

THE IDIOT AM CHRONICLE ANTHOLOGY



curated by
EDDY WEBB

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LEGACY

BY CHRIS SHAFFER

Bernard Kroner leaned against the club's rear door, his posture and sense of authority seemingly adding to his 5'9" frame. The well-worn leather jacket, plain shirt, jeans, and boots framed a picture of Someone You Don't Mess With. His packmate Mike, wearing street clothes and an eternal slouch, stood next to him as they assessed the crime scene behind the Wrong Alley, the club their pack owned and ran. Their employer and leader, a redhead in a sharp suit named Jenna, talked to the police.

The music was off at the police's request, and the fact that the building wasn't shuddering for once made Bernard feel like a sailor freshly stepped onto land. A crowd of rubberneckers and looky-loos stood at the police tape, watching cops pick apart what was left of a shredded car and its equally shredded occupant. It looked like somebody had been torn apart by wild animals. And then for some inexplicable reason, someone stuffed the pieces into the car before smashing the windows, slashing the tires, and scraping massive gouges into the sides and hood.

It wasn't the scent of blood that had caught Bernard's attention when he first got outside, but the aromas of oil and gas and shit from the ruined metal and flesh. He'd had a moment at most to look over the scene before the police arrived, but it was enough. Now the boss had the best viewpoint as the police asked her questions about the victim. He didn't like that, but couldn't help himself.

"What's the next move?" his Cahalith packmate asked quietly.

Bernard glanced over at Mike's tawny expression and clever eyes. Despite the Rahu's best efforts to teach him how to cope with danger, worry lingered in every feature of Mike's demeanor. Even if Bernard thought it'd be appropriate to reflexively reassure him, he couldn't think of anything that'd do the trick.

"Why are you asking me?" Bernard looked back at the car, the police officers surrounding it, and the young woman in the tasteful suit absolutely radiating

emotional detachment from the violence. “Jenna’s the boss, she’s in charge, so she makes the rules.”

Jenna shot him a glance between questions. The Elodoth’s expression confirmed Bernard’s guess about who’d killed this man in the private parking lot behind the club. A Pure pack had been testing their boundaries for the past month with a campaign of harassment. As far as they knew, they had yet to meet these people face to face, but Bernard’s training had helped them piece enough together. The effort of smashing up each chunk of the car, part of a larger tableau of seemingly-random violence, spoke novels to the Blood Talon.

Ninna Farakh, growled the little voice in his head that sounded like his grandfather.

Predator Kings.

“She leads the hunt, Mike. I’m just the attack dog tugging the leash.” He looked back at his packmate. “Have you had any visions that suddenly seem relevant?”

“Nothing too clear.” Mike closed his eyes, focused, and recalled his most recent blessing from Luna. “A pack of huge, monstrous wolves harrying a cow, grabbing at its legs and yanking like they’re going to pull it apart.”

“So in other words, a pack of Pure picking at their prey and weakening it for the kill.”

Mike offered an apologetic shrug. Bernard sighed.

“If any new details come to you, grab me ASAP, okay? And I mean *anything*. Doesn’t matter what I’m doing or what it is.”

“Absolutely.”

Bernard’s calloused fingers fidgeted with the dog tags he kept in his pocket, feeling the familiar metal clink together. He wanted to come up with an excuse to go bother Jenna and get a closer look at the scene. He knew it wouldn’t do much good unless the police were willing to let him actually dig through the car and risk getting the crime scene all over himself and vice-versa. Mike opened up the door and peeked inside the club.

“Looks like the cops are about done asking questions, and they don’t look satisfied,” he said. “Do you think the Pure picked him for something specific, or is it random?”

Bernard pondered for a moment. He thought back to everything he’d learned about the Pure growing up, even before his First Change. He heard that little voice in his head again.

“This is a terror tactic,” he thought aloud. “The *Ninna Farakh* are usually more direct, but it has to be them. The Fire-Touched and the Ivory Claws would have properly announced themselves by now, in their own ways. This particular pack might think this is some weird form of running us to ground. Maybe they’re trying to draw us out of the city so they don’t need to spend more time here than they absolutely have to. Maybe they just want us in a trap.”

“So what do we do next?”

Bernard rubbed his face.

“They’ve been a problem too damn long,” he muttered to himself. He turned to Mike. “Ask Jenna when she’s done. I’m going inside.”

Bernard pulled the door open and went back in to the Wrong Alley. He grabbed the nearest bouncer, and steered him towards the door to keep an eye on things. He skirted the edge of the room and noted the police slowly filing out. He ducked through an Employees Only door and climbed the stairs to the office overlooking the dance floor. The door was unlocked so he barged in.

“Anybody in —” he started before catching Jenna’s sister, the pack’s Ithaeur, making out with a customer on the couch. “Gah! For p... a moment, please?”

He turned away and put up a hand to block his view.

“Sorry, dear,” she said, though Bernard wasn’t sure to whom in that fake British accent of hers. “Head downstairs, I’ll catch up in a mo.”

Heels and a jacket were retrieved from the floor, and after some awkward shuffling and the door opening and closing, Bernard was left alone with his packmate. He turned to face her and tried to tune out the lingering odors of cheap perfume and sweat.

“Seriously, Liz?” he immediately asked.

“Something else is bugging you.” She straightened her dress and moved to Jenna’s desk to adjust a little miniature sand garden on the corner. Then something clicked and she stopped and looked at him. “What happened?”

“Dead guy out back. It’s that Pure pack that’s been sniffing around. They completely ruined a car in the process, like they made an altar of wreckage to present the body. I’m certain now. It’s the Predator Kings.”

“So what do we do next?” she asked.

“Why does everyone keep asking *me* that?” He looked for something to throw and pulled himself into a chair.

“Bernie, dear, most of us are Iron Masters. Trying to fix what’s wrong in this town, dealing with the crooked human machine? That’s our deal. Mike’s a Bone Shadow; we turn to him for spirits. But these are the Pure, and you’re a Blood Talon.”

“Doesn’t mean Jenna’s not in charge any more. I don’t feel comfortable being the lead dog on this.” The tags in his pocket felt especially heavy all of a sudden. “My family doesn’t do well in leadership positions.”

She gave him a skeptical look but kept her thoughts to herself. Somewhere down below, the music started again.

“Fucking Predator Kings,” Jenna snarled as she burst into the room. Mike, her Wolf-Blooded fiancé Luke Henderson, and their Irraka packmate Dan followed close behind.

Dan, whip-thin with a shaved head and a complexion like midnight's shadow, wore a rumpled suit and was followed by a cloud of body spray so thick it was almost visible. He carefully cultivated an appearance of having just gotten lucky, but Bernard knew he hadn't had any action since before the ongoing crisis. Luke, one of the day managers, pulled off the lightly tinted glasses that downplayed his unnatural golden eyes. He helped run the club, his sister Isabel tended bar, and the Wrong Alley pack kept an eye on the rest of their family on the outskirts of town.

Jenna moved behind her desk, produced a bottle of whiskey, and started pouring shots.

"Liz, after our meeting's done, could you get in touch with the Monitor? Ask if it can help keep things from getting out of hand?" she asked, referring to the spirit of restraint that served as the pack's totem. "The crowd might need calmed down."

"So what's our next move?" Dan asked, directing his question to Bernard. "Do we have enough to go after them?"

Bernard scowled at him and looked to Jenna as he approached the desk and picked up an amber-filled shot glass. "Is there anything to work with?"

"Not much," she said as she grabbed one of the whiskey shots and downed it. "The car belongs to one of our neighbors, so no luck there. The guy's from out of town but he's got a key card for a hotel near the national park."

"Where they've been finding the random bits of deer carcass scattered around." Bernard downed his shot and distributed the rest to the pack.

"Right."

"Think it's too much to hope they're actually camped out there and not just leaving that as a red herring?"

"It would be a good spot for a fight," Jenna said. "And not to accuse them of being simple, but it makes a lot of sense that's where they'd be hiding out."

"It could also be a trap, even if they are out there." Bernard stared thoughtfully at the blinds on the window between the office and the rest of the club. "I don't feel comfortable making a move until we know what it is that they want."

"And how long until we have that?"

"I'm working on it." Bernard felt the expectant looks the rest of the pack gave him.

"Get on it, Bernard," Jenna said. "We're letting them set the terms." Her feelings on the matter were clear.

• • •

"Ugh, how much farther do we have to go?" Liz whined in the passenger seat the next day.

"Maybe another ten minutes?" Bernard said as he glanced at the phone in the cup holder. "I've only been out here once since I left home. But our best chance to figure out these Predator Kings is to go through my old notebooks and the family journals."

He hung a left onto a country road. A collection of storage units came into view.

“That’s not our *best* chance,” she said, giving him a pointed look.

“If my family gets wind of what’s going on, my grandfather will take it on himself to send someone out to ‘help.’ Even aside from the obvious insult, everyone would hate it and it’d be my fault.” His grip on the steering wheel tightened. “I earned my space from my family and they know it. That’s why, after I told them all to go to hell and moved out, they put my stuff in the storage unit instead of burning it.”

Bernard quietly suspected his relatives were watching, in any case.

“Thanks for coming along, though,” he added with a sigh. “An extra pair of eyes would be good as we dig through this crap.”

“Don’t thank me too hard,” Liz chuckled. “Jenna didn’t like that I was making out with a customer in her office.”

“First, it wasn’t just ‘making out.’ Second, I didn’t tell her.”

She shook her head. “Dan told her. You know how he gets about security.”

Bernard pulled into a parking space in front of his storage unit. He retrieved the key from the glove box and got out. “I appreciate it anyways, though.”

He unlocked the storage unit, opened it, and stuffed the key and the lock into his pocket with the dog tags. Liz caught up with him, grumbling about her cell reception, as they looked at the collection of cardboard boxes surrounding a wooden desk adorned by a dusty photo album. Behind it all stood a chest of drawers and some chairs. Bernard muttered something unpleasant in the First Tongue when he saw none of the boxes were labeled.

“Start checking until you find one full of notebooks. The rest is junk I don’t need.”

