaving from having tried to run, good body clad in disheveled gray blouse and darker gray slacks and what was left of a matching blazer that had torn when she'd pulled free from them the first time. Yes, very pretty.

But pretty don't mean much to the two who'd been chasing her and now have her pinned against the wall. They don't hunt for pleasure — well, not strictly, anyway. And when unleashed, it ain't to go after “pretty.”

Which's got me intrigued. Which explains why I'm here, crouching overhead, watching to see what happens.

The one in the lead has her by the throat now, though. And his other hand he's arced back, claws out, ready to strike.

So much for watching.

Drop down from my perch, letting momentum add to my already considerable weight — and land on the first one's head. He goes down beneath the impact like a cardboard box under a truck, hitting the sidewalk with an audible thud. As hoped, his hand flies open as he falls, and she slides down the wall, gasping for air but otherwise unharmed.

For the moment.

The second one shakes off his surprise and comes at me, but I'm ready for him. Block his downward strike with my left forearm, drive my right fist into his gut. The brass knuckles add some extra oomph, enough to double him over. A knee to his head and he topples completely, curled up in a ball beside his partner, who's already

starting to groan and try to right himself. These two are tough. Should finish them off now, while I've the chance — my friend and sometime-sparring partner Killian Deathfollows'd go for my throat if he knew I left 'em breathing, but then he's Get, they always go for the kill, especially Ahrouns like him — but there's a chance they could hold their own now the element of surprise's gone, and that happens the girl's right back where she started. And I'm a whole lot worse off, myself. So I opt for Flight instead.

"Come on!" I tell her, holding out my hand — the left, sans armament. She hesitates a second, but another moan and a curse from the pair on the ground convince her and she accepts my grasp, biting back a squeal as I tug her forward. Out of the alley, down the block, around the corner to where I'd left Flight. Practically haul her onto the back of the seat, throw a leg over myself, then hit the gas. We take off down the street in a screech of tires and a roar of engine, and in my mirrors I see the pair stumbling from the alley too late to do anything but shake fists and bellow insults in our wake.

Safe.

For now.

Next question — what to do with her now? Can't take her to my place — can't or at least won't, don't know her at all and wouldn't help any to be boxed in right now, just in case they can follow her scent. I could, in their place. Won't take her home, not yet — if this wasn't random they might be waiting there, not about to send her walking into a trap after just saving her from one. Public place? Maybe, some safety offered there but perhaps not enough since I don't know why they want her or how desperate they are to get her. Places like that can get sticky, so many people around, hard to see everywhere at once, easy to be blocked off. No.

So take her to the park.

Of course.

Roar down the main drag, then pull off onto one of the bike paths — not strictly meant for Flight but this time of night only a few intrepid joggers and the odd mugger left to argue. And none of them're likely to get in my face about it. Throttle down and coast under the nearest footbridge, then brake and drop the kickstand. Feel her tense up when the engine cuts off, the arms she'd instinctively wrapped around me coming loose in a hurry as she slides off Flight's back and takes two quick steps away, those same arms now tight across her own chest.

"Who are you?" she demands. Nice voice, throaty but not rough, warm and rich like a good dark ale. "What do you want?" Then, a little softer: "Why did you help me back there?"

"Help," not "save." She's not sure of my intentions — did I rescue her, or just want her for myself? "Back there" — acknowledging I got her out of a tough situation but not sure she hasn't just landed in one worse. I don't bother to hold back the chuckle that rolls out of me. She's good, doesn't miss a trick.

Already starting to like her.

“Name’s Gryphon,” I tell her, swinging my leg over and sitting sideways now, facing her, legs crossed, boot heels on the ground. I shrug. “Looked like you were in trouble. Figured you needed a hand.”

She studies me, eyes narrowing — less afraid now, but still wary, still careful. Good. I know what she sees isn’t helping her relax — a big guy, tall and broad-shouldered but lean in black motorcycle leathers, dark hair falling across his face but not enough to hide the ink there, the radiating spikes cupping one cheek, the upside-down comma curling up the other. I don’t smile — showing her my teeth won’t exactly help matters — but try not to glare or sneer either. Just sit there and wait.

After a few seconds, since she hasn’t bolted, I start my own line of questioning. “Your turn — who’re you, and why’d they go for you?”

“I — ” almost an accusation, definitely an argument, but it dies after that one syllable. A shake of her head, hair whipping about her face, a deep breath, and she starts over. “Lindsey Harper — I’m Lindsey Harper. They — what do you mean, why did they — ?” A flash of outrage — the automatic response of a pretty lady who knows she’s pretty, has accepted that a long time ago, enough so she’s genuinely offended at the thought that someone can’t see it, not so much arrogant as just acknowledging her good fortune — mixed with confusion — isn’t it obvious what they wanted?

Poor thing, she has no idea.

“They took your purse?” She nods. “And kept coming?” Another nod, this one just an angry jerk of her head. She had them all figured out — a pair of muggers who got lucky, found a target they wanted more from than just her cash, an easy spiral downward from mere crime into true depravity.

She thinks they were muggers. That’s almost adorable.

Her angle, the shadows in that alley, she never saw their claws. Probably wouldn’t have, anyway — would have seen a knife, more likely, or a razor, something sharp and dangerous but not the truth. Rarely the truth. Most people can’t see it, don’t want to see it, train themselves not to see it.

Luckily for her, I’m not most people.

“You a lawyer?” I ask. Mind like hers, fast and sharp, attention to detail, wary of strangers, plus the confidence starting to shine back out of her now she’s over her earlier fear and beginning to think she’s out of danger — a belief I know I’ll have to break her of, and soon, but let her have for the moment, a sop to help her recover — that’s my first guess. Quick shake of the head, hint of a smile — no, but it’s a path she’d considered once. “Reporter?” Startled laugh, smile broadens — thought about that too, once upon a time, but decided against it. Her eyes sparkle a little behind those chilled frames — she’s enjoying this game.

I try not to let on, but so’m I.

Problem is, I'm not sure what to guess next. She's someone they want dead, and not the bottom-feeders I just pulled off her. No, they were under orders, their kind always is. So why's Pentex want her gone? Got to be either she is somebody, or she knows somebody, or she knows something. Lawyers're always poking into things those creeps want to keep buried, same with reporters. If she's neither, and there's no way she's law enforcement, not with those soft hands and well-kept nails — crap, she probably just stumbled onto something she shouldn't, something they'll kill to keep quiet.

She could be anybody, just looked the wrong way at the wrong time.

All that flashes through at once, she's still waiting on me to continue, to try again, third strike's the killer. I frown, give it some serious thought. Smart, definitely. Decent clothes but not fancy, not all dolled up either — sensible shoes, kind you could stand in all day. Hands soft, well tended, not dry, except — something tickles the back of my mind, something I noticed but filed away, a sense memory, a smell that I caught and saved for later. Dry, cool, powdery — I glance down at my jacket. Even in the near dark I can pick out faint white smudges to either side, and I'm careful to keep my lips closed when I smile.

“Teacher?”

Those pretty eyes — gray, like her blouse — widen, skin pales a touch, mouth slackens, feet stutter back a little farther. Damn, spooked her — she's wondering am I stalker posing as hero? I gesture to the marks that gave her away. “Chalk dust.”

Some of the tension fades back from her gaze, her posture. She chucks it up — hah! — to a lucky guess.

I'm okay with that.

Now comes the hard part. “Those guys — they weren't muggers,” I tell her. “They were after you. Why?”

“What?” She shakes her head, can't believe that, won't — the leap from random victim to deliberate target's one she's not ready to make, a whole chasm of terror yawning before her, no clear landing in sight on the other side. “No, no — they wanted my purse. And. . . . I didn't know them. They didn't know me. I just... it happens, it's... no...”

I let her trail off before trying again. “I saw them,” I admit this time. “Saw them spot you, chase you. Saw you pull free, them go after you. A few others went by before you. They wanted you.” That's what caught my attention in the first place, a glimpse of the pair lurking in the shadows, clearly in wait for someone. Poachers on my territory, my pack's, an unwelcome presence in our domain but one we knew we couldn't fight off completely, too many of them and too few of us so most of the time we steered clear unless directly involved. But this time, the way they were scanning all who passed, I knew they were up to something. And I couldn't just let it go.

Good thing for her I didn't.

She's quiet, absorbing what I said. Mind that sharp, she can't discount it, much as she'd like to. "Why?" she asks finally. "Why would they want me? I'm just a teacher, I teach high school science, chemistry" — unbidden I see her in her classroom, etching the board with her precise writing, all the students gazing adoringly, the boys all smitten, the girls all envious, everyone hanging on her every word, enough so's they actually take in the knowledge she imparts, a good teacher who gets through to her students, firm but fair, loved but respected — "what could I possibly have done for them to...?" Eyes that'd been gazing off into space while she searched her memory now leap back to me, latching onto me with laser focus. "Who do they work for?"

Gaia, she's sharp! Took that leap after all, worked out mid-flight her assailants're nothing but the hired help. Question is, how much should I tell her? "Big business," is what I choose. "They're errand boys. Thugs. Question is, what'd you do to draw their attention?"

"I— " There's almost a tangible sense of release as the pressure comes off me, that glance no longer spearing me, thoughts turning inward again instead. But she shakes her head, shivers. "I don't know, I can't think — god, it's cold out! Sorry, could we... would you... the least I could do... could I buy you a cup of coffee?" Cold's not the only thing bringing a blush to her cheeks. I'm guessing she's never had to be the one doing the asking.

I go easy on her. "Sure." I swivel back around, nudge Flight back to life. "Hop on."

She does, more gingerly now her life's not at stake, Flight's bulk intimidating her, hesitating a second before her arms wrap around me again, but I hear a small sound like a sigh or a hidden laugh as I coax Flight back down the path and then open her up again once we hit the street proper.

She may not want to admit it, but Lindsey Harper is enjoying the ride.

• • •

"Wait." I hold up a hand, stopping her mid-stream. "Say that again."

She frowns, annoyed at the interruption, though not terminally so. Her chatter's filled our booth these past ten minutes, since we sat down, paused only to give orders and then accept the outcome, the steaming cup of coffee wrapped tight in her hands more of a prop and a source of heat than something to be consumed. Me, I'd tucked into my slice of apple pie with all the enthusiasm of a starving man, and my coffee with the glee of a dedicated addict long denied his drug of choice. Normally take mine to go, of course — diners're too closed in for me, all narrow aisles and cramped booths and packed bodies, better to drink from somewhere high up, a bridge or a cornice somewhere, wind in my face, city laid out before me, people just a background hum too low to distract. Yet here we are.

Now she repeats her last statement, a little slower than breakneck: "I said I've still got papers to grade, and a lab to plan, and then there's our field trip coming up — "

“That.” I wave my fork, bits of crust and filling still clinging to it, catching her eye and teasing a smile to her lips. “Field trip. Where?”

“Oh, we’re going to the new recycling center so we can see how they process everything and talk about biodegradable materials.” Her eyes shine at the thought, a real academic, loving the idea of learning and imparting, mixed with a hint of hippie, all excited about cleaning the Earth and making Her better.

Our Theurge’d love her.

But she’s frowning now. “That is, assuming we get permission.” Gray eyes go as steely as the glasses surrounding them. “I’ve been getting the runaround.”

“Yeah?” Take another sip of coffee, make the mistake of grinning at the waitress as she glides over to refill it, steaming carafe rock-steady in long-callused hands. She gasps a little, seen-it-all façade cracking from the pressure, backs off quick as she can. Damn. Got to be more careful. Lindsey doesn’t notice, though. “Who’s jerking you around?”

“It’s the company that built the place,” she tells me. “Night Soil. I thought they’d be thrilled to have students see what they’re doing, but they’ve been putting me off, claiming there might be safety issues, suggesting I try one of the older recycling centers instead.” That frown’s threatening to take up permanent residence. “It’s like they don’t want people to appreciate what they’re doing!”

Probably because they don’t. Haven’t heard of Night Soil, but that don’t mean much. The name, though — sounds like a good thing, soil and plants and fertilizer, unless you know what it comes from.

Shit.

Gotta be a Pentex company. Why they’re after her. She was threatening to poke around their “recycling center.” Might’ve uncovered something they didn’t want anybody seeing. Tried shooing her away, didn’t work so they stepped it up to scaring her off. Or just dispatching her altogether.

Odd, though. Normally Pentex’d be subtler than this, least at first. From excuses to killing? Big leap, even for them.

“You coming from school tonight?” I ask then, just as she’s taking a sip of her coffee, maybe her first. Wait till she’s done swallowing, then she nods. “And before that? You go by this recycling center today?”

Another nod. “Yes, I wanted to speak to the manager directly, since he hasn’t been answering my calls. But the door was locked, and the guard said everyone was in a meeting.” Quick shake of her head. “Strange way to run a recycling center!”

Picture’s coming clearer now. She went by there, the guard told someone, they sent those two to tail her, maybe shake her up a bit, scare her off. They got into it, though, went for a more permanent solution — not strictly authorized, maybe, but slaps on the wrist small price for a little fun. “Got their number?” I ask, draining my cup in one long swallow. Ah, have to admit, even better without the usual fibrous aftertaste from the takeout cup leeching into it.

“The center? Of course.” She pulls out her phone, a solid, reasonably new type, not flashy but gets the job done — never did get the hang of those things, buttons too darn small — and after a second shows the screen. I push it back toward her.

“Call, tell ’em you’ve changed your mind, you’re going somewhere else.” She’s studying me like maybe I’m kidding. “Now.”

She starts to argue, then decides against it. I saved her life, what’s the harm in humoring me on this? Seems simple enough. So she dials, and I sit there wishing I hadn’t scared off the waitress. Can hear the message on the other end, then the beep. “Yes, hi, this is Lindsey Harper from Auerbach High,” she says, voice clicking into that bright, enunciated mode of someone who’s left a lot of messages over the years. “I just wanted to let you know that since it seems to be such an imposition on you I’ll be taking my students elsewhere for their field trip. Good day.” Impressive how she can make it clear she’s pissed at them even while admitting defeat. “Do you really think that will help?” she asks after she’s hung up, same time as she’s waving the waitress back over for refills, Gaia bless her.

I savor the renewal of life-giving caffeine — there’s got to be a sacred Rite for it somewhere, I just know it — before answering. “Yeah, they wanted you to steer clear, now you are, they’ve no reason to keep after you.” Well, the company doesn’t, at least. Not so sure about the two who tried already. They might be making it personal. Would love to be wrong about that.

“You think it’s a front for something else, like money laundering or shady imports?” She can’t let it go, danger of a sharp mind and a thirst for knowledge, damn near impossible to walk away. “Should I call someone about them? The police, the EPA, the FBI?”

A long gulp swallows my laugh. “They’d track your call, put you right back in it. Naw. I’ll take care of it.” Can’t go after everything and everyone, but an isolated company, one well-guarded building they’re willing to kill to keep people out of? Yeah, the pack’ll be all over that. Probably mixing formoral into recycled goods or something. Not for much longer, though.

“Thank you.” Fidgeting with her cup, her napkin, her flatware — cheap but serviceable, no danger of real silver here! — before glancing up at me from under long lashes. “If you hadn’t... I don’t know that I’d...”

Yeah, probably not. I try not to let on, though, shrug like it’s no big deal. “Glad I could help.” Finish my coffee again and start levering myself out of the booth, the worn vinyl seat creaking in protest. “Give you a ride home?” Just in case those two turn up again to finish what they started.

“That would be... yes, thank you.” She stands too — a lot more easily than me — and reaches for her purse, then flushes. “Oh! I’m sorry, I — ”

Can’t help it this time, I do laugh. “It’s fine. I got it.” Pull some crumpled bills from my pocket, extract enough to include a healthy tip, and drop them on the table. “All set.” She lets me lead her out, and I force myself not to smile at the waitress as we brush past.

Well, not too much, anyway.

“Nice,” I admit as I pull up, Flight idling now she’s at rest, exhaust still trickling out after our fast ride from the diner. Swear I could feel Lindsey grinning through the muscles of my back, her face pressed to my shoulder as we barreled down the street. Late enough there’s little to no traffic, just the moon overhead and the road straight and gleaming like a glass-smooth lake, dark and clean and welcoming. Following Lindsey’s directions brought us here: four stories, brick with stone for ornamental touches, old enough to have class but well-maintained, shoulder-to-shoulder with others of similar ilk but each faring a little different from long years of service. Decent neighborhood, too, old trees and worn sidewalks, old-fashioned streetlights as much decoration as illumination, cars ranging from a little battered to just shy of luxury, all the houses quiet this late save for some lights and soft music here and there. Kind of place you’d expect a good, hard-working teacher to live.

Her shrug’s embarrassed, her smile pleased. “It’s home. More than I can afford, really, on my salary, but after a long day of labs and parent phone calls and staff meetings I need someplace quiet and clean and all mine.” Keys already in hand, she turns. “I just want to say, again —”

She doesn’t get to finish.

Flicker in the street light, too sudden to stop but I shove her away hard enough to send her flying. The nearest pole, some twenty feet away, stops her cold, and she crumples at its base — but the heavy pipe that would’ve crushed her head swings down through empty air instead, whistling like it’s lonely.

Grab it, wrench it free, toss it aside. Turn to face them.

Same two as before, only uglier. Before, looked almost normal. Almost human. Now even the weak lighting can’t hide deformities — thrashing tails, humped backs, dangling arms, beak-like faces. Eyes tiny red dots in the dark.

The fomori in full form this time.

“We hoped we’d find you here,” lead one hisses at me, circling to one side, claws out and ready. “We owe you for before.”

“You jumped us good,” his partner adds, circling the other way. “Not this time. We’re ready now. And we outnumber you, two to one.”

“Just two?” I laugh. “That the best Pentex can do? They didn’t wanna send more?”

“This is *our* job!” the first one says, scowling, dragging his claws along the wall. Loud screeches match the deep furrows forming there. “*We* were told to scare her off! No one else!”

“How’s killing same as scaring?” I ask, keeping an eye on both best I can. Almost opposite each other now, one behind me, one in front — and betwixt me and Lindsey. Not good. But I keep talking. “You told to do one, or the other?”

“Our orders were to make sure she gives up trying to tour the center,” the second one tells me, its voice going high and breathless into a harsh giggle. “If we kill her, she’s not touring anywhere.”

“Time to finish what we started,” the first one announces. He glances behind him, where Lindsey lays still, and grins slow and nasty. “I’ll go for her, while he takes you out. Then we’ll have plenty of time to play.”

“Not gonna happen,” I warn. He just laughs.

“What’re you going to do, little wolf?” he asks. “You move, he guts you from behind. Besides, I can rip her apart before you get even halfway here. You got claws that can reach twenty feet?”

“Claws?” No reason to hide it here, so I show full tooth as I laugh. “Who said anything about claws?”

Quick tugs and both pistols’re in my hands. Twist to the side, both guns leaping up, fingers tightening on two triggers, and — *blam!*

Two guns, two bullets, two fomori shot in the head, slumping to the ground in misshapen piles before the echoes have done settling.

Still-warm guns sliding back into their holsters and I’m checking on Lindsey. Who’s starting to stir. Good-sized lump on her head, courtesy the street pole, but fine otherwise. And better she didn’t see that. I scoop her up and head for the door she’d indicated right before this all went down. Least I can do is put her to bed. Should be safe enough now — Pentex’ll be happy, losing two foot soldiers a small price to pay for avoiding exposure, when we do hit the center enough time’ll have passed Lindsey won’t be suspected, all clear for her and another step for us.

I pause at the front door, glancing back out. Street lights cast long shadows across the dead fomori — already shifting back in death, just looking like ugly-ass humans again. I need to dispose of them soon-ish, but I can drag their sorry carcasses off somewhere once Lindsey’s safe inside.

The street lights pick out glints of Flight’s chrome, the buildings and benches and trees wreathed with dark, gentle fog, softening edges but adding sheen to steel and glass.

Gaia, I love the city! Some of my kind don’t get that, only comfortable with trees and grass and bush. They’re missing out. Gaia created all this too, gleaming metal and sturdy concrete, towering buildings and sweeping roadways filled with light and life and motion. It’s where we belong. Where I belong.

I’m smiling as I juggle Lindsey’s key into the lock, give it a quick twist, nudge the door open with my hip, and carry her inside.

Tatters of Honor

John Kennedy

He made his way through the exit of Seattle-Tacoma Airport, his hand gripping the handle to the heavy leather briefcase tightly. His dark grey suit matched the color of his hair and designer sunglasses hid dark brown eyes. He did not mind the chill air as he stretched his shoulders. An associate of his had loaned him a private jet. It was spacious but he felt like a stray dog kept in a kennel. The thought of hailing a taxi left a bitter taste in his mouth as his muscles ached for a run, but time was important. Still, a short walk would do wonders for his stiff limbs.

Despite the cold, panhandlers curled up on the side of the streets with makeshift blankets and sleeping bags, trying to keep warm. Some had fallen asleep while others continued to shake cups full of coins as he walked by. Unlike some of his associates, he felt some compassion for them. While he hailed from a noble lineage, he still held sympathy for those who had nothing. His uncle had referred to it as a character flaw.

As he drew closer to the park his left ear twitched as he picked up the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching from behind. The smell of cheap bourbon hit his nostrils as a man in a designer leather coat and jeans ran at him from behind a dumpster and grabbed hold of his briefcase. The man was not one of the beggars, though he had a look of desperation in his eyes.

Toriq had had enough. He'd felt like a caged dog for too long. His muscles swelled, stretching the seams of his coat as he doubled in size, and a bestial growl slipped past sharpening teeth. The mugger's eyes drew wide as an aura of animalistic fury enveloped him and his hands let go of the briefcase in fear. Toriq let out a deep, throaty chuckle as the mugger ran off down the street.

He had torn his suit but it was worth it. The sight of the man tripping over himself as he disappeared into the distance made the old Shadow Lord laugh. Relaxing

and resuming his human skin, Toriq Crow's Warden walked a few more blocks before hailing a cab to take him to Tiger Mountain State Park.

• • •

"Who are you to disrespect us more than your tribe already has?"

As Toriq made his way up the mountain trails one of the tallest men he had ever seen broke the forest silence. He towered over the trail, his open heavy-winter coat revealing a bare chest. Black hair pulled back in a ponytail revealed tribal markings that trailed from the man's cheeks down his chest where they broke into intricate swirls and designs. Despite standing alone on the path, Toriq felt the presence of several others lurking in the trees.

"I apologize for the circumstances of my arrival. I did not mean to be so late."

"So late?" The man ground his foot impatiently into the dirt path. "You are hours late, with no howl to let us know your arrival. We only knew you had started climbing the mountain when Broken Nose over there smelled the filth you cover yourself with!" A chorus of laughs came from the woods as several more Native Americans emerged from the trees with two wolves in their company.

Toriq Crow's Warden took a deep breath and chose his words carefully before speaking. "I chose to honor the Litany and the Veil. It was rude, but necessary. Still, I apologize for breaking with tradition and for being late. Am I still welcome at your sept?"

The leader bristled but gave a curt nod. Clearly Toriq's worlds held some weight with him but Toriq could feel that the leader had hoped for a fight. "You are still welcome, Shadow Lord. I, Schweabe First-In-Battle, welcome you to our sept." With another nod the other warriors relaxed their stances around Toriq and escorted him up the mountainside.

No one spoke as they approached a massive series of stones carved from the mountainside in a crude facsimile of an eagle raising its wings. Strips of leather and wicker bands hung from each wing and small charms dangled from each band. Toriq's research had taught him only that the Sept of the Soaring Eagle was primarily Suquamish Native Americans and that the Wendigo held power here; he knew nothing of their rituals or symbols. The familiar sight of a soaring two-headed eagle in black-and-blue paint, familiar from his native Albania, gave him some comfort.

Fish cooking on wooden poles sizzled as several boys played with a soccer ball. Toriq could not tell who were the Kinfolk at this Sept, but it appeared that all were welcome. A gray wolf looked at the game with great interest while a smaller wolf with silver fur nuzzled up next to him and slept. In the distance a Garou in his Glabro form carried several huge logs into the bawn, a crude axe slung across his back.

The smell of burning pine and cooking fish met his nose as they approached a small shelter on the other side of the monument. The door frame had been carved into a stylistic eagle's head opening its beak; a simple cloth acted as a curtain. Toriq breathed deeply of the night's cool air before stepping inside.

• • •

“I do not understand,” Toriq said.

Enosh Tartarick snorted loudly. Tariq’s mentor was a great big man whose belly had started to grow from years of self-indulgence. “You do not understand? Did you forget how to listen, boy? Or was my story too boring to be kept by your ears?”