The unmistakable sound of cardboard boxes being yanked and half-torn open punctuated the near-silence of the storage unit, echoing off of cinder block walls. Cardboard sliding against cardboard quickly became frustrated slams when the boxes were discarded onto the floor or the desk. The tension only broke when Liz let out an excited squeal and began stacking notebooks onto the desk.

“Oh thank fuck,” Bernard said as he began flipping through the books. The notebooks were full of things he’d learned about being Uratha, about his family history, about the Pure. His grandfather insisted he copy it all down by hand to make sure he remembered it. Bernard was too pleased to ponder the irony. Underneath the notebooks, the box held decades-old journals written by long-dead Blood Talon family members.

“Anything I can help you look for?” Liz asked.

“If you can read my handwriting, look for any mention of the Predator Kings.” She began digging through books as he continued. “Although I probably always wrote it as *Ninna Farakh*. Grandfather insisted I learn the First Tongue names for these things.”

“It was worth it,” a gruff voice came from the entryway. The dog tags in Bernard’s pocket suddenly felt very warm, possibly because his blood turned to ice in his veins.

The man in the doorway was Bernard’s height, maybe thirty pounds heavier, and looked to be in his mid-50s. His hair was gray, as was his uneven beard. A scar tracing his jawline broke up the gray hair. To Liz’s eyes, the man could have been a Future Time Traveler version of Bernard, come back to save them from some horrible fate.

“Archibald,” Bernard said as he slowly straightened up, his body tense with forced civility. “You’re looking well.”

“I preferred it when you called me ‘Grandfather.’ Sounded respectful. You say ‘Archibald’ like it’s a curse.” He stepped into the storage unit, body language carefully concealing a slight limp. “In any case, I’m looking better than you if this is what your pack is like.”

“It isn’t the whole pack.”

“If you ran it properly, the way I raised you, your whole pack would be here helping you go through this.” The older man reached out, casually plucked a notebook from the boxes, and turned it over with his fingers. “But if you could properly run a pack, you wouldn’t need these. I spent so much time teaching you about loyalty, this is how it came out.”

“My bo... my alpha runs the pack properly without me having to be a domineering shit. This is the first time we’ve actually had any problems with the Pure in our area, believe it or not.”

“I should have burned them,” Archibald said as if Bernard hadn’t even spoken, tossing the notebook onto the desk. He then turned to Liz. “Apologies for my rudeness. Archibald Kroner. Blood Talon Rahu, Alpha of the Mountain’s Teeth.”

“Elizab-beth Collins. Iron M-master Ithaeur,” she stammered. “Bernard has spoken highly of you.”

“I’m sure he has.” Archibald turned to his grandson, still speaking to Liz. “He wouldn’t dare carry my dog tags unless he sincerely valued his training. I’m sure that even when he complains about me — and that’s when, not if — it’s with a certain amount of respect.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, worried about the simmering glare in Bernard’s gaze.

“Not all of us can be the war hero you are,” Bernard said to the old man. “So I sometimes need to research things, like unusual Predator King behavior.”

Archibald snorted. “So you *do* have a problem with Predator Kings. I heard through the grapevine there was a large pack possibly headed in your direction. I thought that things would be well in hand, given that the grandson I personally trained was there.”

“And they are well in hand. But this is the first time my pack’s been properly tested by the Pure, and there are things I need to know.”

“Like what?” The old man stood at attention, like a teacher watching for a student’s mistake.

“Why they wouldn’t simply call us out or attack us. They’ve been poking at our defenses and trying to provoke us. At first, it was ‘animal sightings’ and ‘wild dog attacks.’ A couple of people killed. Last night they drastically escalated. They tore up a car and left a freshly-killed corpse in it.”

Archibald raised a scar-notched eyebrow. “A true predator runs the prey to ground first. Mangles a limb.”

“This is different.” Now that he was working the problem, the tension between Bernard and Archibald softened. “It’s almost like....”

Bernard trailed off and blinked. Liz was certain she heard a gear click into place in his head.

“Holy shit.” Bernard grabbed his phone and tried to push past Archibald to go outside. The old man grabbed his shoulder and stopped him. “What?” Bernard snarled.

“Tell me.” The old man affixed him with a stare that could peel paint. “What is it ‘almost like?’”

“We’re not the target.” Bernard shoved Archibald back before storming outside where he could get a signal.

Archibald’s body rippled, threatened to take the Dalu shape, to push back at Bernard. Then he looked at Liz and he settled back into the human skin. His eyes said it all: only Liz’s presence restrained the old man from a sudden burst of violence.

“Oh, thank the Father and Mother,” Bernard breathed into the phone just outside. “I’ve got a question. Yes, this is important. In the vision you described, I need to know two things. So focus.”

Liz and Archibald moved in closer to hear the conversation. Despite the old man’s attempts to appear stern, the corner of his mouth quirked in a proud not-quite-smile.

“First, are the wolves tearing apart the cow? Or just grabbing it?” Bernard asked. “Just dragging it off. Thought so. Now this is important. What color are the cow’s eyes?” He paused. “I don’t care if you never noticed. Notice *now*. I know you can.”

He closed his eyes and groaned in frustration at Mike’s answer. Archibald ducked back into the storage unit.

“Is Jenna there? Okay, look. I don’t have time to have this conversation again with her, too. I have to get on the road. Just tell her to warn Luke and Isabel that the Predator Kings are after the Hendersons. They’ve been distracting us and competing among themselves to see who gets first dibs at the ‘breeding stock.’ And I’ve got a hunch they’re about to make their move. Just watch their house. We’ll be back ASAP.”

Bernard hung up as his grandfather came out of the unit with three packed boxes. Without hesitation he opened the trunk and the older man loaded it up.

“Take the books with you this time,” he simply said.

“That’s more than just the books,” Bernard replied.

“This one,” he said as he tapped a box, “has what you need to call the *Sis-kur-Dah*. I raised you for this. The time has come.” His voice lowered to something between a growl and a sigh. “For once in your life, embrace your family’s duty.”

“Liz, get in the car.” Bernard handed Archibald the lock for the storage unit. “Close up for us.”

Bernard and Liz got in the car as the old man casually closed and locked the storage unit. Gravel skittered along the ground and bounced off the bay doors as the car peeled out in a rush, determined to make a land speed record on the way back to protect the pack’s allies.



As he finished the ritual, Bernard pulled off the bone mask he wore as the ‘prey’ of a mock-hunt. He dug something out of his pocket and held it in a closed fist. He hadn’t addressed his pack like this before, and despite himself called upon his grandfather’s strength.

“This is different from an Iron Master’s Sacred Hunt,” he said to the assembled Uratha. “We’re not hunting human predators or cutting the head off of a gang. Tonight, we face the *Anshega*. The *Ninna Farakh*. They can and will do what we can, but we will triumph and protect our kin.”

“And why is that?” Mike’s Cahalith instincts nudged him to keep the speech going.

“Because you have me. Because the blessings of *Fenris-Ur* will allow for nothing less. But most importantly... because we are fighting for family. Distant or otherwise, family gives us power.” He shot Liz a meaningful look when he said that.

The pack nodded slowly. Bernard felt a warmth in his chest as they mentally girded themselves for the battle to come. Liz moved to the side to meditate, whispering to herself with her eyes closed. Dan checked the myriad blades, mostly small ones, he had strapped to his arms and legs. Mike and Jenna both watched him for further orders. He realized the warmth was a rush of pride that he was leading the Hunt for once, a brief swelling of ego from knowing they looked to him to lead.

A part of him hated that, because he knew where it came from.

“How are the Hendersons set up?” he asked Jenna.

“They’re pretty well armed. Luke and Isabel have the ones that are too young and too old in the basement, and Luke cracked open that ‘emergency kit’ he thinks we don’t know about.”

Bernard knew that meant a handful of shotgun shells filled with silver shot.

“Is the Monitor ready?” he asked Liz.

“Most of the spirits have cleared out for the moment, but our totem’s ready to move and keep theirs out of the way.”

“I hope so. A Pure totem is, at best, fucking terrifying to behold. Good thing we’ve got a totem that’s all about restraining chaos and violence. Might make things even. Mike, anything new?”

“Nothing clear. The future is blurry.”

“Just the way I like it. Nothing set in stone.” Bernard opened his fist and looped his grandfather’s dog tags around his neck. “One last thing: if any of you spot their alpha, point him out to me. Dropping him quick just might save our lives.” He looked around at the pack. “Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines.”

Joints popped and clothing vanished as five bodies stretched and shifted as one, leaving five wolves where five people had once stood. Bernard, with his steel-gray fur, took off running first as they darted through the woods, passing through the light from the full moon overhead. In the calm before the storm, he took a moment to enjoy the earth and grass against his paw pads, wind running through his fur and carrying all manner of scents past his muzzle.

The Wrong Alley pack crashed like a wave into the skulking wolves outside the Henderson home. The Predator Kings were marked by the scents of earth and old bloodstains, like a decommissioned slaughterhouse reclaimed by nature. The Wrong Alley were outnumbered and needed to make every strike count, but their sudden entrance helped.

Jenna and her sister, clothed in dark brown fur, grew into the monstrous Urshul form and lunged teeth-first at the intruders. Jenna’s maw clamped down onto the throat of one and wrestled him to the ground. When another came to assist, Liz harried her with bites and swipes at her legs. Mike announced the Wrong Alley’s arrival with a howl that reverberated with the power of his Auspice, both energizing his pack and giving the Pure their one warning to flee. His call to battle was punctuated by snarls and the impacts of furred bodies against each other.

The Predator Kings shifted from the wolf-form to the dire wolf shape. Their cover was blown and a kidnapping had become a battle. In the moonlight, the werewolves’ fur was a motley mix of colors, dirty and streaked with scars. With the blessings of the Sacred Hunt, the Wrong Alley could see the angry red brands and ritual scars that marked the Predator Kings’ accomplishments and deeds. The Wrong Alley could see which were brash, which would be wary, and which ones thought themselves too good for sneak attacks.

Liz’s opponent grew in size to match her and fend off her strikes, so focused on her she missed Dan in Dalu form diving out of the shadows with a pair of blades aimed at her shifting spine. Jenna, a stone’s throw away, pinned down her target and with an unpleasant tearing noise sent an arterial spray glistening through beams of moonlight. Dan left his blades in the back of the wounded werewolf, producing another pair from under his jacket and diving back into the fray.

Mike ducked under a claw swipe, driving his shoulder against his attacker's leg and knocking him off-balance long enough for Bernard, back in Dalu form, to get him in a headlock and break the neck. He knew the werewolf would recover, but "kill them all" was not a viable plan. He just needed to stop them.

He needed the alpha.

A shifting, translucent mass of teeth and claws approached the ongoing battle, flashing in and out of visibility. It came into view as Bernard slammed another Pure up against the outer wall of the house and dug his claws into her gut. Warm, wet, soft meat spilled out over and between his fingers as he instinctively recognized the Predator Kings' totem. Just as he turned to face it, dropping its werewolf servant, a shape that from a distance looked like a police car made of shadowstuff slammed into it to drive it back into the darkness.

"Good to know that's in hand," he gasped, forcing essence through his form to repair his flesh.

Bernard felt a presence just behind him moments before he heard the shotgun blast. He instinctively knew Luke was shooting out the window, as he could smell the silver burning through the werewolf that almost got the drop on him. Everyone outside paused for a moment as they registered the existence of the silver shot. A black-furred shape, road mapped with red-hot renown scars befitting a pack alpha, immediately dove through the window in response.

The shotgun went off again as the Blood Talon followed. He shifted to Dalu to grab the Predator King alpha and pull him off Luke, aware of a chunk of Luke's shoulder ripped loose. He flung the Urshul-form werewolf half-way across the room, warning back Luke's sister and father with a wave.

The monstrous black wolf, the size of a horse and his jaws dripping with gore, watched Bernard closely. His forelegs were wrapped with thin scraps of leather, the source of which Bernard refused to speculate.

They shared a single silent moment, eyes locked, before Bernard swelled into the Gauru form and lunged. The two bodies hit like cars, the Blood Talon's claws digging between the Predator King's ribs. He twisted his head and face away from the snapping, bloody jaws, and what felt like twin chainsaws tore through his shoulder instead. The alpha released him with a roar as Dan seemingly appeared from thin air, slicing through his back with his knives.

How dare he! his grandfather's voice raged. *He's mine!*

Bernard pushed past it as the *Anshega* shifted into the Gauru form, throwing Dan off and already healing his wounds. Bernard locked eyes with Dan and glanced at the shotgun on the floor. Dan nodded as the Blood Talon sprung up and tackled the Predator King. His own shoulder healed up as he drove the claws of his other arm into the Pure wolf's chest, tearing at him and feeling the alpha's jaws clamp down on his forearm.

Dan appeared with the Hendersons' shotgun and unloaded the chambered shot into the Predator King. A spark like static jumped from the alpha to Bernard as

the sacred metal tore through him. He snarled outrage and tried to lunge at Dan, but Bernard kept him pinned for a second shot. Flesh bubbled and fur burned, and Bernard knew he'd never forget that god-awful smell. He ducked his head down and tore the beast's throat out, feeling him immediately shift to his human form in death.

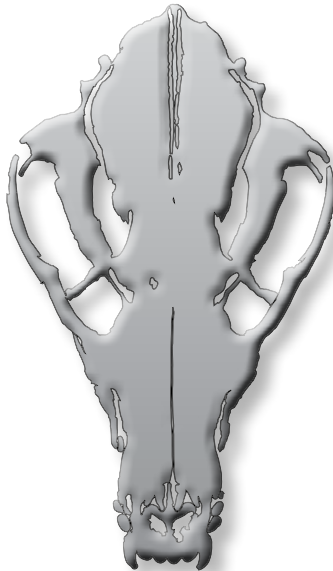
Bernard threw back his head in a howl of victory, celebrating and announcing his kill.

Then a part of him insisted on dealing with the one who interrupted them. The hot blood of battle set Bernard's anger and sights on Dan, but before he could do anything a brown-furred form tackled him and sent him sprawling. A pair of massive jaws clamped down on his throat in an act of dominance. Serenity overcame him and he returned to his human form to look up at Jenna. She watched him for a second before releasing his throat and reverting as well. She looked more than a little torn-up, but he knew better than to ask.

"It's done," she said, her stern tone almost tangible as she took charge once more. "They're running. Get this body out of here and take the others away. I'll stay here and take care of Luke. Already got a story for the cops." She helped him up, and he and Dan quickly hauled the dead werewolf to the window where they'd entered.

"And Bernard?" she said as they slowly climbed out. "Get some rest. You've earned it."

"Thanks." He offered a weak smile, part of him satisfied. He'd led a Hunt for the first time against his tribe's ancestral enemy. Most of all, the order was restored. Jenna was back in charge. Now he just had to heal up and help her deal with the next thing. *That* was the loyalty he'd learned, stronger than blood.



LIKE GOD

BY MATTHEW MCFARLAND

The diner wasn't a place that you'd stop into randomly, just passing by and feeling peckish. It wasn't the sort of place you'd pick out of a phone book, either. If the diner had ever had a real name, that name had been buried under cigarette ash, tied up in varicose veins, and erased along with Tuesday's lunch specials. It was just "the diner." It didn't warrant capitalization. It didn't attract business so much as accept it, the way a drain accepts garbage and dirty water.

The diner squatted between a porno theater and a burned-out tenement like a bum taking a shit in an alley. The employees, those who drove to work, parked their cars in the theater's lot. Arliss, the theater manager, took his payment for this privilege in free coffee and sandwiches, stumbling into the diner late at night reeking of mildew and beer.

Joel bussed tables at the diner. He was just out of college, but he had pulled out too soon. He was barely nineteen and had received enough schooling to know how to write an essay, but not enough to know why he should. He worked at the diner because, on night shifts, the owner paid the staff minimum wage instead of making them work for tips.

The day crew wasn't extensive, but the night crew was truly skeletal. Joel — tall, thin, and sallow, his hair tied into cornrows that were now growing wild — bussed the tables and washed the dishes. Naomi worked the counter — she was a "waitress," but she rarely went over to people's tables. She'd call to them across the diner, and make Joel bring people's food out to them. Naomi was nearly ten years older than Joel, and might at one time have been pretty. The first night Joel worked with her, she jerked him off in the dry stockroom and then, wiping her hands on her apron, glared at him and informed him that "this never happened." Joel hadn't had any idea why it had happened in the first place, so the notion that it never had was easy enough to accept.

Milo worked the kitchen, the arthritis in his hands never getting quite bad enough to stop him from flipping burgers and chopping tomatoes. He was on probation or parole, or he was wanted by the police or something. Naomi had a different story every few weeks, and she always told Joel in a hushed, harsh voice while Milo was making the coffee or frying an egg. She denied ever changing the story, and Joel didn't make an issue of it. Milo never said much, anyway. The one and only time he had initiated conversation with Joel outside of "Order up!" was when he'd clapped Joel on the back and said, "Today, I'm sixty-six years old." Joel had just smiled, and Milo walked away nodding, as if he'd outsmarted someone.

If the staff was skeletal, the customers were zombies — a little more meat and a little hungrier, but still not living people. The customers didn't walk up to the diner and enter it. They snuck up on it, as though they were afraid it would bite like a rabid dog if it saw them before they got in the door. They sat and ordered their food, ate, grimaced at the dirty grease covering everything, paid (sometimes), and left. Anyone who ate there more than once was a regular, but, even by that generous standard, there weren't many.

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Joel was standing in the dry stockroom trying to reach the last roll of paper towels for the bathroom. He was looking at the spot where Naomi had been standing while she stroked him, her face twisted into a look halfway between lust and bitterness. Joel wondered if it had really happened or if he had thought it up. It didn't seem like his kind of fantasy. He didn't really like white girls.

The diner was busy, but, of course, that was relative. Four customers had slunk into the diner within a few minutes of each other. Naomi had actually come out from behind the counter to wait on them, popping her gum and glancing back at the cash register every few seconds. Once she had taken the orders, though, she planted herself behind the counter and half-heartedly began to clean. That left Joel to bring the customers' food out.

The first order to come up belonged to a heavysset man in torn blue jeans and a greasy white shirt. He ordered a hamburger and when Joel brought it to him, he picked it up and ate it so languidly that bits of the bread stuck to his lips like soft white blisters. Joel didn't go back to the man's booth to ask if everything was OK. He didn't want to watch that man.

Two of the other patrons were sitting together, talking. Two women, one perhaps eight or ten years older than the other. Joel walked by their table on his way back to the kitchen and heard the older one saying, "God doesn't want us to be like ourselves. He wants us to be like Him. That's what being made in His image means."

Joel thought about that as he nudged the swinging door to the kitchen open. He didn't go to church anymore. He felt it was for kids and old people. He picked up the women's food — a soggy grilled cheese sandwich and an omelet with tomato — and walked back toward the table.

The fourth customer was sitting near the two women. He had actually arrived first, but had ordered a steak and so was still waiting for his food when Joel brought the church-women theirs. The man was white, maybe light-skinned Mexican, Joel thought. Homeless or crazy, maybe both. The guy didn't *smell* homeless, though. Most bums smelled like piss and garbage, but this guy didn't have that reek. He definitely had an odor — and Joel didn't find it pleasing — but it didn't make him want to retch like the smell of most bums.

Joel realized he was staring at the guy and looked away. He set the church-women's food down and asked if they needed anything else. The older one looked up at him and asked him if he was saved. Joel cocked his head at her. She had stains on her teeth, and her breath smelled like old food and coffee. The other woman with her looked politely bored. Joel wanted to ask them why they were in a diner at 3 A.M. if God loved them so much, but couldn't think how to phrase the question.

He didn't get a chance to answer. The homeless man reached over and tugged on Joel's apron. "Where's my steak, huh?"

"Comin' up, sir." Joel backed away from the table and walked back to the kitchen. Naomi followed him.

"What was that about?"

Joel shrugged. "Got some strange folk in here tonight. Them two women was talking about God wanting us to be like Him, not theyselves."