They were in Enosh’s manor, a small but luxuriously furnished home that exhibited a clash of the primitive and the modern. A large fireplace lit the dining room. Fur blankets smothered the modern leather couches and chairs. A thin film of dust coated a flat-screen television on the wall. Before the fireplace several plates of food covered a large wooden table. Enosh still worked at his second steak while Toriq had barely started his first.

“No, honored one.” Toriq bit back his tongue in the presence of his mentor. As a young man he grew up hearing about Enosh’s exploits as an arbiter between the tribes and when he manifested his First Change it was to Enosh that he turned to for guidance. “What I am saying is I do not understand the cause of this conflict or why we must be the ones to make amends.”

“Perhaps you have been in one too many fights with that pack mate of yours. The one who gave you that scar on your chin and the bigger one across your heart from your incessant fighting. What’s his name?”

“Vykos Kincaid.”

“That’s right. The one who challenged you to that honor duel and left you lying in the grass.”

“I was close to winning that fight, and I still believe I was in the right.”

Enosh looked very serious and leaned forward in his chair. “If you had been close to winning that fight, you would have. Instead you became obsessed over possession of a klaive that now belongs to its rightful owner, Vykos. And those claw marks you have on your chest should be a reminder of the honor that was carved from your flesh that day!”

Toriq’s cheeks burned as he looked down at the table. Enosh went back to eating the food in front of him and silence continued for several minutes before he spoke again.

“I shall tell the story again.”

“That’s hardly necessary —”

“No. You must learn to understand that there is always more to a story than what is spoken. Remember you are a Shadow Lord. I shall begin the story again.”

The elder straightened his back as his eyes bore down on Toriq. “Many moons ago, when the land was not choked by so many men and their mountains of steel and glass did not carve so deeply into Gaia’s flesh, the Pack of the Western Ranges roamed the lands that would make up the western coast of the United States. Their

leader, Boris Honor's-Biting-Edge, traveled the land finding new caerns and the septs of the tribes of the Big Brother and the Little Brother. The second War of Rage was at a low point during that year and it was not uncommon to see packs from all tribes roaming the country.

"Boris, a brave Shadow Lord whose human descendants had roamed with the Cossacks and boyars of Eastern Europe, discovered the location of a magnificent sept shaped like a soaring eagle. Boris, whose own personal symbol was a great hawk, traveled there under the guise of peace to pay his respects to the caern. Boris Honor's-Biting-Edge was a warrior who prided himself for his victories during the second War of Rage.

"The Wendigo greeted Boris' pack with gifts of good, carved artwork, and fetishes of power to help them on their trip. Boris thanked them for their gifts but was shocked when they asked him to leave immediately. They were polite, but insisted their ceremonies to the spirit of the Regal One, an ancient yet powerful spirit that slept beneath the land, had to continue without outside interference. The Wendigo claimed they were observing an annual ceremony of purification and asked Boris to depart from their lands. Boris was angry but his beta, Kalina Moonscarred, convinced him of the foolishness of angering their guests on their homelands.

"As Boris and his pack began to leave their lands a member of the Wendigo, whose name has been lost to time, insulted the pack, saying that the presence of a great killer of the native peoples of the land would pollute their ceremony and taint the land. Boris demanded an apology but was refused. The Wendigo then insulted Boris so gravely that the exact words were lost to the ages but the great warrior's self-control broke and his pack found themselves trying to save their alpha from certain death as the entire sept rushed to the aid of their kinsmen.

"The Pack of the Western Ranges was outnumbered but they were veterans of a hostile wilderness and by the time the battle was over they had lost two packmates and killed more than five of the Wendigo. Many more Wendigo lay bleeding in the mud as Boris stepped up to the great statue that made up the caern. Sitting in a basket was a great breastplate of polished-turquoise shards and whale bones known as the Regal One's Crest. This fetish was the prize of the Sept and Boris felt it was fitting tribute to be taken after the battle.

"Over the years, the Crest has been sought after by the Wendigo and many honor duels have been fought between our tribes, with the Shadow Lords prevailing each time." Enosh chuckled slightly. "Though one has to admit, at times a certain amount of trickery and deception was needed to counter their anger! Still, we have held onto the Crest for more than one hundred and fifty two years. Now we must return it to them, to end the pointless bloodshed and restore the honor of our tribe."

Toriq had listened carefully to Enosh's story as he considered it from all angles. Then, he had a flash of insight into the story and what it meant.

"We are returning the talisman to the Wendigo in order to end a point of conflict between our two tribes."

“Yes?” Enosh took another bite of steak as his cheeks stretched back in a smile.

“A conflict that by our honor they started with their insults and we ended in battle.”

“Go on, boy.”

“We want something from them and this is how we will trade for it?”

The pitcher of tea spilled as his mentor slammed his fist on the table. “Finally he gets it!”

“But what is it we need?”

“We are in a position to claim a great many favors from the tribes in that area but first we must settle our old debts. It is not for you to know, only to accomplish this task. This task which, I might add, brings you closer to cleaning your sullied reputation.”

Toriq leaned back in his chair as he considered his options carefully. “So tell me: when do I leave for this sept?”

• • •

The lodge was hot and humid and the smell of dense pine smoke filled the room. Sitting along the back wall on a bench carved from a single massive tree were the sept elders. They appeared calm, but their attention focused on him. Schweabe was the only one of the pack to enter the long house with him, with the rest staying outside just beyond the door. Toriq did not expect any conflict, but if it arose he was at a disadvantage.

The elder sitting in the middle wore clothes of vibrant blue and black, and her hair was pinned back with a small turtle-shell band. Her walking stick was wrapped with several bands of leather intertwined with brilliantly colored flakes of stone. To Toriq’s eyes it appeared as both a tool to help her walk and a weapon of war. He recognized the ritual staff, and so knew the identity of its bearer. Toriq raised his hands out to his sides and held his head straight.

“Honored elders of the Sept of the Soaring Eagle,” began Toriq. “Thank you for having me on your lands. Sept Leader Treeroot, I thank you for the honor of approaching you today. I am Toriq Crow’s Warden, Philodox of the Shadow Lord tribe. I speak on behalf of the elders of my tribe and have the honor of speaking with you tonight.”

“Thank you for traveling so far, Toriq Crow’s Warden.” Treeroot stood up slowly, most of her weight supported by her stick. She appeared to be in her fifties, though her eyes held an even older wisdom in them.

Toriq brought his arms back together and undid the latches on his brief case.

“I have come to your sept to return what belongs to you. For too long has there been fighting between our two tribes. Too long have we been unable to pass through

your lands without tensions between us. Tonight, the feud may end and the honor of both tribes be upheld. I present to you, the rightful owners, the Regal One's Crest."

Solemnly removing the crest from the brief case, he bent to one knee. It was ancient yet appeared as if it were still new. A double-headed eagle made up of polished stones sat amidst intertwined cords of rope and leather, with small shards of turquoise intertwined within. It was beautiful, and in the firelight it took on an aura of power. He held the amulet up in both arms and turned his head to the ground.

The only noise he heard besides the crackle of burning logs in the fire was the shuffle of a Garou standing. The walls of the lodge echoed with heavy footsteps. Only when Toriq felt the crest lift out of his hands did he raise his eyes up from the floor. Treeroot stood before him in her Crinos form, her stick seeming like a small club in her massive claws. Her grey fur was accented by black-and-blue war paint, tracing the shape of feathers on her fur. She looked down at Toriq solemnly as she lifted the crest reverently.

Speaking in a language Toriq had never heard, she raised the crest above her head. The elders lowered their heads while Schweabe knelt down on both knees. Slowly, she stepped outside of the caern and approached the stone pillars that made up the caern itself. The Garou gathered around her as she walked, their eyes watching the ceremony with great hope and joy. Toriq followed her outside of the lodge but kept his distance, unsure as to what ritual she was enacting.

Raising the crest above her head and speaking again in her native tongue, Treeroot placed the crest on a pedestal that had been prepared for it. The Garou chanted reverently as Treeroot backed away slowly. Toriq smiled, as the sept took to the return of their fetish with great ceremony and love. The crest shone brightly as the eagle on it reflected the moonlight.

Then, they came. From the deepest holes in the ground and the darkest corners of the forest, they came. A swelling tide of insects, snakes, rats, and spiders swarmed through the sept and circled around the great stones. Treeroot backed away in fear, and a look of terror appeared in the eyes of the Kinfolk as they gathered next to the Garou. Several had assumed their war forms but waited for an order from the elders.

Treeroot stepped through the tide of insects, crushing several beneath her massive paws. She carefully placed both hands around the crest and began to speak with the spirits that dwelt nearby in the Umbra. A powerful Theurge, it was said her skills with the spirit world were beyond considerable. As she spoke, Toriq saw several Garou turn their gazes towards him and more than a few were flexing their muscles as if preparing to fight. Toriq shifted reflexively, a tall werewolf of deep black fur standing out amongst the greys and browns of the Wendigo.

With a great shout, Treeroot lifted the crest from the pedestal and the tide of creatures faded away. The night again grew quiet save for the heavy breathing and growling of the Garou. Treeroot cradled the crest in her hands as she shifted back into her human skin.

“Sept Leader, what has happened?” said Toriq impatiently. “What were those creatures?”

Schweabe stepped forward and pointed an accusatory claw at Toriq. “Isn’t it obvious? This is more trickery from his kind! They have done something to the crest!” His teeth clacked together as his lips drew back into a snarl.

“We did nothing! How dare you say that?!”

Shweabe pounced on Toriq and the two became a swirling mass of claws and muscle. Schweabe, fighting out of blind rage, was brutally strong, using fists as big as great hammers on Toriq. Toriq’s blood burned with rage but he was able to shift his feet around, snapping his jaws on Schweabe’s wrists when he saw an opening. Toriq’s long snout grew numb from the repeated punching, but the Wendigo’s arms were dripping blood.

A mystical aura enveloped the two, calming their will to fight and cooling their blood. Treeroot was by their side, her expression stern. The two shifted back into homid form, though Toriq’s suit was in rags around him. Schweabe First-In-Battle’s wounds bled drops of dark crimson into the mud.

Treeroot shook her head. “You’re fighting is as pointless as Honor’s-Biting-Edge’s was! Did you think that more fighting between our tribes would fix this? You two are no more than pups fighting because you can fight, not because you should.” Her eyes widened ominously, and Toriq felt shamed by her stare.

“I apologize, Sept Leader, I was not thinking.” He bowed before her. “But what caused the vermin to appear?”

“I have spoken with the great Eagle, and learned the truth of it and what needs to be done.”

Schweabe rubbed the pain from his arms. “Tell us, wise one.”

“The crest is pure and true, but to appease the spirit of the Regal One, the spirit it was made to glorify and cleanse, it must be delivered to the original caern.”

Toriq’s eyebrow raised. “The original caern? I do not understand.”

Treeroot lowered her head. “There is much more to Honor’s-Biting-Edge’s story than you may know. A deep shame that both of our tribes kept hidden and only the elders know.

“The ceremony of purification was meant to purify the Regal One, a servant of lord Eagle and one that had been an ally to our tribe in years past. He would manifest as a glorious figure of majestic beauty and pass his blessings upon the tribe. But when the ceremony was ruined by the actions of our ancestors the caern itself grew sick and diseased. Eagle appeared to our Theurges and said the caern could not be saved so long as the crest was gone. So we moved the sept here, to a purer location. Not wanting others to know our shame we hid the ruin of our old caern from the other septs, so that no one could judge us worse than we already judged ourselves.”

The gathered Garou were stunned silent. Tears were in the eyes of many upon learning about this violation of the Litany. Schweabe stepped forward, his passion returned. "What must we do to set things right?"

"You must return the crest to the original caern. Near where the steel eagles fly."

"I'm sorry?" Toriq said.

Schweabe took the crest from Treeroot and started walking away. "She means near the airport, idiot."

• • •

The trip was quiet. The Umbra of Seattle was a conflicted place, where spirits of electricity and glass fought for territory from the native spirits. Parts of the city had a tranquility to it that seemed to radiate outwards but the closer they traveled towards the Seattle-Tacoma airport the more the land became muted and dark. The moon was nearly full and yet, as they passed storage units and foreclosed houses, the land seemed drained of color.

Schweabe's wounds were wrapped in bandages but he refused to speak to Toriq. Toriq had hoped that he could help settle bad blood between them during their travel, but the warrior remained silent even as they entered Normandy Beach Park. Schweabe had led the way tirelessly, but whether that was from a need to see the task completed or to save his sept's honor, Toriq could not tell.

The Umbral trees swayed despite the lack of wind. Having no way with spirits, Toriq had no idea how they might react to the intrusion of two Garou into their forest, but he felt the park was stifled by controlled growth. The forest seemed to cry out for the freedom to grow as it wished instead of the forced cuttings and rigid planting it suffered.

In the center of the park they came to three massive stones that lay toppled in the dirt. They had smooth edges as if the wind had worn them away and even in the Umbra Toriq could smell garbage. Schweabe First-In-Battle approached the stones reverently and placed his hand on them, his eyes full of regret. Toriq held his distance, not wishing to insult the proud warrior further.

"When I was younger, my father was the Warden for our sept," Schweabe said. "He brought me here many times and would speak to me of responsibility, honor, and respect for our ways. He would put his hand on the stones like this and become very quiet before we left. He never told me what this place used to be, what it meant to my people."

"What it means to both our people," Toriq said. "How misspoken words can lead to so much bloodshed."

Schweabe glared at him but said nothing. Toriq stilled his tongue again, and let Schweabe begin the ceremony.

Burrowing into the ground, Schweabe made a deep hole for the crest. He brought it to his chest and then to his head before reverently placing it in the hole. He filled

the hole in and stood back, his breathing slow and his eyes cast low. Toriq observed a similar stance, out of respect for his tribe's role in this caern's fall.

A cold wind blew from all directions at once, putting both men off balance. A shrill cry came from deep inside the trees like a wounded bird of prey. Toriq felt his eardrums threaten to burst from the noise, and he fell to one knee. Leaves and twigs swirled around them as the stones grew red hot. Schweabe looked around confused, trying to seek a source of the mysterious cry.

A mysterious figure draped in rotting leather skins held together by rotting cords stepped from out of the stones. The figure's face appeared majestic, but pus dribbled down from his eyes and ears, coating his chest in an obscene mixture. On his head was a braided headdress of rope and cord that drooped to one side, and his hands were nothing but jagged bones. Numerous charms rattled as he took a step towards the Garou, and the wind filled with a foul smell.

It spoke with a raspy voice as more pus dribbled from his mouth. "You have summoned the Regal One to you, son of Hesper Baneculler, descendant of the peoples of this land."

Schweabe stepped forward with shock on his face. "I mean to return your crest to you, Regal One. To restore the honor of our tribe."

"Honor?" a deep throaty voice came from the spirit. "You speak to me of honor? You, who lost your home to foreign men and lost my sacred burial stones to the dark wolves from across the seas? Look at what time has done to me! Am I not in majestic splendor anymore? Do I not court the beauty of the skies and the rains?"

Toriq tensed as he felt one of the spirit's eyes turn to him. The corruption of the spirit burned at his soul and he hoped Schweabe would be able to make the right choice.

"Feel the anger of the lands in your veins, child. Feel the fury of your cheated ancestors. Regain the glory and honor of your people!" The spirit's body flared with power as a strange aura engulfed the two Garou. Immediately Toriq felt his blood boil and anger cloud his mind in ways he had not felt before.

Schweabe turned, his face contorting and stretching as sharp teeth jutted forth from his face. He towered over the spirit yet his gaze fixed on Toriq. The gigantic Wendigo tackled Toriq and pierced his talons deep into his shoulders, his jaw biting at Toriq's neck. Toriq tried to respond in kind but the warrior whose deed name was First-In-Battle took the upperhand quickly.

Toriq lashed blindly with his claws and caught Schweabe across the face, leaving bloody streaks across his snout. Toriq fought dirty, bringing his jaws shut around the Wendigo's ankle and thrashing his head sharply until he heard snapping limbs. Schweabe let out a defiant roar as he raked his talons across the Shadow Lord's back, the sharp points scraping across bone and muscle.

As Schweabe tore his foot free and backed up several feet in a fighting stance, Toriq heard Treeroot's words in his mind with a clarity that seemed to slow down the

events around them. “You two are no more than pups fighting because you can fight, not because you should.” He heard Enosh’s voice follow after hers. “There is more to a story than what is simply spoken.”

Through great will Toriq forced himself into his wolf form. His black fur was matted with blood that poured from his wounds. As Schweabe approached him, he turned over on his back, the grassy ground digging into his wounds and causing him great pain. Schweabe stood over Toriq, his eyes full of anger but also confusion. Toriq held his glare as he held his stance, not moving nor threatening Schweabe.

The Regal One roared out from next to the stones. “Finish him! He has surrendered! Break his spine and drink his marrow!”

Schweabe raised his claw over his head as if preparing to strike, his fangs pulled back in a sneer. Toriq breathed out slowly, letting the tension go from his body as he hoped Schweabe knew what to do next.

Schweabe took several steps back and howled in frustration, his anger and rage channeling through his voice. His form returned to his human skin and Toriq saw tears in his eyes. The pain in his body stung, but Toriq stood slowly, his body fighting the fiercely throbbing pain.

The Regal One stared at Toriq but did not act. His eyes seemed to glow wider and his voice seemed diminished. “You did not fight?”

Toriq nodded his head towards the once great spirit. “I chose not to fight.”

The Regal One’s form seemed to fade as the rest of its rotten skin fell from its body, revealing a glowing form of a young man with a flowing head dress. The spirit dissolved into a white light and a proud, deep voice echoed throughout the Umbra. “Now your tribes can start to listen. Now your tribes can start to heal.”

Toriq transformed back into his human form and leaned on one hand. Schweabe met his stare with tears of pride falling down his cheeks.

The two did not speak for the rest of the night but things had changed between them. As the Wendigo helped the wounded Shadow Lord to walk, the fire in their hearts was gone, and they began the return journey.

Cleanup

Stew Wilson

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Quire muttered, looking around. The pub was one of a dying breed, preferring the low hum of conversation and an open fire over loud music and big-screen TVs. It felt homely and traditional, and for all those reasons and more was the favored watering-hole of the Iron Bridge Runners

"You say that about everything," Smokejumper shot Quire a look of disdain across the table. "It's boring."

"Yeah. Sunita's getting the drinks. That's rare, but it's hardly a reason for you to get paranoid," Ian Denford, the pack's alpha, rolled his eyes at Quire. The old Glass Walker was used to his packmate's pessimism, but didn't share it.

Quire shook his head. "Tenner says I'm right."

"You're on," Ian laughed. "For a Strider you really don't know how to gamble."

Sunita carried four pint glasses back from the bar, and passed them out among her pack. "Let me guess. Quire's got a bad feeling about this?"

"Entirely right." Ian smiled, "I've got a tenner on him talking bollocks as usual."

Quire sipped his beer and looked around the table. He was sure his sense of smell had got better since his First Change, and that the ale tasted better. When he made the mistake of mentioning it, Sunita insisted it was just because he'd stopped smoking when he Changed. Whatever the case, it was a good pint. The start of a good evening, one of the few that the pack could have to relax with just themselves. That feeling lasted maybe ten minutes.

"I know the timing isn't perfect, but I could do with a little favor," Sunita glanced around the table.

Ian raised his grey eyes, pint halfway to his lips. "What kind of favor?"

“I’ve got family who lost track of when they had to go back to India. They’re stuck in a detention center, Wilberforce Cross.”

Quire ran a hand through his hair. “So you want us to bust them out?”

“Maybe. Look, it’s not that simple. My aunt looks after all the paperwork, but she was so busy when they came over that she just lost track of time, it’s a misunderstanding, she was willing to go home but they moved her and her family into the detention center instead of just sending her back and I don’t know why.”

“What aren’t you telling us? We’re Garou. We don’t break people out of detention centers for no reason.”

“It’s my cousin,” Sunita slumped in her chair, sipping her beer. “He’s not been right for a while now, and nobody back home thought to check on him. I’m the only Garou in my family now, and they’ve got some backwards ideas about Black Furies so they didn’t think I’d care, so nobody’s checked him out or put a Kin-Fetch on him. And I think he’s about to Change.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re telling us that you know about a cub going through his First Change in an immigration detention center,” Ian took a long pull on his beer, then handed Quire a ten-pound note.

Smokejumper tilted her head. “Where is Wilberforce Cross? What about the local Garou?”

“Used to be Blackmoor, the high-security prison, until it got handed over to a private company who lease it back to the immigration mob,” Sunita said. “Maybe forty miles from here. The Chalk Hill Sept had something to do with it when it was still a prison, but they don’t want to know now. I’ve already talked to them, but they said it’s up to me. They won’t get in our way, but they’re not about to help out.”

Quire finished his pint. “You spoke to the sept? How long have you known they were locked up?”

“A couple of weeks now. I was hoping it was just a mix-up, they’d get sent home before now. But they’re tied up in legal stuff and the last I heard it could be months before my family’s allowed to go back to India.”

“Bloody Hell, VoxPop,” Ian sighed. “Talk about dropping us in the shit.”

Sunita frowned at his use of her deed-name. She’d nearly blogged about her First Change for a national newspaper, and her pack would not let her live it down. She leant forwards, fists on the table. “I didn’t think we’d need to do anything.”

Quire raised his hands before things could escalate. “She’s right, Talks-Past.” He used his alpha’s deed-name to defray some of the tension. “Clearly something funny’s going on at Wilberforce Cross or her family wouldn’t still be in the country. I’ll get Jane to bring the big van down to pick us up.”

At that, Smokejumper frowned. “We don’t need the van. Faster to run there in the Umbra.”

Ian shook his head. “Nah, Smoke. You’ve never been to the reflection of a prison. It’s not a nice place. And we’ll need some means of getting Sunita’s relatives out, so the van makes sense. Save the spirit work for helping us escape.”

“Very well,” the lupus nodded. “But I do not believe I will deal well with your woman’s relentless cheerfulness.”

“You can ride in the back,” said Quire, a little too quickly. “Anyway. Since none of us are going to be driving, I think we could all do with another drink.”

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Thirty minutes later, the pack sat in a large van speeding towards Wilberforce Cross. The setting sun painted the sky a glorious orange, the judge’s moon already easily visible to the east through the thin cloud. Quire sat up front with Jane, while the rest of the pack checked the supplies from the rough seats in the back. The local radio station played forgettable pop music, its presence mostly to distract the Garou and their driver from the noise of the engine.

“Don’t suppose you’ve come up with a plan?” Ian called forwards.

“Not yet. We won’t get there before ten thirty, which is a bit late to claim we’re anything government. I don’t like the idea of trying to sneak Kinfolk out through the Umbra, either. Blackmoor wasn’t a nice place to start with; I dread to think what fifty years as a prison did to the place. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s why the Chalk Hill Sept wants nothing to do with it.”

“Fair assessment.” Talks-Past turned to his other packmates. “VoxPop, any luck with the layout?”

Sunita looked up from her phone. “Nothing yet. Bunch of crap on their website about visiting hours and a work program to upskill detainees in a value-driven fashion, whatever that means, but just one exterior photo. Best I can find is an overhead shot from Google Maps, putting the two together it looks like the place is four floors of hollow box with a twenty-foot wall around it.”

“Any other surprises?”

“Nah. I’ve had some friends check their suppliers and sponsors, none of the names came back with anything weird. No Pentex links, no nearby Black Spirals.”

Just then, Quire turned up the volume on the van’s radio, so the rest of the pack could hear the news bulletin over the engine.

“—headlines again. The Chancellor has denied any knowledge of a deal that would allow American fast-food giant O’Tolleys to run a number of NHS hospitals. Two guards are dead and one is seriously injured after violence broke out at the Wilberforce Cross detention center, though sources say it was an isolated incident. Arsenal beat Manchester United 3-2 to go top of the—”

“It never rains but it bloody pours.” Quire grumbled.

“Actually, this gives us our way in,” Talks-Past said. “Jane, park up just out of sight, I’ll need to drive the last bit. I’m the only one of us who looks even vaguely military.”

“What are you talking about?” Sunita asked.

“Peterhead, 1987. Another prison riot, only they sent the SAS in to deal with it. Complete overkill if you ask me. Kept it quiet for years afterwards, but it gives us an in. Doesn’t have to be army, of course; Special Branch would probably do.”

Smokejumper made a noise somewhere between a cough and a snort. It took a couple of seconds for the others to recognize her laughter. “Quire’s about to tell us he has a bad feeling about this.”

“He won’t,” Talks-Past said. “Because if he does I’ll rip his dick off and feed it to him.”