The stove sizzled as Milo flipped the man's steak. "Us?"

Joel turned to him. "You know. Everybody. And then they asked me if I was saved, and that guy asked where his steak was at."

Milo flipped it onto a plate. "Right here. Rare, right?"

Naomi nodded. "That's what the man said." She put a steak knife on the plate and handed it to Joel.

Joel took the plate out to the homeless man. The man picked up the steak knife and stared at it as though looking for dirt, then set it down next to the plate. He picked up the table knife instead and jammed his fork into the meat, sawing off large hunks and stuffing them into his mouth.

"Umm, anything else?" Joel asked. He was feeling queasy. The man grunted and waved Joel away. Joel backed off and glanced over at the two women, who were staring at the man with utter revulsion. "Y'all finished?" he asked.

"I am now," said the younger one. She pushed her plate, which still contained most of her sandwich, toward Joel. The older woman said nothing, but nodded at what remained of her omelet.

Joel took the plates back toward the kitchen. The fat man had finished his hamburger and was counting crumpled dollar bills onto the table. He stood up and nodded at Joel. "I'll just leave money here, OK?" Joel nodded back at him and backed into the kitchen.

“Damn, you should see that fucker eat.” Joel scraped the food in the garbage and set the plates in the wash basin.

Milo didn’t move, but Naomi leaned out the door and snuck a glance. “Yuck. He’s got almost that whole steak on the fork.”

“God’s image.”

“Huh?” Joel turned to Milo, who was scraping the steak juices off the stove.

“What you said before about how God wants us to be like Him, not like us. Guess that guy’s still like himself, not God.” Milo smirked. “Leastways, I hope so.”

Naomi rolled her eyes. She didn’t believe in God. “I’m gonna go get those ladies their check.”

Joel leaned on the wall. “God’s image,” he muttered. “What the hell does that mean?”

Milo shrugged. “I ain’t a preacher.”

“My mama used to tell me that God couldn’t be seen or felt, just loved and worshipped. If He can’t be seen, how are we made in his image?” Milo probably wouldn’t have answered anyway, but a gasp from the diner caught their attention.

Joel rushed out and found Naomi holding the steak knife that she had placed on the man’s plate. The knife’s blade was covered in blood. The man was gone, but a \$20 bill lay in a puddle of steak juice. The two church-women were staring at the door, shocked. Joel saw the man walking away from the diner toward the porno theater.

Joel pointed at the blood. “What the hell is that?”

The older of the church women spoke up. “He finished eating... and then starting cleaning under his fingernails with the knife. I thought that was strange, but then I saw blood on his fingers.”

The younger one nodded. “He was cutting himself, smearing it over the knife blade, but he wasn’t hurt. He just looked...”

“Like he was about to light a cigarette, if you know what I mean,” the older one finished. Naomi nodded. It took Joel a second to figure out what she meant. Joel didn’t smoke.

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Joel got halfway home that morning before he remembered he’d left his house keys in his apron. Cursing to himself, he got off the bus and started walking back. He didn’t have enough change to take the bus back to work and then home.

It was still dark when he passed in the front of the porno theater. The door opened and Arliss walked out, glanced at him and muttered a greeting. Joel could hear moans coming from inside the building. As he did every time he passed by the place, he thought about going in and watching the show. He never did. It was probably too expensive.

He walked just behind Arliss as they approached the diner. Arliss was short enough that Joel could just about see over the top of the man's head. Arliss' thinning hair stuck up a bit around the edges, and to Joel it looked like weeds. "Time for your coffee, Arliss?" Joel asked.

Arliss looked back at him. "Yeah," he chuckled. "Thought about getting an omelet, too. Milo gone home already?"

"Yeah, man. Milo's off same time's me."

"Shit, that's too bad. Man makes good omelets." They paused. Joel wasn't used to talking with people, and Arliss always seemed nervous. "So, where is everyone?"

"Huh?"

"Well, I saw Naomi leave. You said Milo's off, but I ain't seen the day people come in yet. Doesn't that one fat girl always park in my lot?"

Joel nodded. He could never remember that girl's name, either. "I don't know. They should be here."

Arliss pointed to the diner's windows. "Lights are out. Somebody's in the back, though, it looks like." Joel squinted. Arliss was right. All of the lights in the diner were out, which was strange, because it was supposed to be open 24 hours. But Joel could see someone inside, not in the kitchen, but rummaging around in the restaurant. As the two men got closer, Joel recognized the man.

"Motherfucker," he whispered.

"What?"

"That guy was in here earlier this evening, man. Crazy fucker ordered a raw steak and then cut on his own fingers with the knife." They crept up and stared in the window. It was the homeless guy, no doubt about it. He was pawing through the cash register. "Fucker's robbing us."

Arliss pulled a small black revolver from his jacket. "So let's get him. There's two of us. We'll tie him up or something and call the cops."

Joel turned to stare first at the gun, then at Arliss. He couldn't believe Arliss had the balls to pack a piece. "What the fuck do I care?"

"I care," said Arliss. "What if he robs me next week? Anyway, it's the right thing to do. 'Thou shalt not steal,' right?"

"God's own image," muttered Joel. "All right."

They snuck around to the back door and found it had been forced. The lock on the door was rusty and old. It wouldn't have taken much.

Joel slipped in first, crossed the kitchen and listened. He heard the man tearing the money from the register, and waved Arliss in. Arliss moved slowly, trying to open the door just enough to get in without making noise. Joel was listening to the crazy man. He was muttering under his breath. "Arliss," hissed Joel.

Arliss cocked his head and mouthed, “What?”

“What the hell language is that?”

They both listened. The man was talking at full speaking volume now, but neither one of them understood a word. “German?” whispered Arliss.

“Maybe French?” Joel was squatting on the balls of his feet and overbalanced. His right hand shot out to steady himself, and a pan fell to the floor.

Joel would have expected the man to curse or yelp in surprise. Instead, everything grew very quiet for a few seconds. Arliss cocked his pistol and backed away from the kitchen door. *Maybe*, thought Joel, *he just thinks something fell by its* —

The kitchen door swung inward, and the man leapt into the room. He glanced down at Joel and kicked at his chest. The blow knocked Joel against the shelves of pans and steel containers. He tried to stand, but when he leaned on his arm he felt pain shoot through his upper body and tears well up in his eyes. *Fucker broke my collarbone*, he thought.

Arliss fired the pistol, and the man’s shoulder pulled back. Joel, still trying to stand, noticed that the man seemed bigger now, his hair longer and darker. A long strand of drool leaked from the man’s mouth, and he hunched over like an excited dog about to pounce at a visitor.

Arliss fired again. The bullet struck the man in the stomach, and he slipped to one knee. Joel saw blood dripping from the wound. The man turned his head and glared at Joel. Joel heard cracking noises from his shoulder and realized he was crab-walking away from the man. Joel’s shoulder screamed in pain, but somehow it didn’t feel as significant. He had finally recognized that stench on the man.

It wasn’t garbage or rot or even just filth. It was blood and meat, the stink from a feral dog’s mouth or the dumpster behind a butcher shop. The man’s eyes followed Joel, not even acknowledging the man who had just shot him twice, and Joel found himself thinking *God’s image God’s image God’s image* as the man’s rabid gaze drove him into the corner.

Arliss stepped forward. Weakly, Joel tried to say something, but the man was already moving. He sprang upwards and knocked Arliss against the wall, pinning the gun against his hip. The man bit into Arliss’ face and pulled up, tearing away his lower lip.

Joel tried to scream, but choked trying to draw breath. Arliss screamed and the man winced, then drew back his hand and forced it into Arliss’ mouth. He slammed Arliss’ head into the wall, again and again, until Arliss finally fell over.

Joel watched as the man crouched on the floor next to Arliss’ body. The man picked up the gun and sniffed it. He didn’t hold it like a gun, didn’t seem concerned that it might go off or realize that he could use it on Joel. He just sniffed it, then licked the handgrip and finally put it down.

God’s image, thought Joel. *God doesn’t want us to be like ourselves.*

The man leaned over and walked on his palms and the balls of his feet to Joel. He grabbed Joel's hand and sniffed it, and then turned those rabid eyes on Joel again. "You?" he asked.

"What?" Joel felt cold. His pants were soaked with sweat. Sweat? No, probably not, he realized.

"*You?*" The question was a demand. It was a snarl. It was the bark before the savage bite.

"What? Me what?" Joel's hands were shaking.

"*Is. It. You?*" With each word the man's mouth drew closer to Joel's face. Joel could see the blood on the man's lips, the flesh between his teeth. Joel tried to answer, but he couldn't catch his breath.

The man let out a long, liquid snarl and forced Joel's hand open. He sniffed at the hand again, and then bit down on Joel's little finger. Finally finding the voice to scream, Joel felt the teeth slash through his skin, grate against the bone and finally meet. Joel jerked his hand away and stared at it, trying to move his missing finger, unable to figure out where it was.

The man stood up and spat Joel's finger into his hand, then stuffed it into his pocket. "It better be you," the man said. He started toward the back door, and then glanced at the silverware bin. He looked down at his hand, covered in blood and grime, and made a face. He pulled a steak knife from the bin, and began to dig under his fingernails. His hands were dripping blood as he shouldered his way through the door.



When the police arrived, Joel was still staring at his hand. They held up a bloody steak knife and asked if that's what had cut off his finger. Joel nodded. He distinctly remembered someone saying that this had never happened. He wasn't sure what "this" meant, though.

The police asked about the man they had seen running away, whether Joel knew who he was or why he had done this. They asked if he had killed Arliss because he ran the porno shop. They asked where the day employees were. They asked why Joel was still at the diner.

Joel didn't have much to tell them, even after they let him out of the hospital. The police blamed the painkillers and the shock, and although Joel told them something very important about the man, they didn't even write it down.

"He's not himself," Joel said. "God doesn't want us to be like ourselves. He wants us to be like Him. But I don't think that guy was *ever* like himself."

What's that make God, then, some part of Joel wanted to know?

Hungry, Joel thought.

FIRST HUNT, LAST HUNT

BY AMY VEERES

“I am Hannah Martel. I am a werewolf. I am a killing machine,” I told myself, under my breath. “I’m going to stalk my prey, give no quarter, rip its throat out, and howl in victory as I...”

I ran headfirst into a tree branch, sending my ass into the snow. I was feeling pretty good about things until then. When I looked up, Uncle Ronnie, my only pack-mate, was looming over me, arms crossed. Even if it wasn’t night out, I wouldn’t be able to see his eyes through the shadows, or his face through the wheat-colored beard. I couldn’t see his disappointment, either, but I could imagine it. Ever since I Changed, he made it his job to make me a real hunter, someone worthy of the name Uratha. In the months he spent training me, I hadn’t improved in the slightest. I think the couple e-mails I had with other werewolves across the country have taught me more than everything my uncle has.

It wasn’t like I didn’t know how to fight. My win/loss ratio in Ultra Burn Legend 4 is the best on my entire friends list! Those skills just don’t transfer well into chasing down insane spirits or wayward werewolves. I knew what to do, academically, but... it was like the difference in knowing the command for an Overdrive combo and executing it.

“On your feet, pup. Didn’t need help tripping, you don’t need help getting up,” he said. I scrambled to my feet, nearly falling again as my scarf snagged on a branch.

He caught me, and this close, I could see his eyes. Then I saw the disappointment.

This feral berserker stuff he had me learning wasn’t how I operated at all, but at the same time, I couldn’t give up. This was a small town. Ever since the hunters that set up shop five years ago, the only Uratha not dead or on the run was my uncle. I think they had something to do with his mangled hand, but I never asked him.

This time I didn't trip, no matter how caught up I was in my thoughts, because I'd found something. I bit my lip and spied through the trees. A deer. I needed an easy win after that embarrassing display, and if there's one thing I knew I could do, it's outrun a game animal, even in Hishu.

By the time I came up with a plan of attack, Ronnie was already in Urhan, pouncing and making confetti out of what was supposed to be my prey.

"I was gonna get that one!" Not exactly the line of a proud hunter.

Ronnie's reply was instant, the same pissed-off tone he always took, this time with more of a growl. "Then take the one behind you."

At first I was completely confused, but then my senses picked up on something — a buck, twice the size of the doe that must have been its mate. Ronnie was at my side, Hishu again. He put a hand on my shoulder as he coached me through my next move.

"Careful, now. You can't spook it. Just go real slow, make yourself look small. Stay downwind, and watch for possible routes of escape. Don't make noise. Just find an approach where it can't get you with the antlers, and it can't retreat. It's about to pick at those leaves, and it hasn't noticed its mate back there."

I looked up at him in awe. It wasn't often I saw my uncle as anything but an angry old man, but at that moment, I respected him. I felt proud to be in a pack with him.

"Was that... some kind of werewolf hunting secret?"

Ronnie smacked me gently on the head. "No, pup, that's just hunting common sense. If you were human I'd be saying the same thing." I looked back up at him, and he was smiling.

"Go get 'im, pup."

Urhan felt weird. Everything was too sensitive, and muscle memory guided me more than experience, so the thing that unnerved me must have been how natural it felt. For now, that was good, but I didn't think I could handle staying this way for long without more practice.

Downwind. No routes of escape. I lunged forward, clamping my jaw down hard on the buck's neck, leaving my body dangling. I expected it to die quickly, but this buck had thicker skin than I expected. I tried to hold on as it bucked wildly, screaming as it tried to throw me off. It flailed its head, trying to gore me in panic, but it couldn't reach.

I scrambled for a plan. I'd shift to Urshul, and use the stronger jaw muscles to put a stop to it. I had a grab on the throat, and now all I had to do is not let go until it succumbed, whether from a broken neck or bleeding out.

The change came as easily as it always did, and I clamped down hard; I heard a *crunch* as fur, gamey meat, and blood filled my mouth. I didn't cut cleanly through however, and may have underestimated how much a dire wolf weighs. I suddenly found

myself with another hundred pounds to support with just my jaws. Worse, the buck wasn't giving up — it was up on its hind legs, thrashing its neck around in desperation.

I had maybe one chance, and in hindsight it was a dumb idea, but it felt right at the time. Instead of being dead weight, trying to drag the deer down, I started swinging back and forth. It was doing a hell of a balancing act to stand upright on its hind legs. My thrashing around didn't weaken my hold on the deer any more than my sudden weight gain did, but I did knock the poor wreck onto its side. I went in for the kill before it found the strength to reorient itself, and finally tore through the wounded throat. It was already dying, with all the arteries I must have severed. I put it out of its misery, and claimed my prey with a howl.

As I shifted back to human, my clothes shifted back with me — one of the few werewolf tricks I'd mastered (Ronnie always said not to call it magic). My uncle clapped slowly, sarcastically, at my kill.

"The trick with the momentum was some quick thinking, so you score some points for that. That said, you shouldn't have had even a minute of trouble, until you shifted and made it complicated. Next time, bite down hard in wolf form, let the blood loss weaken it, then snap the neck. Don't overthink it. And what in Father Wolf's name was up with that howl?"

I turned bright red, and couldn't look him in the eye. "I... I thought it would be cool, like, 'Yeah! I'm a werewolf! What's up now, huh?' It wasn't as cool as I thought, was it?"

Ronnie shook his head, but he was still half-smiling. "You're a dork, pup."

"I know."

Apparently my howl wasn't just dorky — it got something's attention. The next thing I knew, the air changed, like a deep resonant sound echoing through the forest, and for the first time I could remember, Ronnie didn't look like he was equal halves amused and disappointed. He looked afraid.

I didn't understand why, until I turned around to face a translucent, shambling thing made of dark green light. It had huge shoulders armored with bone, a mask made of the same, spindly clawed arms and legs, and an exposed, beating heart. It tilted its head-mask and leaned in at me, saying nothing.

No time to react. The first thing I wanted to do is hide, but everything I'd learned from Ronnie told me that was a bad move, the coward's way out. I prepared mentally for a fight, clenching my jaw through the pain as my gawky frame became packed with muscle, and pasty skin got covered with gold fur. My hoodie, jeans, glasses, and sneakers vanished rather than tearing apart. The "werewolf" part kicked in as I shifted to Gauru, and I was ready to kick some ass.

It didn't go very well. I thought it must be a spirit, but it was patterned after a human. One of my claws went for the throat, while the other went at the exposed heart-like thing. It was then that I realized the thing had no neck, and that the heart wasn't as exposed as I thought. The thing in its chest wasn't a vital organ, either. It

was some kind of hard, crystalline substance that I couldn't crush, even with all the strength this form had granted me.

It counterattacked before I could think of another move. There was a lot of power in the creature's spindly arms, but I was never exactly She-Hulk, even in Gauru, so I know something about being stronger than you look. It raised its arms, and I felt it grab me. I must have blacked out for a second, because the next thing I knew, I was getting to my feet after falling through a tree. It might have been two. Stunned from the impact, I froze.

Ronnie didn't stop, even for a moment. He was back to Hishu when he rushed the spirit down, but he wasn't moving like a human. He jammed a knife into its oversized shoulder, a muffled scream coming from behind its mask. It locked up as he twisted, and shifted his weight to knock it onto its knees.

"Finish it, pup!"

I lunged forward, trying to imitate the way he put all his mass into a single strike. I went too far though, grabbing at the mask as I fell forward. There was a disgusting squishing sound, and then I was Hishu again. The hoodie, tank top, glasses, jeans, and shoes were all back where they belonged on my scrawny human body. I was holding the bony face in my hands, with a trail of all-too-solid viscera leading back to what was now the creature's corpse.

Adrenaline still pumping, I found myself dissecting the corpse with my eyes. I barely noticed Ronnie chewing me out for botching the fight.

"Stop. I just thought of something," I interrupted. He ignored me, so I repeated, louder, with a bit of a growl left over from Gauru. That got his attention.

"What?" He snarled.

Examining the body for clues, rather than trophies, wasn't something he'd be proud of me for, but this was important. I pointed to the face, the organs, and the husk itself.

"Spirits don't leave corpses."

That shut Ronnie up. I don't know if he didn't realize, or if he didn't think about it until I pointed it out. He keeled over to examine it with me.

"You're on to something, pup. This is a Claimed. It's what happens when a spirit and a human fuse, but it... it doesn't look like a normal Claimed." He shook his head, and managed to almost hide a smile. "You did good here. This just graduated from 'practice hunt' to 'hunt.'"



We spent a good half hour looking over the remains of my prey for clues. There was a primeval rush running through me as I picked through organs that shouldn't exist on man or spirit, soaked in an aura I couldn't quite recognize. I expected to have to fight off the desire to further rend my prey, tear it apart with a good victory

howl, to fight the instincts in my bones. That didn't happen. To my surprise, while Ronnie observed me, I was completely focused on the creature and what it could possibly be. I almost had a theory.

“Find anything, pup?”

I looked up with a predatory grin, the kind he'd give me after a kill. “Like you said, it's Claimed.”

Everyone's heard of possession, whether from church sermons, some new-age shamanistic hooey, any number of episodes on *Supernatural*, or just in old horror B-Movies. Claimed are the real deal: a spirit fused with a human, though they're never common, especially not a strange, monstrous form like this. They didn't usually get this monstrous, though.

Out of my depth, I deferred to my elder, who was staring at me like I was an idiot until I finished. Something's missing.

“Except,” I continued, thinking as I talked, “it's too powerful, too much of a monster, and it doesn't feel like a Claimed, spiritually. It's close, but... somehow wrong.”

“Yeah?” Ronnie tried to hide his interest with more scowling. It didn't work. “What're you getting at, pup?”

He was still calling me that. I wondered when I'd earn the right to have him use my name.

“You've been around the block longer than I have, as you're so happy to point out,” I replied. “You Changed when you were my age. This is *clearly* more than just an unruly spirit or a pissed-off hunter. So you must have an idea!”

I swear to Luna, I could see the smoke billowing out of his ears as his brain worked in overdrive. I stared him down, keeping eye contact to establish dominance. This was about the mind. This was my turf. I was the alpha here. Eventually, Ronnie screamed, punching a sizable hole into a tree and sending some birds flying.