“So noted,” Quire called back. “Am I allowed to say it’s a stupid idea?”

“Oh yes. I’d be surprised if you didn’t. But it’s one more plan than you’ve come up with so far.”

• • •

The van drove slowly towards the gates of Wilberforce Cross Detention Center, formerly HMP Blackmoor. The tinted side and rear windows helped keep the pack out of sight. Talks-Past was in the driver’s seat, in combat fatigues. Smokejumper sat in the passenger seat. She’d objected, but her powerful build and short ginger hair made her look more ‘official’ than the others. Sunita, small enough to crawl through crowds but not convincing as a cop even in Glabro, and Quire with his shoulder-length hair and obvious contempt for authority sat in the back with Jane.

They pressed forwards, through the small crowd of journalists formed near the main gate.

One of the guards standing at the front gate ran forwards, gesturing wildly at the van as it moved toward the gate. Ian lowered the window.

“Turn it around! We can’t let journalists get any closer than they already are.”

Talks-Past stared at the guard for a few seconds. “I’m Detective Inspector Greene, this is Detective Sergeant Carter. We’re with Special Branch.”

Talks-Past waved his ID card — the best that VoxPop and Quire could come up with in the limited time available. Spiritual power lent his words extra gravitas and meaning. The guard, already hoping for some kind of backup, was all too glad to wave the van forwards. Parking in front of the prison gates, Talks-Past and Smokerunner got out of the van. People shouted from the media crowd behind them, but the two Garou ignored them. Instead, they focused on the one uniformed man speaking into a cellphone until he hung up and spoke to them.

“John Maxwell, head of security. I understand you’re with the police?”

“DI Greene and DS Carter, Special Branch. Not our normal shout, but given some of the people inside, the people in charge wanted us to be eyes-on the situation.” Again, a touch of spiritual power from Talks-Past papered over the cracks in his story. Normally a minor trick, in the hands of a con-artist or particularly creative liar, the Gift of persuasion could be a very useful tool.

“What happened?” Smokejumper’s lack of tact was easy to mistake for professionalism.

“One of the detainees went absolutely mental about three hours ago. Broke out of his cell, killed two guards and injured a third. We don’t know where he is or what he’s doing. We tried locking him out of some sections, but the secure doors won’t hold him. He attacked a guard station, but couldn’t get in. So far, all of my people who could get out safely are already out, but I’ve got ten who couldn’t get to safety. They’re looking for this maniac to restrain him until someone can get inside.”

“What about your other detainees?”

“Still in their rooms. We don’t have much protocol for this level of lone nutcase. A full lockdown seemed like the best way to keep them safe. But my people—”

“We’ll get them out,” Talks-Past said. “I’ve got a couple of specialists in the van, the kind who don’t like being photographed. We go in, you stay out here and hold the perimeter. Talk to people if you have to, but don’t tell them what we are or why we’re here. That’d cause more trouble than it solves. Don’t mention any details.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. We need to make it look like everything’s under control. Right now, all anyone knows is that this is a single individual who’s suffered a psychotic break. Tragic. We can stop it turning into any more of a bloodbath. You’ve got the situation under control for now. We don’t want to give anyone any clues what’s actually going on because that would weaken our control.”

Maxwell frowned in grudging acceptance. “I suppose you’re the experts. Take the van through the gate. We’ll close it behind you. Radio out to us when you’re clear. Channel six.”

“Understood.”

Talks-Past and Smokejumper returned to the van. One of the guards opened the large gate in the outside wall. The prison loomed in front of them, a four-story slab of red brick dotted with tiny windows. The engine growled as they pulled forward.

“How bad is it?” Sunita said as they dropped out of sight of the road.

“Bad. One individual killed two guards and injured a third, then ran off. Broke into secured sections with apparently inhuman strength. Ten guards still inside, along with about a hundred and fifty of their other inmates—”

“Like my family,” she snapped.

“Yes. Sorry. Ten guards, and all the other people who’ve been rounded up and put here, locked in their rooms for their own safety.”

“If you believe that, I’ve got a bridge to sell you.”

“Shut it, Quire. Give me ideas.”

“We need to locate the cub and keep him isolated. We also need to draw off the guards so they don’t get in his way and end up dead. This is a bad enough Veil breach as it is. Find the downed guards and take their radios so we’ve got the line to the outside that the head guy thought we’d have. I’d suggest Smokejumper and Sunita try to find the cub. Seeing family might help him relax, or Smokejumper can hit him with something mystic. Meanwhile, Talks-Past and I get to deal with the guards, keep them out of harm’s way until we can get them out.”

“You’re learning fast,” Talks-Past said with a grim smile. “Right. Like the man said. Let’s go.”

• • •

Wilberforce Cross might not be a prison any more, but Quire would be hard-pressed to tell the difference. Walking through the visiting area, he was amazed by how little the owners had done. The walls still the same stark white paint, steel mesh over the windows, cheap tables and chairs stacked against the walls. One wall bore posters about immigration advice services as a nod to the building’s new function, but that was the only sign that anything had changed. He felt something pricking at the back of his neck as old memories threatened to come to the surface. He shifted to Glabro and felt his senses sharpen, powerful muscles growing and tensing under his jacket. The unmistakable scent of blood sang out to him, overlapped on top of urine and sweat and fear. He could hear the scuffling sound of people trying to keep quiet and failing.

Glancing behind, he saw Talks-Past in Homid, silenced pistol in hand. Sunita had also taken Glabro, while Smokejumper had opted for her natural Lupus form. It’d be hard to explain to people why a wolf was in a prison, but the pack was very good at answering difficult questions.

The door to the visitor’s room was locked. Sunita rested her hand against it and something clicked. She pushed it open and gestured for the pack to follow her. On the other side, Quire saw more of what he both expected and feared: Wilberforce Cross was still a prison. He could smell the people inside the cells.

“Shit me,” Sunita whispered. “This isn’t what they put on their website.”

Smokejumper looked around, tasting the air. “Two or three people in each cell. All scared, want out.”

“We can’t do that,” Talks-Past said. “We’ve got enough of a job on our hands as it is.”

That’s when they saw the bodies. Three guards, slumped at a guard post. The white walls stained dark red with drying blood. One’s head was twisted around at

an unnatural angle, much of his neck reduced to a bloody mess. Another had been ripped clean in two, entrails coating the floor with a layer of gore. The third sat against the wall, one hand pressed against giant claw-marks carved into his abdomen. His intestines curled through his fingers. While he might have been alive shortly after the attack, he was certainly dead now.

Talks-Past grunted and reached towards the first corpse, liberating its radio. He fiddled with a dial then passed it to Sunita, wiping off as much of the blood as he could manage. He did the same with the second radio, handing it to Quire.

“We’re splitting up, but I want us to stay in contact. We use channel eleven, the guards are on channel six. I’ll switch between the two, but you don’t mess about. Just push to talk. Sunita, stick with Smokejumper. Don’t get split up.”

As Talks-Past busied himself with the last radio, Quire paced. The scent of blood and death wasn’t helping him stay calm.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“For once in my life, I know what you mean,” Sunita agreed.

Smokejumper turned her head around, surveying things that her packmates couldn’t see. “The Umbra rusts. Pain and death and so much fear. It corrodes the landscape, infects everything.”

“Smoke, you and Sunita follow the blood trail. We’re going for the guards.” Talks-Past shifted attention to his own radio. “This is DI Greene from Special Branch to anyone listening. Where are you?”

The radio crackled. “This is Matheson. We’re in pursuit. D-wing, third floor.”

“In pursuit? Heard you were trapped.”

“No time to explain. D-wing. Third floor. We’ll hold here for you.”

Talks-Past frowned, staring at the radio as if begging it to defy him. “What the bloody hell is going on? If they’re in pursuit then they’re not trapped. They could get out at any point. Smokejumper, VoxPop, find the cub before they do. Quire, you’re with me. I want to know what’s going on.”

“What are you thinking?” Quire asked as his packmates split off down the hallway in search of the newly-Changed Garou.

“Something’s very wrong. I want to find out what. Ever hear of a radio play?”

“Only when my gran’s listening to Radio 4.”

“Oh for— It’s an old kind of con. It’s not easy to pull off with all the cameras around, but I don’t think they’re looking at the monitors. I control what they hear from us, so I can paint them a picture of what isn’t actually happening.”

“So you’ll do the talking because they’ve heard from you already. What do you need from me?”

“Isn’t it obvious? You’re the bait. If I’m going to give them something to chase after, I want it to be something I trust.”

Quire shook his head. “Of course. Nothing’s ever easy. Give me ten seconds head start?”

But Talks-Past was already talking into the radio. “This is Greene. I’ve got eyes-on! Must have doubled back. He’s heading back into A-wing. In pursuit.”

“You dick!” Quire shouted.

He didn’t waste any more time, sprinting off towards A-wing on powerful legs. Part of him was glad to get away from the blood and gore. Another part was glad to just run. It was ten years since he’d been in a prison. He was a different person back then, didn’t know he was Garou. He tapped spirit Gifts for speed and agility, jumping between balconies and moving with a swiftness that he’d never known when locked up.

His radio crackled. “Quire. Guards coming your way. I’m going to D-wing. Want to know what they’re up to.”

Quire jumped again, grabbing one of the pipes running along the ceiling and hauling himself up. Braced against the ceiling, he wrapped his hand around a bundle of cables and pulled hard. His enhanced strength pulled them free. Some of the lights died, plunging whole parts of the wing into darkness. He moved through the wing, killing more of the lights. He was more at home in the dark, and hoped that the guards wouldn’t think to bring flashlights.

Still in Glabro, he ran through the block once again. This time he checked the cell doors. He could smell the fear of the people huddled inside. They were awake, most of them, but trying to stay quiet. For many of them, huddling in tiny rooms, this whole situation was depressingly familiar. They wouldn’t leave even if the doors were open. Better to stay put until the whole thing blew over. From what Sunita had said, they’d been held far longer than needed.

He heard footsteps below. Three sets. That’s not right. Didn’t Maxwell say ten guards inside? Even if the injured man was one, where’s the others?

He could see the beams of the guards’ flashlights. Even with them, the darkness was on Quire’s side. He turned to watch them. Guns, squat two-handed things with long suppressors on the front. That’s not right, the guards here were supposed to be unarmed. Worse, the three guards didn’t move right. Quire remembered how prison guards walked, the gait and the stance. Though they wore the same uniform as the dead guards he’d seen, these moved more like soldiers. They kept low, covering lines of fire and holding tight together.

Damnit. Talks-Past didn’t mention guns. What the hell is going on? Might as well see how good these guys are.

Quire dropped from his vantage point and took a long route just through the guards’ field of view. By the time they’d drawn a bead it was too late. He was back in

the shadows, looking down at them from the balcony one floor up. The guards shouted, giving directions and trying to work out where he'd gone. They were too professional to run forward or fire blind. He doubled-back, silencing his footsteps. Soon, he was looking down on the three. He took deep breaths, counting down from five.

On "two," his radio crackled to life.

The shock caused Quire to drop early. This wasn't a controlled leap that ended with a Crinos Garou in the midst of unprepared soldiers. This was a flailing Glabro desperate for a hand-hold, his cover and position blown. Gunfire pierced the darkness, fortunately at the spot he'd just dropped from. The impact knocked the wind out of him, but he had to keep moving. A flush of shame and Rage ran through him. He gave in. Muscle built on muscle as he leapt forward. The fine claws of Glabro became longer and sharper, fitting weapons of Gaia's warriors. His jaw lengthened, packed with powerful teeth.

He felt hot shame and turned it into violence. One arm flew out. Terrible claws carved gaping wounds into a guard's throat, leaving him to choke on his own blood. Quire's teeth sank into another guard's arm, severing it at the shoulder. He picked up the screaming guard and used him to bludgeon the third, slamming both bodies together so hard that their bones cracked. He tossed both of them aside and they crashed head-first into a concrete wall.

Quire looked around. No more guards. He shrank back to Glabro. He'd fallen less than three seconds ago.

He picked up the radio from where it had fallen, straps broken from his sudden transformation. A sudden thought made him go back, checking the first guard he'd killed. The gun was a large, ugly thing, the kind Quire associated with American SWAT teams rather than British prison guards. Fumbling with it, he finally got the magazine free. Even in the darkness he could recognize silver bullets.

He keyed the radio. "Quire to all. Three guards dead, six or seven still not found. They've got guns and silver bullets. Repeat: guns and silver bullets."

The radio barked, and Sunita's voice came through. "Two of them jumped us. They're dead, but Smokejumper took a bullet to the leg. Definitely silver."

Five down.

"Talks-Past, the radio play's a wash. They're armed to take us on. What the hell is going on here?"

"I'll try to send the other guards your way. I've found some disturbing paperwork."

"Great, we're being shot at and you're playing forensic accountant."

Talks-Past ignored his outburst. "VoxPop, where are you?"

"Workshops in B-wing. I didn't know prisons had workshops."

Quire jumped, catching the balcony and swinging himself up to the next floor. "Got to make the inmates productive somehow. I'm coming to meet you. Talks-Past, try to send them my way."

“Understood.”

Shaking his head, Quire took off for the other end of the wing at a jog. He passed through two “secure” checkpoints, kicking the locked doors free. The electric lighting stung his eyes for a second before they adjusted. Doesn’t matter if we get the cub out of here. Enough bloodshed that it’s a Veil breach even without him. How do we get out of this one?

With those thoughts clouding his mind, the first thing Quire knew about the second group of guards was when a bullet hit him. The burning hot-ice feeling wormed its way through his left shoulder for what felt like hours. The acrid smell of silver-burned flesh reached his nostrils, worse than boiling vinegar. He threw himself to one side then kicked off a wall, trying to change direction fast enough that he was a difficult target. Two guards below. Three above, including the one who’d shot him.

Clenching his jaw, Quire shut down the pain burning in his shoulder. Showing weakness was unbecoming in a half-moon. He could still move his arm. Five people. One Garou. But the five had silver, and Quire wasn’t as stupid as he sometimes looked. He fought against the instinct to take Crinos. He could maybe get two or three, but the other team would kill him. And like Talks-Past said, his job was to be bait.

He ran, using the same Gifts as before to make jumps and dives that most humans would find impossible. Anything to make him a hard target. He heard shouts from behind, felt another bullet blow right through his left wrist. No time to slow down. His blood would make an easy trail. Diving around a corner, he keyed the radio.

“VoxPop. Coming to you at speed. Five guards following.”

The radio slipped out of his hand before he could hear her response. He dropped into Lupus. Even with a smashed-up limb, he was faster on four legs than two.

More gunfire. This time the bullets ripped past his right ear. An open door right in front of him. He hoped he was right, that his packmates were nearby. Through the door. Jump down to the first floor. Roll on the landing then up and run again. Jump around to make a harder target. Another door. How much further? He may be a Silent Strider, but he couldn’t sprint for much longer. His legs burned. His chest hurt bad.

One more door, the barrier between this wing and the next. He could hear yelps and howls from up ahead. He recognized them. VoxPop working her own magic, distracting the guards. He could hear Smokejumper in Hispo just beyond the door. He leapt forward one last time, rolling behind an upturned table.

Five guards burst into the room behind him, expecting to find a running wolf. Smokejumper waited until three of them had come through the door before locking her jaws around a guard’s torso and whipping him around like a toy. Quire heard the guard’s neck snap with a sickening crunch. Smokejumper threw his flailing body at another guard before darting forward.

Sunita was in Crinos, lashing out at the lead guards with teeth and claws. She fought on instinct, using the smell and sound of her opponents to know where to hit. She thrust one clawed hand through a guard’s chest, soaking her whole arm in gore.

She turned and lashed out at another, but Quire could see the last guard circling, trying to get a clear shot.

Despite the exhaustion, he shifted up into Hispo and pounced on the would-be shooter. The guard collapsed under his weight. Quire's jaws locked around the guard's head. His teeth sheared through the flesh and filled his mouth with blood. Burning with Rage and with the strength of the just, he brought his head back. The guard's head came free of his body. Quire threw it against the wall, resisting the urge to clench his jaws and crack the man's skull.

Panting, he fell back into Homid and surveyed his packmates. They stood among five dead guards, clothes and fur covered in thick red blood. At the other end of the hallway, he saw two more dead guards. All down one wall, he could see bullet holes in safety glass. The workshops would be on the other side. He gestured, still out of breath.

"Third door down," Sunita said. "He was out cold. Shot up pretty bad."

"Right." He slumped to the floor, hand going to his belt. "Wait. Dropped my radio." He ran both hands through his hair, feeling knots where the guards' blood was drying. "Call Talks-Past. Get him down here."

As Sunita turned away, he glanced to Smokejumper. She remained in Hispo, but he could see the bullet wound. "We really need to work on not getting shot."

She gave a half-chuckle at that. "Why would they have silver though?"

"I don't know. Talks-Past might." He groaned. "I think I've got a bullet in my shoulder."

"As do I." She sat, looking strangely peaceful for a dire-wolf. "Your woman should be able to get them out."

"I hope so."

They had to wait almost twenty minutes for Talks-Past to make his way to them. He shook his head as he came in, unprepared for the sheer carnage before him. "What the hell happened?"

"Guards," Quire said. "Guards with guns. Guards with silver. Guards who didn't flinch at the sight of us."

"Did you have to be so messy?"

Quire met his alpha's eyes. "Yes."

The old man backed down first. "Fine. I've got some answers at least."

"To why the guards here knew how to kill Garou?"

"Yes. Lots of spreadsheets and graphs. Something about low-dosage drug trials delivered through the water. They wanted to keep people around to monitor the effects. Everyone in here is a guinea pig in some experiment. The immigration authorities don't even know that people don't leave once they get here."

Quire snarled. "Eight people have tried to kill me in the past hour. Get to the point. Silver. Why?"

"I had to do some digging on one of the office computers, but it turns out that the drug trial was arranged by an American mob called Developmental Neogenetics Amalgamated."

"What's that supposed to be?" Sunita asked.

"I don't know. I've only heard the name second-hand. The guards we met, the ones who stayed behind? They're all recent hires. All of them came from perfectly normal jobs. Too normal, if you ask me. Five will get you ten, this Neogenetics lot planted a team in case any werewolves came to shut their operation down."

"And when they saw my cousin they what, decided to use him for sport?"

"Maybe," Talks-Past said. "But they're dead now."

Quire stood, feeling his left arm dangle at his side. "We've really fucked this one up. Come here to stop a Veil breach and cause a worse one instead. How do we get out of this?"

Talks-Past looked at the rest of his pack, considering his response. "Quire. Smokejumper. Find anything flammable or chemical you can. Sunita, get your cousin. Find some clothes for him, take him to see his family. Take them all to the van. Tell Jane to go on our signal. We'll head off through the Umbra."

"You're going to burn this place down? What about all the people?"

"We'll get them out. Unlock the doors, tell them what's going on, trip the alarm then set light to the whole place."

Sunita's eyes flashed with resolve. "Good."

• • •

It took almost an hour to gather all the detainees near the main doors. Maybe a hundred and fifty people in total, but many of them didn't speak much English. Quire gathered the guards' bodies and tried to clean up one route out, so they wouldn't have to step over dead people to leave. Talks-Past addressed the crowd, telling them that if they managed to slip off into the night it wasn't anything to do with him, and letting them know that they'd burn if they stayed. Smokejumper gathered paper and wood, and soaked other parts of the prison in flammable cleaning chemicals. The pack set small fires as they went. The building would be an inferno by the time everyone left.

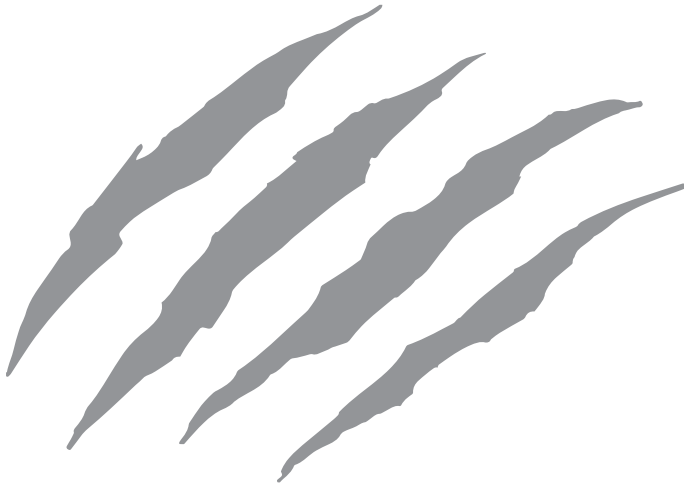
They gathered behind the crowd just as Talks-Past hit the fire alarm. "Get out!" He shouted. "Run for your lives!"

The inmates fled into the night. The pack's van drove out in the middle of the crowd, using them as cover from the cameras and the police until they could speed away, back to the sept. As the flames licked higher and higher, Smokejumper stared into the reflection of the flames in a window, and lead her packmates into the Umbra.

Materializing in a mess of rusted cables and broken walls, the three Garou looked around. Already, fire-spirits danced in the conflagration. Great rusted pattern-spiders lurched towards them.

Quire grinned, exhaustion making him manic. "I told you I had a bad feeling about this."

Talks-Past glared at him. "Shut up and run."





Things Seen

Bill Bridges

When I heard the horrid, screeching howl, like claws scraping the blackboard of my soul, I knew it wasn't a wampus cat we were chasing.

I better rewind and start from the beginning. We were in Pickens County, Georgia, looking into what we thought was a wampus sighting. By we, I mean S.S.I.T., the Strange Sightings Investigation Team. That'd be me, Linda Riverhorse, founder and leader; Tom Radley, our cameraman, webmaster and tech wizard; and Sully Macready, our backwoods tracker.

I figure you haven't seen our videos; we're not on tv. We put them up on our website, and people find them as they need to, and call us as they need to. You see, we investigate the scary things people see. They want to know what in the world is going on, they go onto the Web and start searching, and sooner or later they find our site, along with our email and an invitation to tell us about what they saw and an offer to come investigate it. Expert appraisals.

We're at www.ssit.me. Dot com was taken, and I figured the "me" stood for "monster explorers," with that being what we are. Sort of a double entendre. We explore monsters, but we're also explorers who *are* monsters.

I know this crowd gets it. I figure I can be more frank here among you all than I get to be normally. I can't very well tell some grandma or truck driver who's seen a werewolf that, "no, it wasn't werewolf; I know, 'cause I am one." As far as they know, I'm just a Cherokee woman who knows a lot about my people's old folklore, especially the stuff about the haints, the Sasquatches, and yeah, the wampuses. (Which aren't Indian Princesses gone bad and turned into cats, I can tell you that, because there were no Indian Princesses in the first place and if she did something bad enough to be turned into a giant, piss-mad cat, she probably was bad folk to begin with. Or a Bastet. But they know better than to get seen like that.)

No, what we do is hunt Wyrms creatures. A while back I figured that regular folks see weird stuff all the time, but nobody believes them. What if I could use these sightings to identify and chase down Wyrms creatures that are up to no good? Well, the up-to-no-good part goes without saying. I've always loved the old stories people tell, since well before my Change. I knew there was truth in them. Twisted a bit, sometimes hiding like a woodpecker who keeps sidling around the far side of a tree every time you move to get a good look at him. But if you're patient and willing to keep looking, you'll get a glimpse of what's really going on.

It won't come as no surprise by now that I'm Uktena. A Galliard, too. I was born in Oklahoma, but when my folks figured the Change was coming on me, they sent me to the Qualla in North Carolina to be with my Auntie. Good thing, too, since she helped me through my first moon and the rough ones following it. I got her way of talking. She taught me our people's lore along the way. Uktena lore, but also Cherokee and some Muskogee, too. It got so they finally gave me a deed name based on my ramblings: "Haint Caller." If there was a haint in a holler somewhere, I was going to find it. My Auntie always liked that Bible quote, the one that says "look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen." So that's what I did.

But you're not here for my biography, so let me finish what I started.

We'd come to Pickins County because a young fellow by the name of Clint Treadwell had seen what he thought was a big cat slinking through the woods behind his family's house. He figured, at first, it was a panther, maybe come up from Florida, since they're scarce up here these days, so he got his daddy's shotgun and went to track it before it starting hunting anybody's pets or cows. When he heard it howl, though, he hightailed it back into the house and didn't come out again until two days later.

He emailed us and I told him we'd take a look. We were down in Atlanta, anyway – that's where Tom's from and where he keeps an office for maintaining our site – so it wasn't a long trip. He told us about the sighting and the howl and showed us a print in the mud, and yep, it's a wampus, I thought. Even Sully agreed, and he knows wampus tracks, being from Tennessee.

We set up a night expedition, as we call them, with night-vision cameras and everything. You see, we film some of what we do, edit it up and put it on our site. Enough to make people think we're giving it a good try but always coming up short. We never do seem to catch anything. Of course, we *do* catch things, but we can't show that stuff. Too much blood, howling, and sometimes Wyrms ichor that's really hard to clean off of camera lenses.

We even have some independent chapters opening up in other places, to do what we do all over. There's Tom Matzke, a Get of Fenris who shot some real interesting footage of what the locals around him believed was a pack of Hell Hounds but what he discovered was a drove of Skull Pigs. Then there's Lady Morgaine Lascelles — you might of heard of her: "Burns-through-the-rain", she's known by. She and her pack filmed themselves hunting down a sighting of the Owl Man, which turned out to be one of those Gangrel Leeches. Her audio commentary was a hoot, if you'll forgive the pun.

So, it's nighttime, maybe a little after midnight, when Sully comes across some fresh prints. He's our Ahroun, from early-settler Fianna stock, from up in the Smokies. His deed name is "Ogma", after the Irish god, because he's big and jolly and loves to wrestle. I asked him once if his name was Ogma how come he didn't read more, seeing as Ogma was the god of writing and all. He gave me his ear-splitting grin and said: "Who do you think made the first writing? Animal tracks. I read those. I even write 'em myself, now and then." He burst out laughing and I laughed with him.

So, we're following this creature, and Sully's leading us up a ridge, following the tracks, when that damn howl comes out of nowhere somewhere ahead of us. Chilled me to the bone, and it brought Sully up short, too. Tom froze, but kept filming.

"What the hell is that?" Tom said. He's a city boy. A Glass Walker. His deed name is actually "Tom Cat," which is why we call him Tom (his real name is Bradley — don't tell him I told you). Thanks to us, he's learning his way around the woods at night.

I shook my head. "It's not a wampus, boys. But I don't know what it is."

Sully shifts into dire wolf form. That got me worried. If he'd gone to regular wolf, I'd have known he was looking to pick up a scent. But he was clearly not just looking for a scent, but expecting a fight.

"Come on," I said. "Let's keep moving."

So we did. But we soon got to where the trail just ended cold. Sully ran around sniffing but came up with nothing.

"It's gone sideways," Tom said.

Tom's no tracker, so someone might be inclined to think he was just speculating, but he is a Theurge. He knew something Sully and I didn't.

"Don't you go after him just yet!" I said, knowing he could be impulsive. "We'll all go together. But you can lead us, all right?"

Tom nodded and Sully and me both grabbed a piece of his coat, me with my hand and Sully with his wolf snout. The world melted and reformed — at least, that's how it feels to me sometimes when I step across — and we started searching for more spore.

Sully got the scent — Tom was right, it'd come here — but he growled that it was overpowered by other smells. "I lost it," Sully said, shifting back into his large, lumbering homid form. "Damn thing's clever. Wonder what it is."

"Well," I said. "We got that other sighting to look into. Mrs. Martha Wells, over near Talking Rock. She saw it two nights after Clint did, except she thought it looked like a big dog. Only saw its shape, though. Let's go see her tomorrow."

• • •

So the next day we meet up with Mrs. Wells. She's a kindly middle-aged local, real talkative, and she's not stupid, either. She tells us all about seeing the shape of the thing moving through the woods out behind her shed, and even though she didn't see the whole of it, she said it had a long, tufted tail. "Not like a cat at all," she said. "I know what it is, though. I've seen a picture of it, and heard about it from my cousin over in Barrow County. They call it a Wog."

Well now, that threw me. A Wog? All the way over in Pickins County? There hasn't been a Wog sighting in decades, and they all come from Barrow County, out near Winder. The Muskogee used to call that place Nodoroc, an evil place. Nowadays, most of the evil – the Wyrn taint – has been beaten back and confined to pockets in the Umbra. But before it went quiet, there used to be a nest of Wogs, nasty creatures for sure.

I know their name sounds silly to modern folk, but you don't want to go laughing at one. They're like big dogs, all right, but with forked tongues, giant teeth, evil-glowing eyes, and a host of hate in their hearts. Some of the early European Garou in Georgia heard the legends and thought these must be Black Spiral Dancers, but no, they're Wyrn creatures, from the old days when hell holes like Nodoroc would open up and plague the land and its people – until my people, the Uktena, would bind the Banes and lock up their evil.

When I remembered that howl I'd heard the other night, I knew she was right. She was just a human, but she'd pegged it. "You say you've seen a picture of it?"

"I sure did," Mrs. Wells said, taking a sip of her sweet tea. "An old Indian petroglyph. The Little Scarecorn Creek Stone. Most people don't know about that. It's local, and its owner doesn't like people coming around to look at it."

Well, that floored me again. An old Indian petroglyph from around here that I'd never heard of? I'd seen the Tugalo Stone and the Forsyth Petroglyph, and some others nobody outside my tribe knows about, but this Little Scarecorn Creek Stone was news to me. "He let you see it?"

"Buster and I were once sweet on each other back in High School. He found it in the creek when he was a boy. He'd gone digging for Cherokee gold, since stories said they'd hid treasure in that creek, and he found that rock. Took it home and didn't tell anyone, but he let me see it. Somehow, people began to hear about the stone – I didn't tell them – and they kept coming up to offer money to see it and study it. He told them all to go away and now most people have forgotten all about it."

"Is there anyway you can put in a good word for us? We don't want to study it or take it, we just want to look into this Wog."

"I'll call him. I already told him about the Wog I saw and how it was drawn on his stone, so he might just be curious enough to let you come see it."

So she called Buster and after arguing with him for being "ornery," she said he'd let us come over. She gave us directions – just a bit further north, toward Elijah – and sent us on our way.

• • •

Buster T. Rollins was the paranoid type. You don't spend too long in the cryptid hunting business without running into his kind every now and then. Cryptids – you know, strange creatures like Bigfoot and Nessie – aren't sighted in cities very often, so us monster hunters spend most of our time in the rural areas, places where a lot of folk don't want to be bothered. You get this a lot in the mountains, and especially in the Qualla, but Sully can usually get mountain folk to open up, and I've got a good rep among my Auntie's people. But none of us were Buster's people, so we had to rely on appealing to his curiosity.

After we'd convinced him we were genuinely who Mrs. Wells said we were, he put down his shotgun and walked us to his shed in the back of his property. He had about ten locks on that thing, and keys for about five of them with combination locks for the rest. We waited patiently while he unlocked each, being sure to look the other way so we couldn't spy on his combinations. As the last one popped open, he swung the door out and wiped away a few spider webs.

"Watch your step," he said. "I've got important equipment on the floor. I don't need you banging into it." He flicked a light switch and entered the dusty old room, and we followed behind. It was full of work benches piled with power tools. He walked us over to a table covered with a plastic tarp.

He pulled off the tarp, revealing a plastic box sitting on a butcher-block table. "This is it. I keep it in here." He pulled off the lid of the box and reached in with both hands. He lifted it out – gingerly, like holding a baby. An old river-worn rock, about the size of a pickup-truck tire in radius, though not so thick as that. He placed it carefully on the table and turned on a work light that hung down from the ceiling.

There they were, the old petroglyphs. They weren't Cherokee, though. They were older. They were Middle Brother's marks. Croatan. But there in the center, unmistakable, was Older Brother's totem — my totem — the horned serpent, Uktena.

The glyphs showed a hill surrounded by a snake – ol' Uktena. There was a hole in the hill, and a Crinos-form Garou was fighting a giant, forked-tongue beast – the Wog. But there was something else there, something I couldn't make out. It had been worn away by centuries of river water. I had a bad feeling about that. I knew – just knew – that the answer to whatever was going on here with that Wog had something to do with the smudged out glyphs.

"What the hell is that?" Buster cried out, his voice quaking in fear.

Startled, I looked up and over to where he was gesturing, and there, through the slats in the wall of the shed, was a wriggling, wet, pink, forked tongue. It was questing around for a taste of something.

It was a Wog, all right. They did that, sticking their tongues into settler's houses, searching for anything not already tainted by the Wymr. A lot of the Europeans were spared, since they had a faint trace of Wymr about them even if they weren't bad people. But the Muskogee and Cherokee had a nasty time with the Wogs.

Sully was already out the door we'd come in, moving around to head it off. Tom was filming, probably zooming in on that tongue. I was reaching for Buster, telling him to step back, that we were professionals, and we'd take care of all this.

Then the tongue stretched out longer than I thought was possible and licked across the stone. It stiffened up. I guess it had found what it was looking for.

I was trying to figure out how we were going to deal with this thing without breaking the Veil in front of old Buster, when the tongue reared back, snapped out, and wrapped around the stone. I reached out to grab it, but too late – it reeled back in, superfast, and with such strength it broke right through the wooden wall slats.

I heard a deep growl – Sully – and a responding cry from the Wog, muffled by the big stone it was now carrying in its mouth. Then there's was this weird whizzing sound, like something moving through the air real fast, but not going anywhere. I ran to the hole in the wall and peeped out, seeing Sully – in full war form – circling around the Wog.

Phew. That critter. It was bigger'n a Hispo wolf, all right, and its teeth were like swords. Its black fur was standing all up on end, kind of like a cat when cornered, and its eyes glowed red. I don't mean they reflected light the way a cat's do, I mean they positively glowed, as in a balefire kind of glow. And that whizzing sound? It was coming from its tail, snapping back and forth like a buzzsaw turned on its side.

"Be careful, Sully!" I yelled. "We don't know what this thing can do!"

He sort of gave me a nod, but I could see him smiling as he sized up the Wog.

And that's when the thing disappeared. Just blinked away. Sully howled in anger, robbed of his chance to wrestle it.

Luckily, Tom was watching. "Umbra!" he yelled. I snatched on to him before he disappeared, so we both stepped over as one, with me hanging on to him. Of course, the shed didn't exist there in the spirit world, but then, the Wog wasn't there, either.

"What the hell?" I said. "Where'd it go?"

Tom looked around and then closed his eyes and got quiet. "The stone. It used the stone. Ever since we first saw it, I could tell it had power. It took him somewhere."

"I think I know where," I said. "But first we need to cover our tracks with Buster."

• • •

We got lucky. I hadn't noticed it, but Buster had high-tailed it out of the shed as soon as that tongue had taken his stone. He wasn't a coward, though. He'd run back up to the front porch for his shotgun. By the time he got back, we were walking out of the woods, fresh from the Umbra.

"It got away," I said. "It was a Wog, all right. I'm sorry it got your stone."

He scowled, not at us, but at the woods, angry at the Wog. "I've kept that stone for over forty years, goddamn it. Where the hell did that thing come from and why'd he want my stone?"

Most people would have been pretty rattled about the Wog's very existence, but Buster seemed to accept it the way he would if a coyote had come through and taken down a cow. Not an everyday occurrence, but not unusual enough to start calling the police.

"There's a lot of old Cherokee stories about that thing, and others like it," I said. "Mrs. Wells was right – that was a Wog drawn onto your stone. They were connected somehow. Now, my team will go looking for it – that's what we do. But I can't guarantee we'll get the stone back."

"That was going to be my retirement money! I kept everyone away all these years so I could sell it when I needed to! That creature stole my retirement!"

I felt bad for Buster, but I couldn't care too much. That stone wasn't really his, after all. I had a pretty good idea of just where it had come from, before it had wound up in that creek where he found it years ago. I recognized some of the signs on it, not just the Uktena figure but the landscape, too. It was a stretch, but my Auntie had taught me a lot of the old legends, and there was one she told me that she had got from a Muskogee medicine man near Brasstop Bald. It was a human legend, but it had enough clues that, when matched up with Uktena lore, told a story. A story about a Banetender's rite from long ago, and the war that was fought to enact it.

When we were back in the car, I told Tom, who was driving, "Head north. We're going to Fort Mountain. I just hope we get there in time."

• • •

Now, Fort Mountain is an old place. It's a state park now, and it's always been a curiosity to archaeologists, anthropologists, and ancient mysteries enthusiasts. Near the top of the mountain is a long, zig-zagging stone wall built a long, long time ago. Nobody can decide just who built it or why they built it. Some used to say it was DeSoto, who needed a fortification against Indian attacks, but that's been a hogwash theory for a while now. Others say it was used to chart the path of the stars, to mark the coming and going of the Star People, and still others say it was the mysterious "moon-eyed" people that the Cherokee talk about, maybe Vikings or descendants of a Welsh prince's expedition to the Americas long before Columbus. I don't know. Maybe. The problem is that the Uktena aren't sure anymore.

You see, this used to be Croatan territory, and when they sacrificed themselves to hold back the Eater-of-Souls, it didn't just eat them — it ate their memory, the memories of who they were and what they had done. There are few things worse for the Garou than losing all record of their renown. What the hell is all this fighting for if future Garou can't know to praise your name?

Something nasty went down here on Fort Mountain a long time ago and even my people don't remember what it was, although, from all those clues I'd put together, they were involved. Hip deep, you might say. I recognized the Little Scarecorn Creek Stone for what it was.

"It's a binding stone," I told my team as we drove up Highway 52. "It was meant to plug a hole that should never be opened. Somehow, someday, many years ago,

somebody unplugged it and carried the stone off. It wound up in the Little Scarecorn Creek and then into little Buster T. Rollins' hands. And now the Wog has it."

"Then why ain't that mountain just overflowing with Wyrmspawn?" Sully asked. "We'd of heard about it if it were."

"Well, whatever binding power was laid down on Fort Mountain is still holding — they knew how to do this stuff right, back then — although without the capstone it's probably getting weak. I figure that's why the Wog wants it, to destroy it and fray the rest of the bindings."

"Shit," Tom said. "Shouldn't we call someone? There's just three of us, and this looks big."

"There's no time. We don't even know what's up there. But I'll tell you what: we do not want that damn Wog breaking up that stone. So step a bit harder on that pedal!"

It was growing dark by the time we got there and parked in the official lot. We'd have to make our way on foot from there. Luckily, there was nobody around. It's not as hot a tourist spot as it used to be. We all went to our wolf forms without planning it and started running.

As we got within sight of the crumbling stone wall, I yipped for the others to stop and shifted back into human shape. They did too, and I smiled to see Tom's camera out and already filming. He'd dedicated it so it would travel with him in all forms. He even had an eyepiece lens for when he was in Lupus.

"That stone wall there," I said, pointing up and down its visible length — most of it wrapped off out of sight — "is ol', Uktena. Some people surmise that it's a representation of the stars or the path of the planets, but it's actually a snake. The Uktena Banetenders sometimes used these sorts of stone formations to wrap around and reinforce their mystical bindings, calling on Uktena's power to seal it all up. I recognized it as soon as I saw it on the stone, and the rest of the story just fell into place."

"Okay," Sully said. "So what does it mean when most of the wall is crumbling and there are holes in some places? That can't be good."

"No, it does not portend well at all. If whatever is bound up here is able to slip out, I don't know that we're going to be able to wrestle it back down." I chose my words well, knowing that Sully was never one to turn down a wrestling challenge. Right as rain, he grunted and shook his head.

"Says who?" he said. "I damn sure aim to try!"

"Well, all right then. Let's keep going, but slow down and keep an eye out. I suspect that hole I saw drawn onto the stone is around here somewhere. It might be from where that Wog crawled out."

"I don't think it's here," Tom said. "I mean, not *here*, but *there*."

I knew he was talking about the Umbra. And he was probably right. All the action was surely on the other side of the Gauntlet. He had that look in his eyes, where

he's looking around but he's not looking at anything you can see. He's seeing over to the other side. He wasn't comfortable in these woods. He preferred city spirits, but his boyhood curiosity about monsters and ghosts was strong enough for me to rope him into my crazy organization, and I certainly needed his tech skills to keep up appearances. But I always kind of felt bad when I dragged him into situations like these.

"Okay," I said. "Then that's where we got to be. So why don't..." Before I could finish, he stepped into thin air and was gone. Goddamn it! I was always telling him to wait for us. He just got caught up in it and didn't think.

I raised my left wrist and stared at my wristwatch, moving it around, trying to catch a glint of light across its glass surface, something I could use to draw myself across that syrupy wall between flesh and spirit. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sully doing the same with his big Bowie knife. I reached out and grabbed at his flannel shirt just as I felt the resistance give way, and I pulled him in with me. He wasn't very good at stepping like that, and I didn't want to have to wait half an hour before he made it across.

We stepped onto the crackling, dry leaves that littered the ground on this side of the divide, the spirit side. I let out a moan when I saw Tom lying there on the ground, unconscious. Standing over him was kindly Mrs. Wells. She smiled when she saw us.

"You're late," she said. "I wasted my ambush on just one of you. It'll take a while to build up the juice for that trick again. I guess luck is on your side... or was."

Her finger pointed down at Tom, hovering over his midsection, and it started to grow real long, like Pinnochio's nose, but sharp as a spear. I must of whined in fear without realizing it, because Sully stepped between her and me. You see, I came to the terrible realization of who she was, and it wasn't a rural Georgia grandmother.

As her finger grew, her skin sloughed off, revealing the bony, wizened hag beneath.

"Utluhthu," I whispered.

"Who?" Sully said, looking at me and then right back at the hag. "You get off of Tom!"

"Spearfinger," I said. "She's a witch. I mean a hag. I mean – she's a fucking Wyrn creature!"

Before I got those last words out, Sully was already a blur of motion. He'd snapped into Crinos and launched himself at Spearfinger, who screeched and redirected her finger at his incoming body. He managed to spin aside a bit, so the finger only scraped a small trench along his ribs, and he howled as his full weight plowed into her like a boulder flung from a cliff. Down they went, rolling head over heels, with her crying out in the most hideous manner and Sully snarling and slashing left and right and chomping down.

Spearfinger was a bloody mess but didn't seem to care. She slipped out from under Sully and drove that finger of hers right into his ear. He gurgled, stood up, then dropped like a bowling pin.

I wanted to jump over there and tear her apart, or tend to Sully, but I knew better than that. This was one of most fearsome creatures I had ever heard about in my childhood. You do not underestimate Utluhtu. I had to think fast, but nothing was coming up.

She cackled, because that's what hags do, and sauntered over the Little Scarecorn Creek Stone, which I now saw was lying on the ground right on top of a depression or hole in the hill. I figured this was where it originally came from. She started waving her hands over it and chanting words in a language that actually hurt to listen to.

I didn't have a plan, but I couldn't just stand there watching, so I shifted to the big, bad war form and headed at her. That's when the Wog showed up. It'd been hiding behind the trees, probably stalking around behind me so it could do just what it did – jump me from behind.

I howled in pain as its teeth punctured my shoulder blade, just missing my spine. I tore away from it, ripping more flesh off of myself, and slashed back at it. I got lucky and scored a deep groove into its face, my pinky claw snatching out its right eye as my hand came lose from its flesh.

It howled, that same horrible, blood-curdling howl from before, but this one way louder and way worse. I was wise to it by now, though, so it didn't halt me none.

It got awful quiet then of a sudden, and I realized that Spearfinger had quit her chanting. I looked over at her and she was doing a little dance, smiling at me.

“Thank you, Linda Riverhorse, for getting Buster to take the stone out of that damn box he kept it in. For some reason, my Wog couldn't capture its scent there, and I knew there'd only be one chance to make a grab at it.”

The Wog and I were now circling each other, both of us wary, looking for an opening. It started with that tail-whipping thing again, its tufted tail going so fast it made a buzzing sound. I knew that if it hit me, I'd be hurting bad.

Old Spearfinger knew my tribe well. She'd be expecting just about any Gifts I could try to use. I could break whatever spell she'd put on the stone, if I could reach it. But she knew that, which is why the Wog was getting between me and the stone.

I threw back my head and howled deep and loud. The cry of the wyld. The cry for summons. I didn't think it'd work, but if there were any Garou nearby, they'd come.

Spearfinger laughed. “Your kind aren't anywhere around her, dear.” That's when her eyes got wide and she fell back, scared.

Something was coming up behind me, fast. I barely had time to turn around as it leaped past me and onto the Wog. It took it right to the ground with its hairy, giant arms wrapped around its torso. The Wog's tail whipped in a frenzy against the creature's hairy sides, but it took the punishment and kept bearing down, keeping the Wog immobilized.

Of course, surely you've figured out what it was. You can't very well have a story about woodland monsters without an appearance by the big one himself — you know, Bigfoot. Sasquatch. *Tsul 'Kalu* — the sloping giant, the “great lord of the game.” He's not really a creature so much as a spirit that's really good at manifesting. He's a cousin to Little Brother's totem, the Wendigo. A kinder, gentler cousin, but one that could still knock your head off with a single blow.

This one had heard my call and come running. He'd already been nearby, spying on Spearfinger and trying to figure out what to do. Now, *I* knew what to do with the opening he gave me.

I was in Hispo in a flash and bounding pell mell at that stone. I called on all my power and the wisdom my Grandfathers had taught me and raised up my claw to slash right through that spell Spearfinger had wrapped about the stone — when it started glowing and rising up all on its own. I was too late; the spell was taking effect.

Spearfinger didn't even care that I was right there next to her; she just started laughing.

From out the hole came a faint, silvery light, growing brighter and brighter. It was five human-shaped, glowing figures floating out toward us — small, though, like pygmies. Their eyes were big round saucers and I knew then they were the “moon-eyed” people from the legend, carrying spears and bows.

She'd broken them free. My ancestors had clearly bound them here ages ago, but now they were back. I'd lost.

Then the lead Moon-eye raised up his spear and slid it right into Spearfinger's stomach. She coughed up a gob of blood and the Moon-eye twisted the spear and yanked it out, taking a string of her intestines with it.

She was wailing and hollering and completely confused about what the hell was happening. So was I. Confused that is, not wailing and hollering.

The Moon-eyes, all five of them, circled her and grabbed her arms and carried her back into the hole. She was struggling and screaming and trailing intestines behind her, but she couldn't break their grip.

It finally hit me: these were the Star People, the ones some folk said had built Fort Mountain, to align with the stars. They're kind of like Lune spirits, but instead of serving Aunt Luna they're tied to the stars.

The leader stopped and looked back at me. He spoke in the spirit speech, and although I didn't have the Gift to understand it, somehow I did. “It is not our time yet. We must sleep longer. When the world is ending, we will return to fight the final battle.”

He hovered away into the hole, and the stone floated down on top of it again, sealing it up.

I heard a snapping sound, but it was behind me. I turned and saw the Bigfoot let go of the limp neck of the Wog. He'd twisted it around until it broke. But he was

beaten up pretty badly. He grunted and then dissolved, the way spirits do when they need to go away for a long while and reform somewhere deep in the Umbra. I waved goodbye but I don't think he saw it.

Well, I of course went to check on my team, and used what Gifts I knew to revive them. Sully would take a while to heal from that earache, but Tom was coming around now that he was awake and I had broken the spell Spearfinger had hit him with when he stepped over.

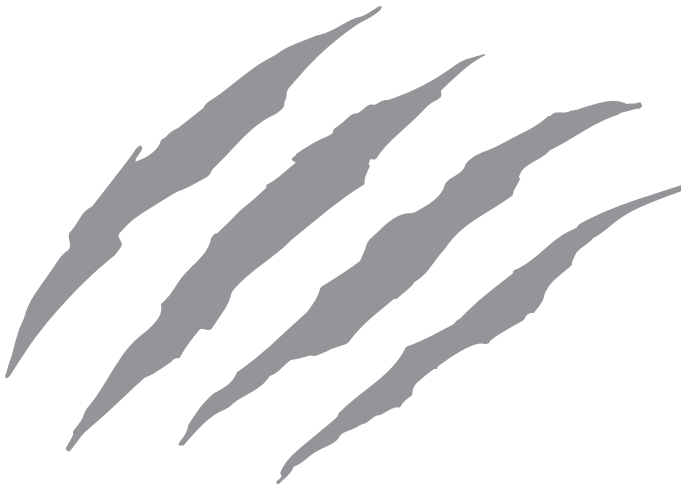
Turns out, I had it wrong. Fort Mountain wasn't a Banetender's binding, it was a ward meant to protect the Moon-eye warriors until they were needed to fight alongside us Garou in the final battle against the Wyrms. The good news is that that's not today. They went back into their mountain to sleep. The bad news is it could be tomorrow, or the day after. Who knows?

I think Spearfinger read the legends wrong, too, and thought she was freeing some great ally. The loss of the old Croatan legends is a tragedy, but I guess their sacrifice has a good side to it, too, in that old Spearfinger got it wrong and now sits in that mountain, stuck there until doomsday. I hope.