“God dammit, pup, I don't do that weird shit! Maybe... I don't know, there's this story I heard about some moon spirits. Powerful ones, too powerful for Earth, that could do whatever they want. Even Father Wolf couldn't tame them. A few years ago, I heard rumors that one or two might still be around, but that's it!” Ronnie roared, cracking another tree. “I don't know this shit. You're the smart one here.”

At that moment, I realized how deficient my training had been. The more I learned, the more I realized I don't know about what a werewolf really is. I have no idea why we hunt spirits, how we fit into spiritual cosmology, and a lot of other things that seemed pertinent, with a dead superclaimed and vague recollections of moon spirits that can turn humans into Japanese monster movie rejects.

“Yeah! I am the smart one, but I don't just magically know stuff. I need to be taught, and oh hey, guess whose job it is to teach me this kind of thing. I shouldn't have to be finding other werewolves online for *basic fucking education while you*

get drunk and watch action movies all night.” By the time I finished the sentence, I realized how angry that made me. I was a nerd. Knowing stuff is all I did. He’s expecting me to know this stuff, when nobody ever taught me a thing.

“Well what the fuck do you think I know?” Ronnie retorted. He’d shifted to Dalu by this point, and I matched him. This time, I wasn’t thinking enough to will the clothes to change with me. They strained against my increased height and musculature, tearing in places. It oddly didn’t bother me. I liked the sound of fabric ripping apart. It made me feel powerful.

“You fucked this up!” I screamed. “You fucked everything up for me with this muscle-headed training!” All of that resentment that had built up over the last two months was unleashed. I was barely in control of myself. “I’m *sick of it!*”

“Careful what you say, pup. I’m more than happy to put you in your place.” Ronnie ripped his shirt off, showing off more scars across his chest and down his bad arm. Unable to control myself, I lunged at my uncle, howling and lunging towards his shoulder to bite down hard.

At least, that was the plan.

All the hot-blooded fury in the world couldn’t help a buffed-up nerd fight a buffed-up brawler. Anime had lied to me again.

Ronnie grabbed me by my calves before I could even break his skin, tossing me through more trees as I tried to reorient myself, to no avail. I tried, again, to draw strength from my Rage. I wasn’t hurting, but it was hard to counterattack, so I dwelled on this mess of a hunt. Roaring out the most terrifying unhinged howl I could possibly manage, I grabbed my feet and lunged forward, managing to screw up his balance, unraveling into an uppercut, claw grabbing into his arm for support as the other went up towards his chin.

He always did have a glass jaw. Too bad I did too. It must run in the family.

Ronnie was ready, and as I sent him reeling, he grabbed harder on my legs, sending me backwards beneath him, and he had the advantage. Until I kned him in the groin.

He made this growling heaving noise, like he was trying to puke through a snarl, and collapsed on top of me. I rolled off from beneath him and got to my feet.

“Don’t get pissed at me,” I said. “This is your fault, Ronnie. You didn’t teach me anything about this, so I can’t help you.” My ears twitched, suddenly, and the words I was saying felt somehow wrong. I wanted to be angry. To be pissed. To rage at this asshole that had been wasting months of...

“That’s not me,” I realized. Ronnie looked up, as confused as I was.

“Something’s influencing our thoughts,” I explained. “Making us angry.”

Ronnie nodded firmly, and the two of us closed our eyes to open our senses.

And there it was. Another one of those superclaimed things, standing between us. This one wasn’t deformed like the last guy. Just barely seven feet tall, skin the black of shadows, with a seven-eyed mask, holding arms out at either of us.

We opened our eyes again, and we still saw it. Ronnie nodded, and I nodded back. It was time for a real fight.

Ronnie barreled in without shifting. It looked surprised for a moment, and that's all he needed. Tackling the superclaimed to the ground, Ronnie's oversized hunting knife looking for a new home in the creature's shoulder, just like the last spirit thing. I got ready to shift, waiting for my cue. Everything under control.

Or so I thought. The mask rotated without the creature turning its head, following the trajectory of the blade. Just as it was about to make contact, the entire creature turned into a hazy three dimensional shadow, all physicality lost, sending Ronnie and his weapon onto the ground.

I'll never forget what happened next. The creature, the superclaimed, whatever it was, became solid again, overlapping with Ronnie. It was the first time I heard him scream from pain. It stood back up, seemed to flex all over, and ejected a broken, battered, mortally wounded man from inside itself.

I wanted to go to him, help him, do *something*, but the superclaimed was coming after me next. I didn't have time for anything but instinct. I'd never truly listened to what was in my bones before. I hoped it was something good. And I hoped Uncle Ronnie was alive. Funny, I only seemed to call him "Uncle Ronnie" when I was getting emotional. When I wanted him to know I love him? The Rage was gone. Just fear now. And then that melted away, as I stared down my prey.

I don't think I'd ever moved that fast before. I didn't even realize I shifted to Urshul until after it was done. When I shifted fighting that deer, it was a strange sensation of feeling right and wrong at the same time, changing my shape. Now that I was letting my instincts guide me, though, it felt right. Listening to the song my bones sang to me told me everything I needed to know, to move fast, to be as quick and nimble as I needed to be. My fur is light colored, and with the snow and the shadows of the trees, the superclaimed lost sight of me. It headed for Ronnie instead.

Didn't plan on the second part, but it wasn't focusing on me, so I took my chance. Quiet as a poverty spirit on payday, I lunged silently from my hiding spot at the monster's neck. It didn't have time to vanish; it didn't see me or hear me. I shut my jaws around its neck, and felt the combination of Essence and blood pooling in my mouth as it fell apart, like the last one.

I'd done it. For a moment, I was ecstatic. I wanted to howl with joy, but with the monster gone, I was left looking over Ronnie's battered, bloodied form. I shifted back to Hishu and looked the damage over. Compound fractures, blood coming out of his mouth, wounds everywhere. It's like he was telefragged. I mentally added "prevents werewolves from healing" to the list of things these superclaimed can do.

He tried to talk, but at first all he could do is cough up more blood. Eventually, words came.

"That's what I get for rushing in like a moron. One last lesson for you, pup." He was trying to smile, like the guys in his movies, but it didn't work. He was in

too much pain. That must have been when I started crying, because a bloody hand reached out to touch my face.

“Listen here, pup. No. Fuck it, you’re not a pup anymore. Hannah. Listen to me, Hannah.” More coughing. I was listening while trying to figure out some sort of healing Gift I could use. Why didn’t I learn more about Gifts? They were so important, and I just ignored them, and now my uncle’s dying, and it’s my fault! I was *definitely* crying then, because I remember the sobbing.

“Enough of that, Hannah. You’re Uratha. I’m not around to help, so you need to act like it.”

“No. You... You can’t die! You’re Ronnie! I don’t know what to—”

“I know what you’re gonna say, Hannah. It’s bullshit. I haven’t taught you a goddamn thing. Screaming, and roaring, and charging in like a damned football player. That’s the shit that got me killed, and it’s the shit you suck at.”

I was speechless. I wanted to tell him that’s not true, how much I’ve learned. I knew deep down, or at least then I did, that the way of fighting he taught was worthless, but I’d learned more than that from him. I wish I could have told him anything, about how he showed me a world where I didn’t have to be scared, where I wasn’t a useless nerd, where I felt powerful, where I felt alive, where I did things that mattered.

But all I could do was listen to his last words.

“You... need to stop trying to be me, Hannah. Be yourself.” He tried to laugh. More blood. Still didn’t know any way to make it stop. “Sounded like some shit out of those sappy kid books you’re always reading.” I wanted to correct him, tell him they’re *young adult novels*. I couldn’t bring myself to say something so stupid, and remained silent.

“Find your own way to fight, to hunt. Hannah, listen... to what your instinct tells you. I ain’t gonna be there to watch, but... do me proud, yeah?” He reached up a mangled hand. I grabbed it.

“Yeah.”

“... I’m proud to call you my niece, Hannah.”

“I’ve always been proud to call you my Uncle Ronnie.”

The hand went limp, and everything went quiet.



I was on the hunt before I ever realized that I had left Ronnie’s body. Between the corpses I had the scent, and I knew what to look for. I made a note of where it was so I could bury him properly, give him the respects he deserved. He was a bastard nine times out of ten, but on that tenth time he was just amazing. To go down like that.... I’d find what’s creating these monster spirits, and make them pay.

I was in Gauru. I wasn’t sure when I shifted. Finally listening to instinct was like a dam that had broken, and I couldn’t stop myself. I charted the course, but my body

was on autopilot. And that course is right toward the most powerful of these — that's how it always works in video games, after all. The strongest guy is the leader.

By the shore of a frozen lake, I caught the rancid scent of spirit and flesh melded together in that terrible way, passing by many more on the way, but evading their notice. I was going after the big guy. The End Boss. I realized that whatever these things were, they aren't Claimed. They were far worse, but I had yet to find out what.

The strongest of the abominations was alone, kneeling in prayer to the moon. It tied in with that moon god-spirit Ronnie was talking about. Everything burning inside told me that was my guy, but he looked relatively human. Well, aside from the fact he was completely colorless except those red eyes, and his towering spirit looming in the Shadow. I didn't know who or what caused this, but I had to stop it. I had to take this guy out, and I wasn't sure how. Ronnie's approach of brute strength, screaming, rending limbs — that's what killed him. I had to use stealth, trickery, and most of all, fear.

So I asked myself: What would Batman do?

I wanted to keep the fight in the material realm — if I had to fight the spirit this guy was attached to, it'd be over in a second.

Hiding in the trees, I stared down my prey, watching. He'd be fast and strong, if the others were any indication. Without a sound, I leaped from the trees, claws and fangs bared. I grabbed my shoulders and slammed my head into his. It had to have been hard enough to at least concuss it.

It didn't work. The bastard was just smiling, like I'd done no damage at all, even though I could see the blood leaking down my hands. In that moment of confusion, I let my guard down. Big mistake. I felt a pulling, and it wasn't until the hulking horned thing standing behind him became more solid that I realized it.