So I'm going to keep doing what I do, hunting down the Wyrms by way of human sightings. A lot of times they don't lead nowhere. But when they do? Best be ready.

Thanks for listening, and if you want to start a S.S.I.T chapter in your region, just let me, Tom or Sully know, and we'll help set you up. We need all the eyes we can get.

Do'da da go'hv i. Until we meet again.



The Stone is a Mirror Which Works Poorly

Rick Chillot

The stone is a mirror which works poorly.

*Nothing in it but dimness. Your dimness or its dimness, who's to say?
In the hush your heart sounds like a black cricket.*

— *Charles Simic, The World Doesn't End*

ONE

As she was washing the blood out of her hair, Iris realized she had no idea of where she was, and no memory of how she got there.

This was a public restroom of some sort. A grimy double sink with two rusted faucets. Fluorescent fixtures overhead, buzzing like horseflies and emitting icy white light. Paper towel dispenser. Outlets. Cracked tiles. Stalls covered with incomprehensible writing and crude drawings.

Iris sniffed. Bathroom smells, urine, shit, sweat, deodorizer, blood.

She was holding a wad of damp paper towels. She resumed wiping away the dried, red-brown blood which had thickened over the top and right side of her head. In the mirror she saw that the hair beneath was a dirty yellow, thin, cropped short. She noticed more blood spattered on her right shoulder and upper arm, stains across her powder blue shirt like an archipelago on a long-forgotten map. Her reflection revealed a bruise across her forehead. She touched it and stars burst across her eyes.

Gingerly, Iris probed the rest of her cranium and her neck, examining the reflection, but found no lacerations, no sign of other injury.

Because this isn't my blood, she concluded, and instantly knew it was true.

Her eyes fell on a large bag resting on the sink in front of her. Some sort of duffel, with extra straps for use as a backpack. Thick, black canvas; a single zipper.

Iris tossed the damp wad into the sink, then rinsed blood and dirt from her fingers. She shook the water off and emptied her pockets: A key ring with three keys; a ballpoint pen; an ATM receipt. No phone or wallet — she knew she typically carried those things, but could not call their specific images to mind. She realized her jacket was missing... it was navy blue, same as her pants.

Am I wearing a uniform? Or do I just like the color blue?

She stared into the mirror, trying to remember the symptoms of concussion. She pursed her thin lips, noted she was wearing little makeup. I'm 24, she thought... I know that. My birthday is...

No, she couldn't recall.

Iris pressed her hands against the black bag. Something was packed tight inside. And there was... movement? A vibration of some sort. Iris fumbled for the zipper, her hands shaking.

She jerked her head up as the bathroom door opened. A surge of music, noise, laughter, quickly cut off as the door slammed closed again. Iris watched two young women stumble in, leaning on each other, giggling. She smelled perfume and beer. One of the pair staggered into a stall; the other took a spot at the other sink and worked a stick of opalescent red lipstick across her upper lip.

“Hey! What the hell!”

Iris heard the complaint before realizing that she'd grabbed the girl's wrist.

“Let go of me, bitch,” the woman hissed. Iris let Lipstick yank her arm away. “I was just gonna move your stupid bag out of my way. God.” She turned her attention back to the mirror.

Iris pulled the bag closer. She slipped her possessions back into her pockets, the whole time watching the girl from the corner of her eye. Something wasn't right.

The girl's reflection. It wasn't matching her movements.

In the mirror, the girl had turned her head and was staring back at Iris. The reflection smiled, the corners of her mouth rising up so far they almost split her head in two. Her mouth opened to reveal a row of pointed, pin-sharp teeth.

Iris slipped the bag over her shoulders and backed towards the door.

The barroom was a confusion of sweat, noise, and movement. This is just the kind of place where someone could walk in with her head covered in blood and not be noticed, Iris thought. Unbalanced by the backpack, she shoved herself through a forest of elbows and torsos.

“Iris!”

He loomed in front of her, a head taller, with a face so smooth and angular that it seemed cut from glass or metal. Short, dark clipper-cut hair. Dressed in charcoals and grays that hung like loose skin on his wiry frame. “Iris,” he repeated, “It’s me, it’s William.”

She tried to move past him. “William” grabbed at her shoulders. Iris pushed his hands away. She glimpsed a gold ring on his right hand, and a bandage wrapped around his left forearm.

“What are you doing here, Iris?” He leaned in, his minted breath breaking across her face. “It’s not safe, don’t you know that?”

She stared back, trying to see something familiar.

“You’re in my way,” she said, finally. It hurt to raise her voice over the din of the crowd and the pulsing baseline. Her throat felt sore, as if she’d been shouting for hours.

“Do you even know where you’re going?” Before Iris could answer, he grabbed her, trapping her arms, pulling her into an embrace. He spun her around, swaying the two of them deeper into the crowd. She tried to push his arms apart, but couldn’t find her footing.

“Get — the hell off me —” she gasped.

“Go with it. We’re dancing, okay?” He relaxed his grip; she found herself leaning on him. The pack felt heavy on her back now.

“Look just to your right,” he whispered. “The guy talking to the bartender.” Iris saw a tall man wearing a brown raincoat, a button-down shirt and tie. He was handing something to the bartender.

“Cop,” William said. “I heard him. Looking for someone who fits your description pretty well.”

For a moment she felt light-headed. “Back door,” she said.

“Around the corner from the bathrooms. But —”

She pushed, but he kept his arms locked around her waist. “I need to get out of here, now,” she told him.

“Just wait,” he answered. “I’ll go with you.”

“Let go of me.”

“Wait — Iris — You won’t get anywhere with that thing on your back. Let me take it, we can meet up afterwards —”

Just as he released her, she shoved and he staggered backwards, bumping into three women dancing with drinks in their hands. While he negotiated an apology, Iris slipped away.

Brown Coat had taken a spot against the wall, near the restrooms. While he was checking his phone, Iris held her breath and moved past him.

She rounded the corner, into the empty corridor leading to a fire door.

“Stop.” The voice was barely audible, more like an echo than a word. But Iris had to obey.

Rooted to the spot, she turned her head, saw Brown Coat, and he was growing taller, wider, as if she was tumbling breathlessly towards him from a great height.

And then breaking glass, bottles against the floor, shouting. Iris backed away, watching Brown Coat, William, and a flustered barmaid in a heated exchange, with bottle fragments and a widening puddle of spilled beer at their feet. William caught her eye, for a split second, and nodded towards the doorway.

Iris pulled the door open, and jumped through it, and ran.

TWO

After ten blocks or so, the adrenaline began to drain from her muscles. Iris turned down a side street, the pack pulling on her shoulders, the straps digging into her skin like claws. Hearing sirens, she slipped through the part-open gate behind JM Glass & Door LTD. She found deep shadows where the parking lot lights didn't reach, threading a path between stacks of broken window frames and dented entry doors. She reached a hidden space where several warped floor mirrors leaned against a dumpster. The street noise seemed far off. Her head began to throb, keeping time with her heartbeat.

“I've done runs like this before. We have plenty of time,” Brian was telling her, tapping one finger nervously on the steering wheel.

“But we don't,” she was answering. “Goddamn it, Brian. You can't go an hour without a toke?”

“My arthritis is bothering me and when you yell at me like that it just gets worse.” He flicked off the wipers. The rain had died down to a few drizzles. “We'll pull over there, two minutes, tops.”

“Then let me drive.”

“We'll still have to pull over —”

“BRIAN, LOOK OUT!”

Iris jerked herself awake. She'd slumped to the ground with her back against the mirrors. “Just a minute or two, I wasn't out that long,” she stuttered.

Iris stood up slowly. This place wasn't as she remembered it. Harsh green-white light spilled from a spotlight overhead, with jagged lunar shadows cast by heaps of twisted metal. There was debris scattered all around: machine parts, furniture, brick

fragments, broken glass, barbed wire. Plastic mannequin pieces; heads, arms, torsos. Dead birds and tiny, bleached animal bones. Thick cables ran up and down the half-collapsed buildings, stretched from rooftop to rooftop like a great spider's web.

Iris noticed a scrap of newsprint soaking in a puddle of engine oil. The headline read: WORM EATS ALL.

And then she realized the black bag was missing.

Iris turned, frantically, her heart pounding. Where was it? She remembered putting it down next to a brick wall...

Where the wall had been there was a half-collapsed chain link fence. Someone was standing behind it. An inky silhouette against darker blackness.

"Hey," Iris shouted. "Hey! Over here." She walked towards the fence. "I need some help. I need to know where I am."

She saw there was some kind of alley behind the fence, with an overhang that kept the stranger in deep shadow. The top of the fencing had fallen away. She stopped several feet before the fence line, out of reach.

"You're under the skin of the world now." It seemed impossible that the man's whispers could reach her, yet the voice brushed the insides of her ears, like the noise of the ocean inside a seashell.

"What?"

"Closer to the rotting core, where the worm eats everything away," the shadow continued. "One day everything will look like this."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand what's going on. I don't remember..." She walked closer.

"The Worm has slaves, and one of them is looking for you. Wants you dead. And especially wants the burden you carry." Iris could see the faint outlines of clothing now... shirt sleeves, a belt.

Something about the man's voice made her feel like crying. "I lost my — I need my bag. Whatever's in it... look, I can't remember, but... I was in an accident..."

"When I carried this for all those years, it felt like stone, it was so heavy with dimness. Don't let them take it. They'll do awful things with it, Iris." He bent down, then raised the bag in both arms, cradling it like an infant. As he came towards the fence, the light revealed his hands and then his face. He raised the bag towards her.

Iris tried to speak his name as she reached forward, but her voice failed.

THREE

"Take the soup."

Iris reached over the counter as a large pot was handed to her. Fresh off the stove, it was almost too hot to hold.

"It goes to the apartment on the corner. Second floor, you know the one."

"The old lady," Iris said. "I don't like her. She's weird."

"She's sick. You watch your mouth before I slap it." Her mother pressed the lid tight. "Come right back. It's going to be a busy night."

Pine Street was quiet under the uncertain twilight sky of late October. Iris was 12 years old, gangly and restless. It would be another hour before the day shift at the factory ended, and the men crowded into the diner, noisy and rushed and making jokes with her in that teasing way she liked. Halfway down the block she saw the older boy leaning against a mailbox. His hair was slicked back and shiny. She wished she'd zippered her jacket closed.

"Iris."

She considered crossing to the other side, but then she'd have to cross back again at the corner. It seemed stupid.

"Iris, mmmmm yeah, smells good." He whistled eight or nine notes.

"Soup," she told him.

"Not the soup," he answered. His grin was all angles. "Do you even know where you are, Iris?"

The cracked and ragged buildings of Pine Street seemed to lean closer towards her.

"I'm not afraid of you, Willy," Iris told him.

"Do I want you to be?" He shook his head. "We're practically family."

"I have to bring this to..."

"Let me take it."

"My mother told me..."

"Your mother? The one you're going to run away from in four years?"

"I..."

"Remember? The arguments? The fighting? You called her a monster."

Iris looked back down the street. The diner was boarded up now, the sign gone. Weeds grew through cracks in the asphalt.

"I don't blame you for running away. You just ran in the wrong direction. Change your path, Iris. Come with me." He reached for the pot. "Don't carry that yourself. Let me take it."

She ran.

As the ground shifted from concrete to dirt to thick, root-bound soil, Iris realized it wasn't a pot she was holding now, but a basket. The lid was tight. Something rolled around inside it as she ran. Clumps of trees became thicker and thicker, until the sun-dappled forest was all she could see in every direction.

"Iris!" The voice was far behind. She pressed herself against a tree, the bark digging into the skin of her back like claws. Somewhere crows were croaking at each other. A chorus of insects chattered in the air like the rasping of a thousand dry bones. A wind rustled the tree-tops, then died down.

Iris crouched, put the basket on the grass. She lifted the lid. At first the basket seemed empty. But she reached for the single object that had rolled into a dark corner. Smooth, rounded. It was an apple, deep red in the shadows of the forest, moist and warm in her hand.

Somewhere a twig snapped. A flock of birds fluttered into the air. Iris felt a vibration through her feet, something heavy walking nearby.

There. Behind a thicket of deep green brush. In the darkest patch between the leaves.

The eyes, watching her. A predator's eyes.

She sprinted deeper into the forest.

FOUR

The cabin sat atop a partly-collapsed ridge of stone and soil, with its front porch propped up by two thin supports that looked like the legs of a giant bird. Thick vines trailed across the roof, and into the treetops overhead, like giant cobwebs. The fence creaked in a gust of wind, but the cabin remained still.

When she knocked on the door, the response came quickly.

"Come in, honey. And close the door, to keep the bugs out."

"Grandma?" All the shades were drawn against the summer sun. Iris was sixteen now, limbs tanned and peach-fuzzed, just a trace of baby fat in her face. She slipped her rucksack off her back and laid it outside the door. Then she stepped into the cool, dark parlor, and shivered at the familiar scent of lilacs and potpourri.

"I'm in the back, dear," floated a weary voice.

Iris found her grandmother in the big, overstuffed chair where she always sat when it was too hot to venture outside. She fell to her knees, embracing her, and it took several moments for her sobs to resolve themselves into words.

"I'm not going back, grandma, not ever."

"There, there, sweetie. It's okay."

"I don't care what mama says. I'm done with her. I'm done with all of them."

“Honey...”

“I know they’re supposed to be my relatives, but I don’t care. They’re weird and they smell weird and you should see how they look at me. I don’t care if they give Mama money to keep the diner, I’m not going anywhere with them and I don’t care...”

“Shhh... I know how upset you are, sweetheart. But don’t forget they’re your family.”

“If we’re related how come I never heard of them before? They just show up and move in with Willy and his dad and all the sudden...” Her breath came up short.

“We’re a very old family, and we’re spread out.” Her grandmother stroked Iris’s hair. “We lose touch.”

“But I don’t understand what they want from me, Grandma. They’re always watching me...”

“They do have different ways, that bunch. You’re right to be cautious. They’re not like us, honey. But sometimes they need help. From someone who won’t tell their secrets to their enemies.”

“I hate them.” Iris felt the tears burning her eyes again. “There was a boy... Johnny... he loved me. We were going to get married, I mean it. He wants to be a doctor and I’m going to be a nurse and... I’m not telling this right... and, and they found out and now Johnny and his whole family are just gone and nobody knows where.”

“Yes, your mother wrote me.” The old woman sighed, turning her silver wedding ring around and around. “Iris,” she said, “When are you due?”

Iris looked to a window. She saw tree branches, and the thick white mass of a tent-caterpillar nest. Skeletonized leaves, and the dark curls of caterpillars gnawing their way along the foliage. “February,” she whispered.

“All right then. No hurry. We’ll take care of it.”

They sat in silence, listening to the katydids chatter. The old woman started to rise from the chair, then sat back again. “Well now. Why don’t you go get your things and unpack?”

On the porch, retrieving her black bag, Iris heard her grandmother calling, but couldn’t make out the words. She was 24 now, blood on her shirt, her head throbbing and her feet sore from running.

The woods were dark and silent; over the treetops she could see thick storm clouds.

Her black backpack was heavy in her right hand as she re-entered the parlor. “I’m sorry, grandma, what did you say?”

“Your mother gave you something to bring to me. Bring it to the back bedroom, won’t you?”

The bedroom was dark, with the shades drawn tight. A breeze hissing through the edges of the roller blinds carried a scent of rain.

“My eyes don’t like the light these days,” her grandmother said from beneath a mound of bedding. “Come closer, let me see you.”

“Shall I put this in the closet?”

“Don’t,” her grandmother replied. “Just come here. Give it to me. I want to see you —”

But Iris was already opening the closet door. A strip of cloud-muted light shone through the gap between a window frame and one of the shades, piercing the darkness of the closet. Iris could just discern the body leaning in the closet’s back corner, a corpse wearing her grandmother’s nightclothes. The skin of its face and head had been peeled away, the hair ripped out of the scalp, leaving a bloody mass of flesh and teeth with wide, surprised eyeballs that saw nothing at all.

Iris staggered backwards with her hands pressed against her mouth. She turned and almost fell, her legs buckling. She spun, seeing window, bedpost, night table, carpet... where was the door?

“Come here Iris.” It was her grandmother’s voice, overlaid with something else. Iris teetered towards the dresser, seeing her own face in the mirror above it. She remembered washing blood from her hair. Had that happened yet?

She saw a shape rise up behind her reflection. A dire wolf whose shoulders brushed the ceiling, a night sky of fur with a jagged tooth-filled moon. And two eyes, predator’s eyes, deep yellow, unblinking, hungry.

In the mirror was a door, and she reached for it as hot wet canine breath spilled across the back of her neck.

FIVE

Iris found herself in a small foyer. A coatrack on the wall, mail lying on the carpet under the door slot. In three steps she entered the little kitchen she knew would be there. She flipped a light switch and, as the overhead fluorescents hummed to life, placed the black bag on small round table.

The ceiling creaked; she heard footsteps above her.

The zipper wouldn’t move. Iris saw a small luggage lock holding it in place. She tried another pull, with no result. She found a drawer under the counter, pulled it open, and after a few seconds of rummaging she retrieved a pair of screwdrivers. The first one was too thick, but she was able to slip the second under the lock’s U-shaped shackle. She turned the screwdriver end over end, pulling the lock against its catch until the lock popped apart and clattered onto the floor in pieces.

She unzipped the bag and pulled away a layer of thick gray foam.

A voice came from somewhere beyond the foyer: "Hello? Iris? I'll be down in a second!"

She glared around the room, saw there was only one way in or out. She tore another layer of padding out of the bag, and another. And then... she touched metal. No, it was hard plastic. Iris worked her hands down the sides of what felt like some sort of heavy box. It was vibrating, and she could hear the buzzing of some sort of motor. She slid the bag to the center of the table, directly under the light. She lifted a white-and red cube out of the bag. It had thick chrome latches on top, and a small LED screen bearing a string of five or six numbers. One side bore a label with thick black letters on a white background:

HUMAN ORGAN FOR TRANSPLANT

TRANSPORT UNIT TYPE 1

Maintain perfusion until pre-op.

Assess electrolyte status before transfer.

"Iris? You're home already?"

The man in the doorway was Iris's height; his sandy hair was unkempt and he bore a two-day beard on a jowly face. His glasses were slightly crooked. He brushed something from his left shoulder. He wore a wrinkled flannel shirt and faded blue jeans.

"Peter..." Iris said. She stepped in front of the table.

"I guess your delivery went okay, then?" He turned and opened a cabinet, rooted around, withdrew a box of crackers.

"Peter..." she repeated. "Go... go get the mail, would you? It's in the hall."

He shrugged. As he stepped out, Iris slid the black bag in front of the transport container.

"Here you go," Peter said, handing her a stack of papers. He looked at her expectantly. Iris took the mail, examined it. Four envelopes were marked "resident." The fifth carried a hand-written address: Iris McCoy. She ripped it open.

"So, how was it?" he asked. You were so nervous when you left this morning, with Brian driving and all."

Iris could see the ambulance in her mind's eye. She remembered taking off her EMT jacket, draping it over her seat. "Just... hang on a minute," she told him, raising the letter so it hid her face.

"Mmm," he answered. "Scuse me." She moved aside as he crossed the room and opened the refrigerator. "Get me a spoon, would you?"

Iris stared at him as she slowly placed the letter on the counter.

"Iris? Spoon?"

The drawer was still open; she kept her eyes on him as she felt her fingers closing around the handle of the chef's knife. She stepped towards him and stabbed him with a single, smooth motion, shoving the blade halfway into his right thigh and slipping it out again, backing away as he collapsed, wide-eyed and moaning, to the floor.

"WHO ARE YOU?" she screamed at him, pointing the bloody knife at him.

"Oh, God," he sobbed, pressing his hand against the growing stain of blood on his leg. "Iris... why...?"

She slammed her left hand on top of the counter, keeping the knife aimed with her right. "PETER WROTE THIS LETTER YESTERDAY! My flight leaves early in the morning, I'll drop this in the mail on the way. Hard to believe it's been six months since we split up." Her voice cracked a bit. "I don't miss us fighting. Hope you find peace."

He stared at her as the pain and confusion drained from his face. "Ah," he said, smiling, his voice different now. "Even with scrambled brains, you still think you can outsmart me." He chuckled as he stood up, his bloodied leg as strong as the other one. "I won't be needing this, I suppose." He placed both hands on the sides of his head. He slid his hands downward, and his features began to sag, and then, with a sickening slurp, the front of his face fell away from his head and onto the floor. His hair was darkening, he seemed to grow an inch taller. "I could feel its power fading out anyway."

Iris could see Peter's face, heaped on the kitchen tile, oozing blood and mucus like an afterbirth. A stink of rotting meat assaulted her. She held the kitchen knife with both hands now, as the man in front of her wiped away dark fluid and a yellow ooze from his own features, revealing sharp cheekbones and dark eyes.

"William," she whispered.

"This is all so stupid," he said to her. "You hate the family as much as I do."

"Don't come any closer..."

In a blink, he was gone, and then he was behind her, his hands around her throat. He whispered into her ear, his saliva tickling her cheek. "They said I was weak because I let you get away, all those years ago." She felt the knife slip from her hands, heard it clatter on the floor some miles away. She choked and gasped, flailed at him uselessly, the panic of suffocation stealing away her control. The bandage wrapped around his right forearm scratched her neck.

"I'm in a different family now," he whispered. He lifted her by her neck, then half-pushed, half threw her at the kitchen table. Iris felt a rib crack as she slammed against the edge of the table. She ended up sprawled on the floor, tried to get her legs under her body. "Someone told me..." she gasped. "You're... working for... a worm."

"So you learned something in the spirit world. Big deal. You don't even know how to use the mirrors. You don't know anything." He reached over, pushed the plastic box off the table. It landed in front of Iris with a muffled thud, the perfusion unit still whirring inside.

“You don’t know how much I laughed when I realized it was you who was delivering this thing,” he said. “Open it.”

Iris saw the knife, it had slid into a far corner of the room.

“I can remember now,” she said, fumbling at the latches. “The car slamming into the ambulance, and hitting my head on the dash.” She remembered the boxcutter, slashing once across Brian’s neck. Reaching for her door just as someone smashed the glass. The arm reaching towards her. Backing away, tangled in the seat belt, desperate, and in the rearview mirror the eyes staring back at her...

“You’re going to take it out of the box and give it to me,” William told her. “That’s how they want it done. There’s more power to the masters that way. More energy to corrupt. I’m glad your brains are unscrambling, because I want you to understand everything I’m going to take from you.”

She snapped open the catches. Then she looked up at him. “What happened to your arm?”

His head shook once, like a twitch. “What? What are you talking about?”

“The bandages.”

“OPEN THAT BOX NOW!”

She pulled at the lid until the gaskets popped apart. She smelled the antiseptic and the salt. The perfusion system bubbled and hummed. And there, in the center of a transparent cradle of plastic and fluid, floated the heart. Its deep red surface was forked with arteries and veins, and it glistened with white highlights from the fluorescent kitchen lights, like white clouds across the dark crust of a strange planet.

“I did that to you, didn’t I?” Iris asked William, as she reverently slipped her fingers into fluid warm as tears. The heart was like a just-born animal, a dark curled-up amphibian or sea creature never meant to be raised into the open air. So fragile, so swollen with life that it felt electric as it writhed in her hands. “That was your blood on me.”

He loomed over her. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“But I know that if you want this, I won’t let you have it.” She brought the heart close to her face, as if to whisper a secret to it. For a moment she saw her own eyes reflected in its oily sheen. A predator’s eyes.

Iris pushed the heart against her mouth and bit into it quickly, chewing at the fibrous cardiac tissue until the warm and salty blood filled her throat.

When it was over, when she felt the wolf padding away from her mind, her teeth sloughing off their daggered points, and the cool on her body as the coarse hair vanished from her limbs, Iris carefully stepped over what was left of William. At the sink she turned on a faucet, filled a glass with water.

“Were you watching the whole time?” she asked, then tipped the water into her mouth.

The man in the brown raincoat stepped into the room. “No. He was good at keeping me off the trail. I only just arrived.”

She placed the glass down on the counter. “Are you and I related?” she ask, wearily.

“Distantly. We’d given up on you a while back. We didn’t think you inherited the Changing Gift.” He regarded the body parts on the floor. The blood wasn’t normal. There were things moving in it. “I was looking for William, really. We only found out recently that he was serving the Worm.”

Iris leaned forward over the sink, bowing her head. “Why...” she began, then couldn’t bring herself to finish the sentence. But he seemed to take her meaning. “The heart belonged to one of our enemies,” he said. “He killed many of us, years ago, before going into hiding. We respected him... he wasn’t corrupt, like William. He was just a man... someone who found out about us, took us for monsters. “

“Was he wrong?”

“William would have made it into a powerful totem against us. You were right to keep him from taking it. And lucky that the hunter’s heart woke the wolf inside you.”

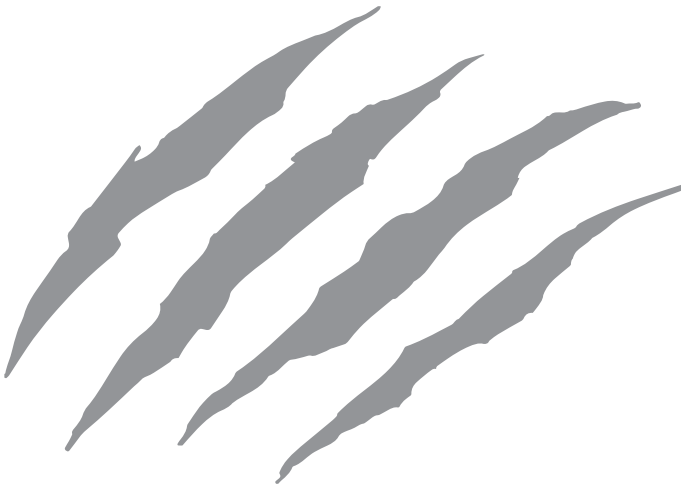
“His name was John. And I imagine he was an organ donor because he thought it would help somebody. And now whoever was waiting for that heart will never get it.”

The man in the brown coat shrugged. “Individuals die, the herd continues.”

“I still can’t remember very much.”

“We can help you with that.”

“No. Iris is gone, long gone. Let her stay away. It’s what she always wanted. She can stop running now.”



Eyes Toward Heaven

Brian Campbell

ONE

The dog almost died before we got to Sedona.

Let me be clear about this: The trip was Alice's idea. I didn't think her dog was ready for it, but then again, I had been expecting that little dog to die for a long, long time. We really shouldn't have been driving up Interstate 17, but I wasn't in the mood for another argument with Alice. She usually won. As I tried to keep my eyes on the road, Alice cradled the dying dog's body against her chest. She invented new sounds to soothe it, and the dog found new ways to whimper, developing an ever-expanding vocabulary of pain.

Every once in a while, I looked over at the ratty little thing: it was a mongrel mix of a Sophie Maltese and what was probably some kind of rodent. Some patches of fur had little bows, some of its fur wasn't there anymore, and even the rhinestones on its tiny collar had faded with time. Sometimes, I looked to see if it was still breathing, because sometimes, it didn't move that much. Every time I looked down, I had to look away before I started staring down Alice's low-cut halter top. Hey, I'm only human.

She always wore a little crystal on a leather strap around her neck. Usually, it was buried down in her cleavage — which again, I was really careful not to stare at — but now, she was clutching it tightly in her tiny hand. Despite the fact that I was driving, she had taken over the car's stereo, playing Dead Can Dance for the fifty bazilliionth time while my Agalloch and Mastodon CDs sat neglected in the glove compartment.

I turned off the interstate into the Red Rock Country, slowing down as titanic monuments of rock cruised past us, bigger than buildings. Each massive block of rock had a name that couldn't compare to its majestic appearance. Alice had saved a map on a paper placemat from a pancake house, and she had memorized all the names. Bell Rock. Courthouse Butte. There was an even a place called Cathedral Rock, complete with a massive church mounted right in its cliffside. That outer wall had a cross at least a hundred feet high. We sure as hell weren't going there.

Red Rock Country looked like the scenery of an old John Wayne movie, and that damn dog was pretty much oblivious to it. Alice would occasionally hold it up to look out the window, although I'm pretty sure it didn't care. I don't think a dog even knows what the color "red" looks like. It just looked up at the sky through its dark filmy eyes. Alice cradled it against her, making me kind of jealous.

Before you think I'm a horrible person, please understand that I'd do just about anything for Alice. You might as well know that she wasn't my girlfriend. She was, as they say, "out of my league," and I was surprised that anyone as attractive as her would even put up with a jackass like me. The fact that I was always the one to drive her places and usually the one who paid her way doesn't matter — I'd do anything for her. You should know this, especially if you're waiting for the part of the story where we're holding hands in the moonlight... well, I'm getting ahead of myself.

So there we were, Alice squirming in the passenger-side seat of my beaten old Kia Rio, holding onto her scruffy old dog as I scanned the roadside for a place to pull over. As we approached the first hiking trails, overstuffed parking lots held rows and rows of tourists. The overweight and the elderly stretched and pointed their cell phone cameras at giant rocks and cacti, adjusting water bottles and fanny packs on their belts. I was kinda glad we found decent a place to park, but Alice wouldn't listen to reason. I thought we should take it on a walk into the desert, so it could at least die somewhere nice, but that apparently wasn't an option.

Suddenly, the dog arched its back, whined, and stopped moving. I paused the CD; Alice held her breath. The car got really silent, so Alice clutched onto the crystal hanging around her neck. She had already chosen our final destination. Sedona was a Mecca for what she called a "New Age community" — I always pronounced it "newage," so it would rhyme with "sewage" — and she held onto some desperate notion that somewhere in Sedona, that damn dog would find peace.

It wouldn't.

"You drove here too slowly," she said, setting me up for a fight if I decided to take the bait. "We should have gotten her sooner."

"We shouldn't be here at all. We need to get off the road," I replied. "Let's find a trail somewhere. Take the dog for a walk."

“We’re not here for the scenery. We’re here for a reason,” she said. “This is a place of healing.”

I let her have the last word. She talked like that sometimes, and I had learned not to question her about those things. After all, I had been carrying a torch for Alice for a long time, worshipping her as the girlfriend I would never have. Even after months of practice, I still wasn’t good enough for her. We were just friends. I had been carefully calibrating my thinking and my speech for months, learning to humor her just enough to keep her happy, but not so much that I would encourage her to waste my time with too much of her mystical nonsense.

I know. I’m a bad person. I could have been worse.

A really expensive Audi passed us at well over the speed limit. This wasn’t a place for healing. This was a place of business. I knew its reputation: this was a place for spiritually bankrupt and financially entitled tourists who wanted to fill some kind of void inside. They’d pay stupid amounts of money to do it, too. I knew my opinion would start a fight. It was an argument waiting to happen. You try to avoid arguing with a woman like Alice, especially if you want to stay on her good side.

Changing the subject usually worked well. “What do you want to do now, Alice?”

She brushed her long dark hair away from her pale cheek, looked out at the desert with her clear blue eyes, and said, “Let’s go into town. I need to do some research.”

An afternoon hip deep in newage? I thought about that prospect for a while, enjoying the silence. Off in the distance, a whirling column of dirt — what we call a “dust devil” in Arizona — lazily swirled and drifted across the desert. My mind strayed, and then it found its way back.

We passed another motel by the side of the road. As we got closer into town, those hotels looked nicer, and generally more expensive. For a moment, I entertained the one thought I knew I shouldn’t: We could get a hotel room. We could spend the night here... together. I had earned it, and after all, we were too far from home to go back tonight. Alice and I were good friends, but this was a place that could change all that. It had good wine, good food, and beautiful scenery. Some people would call it romantic.

Then the dog made a noise I couldn’t identify, spewing something onto its chin. Alice hugged it to her chest, and I slowed down, watching her. Another BMW honked as it passed us at some ridiculous speed.

Yeah. Romantic.

TWO

I first met Alice in a goth club in Tucson.

I know those words might not make much sense, but Arizona really does have its share of goths. You wouldn't think people who live in a place that's over 90 degrees in the summer would want to wear a lot of black and velvet and move around, but my friends in Arizona had a saying: *heat makes freaks*.

Everyone living in the Southwest has a choice: you can stay inside with air conditioning until you go stir crazy, or you can go outside until the heat burns your skin and melts your brain. Unfortunately, inside is never quite cool enough, thanks to the "swamp coolers" most people have in Tucson, and outside is uncomfortable enough to slowly drive you insane. There's a convenience store every two or three blocks, mostly because guys like me keep buying cheap, gigantic tankards of soda with lots of ice as we move from one patch of shade to the next.

Once a week, every Saturday night, the freaks in Tucson would come in out of the heat to a dingy little dive bar on Fourth Avenue, and they would pretend it's Goth Night. Or so I had heard. Back then, I spent most of my free time playing games on the Tellus 270, hanging out around campus with a backpack full of books, and walking from one convenience store to the next. The low point was when I started playing some Black Dog game about vampires with a few of the weirder kids. I started reading a lot of stories by Lovecraft and Clive Barker and Steven King and Joe Hill. I used to sit in the dining room of an O'Tolley's all night, drinking free soda refills and reading about monsters.

For some reason, I thought that would prepare me for life.

Tucson had taught me how to live cheaply and kill time, but I was ready for a change. I wanted something different. I had seen flyers for an event called DARK-WAVE all over campus and up and down Fourth Avenue. Since most of my friends were alone and depressed and obsessed with imaginary characters, I decided one month to get dressed up and talk to the spooky kids in black. And believe me, I went all out. I bought a new black t-shirt and some nice boots. That outfit cost more than I spent on ramen in a week.

Even at night, the club was darker on the inside than it was on the outside. Everyone had drifted to the back of the bar, except for a few besotted souls buying drinks. On my first night there, the first freak I noticed was a Native American kid sitting in the corner, wearing a black surgical mask and sunglasses. Leather bands covered with lots of spiky little metal studs wrapped around his arms and legs. If he wanted to seem aloof or inconspicuous, it wasn't working. He had sunglasses, after all... indoors... at night. He had a thrift store trench coat and a creepy way of looking at the girls on the dance floor.

I was off to a good start. If no one cared about him being there, no one would care about me.

Every freak in that bar was an archetype, a story waiting to be told that I really didn't want to hear. There was a fat guy with a neckbeard and a Lady Death t-shirt, bouncing up and down near some scantily clad women on a stage. A middle-aged guy in a dress shirt and slacks sat in a padded chair. He fiddled with his cell phone, desperately trying to look like he wasn't there to stare at college girls. A mousy little girl with too much black eyeliner and too little clothing periodically drifted near the middle-aged guy, unsure of what to do, but curious enough to keep doing it. A big girl in a beautiful dress floated across the sea of people like a battleship, patrolling her territory as she said hello to every woman on the dance floor.

And those women. Good Lord, those women. The corsets, the gloves, the frilly skirts, the tiny boots, the miraculously pale skin, the tattoos, the piercings — you know the drill. This room had a checklist of everything a lonely guy like me needed to see, containing enough clichés to fill a Goth Bingo card. Oh, and there was that *one old guy* in a *pink shirt* who had no idea what he was doing. I think his dance was called a Cabbage Patch or a Running Man or some such thing. No one cared that I was there, so I tried to remember how to dance.

We were all pretending. We were all escaping. For this one night, we were the beautiful and the damned, and we danced.

Most of the people there never actually danced with anyone else. The guys would kind of drift near someone they found interesting, no doubt pretending to be “with” some pretty girl. The women would either vaguely watch them dance, or they would politely drift away. The few couples were obviously, blatantly couples, fiercely marking their territory. That didn't stop the drifters from trying to dance near anyone they found attractive. In fact, there was a pack of four drifters circled around a woman in the center of the room, although she wasn't really paying attention to any of them.

That was when I saw Alice for the first time. And that was when my life changed.

She didn't move with the music; the music moved with her. She wasn't dressed like the other women; as far as I was concerned, the other women wanted to dress like her. Alice seemed almost supernatural: she moved a little slower than everyone else, languidly swatting at imaginary psychedelic butterflies. She drove back the darkness with her dancing. No matter how many people came near her, passed by her, or tried to get caught in her orbit, she remained alone. Alice stood at the center of the room, gradually dancing towards some mystical ecstasy, eyes cast towards heaven.

I couldn't look away. When my heart started beating again, I felt a tightness in my chest. What I felt was... well, somewhere between jealousy and an instinct to protect her. Of course, I suspected she could take care of herself — the club seemed

like her natural element — but I couldn't help feel like those losers shouldn't be anywhere near her. *I* should. I actually *envied* them.

After some indescribable epoch of time passed, I realized that I was still staring at her. In fact, my mouth was hanging open. Maybe she was used to that. I reflexively turned away, inadvertently looking at the middle-aged guy with the cell phone. I noticed that he was looking back at me. He grinned, like we had some kind of creepy stalker bond, and a cold chill ran down my spine. Time synched up with reality again, and I wisely decided to walk back to the bar.

Three pints later, I was sitting alone near the bartender, still trying to figure out a strategy for talking to her. So far, the early parts of my plan mostly involved staring at her in the mirror over the bar. I was watching everyone on the dance floor, looking to see who was near her, and being cynical. Retreat seemed like a workable option. Maybe I was fighting above my weight class here. I could get a bucket of Mountain Dew on the way home, queue up some decent music on my cell phone, and read a few Black Dog books before dawn.

While I was distracted by my own self-pity, Alice walked up and sat on the stool next to me. She held up her hand to signal the bartender — her delicate pale fingers signaling to him — and time immediately did that *Didn't-Want-to-Sync-Up-with-Reality-Move* again. My brain randomly searched through every stupid line I could think of until it settled on the worst possible pick-up line I could say.

“Hey,” I said, like a casual genius, “are you a vampire?”

She stared at me for a moment. I swear, all the cigarette smoke in the room actually stopped moving for a few seconds. My heart stopped beating. Time stood still, just long enough for me to feel like a complete and utter idiot.

“No,” she replied, “but my mother was a werewolf.”

And we were off. Nothing would ever be the same.

She told me about her favorite werewolf novels, her favorite bands, a few spooky movies, and fragments of forgettable drama about the club. The couples, apparently, had been sleeping around, changing places more often than guests at the Mad Tea Party. I didn't care. She talked, and she talked, and we drank. I bought her a bottle of King Lite... and another... and another.

After a few hours, she told me about her family, although she got very vague and rather sad about it. “They kicked me out,” she said. “I did something wrong, and they kicked me out. Now I can't go back.” I changed the subject, wanting to avoid drama this early. Maybe she would confide in me later.

All evening, the music jumped from decade to decade, as the DJ mixed in some strange choices. I remember one obscure song he played from the 1990s. It didn't sound particularly gothy, but I liked it.

Slide over here, someone sang from the past, and give me a moment. I've got to let you know. I've got to let you know.

Alice stared at me with her cold blue eyes, and my soul just kind of tumbled into them. She smiled at me, and time stood still.

You, the music said, are my kind.

We drank more and talked more, and I said just enough to keep her talking until someone shouted something about Last Call. The lights flickered, and we walked outside to a parking lot where we smashed some beer bottles against a wall and laughed a lot.

Three months later, she got a dog.

THREE

Six months after that first night in the bar, my battered old Kia was rolling into Sedona, and I could almost feel the money of a thousand tourists flowing into town. Compared to Tucson, this was the most pretentious excuse for a city I had ever seen. Most of the buildings were built to look like some kind of fake adobe. Alice called it "fauxdobe," and that seemed about right.

Reality kind of shifted sideways as we read the signs by the side of the road. CHAKRAS CLEARED. CRYSTAL HEALING. REIKI MASTERS. VORTEX INFORMATION. Windows were cluttered with distractions: elaborate displays of crystals, dusty dreamcatchers, posters of the desert, and even more cryptic signs. We were in a New Age Disneyland, and judging from the smile on Alice's face, she was in heaven. She clutched her crystal, and the dog rattled something close to a cough.

The traffic slowed to a crawl as we approached the touristy part of town. Rubbernecking out-of-towners looked everywhere except the road. Then when we hit the roundabouts. Sedona didn't want to bother with intersections or traffic lights. That would make too much sense. Every three or four minutes, we stopped at a different roundabout: a big circular road where no one seemed to bother with taking turns or acknowledging other people. Cars randomly changed lanes, sometimes missing their exit and circling round again. Each roundabout had a big circular plot of concrete in the center, usually with some kinda New Agey sculpture. Drivers randomly entered or left whenever they damn well felt like it. After three or four of those things, I was almost dizzy.

"Relax," Alice said. "You need to let go of your stress. Feel the energies here."

The dog twitched and tried to cough. Alice cooed at it. I was sick of driving.

With all due deference to her spiritual needs, I pulled in to the parking lot of the first Dairy Queen I saw and said, “We’re here.” Close enough.

“No we’re not. I need to stop for directions.”

“You can ask directions here. We can get some ice cream. Go for a walk.”

“I don’t want directions from some guy at a *Dairy Queen*. I need to talk to someone who knows the sacred places.”

We were about thirty seconds away from another fight. You could feel it in the air, more palpable than any newage “energy.”

We were drawing a crowd before the fight even started. I don’t know how they even found us, but some of the local kids in black were waiting for us in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen. One kid was wearing a black longcoat and a shirt from a first-person shooter. The fact that it was almost a hundred degrees outside didn’t seem to bother him. I think he was their leader or something.

The others were the usual standard-issue street rats: a skinny girl in a torn shirt, ripped shorts, and tattered stockings; a fat bastard in a filthy hoodie and board shorts, smoking a cigarette; a tall rail-thin kid in jeans and a shirt for something called the MURDEROUS HARLEQUIN CLIQUE.

The freaks stared at Alice, and she stared back. Alice tended to attract losers like them. Then again, she had attracted me, so maybe I shouldn’t judge.

As soon as Alice saw them, she stopped arguing. “Get out of the car,” she said. “We’re going for a walk.” Without another word, she picked up her ratty dog, adjusted her skirt, and started walking toward a row of touristy shops. I got out, put my head down, and locked the car without a second thought. She walked with a purpose, determined. I tried not to look back over my shoulder. Those punks were either going to follow us or pour ice cream on my car. I just knew it.

“What was that all about?” I asked. She didn’t answer. We wandered by souvenir shops, past another New Age store, past a barbecue restaurant, and Alice didn’t say another word. She didn’t stop until we got to a little nook with the word INFORMATION overhead. It had a giant map of Sedona and its surroundings, but more importantly, it had shade.

We walked right up to the map. Conflicting signs offered random information. SCENIC TOURS. SUNSET GOLF. VORTEX INFORMATION. HOTEL RESERVATIONS. There was nothing about veterinarians, unfortunately. A chipper young mannequin of a woman with perfectly manicured nails stood behind a service counter, clattering away on the keyboard of her computer.

“HI!” she said in a voice that was a little too friendly and a little too loud for the room. “WELCOME TO SEDONA!”

“Um... hi,” I shot back, nervously trying to look at some pamphlets.

Alice was more direct. “We’d like some information about the closest vortex. Can you give us directions?”

“OF COURSE!” she beamed, pulling out a map from under the counter. “I CAN TELL YOU HOW TO GET TO ALL OF THE VORTEXES!”

“Vortices,” I said.

“EXCUSE ME?”

“The plural of ‘vortex’ is ‘vortices.’ And... what’s a vortex?”

The mannequin ignored me, as though the sound of the passing traffic whisked away any of my nonsense. She was already engaged in some kind of well-rehearsed subroutine, marking X’s on the map.

“THERE ARE FOUR MAJOR VORTEXES IN THE AREA. THE CLOSEST ONE IS *HERE*, ON THE ROAD TO THE AIRPORT.” She circled it, just in case the X wasn’t enough. I searched for a pamphlet with more information. “ARE YOU INTERESTED IN A TOUR? WE HAVE SEVERAL TOURS.”

As if on cue, a pink Jeep with the words KOKOPELLI TOURS written in tour-quoise passed behind us. Some Indian guy painted on the side was playing a flute. I had already seen that design on about twenty t-shirts.

“How will we know if we’re near the vortex?” I said, searching through my pamphlet. “Is there a sign?”

“YOU’LL KNOW IT WHEN YOU SEE IT!” she explained with a big smile. “SENSITIVE PEOPLE CAN TELL WHEN THEY’RE NEAR A VORTEX.” Her eyes shone with glee.

“I’ll know,” Alice agreed, nodding her head.

“How late is it open?” I said, keeping my eyes on the pamphlet.

“IT’S BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD. YOU’LL KNOW IT! DO YOU HAVE A HOTEL? WE CAN GET YOU A GREAT RATE ON A MOTEL!” Her manicured claws were already clutching for another pamphlet, something with pictures of a big swimming pool and a golf course. An elderly couple frozen in time was drinking some wine in front of a sunset, pretending to like each other.

A hotel? I thought. My heart skipped a beat.

“We’re fine, thank you.” Alice demurred. “We’re just here for the vortex. But could you recommend a good vegetarian restaurant?”

Alice and the chipper hotel lady exchanged friendly noises while I scanned my pamphlet. I had nothing to contribute to their discussion.

Apparently, the biggest vortex had “male yang energy” or some such thing. Yang vortices promoted aggression and clear decision making, and many people felt energized in their presence... or said they did. The closest vortex had “female yang energy,” creating a site of healing and empathy. The third balanced both energies, and... whatever. I felt embarrassed trying to find something useful in the pamphlet.

Alice’s ratty little dog was scanning its surroundings, as if it was looking at something scurrying around that wasn’t there. It growled until Alice calmed it down.

Alice kept talking. “Maybe we could get a beer there,” she said. “Do you have microbrew?”

I looked up from my reading at the mention of something worthwhile. “Uh, yeah! Beer!”

Miss Mannequin gave more directions, and I kept reading.

The back of the pamphlet had a grainy picture of a juniper tree. Allegedly, you could recognize a vortex because of the juniper trees that grew there. I actually started laughing. There must have been *hundreds* of those trees in the desert. This woman’s business was making a fortune sending people to a vague location with mystical properties no one could actually see.

Alice grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the alcove, presumably walking in the direction of beer. I stopped breathing for a moment. *Beer. Girl. Good.* Out of instinct, I looked back in the direction of the Dairy Queen.

True to form, there was a roundabout nearby. The kids in black had found a new way to pass the time. Four of them stalked in single file, walking along the edge of the road, circling the roundabout. *Heat makes freaks*, I thought. Then again, this place was nicer than the parking lot of a convenience store.

I thought about cold soda. Then I thought about beer. Then I thought about Alice.

Her dog growled, and she let go of my hand. Normal time resumed, at least as much as it could in Sedona. We walked.

FOUR

An hour later, Alice finished off a “sandwich” that was mostly full of salad, and I ate some tasty barbecue made from a murdered animal. One short walk later, we found the Kia Rio undisturbed in the Dairy Queen parking lot. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Alice had a plan, and once again, I was the guy who was going to put it into motion. By the time Dead Can Dance was playing on the car's stereo, we were on our way to the closest vortex.

Parking was a bitch. I pulled into a parking lot where a twitchy woman in a H3 Hummer was about to park across two spots. The usual dance followed: I shouted angry things out the window, Alice acted embarrassed, and the tiny Kia jumped forward about thirty feet to cut off the Hummer. We slid into the parking spot with inches to spare, just as Twitchy Woman shrieked something shrill out the window. Maybe she was in desperate need of some kind of spiritual healing.

And maybe there's a reason I'm not Alice's boyfriend.

Normally, this would lead to another argument with Alice, but she didn't seem to care. She sidled out of the car, clutching her yappy little dog, and smiled wanly at the driver of the Hummer. The two women exchanged passive aggressive apologies, and I locked the car again. I made a mental note to keep an eye on it, just in case Twitchy Hummer Woman wanted to scratch my Kia with her car keys. She seemed like the type.

If this "vortex" was a spiritual place of healing, it certainly didn't look like it. An old guy in a polo shirt and Dockers was standing in the shadow of a big signboard, arguing on his cell phone. A few kids ran up and down a trail to a nearby cliff. One of them threw a shiny foil juice packet down on the ground, hooting and hollering as he raced to catch up with the others.

The signboard displayed helpful announcements about scorpions, cacti, and a local fungus. Apparently, we were supposed to stay on the trails and watch where we stepped. Fragile crusts of dirt in this part of the desert held delicate fungal spores, although no one seemed to care. On the sign, a cartoon foot in a sandal hovered perilously close to a cartoon patch of fungi. Ten feet away, the kids tromped through the dirt like elephants.

Alice didn't notice any of this. With her usual determination, she walked up the trail and away from the unpleasantness in the parking lot. Her dog was awake, but breathing so heavily you could almost hear fluid roiling in its lungs.

We crested a hill and saw the most amazing sunset I had seen in years.

The trail led off to the left and right, but straight right ahead, a vista beyond the edge of the cliff looked out on pristine desert. The scenery was only occasionally marred by pavement and a few fauxdobe buildings. Towering monuments of red rock caught the light of the setting sun. A hawk lazily soared overhead.