He was pulling me into the Shadow. Where he wasn't an abomination taking the form of a human. There, he was something that I couldn't fight, even if Ronnie were still alive. I would die.

I've never used a Gift before, but something told me that there was one that could keep me from reaching. Closing my eyes and focusing on nothing but that, I tuned out the roars of the spirit beast, dug my feet into the ground, and focused on myself, my Essence, on the reality I knew. It worked. That got a reaction. His eyes widened, and I laid into the son of a bitch.

Once the human form was dead, the ephemeral counterpart just dissolved, and that was that. I heard screams through the forest, and I knew somehow that was the other creatures collapsing into the mutilated remains of their human and spirit components.

I thought, *No, this was too easy. I can't have solved it just like that*, but I had. It was over. Grinning madly, I stared at the moon, and myself, and the corpse in front of me, my prey, caught and killed with my own two hands. This morning, I'd say winning a fight like this would be impossible. Right then, I felt unstoppable.

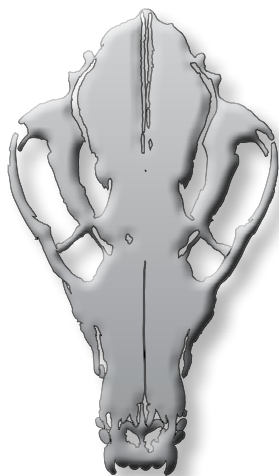
I looked down at the dissolving corpse, melting into a gelatinous thing with ephemeral tentacles and too many eyes. None of the others had done that — more proof I had my man, so to speak. Once it was gone, I looked up into the sky at Mother Luna, letting my body melt back to Hishu. I was crying, but it took me a moment to realize it. This was supposed to be simple. A practice hunt. Educational. I learned something, true, but the cost.... I don't know if I would ever stop blaming myself for Ronnie's death, but I'd never forget him. Misguided as he was, all he ever wanted was to help me. To make me into a werewolf he could be proud of. How could I fault him for that?

I buried my uncle. I was the only one at his funeral. The police figured it was a hunting accident, and never thought of me as a suspect, even after all the questioning. Better that way. I never stopped hunting for the cause of that terrible night.

I've discovered a few things since. The superclaimed that Ronnie was talking about is called an *idigam*. Like he said, a powerful spirit of nonsense from the moon, come to wreak havoc on Earth and in Earth's Shadow. It was just waking up, toying with humans and spirits, and populating the forests with failed hybrids. They were linked in a hive-mind, and I killed the literal brains of the operation, but not its creator. I'm still hunting the thing down, with a pack. The werewolves I'd chatted with online were meeting up, and I joined them. If I can track the *idigam* down, I'll be a hero. If I kill it, I'll be a legend.

Glory and revenge are great. I think I could use both of them — closure and a confidence boost would do wonders for me — but that's not why I'm doing it. My pack would say I'm obsessed, but it's not that. It's the kill. Finding this thing, this indestructible monster, taking it down, and ending it, that's what drives me. It's the rush of the kill, taking something and making it mine. That sounds like serial killer talk, but no. It's Irraka talk. I'm done resisting what I was meant to be, and I'm not afraid of losing myself. I can still be me, but there's something else.

I'm a werewolf, and I'm on the hunt.



CONFLUENCE

BY JIM FISHER

The graveyard shift sucked. Maya knew it. She'd been kicking herself for a week after accepting the position, but it paid well and it's not like she was really doing anything else with her evenings anyway. She didn't have many friends. Her old ones had moved away and, while they kept in contact through texts and social media, it just wasn't the same.

So here she stayed, staring at the small bank of monitors until she felt like her eyes were going to cross. The grainy video never showed her anything other than the maintenance workers and the occasional student, anyway. Maya had hoped there might be patrols involved with the job. After all, the position was with the University, and specifically at the Cathedral of Learning. She'd thought that might mean more than just sitting in a little booth watching a few security monitors and trying not to freeze her ass off.

Maya reached over and played with the heater for what seemed to be the hundredth time. It never seemed to warm up the booth sufficiently. Sure, it helped a little bit, but it's not like Maya had a lot of extra body mass to keep her warm. It was one of those times that she regretted her runner's body a little bit. Even so, her relief in the morning told her she kept it colder in the booth than others did. She wondered how they got the heater working so well. After fiddling with the controls, she conceded that maybe it was working somewhat, and resigned herself to watching the monitors again with a sigh.

Had she been able to study or at least read a book, it might be better. But her sense of responsibility kept her alert. She'd glance across the monitors, and then look through the windows of her guard station. Despite the calendar saying that it was late March, nature wasn't having any of it. A layer of snow blanketed the ground, covering the area around the Cathedral in white. The tracks of students crisscrossed the snow, as they braved cold feet to get to class.

Glance at the monitors.

Look around outside.

Nothing.

Glance. Look. Nothing.

Glance. Look. Nothing.

Glance. Wait. What was that? Maya looked again, and saw movement in the corner of a monitor. Was someone being assaulted? It was hard for her to tell, what with the poor video quality and quick movement. Whatever was going on, it was happening on the other side of the building. She thought over protocol — at this point, she should be on the phone to the police. Her job was to observe and report, not to engage.

It could be nothing, she thought. If it was nothing, then she'd be in trouble for filing a false report. But if it was something and she didn't report it, then whatever happened would be on her conscience. *Oh fuck it, if I get fired, it's a boring job anyway. I should make sure.* Throwing on her coat and grabbing a heavy flashlight, Maya headed out to investigate the disturbance.



The tapping of computer keys echoed slightly in the Cathedral's Commons Room. This room, a gigantic gothic-style hall, was usually home to many students in the late-night hours as they studied.

Tonight, though, it belonged entirely to Oscar.

He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. Gulping down some energy drink, he returned to his work. Differential equations weren't going to solve themselves. Still, something was distracting him. He leaned back in his chair and wandered through his thoughts. Family stuff was generally fine. College was fine, even if he was, at twenty-nine, much older than most of his classmates.

The most stressful thing in his life that he could think of right now was being one of the People, and even then, things had been relatively quiet. While he wasn't in a pack at present, he did some computer work for the Steelhouse Seven over on Southside in exchange for the occasional rite or talen. One of them, Lara "Aces & Eights" Ross, had even helped initiate him into the Iron Masters. Relations there were fine, if distant. The Seven were a clannish pack, and very serious about the "seven" part of their pack name. Oscar surmised it had something to do with the pack's Bone Shadow, but he wasn't sure.

Still, he couldn't quite place what was distracting him. He struggled to go back to the last of his work. He concluded that his brain was just tired after putting in a lot of hours studying and doing schoolwork. He resolved to sleep in tomorrow, once he got his current work done. He was almost there.

An hour of staring at numbers and formulae later, Oscar finally had to call it quits. He'd made little headway, and the assignment wasn't due for another two

days anyway. Still, ever since the Change, his habits had slid more toward night-time activity, so he took advantage of it by getting his work done. Evidently, that was catching up to him. He slid his laptop into its pocket in his backpack, slung it over his shoulder, and headed for the door.

Once outside, he was greeted with a wind that chilled him to the bone. Adjusting his scarf over his face, he crouched down inside his coat and resigned himself to the walk back to his apartment. Despite the gloves on his hands, he still shoved them into his pockets for the extra warmth. He was halfway to the street when he heard yelling and a roar to his right. Spinning quickly, he saw a group of people — three men, one on the ground. Closer to the building, a lean African-American woman was yelling in some sort of disbelief. She then grew taller and more muscular and moved toward the group. And on the other side of the men from Oscar, he saw an enraged, hairy, eight-foot-tall killing machine, all claws and teeth and spit and Rage.

Oh shit, he thought, and broke into a run across the snow.

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Damn, Pittsburgh winters are colder when you live on the streets, Annie thought. She pulled her jacket more tightly around her as she slunk through the dark. Nobody else was up and about at this hour. Annie reckoned it was somewhere around 2 A.M., and she knew that she really should be somewhere warmer, getting some sleep. She spent her days searching for food and occasionally begging for change. She tried to avoid the soup kitchens, or really any crowd crammed into a small area. Ever since her Change, she'd been worried about the Rage that was always with her. Or, more to the point, she was worried about what would happen if she couldn't control it.

Unbidden, memories of the Change came to the fore — how her body betrayed her, how the instinct to hide dominated her mind. The man she shoved forcefully through a window in her need to escape, to flee. How his body looked on the ground below, limbs broken and twisted in impossible angles, his final look of terror still on his face. Later, she had odd, unclear memories of some sort of luminescent creatures surrounding her, speaking in a language her ears couldn't quite understand, but she knew it deep down all the same. They changed her in some way different than her body had changed earlier that night.

So she'd left her previous life. She didn't want to risk her friends or her family. It was for the best, she kept telling herself. Yet, in the middle of the night, when she had nobody but herself to talk to, the memories came. What were her parents up to? Were they searching for her? What about Sylvie? And Matt? What must they think of their older sister now?

When these thoughts came to her in the small, quiet times in the night, she had to move. Her frequent companion on her trips was John. Forced onto the streets when the dot-com bubble popped, he knew the ins and outs of the city. It talked to

him, he said, and he to it. He looked on her like a daughter — one Annie suspected he'd had, in that previous life, but he didn't talk about her. Annie didn't broach the subject. John had helped her — she would have surely died of exposure or starvation had he not taken her under his wing.

Further, walking calmed her down. She could clear her mind and go blank for a while. It helped bring her Rage under control so she wouldn't let it out on innocent people. Or, if John was with her, they'd talk, bringing Annie to the present and not dwelling on her memories. He was full of advice and stories, ways to help her get a grip on her situation. He didn't know she was a werewolf, of course. Annie didn't share that with anyone if she could help it. Being on the street was bad enough. She didn't want anyone to think she was crazy — or worse, to be victims of the Rage she couldn't quite control.

Still, John was a frequent companion. "Anytime you can find someone that's willing to help you, take it," John had said. "Lord knows there are few enough of 'em, and it might mean the difference between waking and not. But watch yourself. Some folks will just fake it, planning to stab you in the back."