Some jackass with an iPad stood directly in front of us, struggling to capture nature's majesty with his webcam. It didn't work out that well.

The trail to the left snaked up another hill, where a tall juniper tree stood dramatically against a clear sky. The kids had already made it up to the top, where their Dad sipped a beer and mostly ignored them. He had parked his ass on a cooler. A cell phone in left hand blared tinny music loud enough for us to hear a hundred feet away.

Alice was still oblivious. She stared out at the desert, talking to her dog like it was some kind of infant. She kissed it on the forehead, calming it with words I couldn't understand.

I sure envied the guy with the beer.

"Why do they even come here?" I asked, not thinking before I spoke. "They'd be better off back in town. All they want to do is drink beer and shout on their cell phones."

"There's some hope for some them," she said. "Troubled souls are drawn to a place like this. The barrier between worlds is thin here. We're standing on the periphery of reality. If you meditate here long enough, you can see the world as it really is."

She made no sense, but what could I say? I've always been attracted to beautiful and crazy.

Months of not dating Alice had taught me to let her keep talking. She put up with my crap, and I didn't dare challenge my incredibly attractive female friend on these matters. I thought about hotel rooms instead.

"The vortex is at its strongest at sunset and dawn. We should come back here later, when fewer people are around. There's going to be a crescent moon tonight. It's the perfect time."

Despite everything I've told you so far, I am not an idiot. This time, I thought about our situation with mathematical precision. We were going to be alone in the moonlight in the desert. She was going to be incredibly sad and in need of sympathy. Granted, she's just my friend, but I was starting to feel like I was the best friend she had in this world — maybe her only friend.

If my girl wanted to take her sick dog to a vortex in the moonlight, she was going to take it to a vortex in the moonlight.

"We'll be out late," she said. "We should get a hotel room."

"Good idea," I said.

Thank you, Sedona.

FIVE

The magnetic strip on my credit card was worn, but it still worked. The card had sat neglected in my wallet for over a year while I methodically paid down my balance. I had saved it for an emergency, and this was the proper time and place.

We got a room. Two beds. Two *damn big* beds, each one big enough for two people. A fridge for storing wine and beer. A place to put a laptop full of swirly goth music. A beautiful view of the desert. A hot tub down the hall.

Tonight, I knew our relationship was going to change. I could feel it, stronger than any of the bullshit energy around a Sedona vortex.

The dog took a nap on one of the beds. Alice took a shower. I laid down on the bed, watching a movie on my laptop while she changed. I closed my eyes for just a moment...

...and then opened them when it was dark outside. Okay, maybe I *am* an idiot.

Alice was adjusting her makeup. She held up a tiny little makeup mirror, brushing mascara on her eyelashes with practiced strokes. I really didn't understand why she wanted to wear make up for a midnight run to a mystical vortex, but again, I learned to not question these things.

"Time to go," Alice whispered, gingerly picking up her sleeping dog.

I was starting to feel like I was the one on a leash. She called. I followed.

On our way out, she stopped for a moment in the doorway. "I just remembered. I never thanked you for driving me here," she said. She never, ever talked like this to me. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this. I'm so glad I can trust you. You're like the brother I never had."

My heart shattered. We wouldn't be sharing a bed together — not now, not ever.

I nodded and thought about how much I was doing for the sake of that damn dog. No wonder I hated that thing.

Just to play it safe, I didn't tell Alice about the shovel I had in the trunk of my car. That thing wasn't long for this world, and I once I buried it, I'd have to find some other reason to help her out... or walk away.

The streets outside the hotel were nearly empty. Alice had been right: no one wanted to be out in the desert in the middle of the night, not when there were expensive hotel rooms, overpriced bars, and pretentious restaurants that demanded their attention. The more... mystical... people staying here would be resting up for dawn, the most popular time for visiting places like the vortices.

We drove into the desert in the middle of the night, and we didn't pass another soul.

Thankfully, the parking lot was open all night. All the children and cell phones and iPads were long gone. Alice got out of the Kia again, almost ceremoniously this time, holding her ratty dog like a sick infant. She was as graceful and as beautiful as the night I first met her, gliding toward the trail in the moonlight.

I locked the car, looking around to see if anyone else was lurking nearby. Okay, I have trust issues. I have my reasons.

Without a flashlight, or the light of my car's headlights, or even the glare of a cell phone, she confidently strode into the darkness, walking uphill towards the tree at the top of the hill. She seemed to act on instinct, even as I tripped over a rock, snapped a branch underfoot, and heard a weird crunching sound as I accidentally wandered off the trail.

Sorry, endangered fungal spores.

The night was dead silent as she stood in the light of the waxing moon. As I drew closer, I could see her silhouette. She knelt down beside the tree, gently putting her dog down on the ground. For some reason, she set her makeup mirror down next to it.

I briefly debated whether to keep my distance and give her some privacy. That wouldn't be terribly intimate, of course, and I wouldn't be able to show her how sympathetic I was. But who know what kind of freaky newage shit was next? I was standing on the edge of a boundary, right at the edge between where my world ended and hers began.

Then I heard something: a bird call, just one. It didn't sound like any of the birds I had heard today. Not that I usually noticed such things, but it was odd enough to draw my attention. Step by step, I advanced.

The insects didn't make a sound. The single bird call sounded again, this time from the opposite direction. The syllables almost sounded like words.

Alice stood tall in the moonlight, and for a moment, I thought she looked taller. Thinner, too, if that was possible. Once again, she was in her element, and time slipped sideways.

My eyes adjusted, but it probably wasn't the moonlight. Everything nearby had a dim outline. The juniper tree stood even starker and more distinct against the pale sky. I could barely make out the words of that bird cry.

"whip-poor-whill! whip-poor-whill!"

You learn things growing up in the desert. One of them is that whippoorwills aren't native to the American Southwest.

Maybe I had spent a little too much time in the heat today. Maybe those fungi had set off some kind of psychedelic spores. In a heartbeat, both of those ridiculous ideas fell away, as I realized I might have actually been wrong all along. I had been wrong about a lot of things.

I crept toward the outline of the juniper tree. Alice stood tall and majestic in the warm night air. I stumbled a bit, feeling woozy and losing my balance. She looked like she towered over me, at least eight or nine feet tall. I coughed, imagining pollen and spores floating out of my lungs. Her skin looked all wrong. It was... softer than I ever thought possible. Shadows moved in the distance.

Ascending the trail, one of the shadow moved towards us, the outline of a long-coat billowing behind it. The fake bird cry drew closer.

"whip-poor-whill! whip-poor-whill!"

Goodbye, Sedona.

Goodbye, reality.

Something heavy tackled me from behind, throwing me to the ground. My brain seized up. Something growled, and it wasn't the damn dog — it something big and heavy and murderous. My face was down in the dirt faster than I could say *what the fuck?*

The body on top of me grew bulkier — I thought it was actually getting *bigger* — and I felt hot breath on the back of my neck. That primal growl was now inches away from my face.

I admit it. I was an idiot. I tried to look up.

Hello, fungal spores.

The sky had shifted to a dark shade of purple, and a dust devil lazily whirled around the juniper tree. It kicked up dirt and swirled like a nimbus of pure energy. Alice really *was* nine feet tall, and her mouth was stretched out in a snout, like the mouth of her little bitch dog. She even had *fur* like her little bitch dog, patched and matted and giving way to scabrous patches of rough skin. Her eyes, though... her eyes were the same cool pools of blue that had captured my soul.

Three more shadowy figures surrounded her, while the fourth one pinned me to the ground. They looked a little too familiar. A fat bastard crouched in his hoodie and sunglasses, still smoking a cigarette, his ears folded out like bat wings, his skin covered in a thin sheen of puke-green fuzz. A twitchy rail-thin freak hulked over like a linebacker, his albino eyes blazing, his white fur shifting under his deranged

harlequin shirt. Part of me wondered, fighting to cling to reason, *where did he get that clown make-up?*

The leader, the freak in the longcoat, he was even taller, his shoulders broad, his lupine fangs sharp, his claws stained with blood. They looked like *wolves*, but they were walking. They actually *stood on two legs*. Their rat-like girlfriend felt like about five hundred pounds as she pinned me to the ground, growling.

My brain should have collapsed in on itself, shattering like the sanity of some professor in a Lovecraft novel. I should have been gibbering like a madman, yet somehow, some instinct inside me kept my resolve together.

I felt the same surge of emotions I struggled with back in the club six months ago. I was sure she could take care of herself, but instinctively, I wanted to protect her. Those freaks shouldn't be with her. *I should*. I felt angry and afraid and jealous, and worst of all, a little part of me *envied them*.

Three hulking freaks circled her in the moonlight, as the fourth nuzzled the back of my neck. She nipped at my skin. Her teeth tested to see how thick it was, and I felt a warm trickle of blood on the side of my neck.

The freaks began screaming, a strange ululation that echoed into the purple void overhead. Logic had given way. The moon hung like a knife blade in the sky. The fungal spores in the soil began to glow, forming a pattern in the dirt. Their sigil radiated out from the roots of the juniper tree, slowly spiraling outward, forming a path out to infinity.

Fucking fungus.

Alice stood towering and monstrous near the center of the spiral, her back to the bark of the tree. She refused to meet their gaze, staring with the same expression that had made me fall in love with her. She slowly moved her arms, oblivious to the madness around her, eyes looking straight up, gazing towards Heaven.

From the depths of my heart, passion surged. Call it love or lust or madness or whatever, but I was in another state of mind, lost in a dimension far beyond anything as false or misleading as names. I screamed as a hideous strength surged through my arms and legs. Muscles tightened. Bones creaked. Through sheer force of will, I pushed myself up from the poisonous soil, throwing the slavering freak off my back. The beast stumbled, completely surprised. I could hear a branch snap as she began to tumble down the hillside.

The kid in the longcoat, Mr. Freak Leader, turned and glared at me, his eyes burning like the fires of Hell. His chanting had solidified more of the glowing spiral. It no longer spread outward into the night; instead, it circled *downward*, forming a cone out of the once-sacred soil.

I thought more about those fungi. The skin of the earth's crust had rested in a thin layer over the downward spiral, but it had cracked and torn like gossamer, separating like spider webs. The wealthy and mystical citizens of Sedona had built a city in the center of these vortices, hiding the truth under layer after layer of civilization, but here on the hilltop, all lies had been cast aside.

The veil obscuring another world gave way. The scales had fallen from my eyes. For a few breaths, I saw the world as it truly was.

The kid in the longcoat stopped chanting, and the spiral stopped in its revolution. His attention was focused on me. Obviously, he wanted to take me out as fast as possible and go back to threatening Alice. She wasn't my girlfriend, but she was more than a sister to me, and I was more than a brother to her. I felt a sympathetic urge surging in my blood — like life, like anger, like destiny.

Freak Leader charged. The Fat Bastard howled. The Deranged Harlequin giggled maniacally, sharpening his claws. The Little Bitch Girl screamed with rage, like she had just fallen into a patch of cacti downhill.

And me? I laughed, but my voice was a few octaves deeper than I remembered it.

I stood up, nine feet fucking tall and ready to paint the soil with their blood. My fur was wet from the wound in my neck. The tips of my fingers itched, like they were sharp and ready to rend and tear. I wasn't my old self. I was my new self, my better self. My true self. This was long overdue.

As Freak Leader rushed towards me, I lunged at him fist-first, feeling my hand grow a little bigger with each inch it moved forward, surging as the muscles in my arm bulked up. The fucker ran right into my punch. I heard his skull crack as my fist, now the size of a bowling ball, caved in bone. He staggered, stumbling around as he tried to keep his feet in a place where they'd hold up his body.

I followed through by plunging my itchy, scratchy claws into his belly, feeling his warm fur give way as I tore through his skin like paper. Rending and tearing, I worked my way into his intestines. I closed my grasp, and as he shuffled backwards, I held on. My claws yanked an intestine out of the wound in his gut. He howled in agony, but I continued to pull, scattering his innards on the glowing path of the downward spiral. They fused with the pattern, feeding the soil with his warm blood.

Hey, I didn't play Black Dog Games all those years without learning how to fucking disembowel someone.

Alice and I danced in the moonlight, as the drifters circled around us again. The freaks were trying to connect with us, whether by gaze or fang or claw. Alice ripped out Fat Bastard's throat in one swipe, leaving him to sputter and choke like a cancer patient with a shitty tracheotomy. His cigarette tumbled from his lips. If Fat Bastard

really did have any cancerous tumors in his chest, she probably ripped them out of his lungs when she cracked open his ribcage. The swirling dusty vortex drifted into his lungs, drying them out as he rapidly asphyxiated.

Then things got kinda fucked up.

I screamed and screamed and didn't stop screaming. Alice let out a rousing "yawp!" in a voice I had never heard before, and the Earth shook. The spiral shifted again, and the ground opened up under the paws of the Deranged Harlequin. Laughing in terror, his monstrous form tumbled into the abyss.

Dark spirits swirled around him. Reality defenestrated him through an extradimensional window into the depths of some unknown Hell.

I felt alive. I gave way to limitless rage.

SIX SIX SIX

Honestly, I have no recollection of what happened after that. No conscious thoughts compelled me, only bestial instincts. Bones cracked into impossible angles. Blood sprayed on the soil. Meat and muscle spattered and splayed.

I screamed in terror and triumph. Malevolent spirits from the spiral labyrinth beneath my feet — sympathetic psychopomps of the underworld — rose from the shadows below. Swirling like clouds of smoke, they pulled down the souls of the desperate and the damned into limitless suffering and torment.

The Little Bitch from the Cactus Path was the last freak standing. When she saw us stained in the blood and ichor of our foes — not to mention the nice little spiral of intestines surrounding the edge of the abyss — she willingly dived into the downward spiral. She soared like a bat into Hell. Maybe she thought her chances in the infinite underworld were better than her odds of defeating us.

As the dust cleared, I stood before Alice in my new and terrifying body. Then her toothy snout distended into an expression I considered even more impossible.

I think she actually *smiled*.

I tried to speak, but the words that emerged were guttural, alien, obscene, bestial. I fought to convey meaning, until my body began to *shift* gradually back to my former human shape.

I stood beneath a limitless sky in another dimension, a realm parallel to ours, an approximation of the skeleton lying beneath what humans called *Sedona*. I witnessed fauxdobe structures composed of perfect geometric forms, their polygonal walls crafted from lattices of spiderwebs. Glowing spirits scuttled and crawled across a

grid of streets, circling the spirals of roundabouts. Despite their industry, surges of pure magical energy seeped through gaps in their pattern, flowing like the force of the wild unrestrained. And inches away from my now-human feet, a yawning chasm gaped, opened by a glowing spiral that descending into a deeper dimension. I stood on the periphery of the hellish labyrinth of the damned, a well of souls that had answered our monstrous cries for aid.

My mind reeled, but I still couldn't help but feel like this was somehow... well, familiar, like a bad dream after too much tainted hamburger and lukewarm soda after an all-nighter at O'Tolley's.

"The dog," I said, finding some comfort that my voice sounded human again. "What about the dog?"

I looked over at the tree.

Alice looked just like I remembered her in the club that first night, although she was stained with something I couldn't — and didn't — want to identify. She had a look of shock and awe on her face, and her clear eyes were wide.

She cautiously walked to the trunk of the still-standing juniper tree. The dog's body was curled up snugly, breathing rapidly as its heart hammered with fear under its patchwork fur.

"The dog?" she said. She picked up and cradled it again, holding it in her arms.

She looked down into its milky eyes. And then she snapped its neck.

The Earth beneath our feet trembled. The impossible spiral twisted deeper.

Birds didn't sing. Insects made no sound. Dead silence reigned on the hillside.

"The dog" she said, "was a sacrifice."

With that, she tossed its body into the abyss. Grateful spirits swarmed the body, consuming every quantum of its soul before it was lost to darkness.

My mouth was open again. No words came out.

"We came here for a reason," she said. "This was a place of healing. This was sacred ground. Now we have corrupted it with the blood of the damned, and one innocent soul has sealed the deal."

"This is... demonic? You're some kind of demon? Is that it?"

"This is lupine," she said. "I told you. My mother was a werewolf. I did something *wrong*, and I got kicked out of my family. Every pack I knew was howling for my blood."

For a moment, I thought about how much I had risked for a woman I had never seen naked.

“I couldn’t go back. Not without an act of atonement, at least. Not without an offering.”

I remembered that song in the goth club months ago.

You, the music said, are my kind.

“You’re going to meet them. We could use some fresh blood, and really, you’re like the brother I never had. At first, I thought you were kin to me, but you’re more than that. We came here for your initiation. The sweet soul of my pet was just the key that opened the gate. I doesn’t take much to open a gateway here.”

I felt something tighten in my throat, like a leash wrapped around my neck.

On some level, I had been right all long. That dog really wasn’t long for this world. Now that it was buried deep in the ground — deeper than I ever thought possible — I would either find some other reason to help her out... or walk away. I stood at the edge of the abyss, gazing down into infinity.

“Wonders await you below,” she intoned. “Limitless knowledge and the power of the abyss. It lurks below, waiting for you and me. Waiting for *our kind*.”

She reached out her hand. She looked at me with her cold blue eyes, and I looked deeply into the remnants of her soul.

“Walk with me along the corridors of the spiral labyrinth, my love. Dance with me through the circles of the underworld. Spirits below will gift us with blasphemous power. The Princes of Malfeas will revere our love. Breed with me, and we will revel in eternity.”

Right.

I laughed. I couldn’t stop laughing. I fell to my knees and laughed like an idiot, surrounded by carnage and slaughter.

From the depths of my heart, I knew I had been willing to do anything to protect her, but really, she had shepherded me. I would have gone to Hell and back for her, even if it cost me my soul.

For a moment, I began to stand up. I started to take a step back...

...but my hand unerringly went to hers. All jealousy and envy faded away, as the moonlight celebrated our unholy union. Shadows swirled in the depths of the malfean abyss. Together, we would be eternal.

I took one more look at the stars above as we descended into Hell, eyes cast towards Heaven.

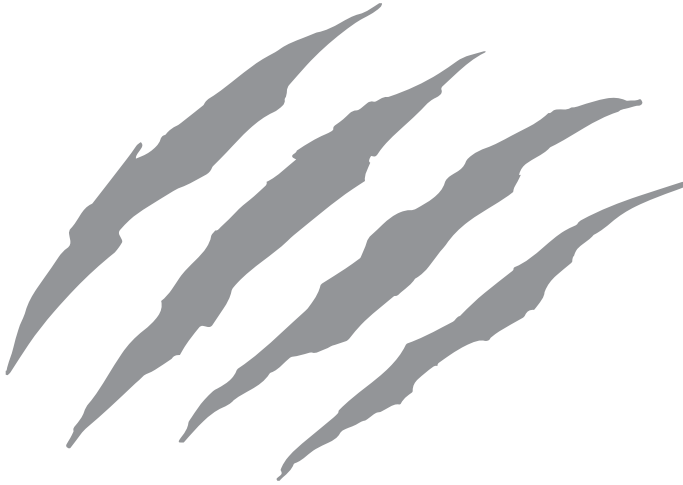
INFINITY

We are the beautiful and the damned. My love for her will endure almost anything, at least until it leads me to the brink of insanity.

My soul will be hers, as long as I have one.

And if it doesn't work out? Well, what the fuck. We had our moment holding hands in the moonlight.

What can I say? I've always been attracted to beautiful and crazy.





Vigrid

James A. Moore

There were days when it just didn't pay to wake up. Most days, really, as he got older. Karl rubbed the sleep from his eyes and rolled out of bed. It was a nice bed, and the girl he'd slept with the night before was a welcome sight. He'd have liked it better if he could remember her name, but maybe in a few minutes it would come back to him. The name "Marco" was tattooed on her left buttock. He had doubts that was her personal moniker.

The sun through the window should have been too bright, but a clear day was never a bad thing, not even when he had a hangover big enough to break his skull wide open. Hangover. That was a mistake. Still, it would likely be the last one.

He took the time to put on a pair of jeans before he left his room. The party had been a big one, and there were still people around. He wasn't exactly shy, but there might be a few people out there who didn't feel the need to see him in all his glory.

The air stank of beer, mead, ale and a few other spirits. There was also tobacco and pot taint to add to the mix, along with sweat from a dozen different people.

Sure enough, there were people all over the room and most of them were unconscious. The few who weren't looked like they were seriously considering the idea of heading back for that state as quickly as possible.

Karl walked slowly through the lodge's main room, looking at the folks around him. They were his people, of course. His family and his tribe. Several sported tattoos and others bore scars to show who they were and what they were. Not that most of the world would have had a clue about what the markings meant. Most of the world had no idea that werewolves existed.

Karl smiled through his headache and moved to the kitchen. What he needed most at the moment was water. Well, and to relieve his bladder, but one crisis at a time.

He drank deeply, until his stomach felt almost full, and then he hit the bathroom and took care of getting rid of the toxins he'd consumed the night before. He wasn't much of a drinker these days, but there were exceptions.

When he came back to the main room, Tori and Lisa were up and starting to clean around the unconscious celebrants. Both of them smiled weakly when they saw him. He doubted they could manage much by way of enthusiasm as they'd kept pace with him on the drinking and, much as he loved his daughters, there was no way they were big enough to match that sort of pace without feeling it the next day.

Their mother was dead. He missed her. He saw her in both of them for different reasons.

"Morning, Dad." Tori's voice was soft, not because she was shy, but because she was respectful of the other members of the pack still trying to sleep off the epic night of partying.

He nodded instead of speaking, and managed a smile of his own.

On the wall above the couch two axes were crossed over each other. They were not for display. He looked them over and considered them carefully before plucking the larger of them from the hooks that held it in place.

Lisa's smile faltered as she watched him. "I wish you wouldn't."

Karl looked at her for a long moment and blinked back the nostalgic twist that made him want to blubber like an old fool. "It's time." She opened her mouth and he knew she wanted to argue about it again, but she looked at the expression on his face and nodded instead.

He moved to her with a careful pace and put his free arm around her shoulders. She was all muscle and sinew, and her skin was hot. "I don't want you to go." Her eyes were dry, but her lower lip trembled.

"I know. But it's time. I'm not getting any stronger." And there it was, really. That summed it up in a way that couldn't be argued. Tori moved over to him and her sister and put a hand on her father's chest. He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Most men wouldn't have dared. She wasn't known for being the touchy-feely sort. "You. Both of you. You know this is for the best. You know I'd rather leave this way than face off against one of the pups thinking he could take me." He grinned as he said it and both of his girls smiled. They knew he was right. Most of the men in the pack were strong fighters, but despite his illness, Karl could likely take any of them in singular combat. Hand to hand or with weapons, it wouldn't matter and he wouldn't fight them with half his abilities. Anyone that wanted to challenge him would have to be ready to die if they failed. They were ready. He knew that. He also preferred they live to fight the enemy.

"Where are you going?" Lisa's voice was calmer. Her face like stone. He smiled. She was good at many things, but hiding her intentions wasn't one of them. She planned to follow him. He intended to let her, too, but she'd have to track him properly and earn the right to follow him this time.

“I have a target in mind.” He stepped back from his girls and moved for his room. The girl on the bed might sleep through it if he was quiet while he got properly dressed. If she didn’t that wasn’t much of a concern.

He pulled on boots and a thick shirt. A moment later there was a jacket to follow and a heavy leather belt. The belt was a necessary evil. He needed something to hold his small arsenal of weapons.

He did not waste time. Ten minutes after he’d finished dressing he was on his way out the door. There were places to go and things to kill and it was a glorious day for dying.

• • •

Of course she called her big brother. Karl sighed when he saw the blue lights coming up from behind him in the rearview mirror. He pulled the Harley over to the side of the road and crossed his arms, waiting patiently for Lars to approach him.

Lars did not disappoint. He watched his son heading his way in the clean, sharply pressed uniform of a California Highway Patrolman. He kept his face stern, but felt pride swell his chest just the same.

“Dad.” Lars nodded brusquely as he stood next to the bike.

“Lars. What can I do for you today, son?”

“Lisa called. She told me....” He had no idea how to finish the sentence.

“She wasn’t wrong. It’s time, Lars. You know how this goes.”

Lars looked away for a moment and blinked his blue eyes. The blond crew cut of his hair was almost translucent as the sun ran through it. He was as fair skinned as any kid ever had been, but his flesh was tanned to a bronze layer that made him look a lot like that old pulp hero Karl had always read about as a kid. Strong features. Just like his old man had back in the day, only he was clean cut and Karl had a beard. He liked his beard. It saved him a fortune in razor blades.

“Damn it, Dad.”

“It’s not up for negotiation. Listen, I love you and I love your brother and your sisters but you’ve known this day was coming your entire life and it’s here now and you have to deal with it.” And it was true. He had four amazing kids. He had watched all of them grow up and couldn’t have been more proud of how they’d turned out if each and every one of them had bred true. That wasn’t the case. They were Kinfolk. Part of him was glad of that. They would never have to face the things he’d seen in his life.

“They’re going to follow you, you know that, right?”

Karl laughed. “Of course they’re going to follow me. But they’ll do it from a distance, because that’s the way this is done, son. You don’t walk alone, even when you want to. Not when you’re a member of a pack.”

Lars lowered his head and his voice broke for a moment. "What am I supposed to do without you, Dad?"

"Be an example to the rest of them." Karl's voice was gruff. "You're the eldest of my children. Lead by example, and make sure they follow the rules. Same as I am." He climbed off the bike and stood facing his son. Lars stepped back a pace and looked him up and down. Lars was a big lad. His father was bigger. He stood almost a head above his son and that would not change. Lars wasn't a young buck anymore. He was closing in fast on thirty, with a wife, two kids and a third on the way.

"Are you sure, Dad? Are you absolutely sure?"

Karl shook his head and snorted. "Of course I'm sure. You think I didn't consult a few specialists before making my decision?" Specialists. That he had, indeed. The verdict was the same in every case. He was not long for the world.

So he took matters into his own hands. That was the way it was done.

Lars's big hands caught his shoulders and he looked at his father long and hard, not quite letting himself tear up, much as Karl could tell he wanted to.

Instead of answering with words, Karl hugged his son hard, his hand roughly slapping at his back for a moment. "Take care of them, Lars. Make me proud, like you always do."

Without another word he climbed back on the hog and looked toward the road. It was early in the day, but he had a few hours worth of driving time before he got where he needed to be. There were things to do. There were always things to do.

He rode south, away from the great redwoods and the places he'd loved most of his life.



The sun was ready to set by the time he stopped. Karl climbed from his bike and stretched, working the road out of his muscles and joints. The jacket, the helmet, the shirt, all got set on the seat of the bike.

They were no longer going to be necessary.

The wind came from the desert and blew hot and dry, like a good wind from Hell should.

One last look at the stars, and he considered Olga, his wife, long gone, taken by cancer. She'd been a beauty when they met. The death she suffered had been filled with medications and indignities, vain, desperate attempts to save the life of the woman foolish enough to accept his proposal of marriage and to bear him four fine, healthy children.

Fifteen years and he still missed her. Oh, there had been others, of course. He was hardly celibate. But none of them mattered, not really. They were just warm bodies to fight off cold nights.

“Miss you, honey.” He whispered the words. Best not to speak too loudly just yet. He had plans and those plans required a bit of stealth.

How long had he bartered with the spirit to learn his new trick? He couldn’t remember. It had been a while, to be sure. And he’d been told to handle issues that he would have been fine never dealing with in his lifetime. He’d done it gladly. It was worth it for this.

One last fight.

Somewhere out there, not far from this spot, was his enemy. The thing about enemies is sometimes they hide.

Karl grinned at the thought. Had any of his family seen that grin they’d have worried for his enemies. Had his enemies seen it, they’d have worried too. It was a wolf’s grin, to be sure, and it was a hungry, living thing.

“Great Fenris. Hear me one last time. Hear my pleas and help me find your enemies.”

The land beneath him was poisoned. It had been tainted long ago, before he was born, and though some life managed to fight on — Gaia was strong, despite the diseases the Wyrn used to strangle her — slow death crawled under the soil and worked itself deeper and deeper into the ground, worked toward the heart of the Mother.

It would take more than one of his kind to destroy the sickness out here, but he could be a starting point. Though they did not show themselves he knew his pack followed. They knew this was a personal thing, but that didn’t mean they weren’t going to witness what he did. They had to, didn’t they? You can’t sing songs about things you’ve never witnessed.

He settled on the sickly ground and ran his fingers through the soil.

The problem was not in fighting his enemies. It was in finding them. So he’d asked Great Fenris for help and had been granted the boon he requested.

He wrote in the sand with his fingers, and muttered the words needed to summon the enemy. Not a trick, really, more of an invitation they’d be hard pressed to resist.

The moon was rising in the east, lighting hints of the desert before him, teasing forth faint lines and images from the desolate surfaces he faced.

Karl stripped down from his human clothing. They’d only get torn asunder anyway.

The ground beneath his feet stirred ever so softly.

And Karl grinned again as Luna’s light touched his bare flesh.

The moon was full. That suited him all the better. He’d been born under a full moon, and he would fight his enemies under Luna’s gaze.

The axe and the hammer were his weapons of choice. He took them in his hands and willed the change into his flesh. Muscles burned as they began to shift and pull

and warp themselves to fit with bones that took on new shapes. His face ached where the planes of his skull took on different forms, just as familiar, but not as often seen.

His skin itched furiously as thick fur slipped from within him, covering his body in a fine red-gold pelt, marked and laced with iron gray.

His eyes saw so much more than they did when he was merely human. His ears heard symphonies denied him when he walked among men. His heart thundered with the flow of blood, and his lungs swelled with the deep breaths that made transformation more tolerable. Not that he ever minded the pain. The pain reminded him that every gift comes with a price and it was a cost he gladly paid.

The flesh of his bared feet thickened, grew coarse, as his bones lengthened and the thick nails — never pretty, to be fair — grew hard and sharp.

His senses opened up. His body grew, almost four feet taller than he was in human form, a veritable giant. His very soul wanted to roar as he saw the disease that hid beneath the desert. Truly, Fenris was kind. This, this would be a glorious battle.

“Oh, Great Fenris,” Karl’s voice was a guttural growl, but he knew Fenris would understand him just the same. “You are kind to me.”

The ground seethed ahead of him, the soil loosening, small pebbles dancing as the enemy came closer.

The servants of Jormangundr were endless. There were creatures great and small, spirits of every possible shape and potency that ran through the universe seeking to corrupt and kill all that was pure and good. In his time Karl had fought many of them, and his body had the scars to prove it. Still, there were creatures he’d heard of and never seen, beasts that he wanted to see, wanted to kill with his own claws and teeth.

And what better than the very image of Jormangundr that slithered beneath the surface of Gaia’s tortured flesh?

The ground danced and bulged not a hundred yards away.

Karl’s grin grew into a full snarl and he gripped his weapons all the harder, ready for combat, glorious, violent and decisive.

And the hill that rose from the earth exploded, vomited a geyser of nutrient-robbed soil into the air, a herald of the thing that followed afterward. Pale flesh thrust upward, a heaving, nearly gelatinous mass that shuddered as it rose well above the height of a man, taller even than Karl in his most dangerous form. Still it humped its way from the ground, fifteen, twenty, thirty feet into the air, a column of diseased, slick flesh that stank of sulfur and death.

The roar that came from somewhere within the thing was a physical assault; Karl felt it in his bones. There were many servants of the Wyrms, but few that came close to resembling the Great Destroyer. This then, was a thunderwyrms.

The massive thing fell forward and Karl leaped back to avoid being crushed. The ground shook with the impact of the vile body, and thick strings of mucus splattered the soil.

Karl's heart pounded in his chest, his eyes drank in the sight of his enemy and his rage sang within him. This was a worthy foe. This was an acceptable death.

Better this than the cancer eating away at his liver, his bones. Better by far to fight against Jormangundr than merely to surrender to the growths poisoning his body.

The axe and the hammer rose up together as he charged, answering the roar of his enemy with a roar of his own. One blow told him the hammer would not do the job. A wonderful weapon against creatures with bones, but the thing in front of him merely rippled at the contact. The axe, however, cut deep, slashing through layers of slime, skin and muscle with the first powerful slash.

The monster recoiled, endless muscles flexing in a sudden wave. Karl was thrown through the air by the shivering bulk. The thing was faster than he would have guessed. He rolled with the blow, sliding and scraping across the arid ground until he rose back to his feet.

Barely a start to the fight but he was already feeling the toll of the battle. He had, perhaps, waited too long for this moment.

No. That was a coward's excuse. He shook his head and roared a second time as the wyrmling turned its vestigial head in his direction. The great mouth of the thing opened wide revealing heavy blades of teeth capable of rending stone into pebbles, flesh into bloodied ribbons. The maw grew wider and the mass of muscles shuddered as it lunged for him.

Karl jumped, his talons spread to prepare for landing on the slicked flesh. His axe drove deep a second time, carving into the hide of the thing and ripping a gash large enough to swallow his Harley. On most creatures the wound would have been fatal. On the great dragon before him it was merely an inconvenience. The mouth roared and the entire body seized, slipped upward as it sought the source of the pain.

Karl's body landed on the heaving mass, his claws cutting trails into the flesh as he clung to it. The third try with the axe was a failure. The blubbery shape pulsed and slapped the weapon from his hand before he could strike.

Enough. He panted. He grinned. His blood sang and the thick claws on his hands took the place of his axe, cutting, hacking, ripping into the pallid, clammy flesh.

And the great wurm roared and rolled, trying to crush him into the ground. Karl held on as the thing bashed him into the ground, his muscles screamed and three of his ribs shattered, the pain a reminder that he was alive, that he was capable of feeling pain.

And capable of dealing it out as well.

Karl's claws sank deep, and even as he attacked his body mended itself. The Garou were the warriors of Gaia, and the Get of Fenris were the greatest of those warriors. Let the other tribes believe what they would, Karl knew the truth.

Great divots of flesh came free, pulled from the hide of the serpentine demon, and still it roiled, trying to crush him. He crawled across the beast as he cut into it, tearing away the hide of the serpent to find the soft internal organs.

The tail of the beast swept up its body and caught him, sent him rolling across the desert floor, bashed him against endless rocks and withered plants.

And Karl coughed blood and smiled past the crimson spittle.

He did not take the time to howl his joy, but oh, he was so very happy. This was a worthy death.

The child of Jormangundr reared up, and came down, the great mouth opening to consume him, and Karl took the invitation, leaping to meet that grisly wound. His body slipped past the teeth, his left leg was not as fortunate. The pain was immediate as the limb was pulped and torn apart.

Now Karl howled, not in victory, but in pain and rage.

He fell deeper into the beast, felt the steaming heat of its insides, and lashed out, clawing into the soft interior, tearing through the flesh. The great monster howled too, the sound blowing his eardrums, loud enough to make his eyes throb and his body shake. The fluids of the thing surrounded him and cooked him as he struggled. Hot, vile waters burned at his eyes, scalded his tongue and throat.

And still he cut, he tore, he ripped. Still he fought, because that is what Fenris taught his children. Life is a battle but it's one worth having. Best to make the most of it, then.

Karl's claws carved and pulled, gutting the creature from the inside, and it fought as best it could against the invader killing it, just as Karl had fought the best he could against the cancer doing the same to him. Ultimately the monster was less fortunate. Karl peeled one last layer of steaming flesh away and felt the surprisingly cool air of the desert night bathe his muzzle, just as he was sure he could hold his breath no longer.

The acids of the beast burned at his skin, but that was all right. He knew this was a one way ticket. Karl pulled himself from inside the heaving bulk of the dying beast and fell to the ground, shuddering, weak.

Damned if his skin didn't hurt. He could see, through eyes that weren't working as well as they had been before, the spots where the corrosive juices of the thing had eaten away flesh and fur and worked to destroy his muscles. The blood of his enemy continued to kill him, to blind him.

He dropped to his hands and knees, his ruined leg a screaming raw nerve that tore at his will to live. Enough then. Enough.

Karl took in as deep a breath as he could and coughed out the burning blood of his enemy, even as the thing shuddered one last time and died. Then he howled out a victory cry, a final note of defiance against everything that Jormangundr tried to take from his world.

And the ground around him heaved and broke, spilling more of the spawn of the Wyrms into the light of the moon.

More of them. He had killed one. But there were more. Three, four... more still.

Karl coughed again and reached for the closest of his enemies. As long as there was a breath within him, he would fight. It was his way.

His claws drew mirrored wounds down the hide of the thing, but they were thin. His claws were weakened, burned by the acids that cooked his flesh from his bones.

The thing hissed once and lurched for him, biting.

And Karl knew no more.

• • •

The wyrms crawled, worried themselves from the ground, uncertain as to why they felt compelled to wake and make themselves known, only knowing that it was imperative that they surface. One of their own was dead, but that hardly mattered. Ultimately the dead wyrm was another source of food and they consumed it, taking great steaming mouthfuls until there was little left to see, and occasionally fighting amongst themselves as they tried to take a bite from the wrong flesh.

They were not mindless. They merely seemed that way. They had an agenda of their own. Go forth and multiply. Feed and then sleep. They ate and when they decided they had not consumed enough, they started seeking other sources of nourishment.

That was their second mistake. The first was answering the summons they had no choice but to answer.

• • •

They watched Karl die. That was what he wanted. It was a better death than waiting for one of them to challenge him. A weak leader is not a leader for long, and though few doubted Karl's strength, they'd all smelled the sickness eating away at him and there had been discussions about what to do.

This was a better way.

The pack stared at the thunderwyrms for a moment, watched them as they sorted themselves out and began to consider where they would go after their feast. The smallest was merely fifteen feet in length. The largest was close to ten times that size.

Karl had given them a gift then. A battle in his honor. A chance to prove themselves worthy to Great Fenris. Jurgi-Wyrm-Reaper threw his head back and howled to the moon, calling for the others to celebrate Karl's last acts and to help him seek revenge against the enemies that had killed their leader.

One by one the rest of the pack joined in his howl and then they moved, preparing for the hunt, following Jurgi's silent commands. He had been Karl's second, had been ready to kill his mentor and friend if necessary. Instead, he would celebrate his pack mate's life when they were done with this hunt. When they were done hunting down and killing the children of Jormangundr.

There were five of the massive creatures.

Sometimes Fenris was generous.

About the Authors

Brian Campbell has worked in various incarnations of the game industry for over twenty years. After loyally serving as White Wolf Employee #19, he's contributed to over eighty books for roleplaying games like *Vampire*, *Werewolf*, *Mage*, and *Changeling*. For the last seven years, he's been working as a writer and editor for online roleplaying games, including *Guild Wars 2*, *Elder Scrolls Online*, and *WildStar*. On a good night, he lurks in the shadows of a goth club, reading from his Kindle. He likes beer.

Jackie Cassada has been a freelance author and developer since 1995 and has written for most of White Wolf's Storyteller System lines, including *Rage Across Appalachia* and *Rage Across the Heavens* for *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*. She is the author of the Immortal Eyes trilogy for *Changeling: the Dreaming* (*The Toybox*; *Shadows on the Hill*; *The Court of All Kings*) and several short stories for *Mage: the Ascension*, *Wraith: the Oblivion*, *Vampire: Dark Ages*, and *Changeling: the Dreaming*. Since 1984, she has written the sf/fantasy column for *Library Journal*. She lives with her partner and often co-author Nicky Rea in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina in a town whose original name was Lick Skillet, where she shares her life with a passel of cats, a Corgi mix and a Plott Hound, all rescues. She volunteers for the Asheville Humane Society and is an advocate for pit bulls and other "bully" breeds against Breed Specific Legislation (BSL).

Rick Chillot is a writer of fiction and nonfiction who's created many stories set in the World of Darkness, both classic and current. In the daylight he's an editor and writer at Quirk Books in Philadelphia, Pa.

Writer, game designer, roleplayer, podcaster, and father, **Sam Chupp** is an Origins Award winner. Sam got his start designing games with White Wolf Game Studio and was a principal designer on *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*, *Changeling: The Dreaming* and *Wraith: The Oblivion*. His novel, *Sins of the Fathers*, was published by Harper-Prism in September of 1995. He wrote *Tribebook: Bone Gnawers* and *The Book of Nod* (with Andrew Greenberg). His writing has been included in over 40 role-playing game books published by White Wolf, Holistic Design, and Steve Jackson Games.

The former developer for *Wraith: The Oblivion*, **Richard Dansky** was named one of the Top 20 Videogame Writers by Gamasutra in 2009. The Central Clancy Writer for Red Storm/Ubisoft, Richard has written for numerous games, including the upcoming *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*. His most recent novel, *VAPORWARE*, is now available from JournalStone. He lives in North Carolina with his wife and his collections of books and single malt scotches.

Devin Grayson is an avid gamer, former acting student and voracious reader fortunate enough to have turned a lifelong obsession with fictional characters into a dynamic writing career. Best known for her work on the Batman titles for DC Comics, Devin has written in a number of different media and genres, from comic books and novels to video game scripts and essays. She currently lives in Northern California and devotes every Saturday night to a gaming group now in its sixteenth year. *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* was the first game she ever ran.

For more than a decade, **Jess Hartley** has worked as a novelist, short-story author, freelance writer, editor, and game developer. She has written extensively for White Wolf Publishing (and now Onyx Path), working on both the Classic and New World of Darkness lines, along with *Scion* and *Exalted* products. In her copious (HAH!) spare time, Jess LARPs, plays SCA, and spends time in the wilds of the Pacific Northwest with her family and a menagerie of other interesting creatures. More information about Jess can be found through her website at www.jesshartley.com, and questions or inquiries can be addressed to "jess@jesshartley.com".

Sam Inabinet was born, and has lived most of his life, in the Tidewater region of Virginia, as well as Richmond and the Philippine Islands. He has written and drawn for comics and roleplaying games for over a quarter of a century, and sometimes attempts filmmaking. He currently resides in Virginia Beach with his family, which includes two cats.

John D. Kennedy, a writer from Indianapolis, Indiana, graduated from Purdue University in 2007 with degrees in English and History. He spends his time writing and rescuing canines on the Eastside of Indy. His writings include work in the RPG industry as well as comics.

Mike Lee is a novelist, scriptwriter and game designer who developed *Demon: The Fallen* for White Wolf Games Studio, and contributed to award-winning games such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Adventure!*, and the *World of Darkness* core rulebook. In addition to his game-writing credits, Mike has written nine novels for Black Library Publishing's Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer Fantasy fiction lines, including the dark fantasy epics *Rise of Nagash* and *The Chronicles of Malus Darkblade*.

Matthew McFarland, also known as BlackHat Matt, has been writing and developing roleplaying games professionally since 1998. He has contributed to almost all of White Wolf's game lines (including both incarnations of the World of Darkness), and spent three years as lead developer for the Dark Ages game line. Matt wrote the Ennie-winning demo chronicles for *Vampire: The Requiem* and *Mage: The*

Awakening. In 2012, he and his wife, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, formed Growling Door Games and released an original roleplaying game called *curse the darkness*. This was followed in 2013 by *A Tragedy in Five Acts*. In Matt's day job, he's a speech-language pathologist for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

James A. Moore is the award winning author of over twenty novels, thrillers, dark fantasy and horror alike, including the critically acclaimed *Fireworks*, *Under The Overtree*, *Blood Red*, the *Serenity Falls* trilogy (featuring his recurring anti-hero, Jonathan Crowley) and his most recent novels, *Smile No More* and *Blind Shadows* (with co-author Charles R. Rutledge). He has also recently ventured into the realm of Young Adult novels, with his new series *Subject Seven*. In addition to writing multiple short stories, he has also edited, with Christopher Golden and Tim Lebbon, *The British Invasion* anthology for Cemetery Dance Publications.

Moore cut his teeth in the industry writing for Marvel Comics and authoring over twenty roleplaying supplements for White Wolf Games, including *Berlin by Night*, *Land of 1,000,000 Dreams* and *Tribebook: Get of Fenris for Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, among others. He also penned the White Wolf novels *Vampire: House of Secrets* and *Werewolf: Hellstorm*.

Moore's first short story collection, *Slices*, sold out before ever seeing print. He recently finished his latest novels, *Seven Forges* and *Congregations of the Dead* (with co-author Charles R. Rutledge). He is currently at work on several additional projects, including the forthcoming *Alien: Sea of Sorrows*.

Conceived during the dying days of the Eisenhower Administration and born during the "New Frontier" in Southern California, young **Rustin Quaide** swiftly moved to the Bay Area when his father became a Geologist for NASA. Eventually he ended up on the East Coast and pursued a Bachelors degree in History at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, and a Masters in English at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, where he studied under Russian author Vassily Aksyonov. Having written for White Wolf and Holistic Design's *Fading Suns*, and with no new summits to conquer, he found himself working at the National Register of Historic Places.

Aaron Rosenberg is an award-winning, #1 bestselling novelist, children's book author, and game designer. His novels include the DuckBob series (*No Small Bills*, *Too Small for Tall*, and the upcoming *Three Small Coinkydinks*), the Dread Remora space-opera series, and the O.C.L.T. supernatural thriller series, plus novels for *Star Trek*, *Warhammer*, *WarCraft*, and *Eureka*. His children's books include *42: The Jackie Robinson Story*, *Bandslam: The Novel*, books for iCarly, PowerPuff Girls, and Transformers Animated, and the original series *Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles*. His RPG work includes *Asylum*, *Spookshow*, the Origins Award-winning *Gamemastering Secrets*, *The Supernatural Roleplaying Game*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, and *The Deryni Roleplaying Game*, plus work for Wizards of the Coast, White Wolf, Pinnacle, Decipher, West End Games, and many others. Aaron lives in New York with his family. You can visit him online at gryphonrose.com and follow him on Twitter @gryphonrose.

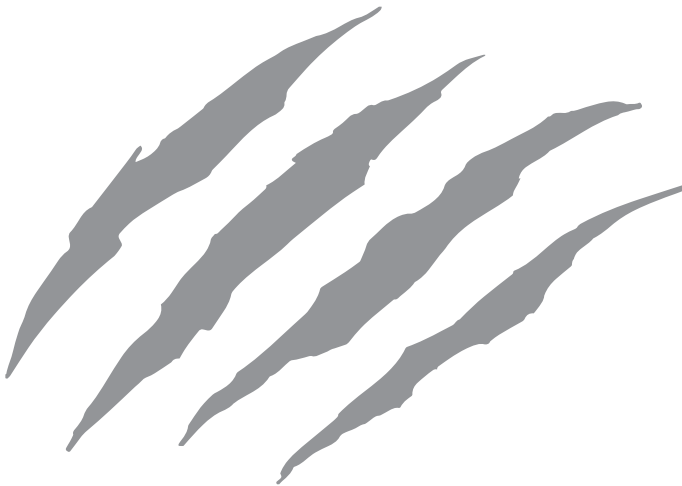
Ethan Skemp first got involved with *Werewolf: the Apocalypse* in a professional capacity as editor of *Freak Legion: The Players' Guide to Fomori*. He wound up working as a developer and writer for the line from partway through the days of 2nd edition to the Time of Judgment. He's pretty proud of that.

Eddy Webb (with a "y," thank you) is an award-winning writer and game designer. He has worked on over 100 products, including acting as Lead Developer for *Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition*. Today he designs content for the upcoming World of Darkness MMO, as well as continuing to crank out freelance words as long as people keep paying him. He lives a sitcom life with his wife, his roommate, a supervillain cat, and two affably stupid pugs.

Stew Wilson is a writer, game designer, system administrator and computational demonologist. His work has appeared in a range of World of Darkness games (including *Werewolf: The Forsaken* and *Hunter: The Vigil*), and he's the current line developer for *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. He lives in Edinburgh with his wife, their cat, and almost enough whisky. For more information on his games, check out <http://www.zeropointinformation.com>

Teeuwynn Woodruff lives in Sammamish, Washington, with an assortment of animals, kids, and a husband. She has written fiction, created games, and puzzles for companies including Microsoft, Wizards of the Coast, Wired Magazine, and Marvel.

Bill Bridges is a Senior Content Designer at CCP Games. He was the original developer of White Wolf's *Werewolf: the Apocalypse* game line and the co-creator of Holistic Design's *Fading Suns* science fiction universe, as well the lead designer of the Storytelling system rules for White Wolf's World of Darkness games. He is a Fellow at the Mythic Imagination Institute. More information can be found at his website, bill-bridges.com.



Kickstarter Backers

Character Appearance

Ian “Talks Past” Densford (*Cleanup*)

Character Mentions

Amanda-Laugh-Menacingly (*Hairshirt*)

Lady Morgaine Lascelles “Burns-through-the-rain” (*Things Seen*)

Kamaria Thimba, “Laughter-Curses-the-Darkness” -- “Kammy” (*Scar Tissue*)

Killian Deathfollows (*A Gryphon, in Glass and Steel*)

Rowan Mcgregor (*That Kind of Kin*)

Tom Matzke (*Things Seen*)

Travels-with-the-Wind (*Straw Death*)

Uriah “Walks Softly” Izeksen (*Tears on a Tainted Blade*)

Vykos Kincaid (*Tatters of Honors*)

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- Rick Chillot
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