So she walked, with no real plan or destination. Remaining still wasn't an option, and she wasn't going to go back to sleep anyway. Walking was something to do, and she had to stay alert to noises and movements around her. People got mugged or worse if they didn't pay attention. Annie had even heard that some folks just... vanished. One day they were there, and the next, poof. Gone. Missing, like they hadn't even been there in the first place. She didn't want to become a statistic, so she kept an eye on her surroundings. And if someone did try to take her? Well, she didn't like that side of herself, but she could make sure they found out that they'd bitten off far more than they could chew.

The wind picked up, cutting through even her thick jacket. Annie debated shifting into wolf form to better handle the cold, but didn't want to risk it. In the snow, the tracks *might* be indistinguishable from a large dog, but they also might not. The last thing she needed was to draw attention to anything weird in the city.

Crossing Forbes Ave. near the Cathedral of Learning, Annie could hear the ticking of the relays in the traffic lights. She marveled at how quiet nighttime can be without the background murmur of activity, even in a city. Or maybe it was notable especially because she was in a city.

Her reverie was interrupted by a voice off to her left. She couldn't make out the words, but she recognized John's voice. Annie looked in that direction, thinking he was calling out to her.

Instead, he was looking away, talking to two men near him. The one on John's left was over six feet in height and bald. The one on the right was only slightly shorter, overweight, with dirty hair. Even from this distance, Annie could smell something odd about the two men. She couldn't place the scent exactly, but it was just... *off*. From John's body language, Annie could tell that he was in a defensive posture, as though the men were about to attack him.

The larger one struck first, moving faster than she expected for someone of his size. The blow caught John high on the cheek, and Annie heard the crunch of breaking bone. The smaller one pounced, wrapping his arms around John and driving him to the ground.

“John!” Annie screamed out as she ran toward him. As she got close, the larger assailant looked at her, and she very nearly froze. Where his eyes should be there were simply sockets — but even they didn’t look normal. Where the man’s eyes should be was simply *nothing*, a deep blackness that was somehow darker than the night surrounding them all.

A wet, meaty snap brought Annie back to her senses. She looked down and the smaller man was starting to get up. John’s head was turned at an awkward angle, and she knew he was dead.

Annie didn’t consider herself a killer. At least, she didn’t want to think of herself that way, despite being a werewolf. Some of the people she’d met on the street were petty, or mean, or cruel, but they were still human beings. She didn’t want to hurt anyone, had never wanted to hurt anyone. Until now.

It hurt, changing her shape. Bones stretched in ways they shouldn’t, snapped and re-knit themselves in moments, muscle tearing and re-growing in equal measure. Her face elongated, a monstrous snout blossoming from her jaws. To Annie, the world exploded into an overwhelming kaleidoscope of sights and smells. The cloying scent of *other* put off by the men invaded her nostrils, threatening to push out the scent of John’s dying body, the snow, the city itself.

Or the two werewolves close by that Annie hadn’t noticed until now.



Maya knew it was stupid every step of the way. But once she was resolved on a course of action, dammit she was going to carry it out. Others called her bull-headed. She called it stubborn. Still, she tossed and turned the idea around in her head the entire way around the grounds to get to where she’d seen the disturbance on the monitor.

It took her longer than she’d wanted to cross the property, as she was careful of unseen ice on the sidewalks. Once she’d gotten to the site, however, she did not expect to see three men, one of them down and presumably dead, and one Gauru form werewolf.

“What the fuck? Hey, stand down!” Maya yelled to the fighters as she shifted form herself, bulking up into Dalu. She hustled to the confrontation as the large man broke into a run, sprinting away from the scene. Maya started to run after him, glad to stretch her legs after being cooped up in her booth. She stopped as she realized what was going on in the fight.

Giant claws ripped into the body of the runner’s compatriot, tearing gashes that, for some reason, didn’t bleed. Maya was stunned — *normal people bled when*

portions of their bodies suddenly go missing — but instead, the rips simply appeared empty, like there was nothing inside of him. The mystery werewolf roared again — in pain this time — but didn't stop with one attack. Again and again the claws tore into the victim, ripping pieces of flesh away, but still with no blood.

After a swipe nearly tore the head from the body, the man simply deflated, dropping to the ground like discarded clothing. Both Maya and the werewolf paused, not sure how to react. Just then, a young Hispanic man ran up, and the Gauru form Uratha quickly straddled the third man (dead, as Maya just noticed), lowered its body, and growled deep in its chest. Its fangs clenched tightly together, saliva bubbling along its lips, and it held its arms out wide, ready to swing with deadly claws.



Oscar was rethinking his choice of running at the Uratha in Gauru form. He knew it could potentially get him killed. Oscar had no way of knowing whether this werewolf was of the Tribes of the Moon or Pure. He didn't even know if it was male or female, or really, anything about it. All he knew was that he had a way to talk it down out of its Rage. And so he walked forward slowly, whispering soft words in *Uremehir*, First Tongue, the hereditary language all werewolves shared. He approached the beast carefully but confidently, and as he talked the werewolf visibly calmed down, collapsing in on itself as it shifted form.

In a few seconds, where the slaving monster once stood, there was now just a young woman in her early 20s. Her threadbare jacket was clearly two sizes too large for her. A knit beanie cap fit snugly to her head, controlling the tangle of brown hair peeking out beneath it as much as it was keeping her warm. She had bags under her brilliant blue eyes. Torn jeans and “well-loved” sneakers completed the ensemble. She immediately dropped to her knees beside the dead man and broke into tears.

Oscar looked to the other woman, who had shifted back down into Hishu form, and only now noticed that she was the night security guard. They each glanced at the scene in front of them, then back at each other. Oscar tilted his head slightly away from the death scene, indicating that maybe they should give the crying woman some space. The security guard nodded and followed him a few steps away, but was the first to break the silence.

“What the fuck just happened?” she snapped.

Oscar shook his head. “I’m not entirely sure. I was in the Cathedral doing schoolwork until a few minutes ago. I came outside on the way back to my apartment, and found this. You were here before me. What did you see?”

Keeping one furtive eye on the scene, Maya replied. “By the time I got here, that guy must have already been dead. The other two were being attacked by her,” Maya jerked a thumb in Annie’s direction, “and one ran off. You saw the rest.”

Oscar nodded. "If he's like his partner here, we should probably go find him. I doubt that's anything less than trouble." He was about to say more, but was interrupted as Annie joined them, her hands shoved deep into her pockets.

"Uh... thanks. For whatever you did. Talking me down, I mean. I don't know what I would have done otherwise."

"It's no problem. I was just trying to defuse the situation." He extended his hand in greeting. "I'm Oscar. What's your name?"

Annie dug her hand out of her pocket and shook his hand quickly, before her hand darted back into hiding. "I'm Annie," she replied, glancing around.

"It's nice to meet you, Annie. And this is...?" Oscar leaned slightly toward Maya.

Maya sighed. "My name's Maya. I'm the night security guard. Once the news of this reaches my boss, I guess I should say I *was*. Who was that guy to you, Annie?"

Annie sniffled, rubbing her nose on her sleeve. "His name was John. I've been living on the street ever since I, uh... changed. He helped me a lot. Without him, I probably would have died out here. Maybe he saw me as the daughter he never had. I don't know."

Oscar looked puzzled. "Why would you live on the street? Were you homeless before?"

Annie shook her head. "Oh, no, but I didn't want to lose it around my family or my friends. I don't want to kill anyone! I want to go back to the way it was before."

Maya looked at Annie sternly. "That's not going to happen. The quicker you get that in your head, the easier the rest of it is going to be. In the meantime, we need to clean up this mess, and quickly."

She ushered Oscar and Annie to the scene, where they cleaned up the scene as best they could. Maya went into the building and retrieved some garbage bags, into which they gathered up the remains of John's killer. They bundled John into a few more bags, and placed him in the back of Maya's car for now.

"Okay, we need to track down that other bastard," Maya said.

Oscar agreed. "Anyone particularly good at tracking?" he asked.

Annie raised her hand. "I've learned how to track some weird stuff. It helps when I have to find people sometimes. I also caught a good whiff of those guys when I... well, you know." She kept her eyes downcast.

"Alright, let's get to it. I'm amazed that nobody came to see what was going on yet." Maya looked around as if she expected a crowd of people with cameras to pounce on them at any moment.

Annie screwed up her face in concentration and shifted to her wolf form. It was a small brown wolf, almost scrawny, but still wiry. The change felt somehow easier than it had before. She sniffed all around, taking in the whole of the area.

The scent of something *other* permeated the scene, overlaying the odors of John and the werewolves. Annie opened her senses further to include spiritual smells as well, looking for even the potential of a trail.

There. The other scent mingled with snow and a certain kind of emptiness in the air. She barked to the others and followed the trail, Maya and Oscar at her side.

Night always seemed to last longer in the city. The surrounding mountains and hills — not to mention skyscrapers and other huge buildings — helped block out the early morning and late evening light. Annie was glad for that fact now, as there were fewer people on the streets to witness a wolf prowling about with two people in tow.

Even so, dawn was just peeking over the hills when Annie led Oscar and Maya to a culvert leading to a tunnel. The culvert was mostly dry, with a thin ribbon of ice wending its way down the center. She stopped, looking at the tunnel. The smell of *other* was very strong here. Annie shifted back to her human shape, and looked at the other two.

“Whatever it is, it smells the strongest here. Do we go in?” She looked questioningly from one to the other.

Maya nodded. “If you want to get the fucker that helped kill your friend. Otherwise, we can just go.”

Annie shook her head violently. “Oh hell no. I’m going to take care of him, don’t worry.” From her pocket, she produced a shaved-down piece of metal, edge honed to sharpness. “This will help.”

Oscar started. “Have you had it the entire time?”

Annie studied the makeshift blade. “Yep. I made it a few months ago. John showed me how. It seems right to use it for this.” A predatory grin appeared on her face.

Maya broke in. “Alright, let’s head in there. Urshul on the way, harry it, then go Gauru and rip it apart. Except for Annie, who is going to stab the hell out of the thing with her little knife.”

They all shifted, and Annie led the way into the tunnel, following the trail until they had to rely solely on their senses of smell and hearing to get around. From far down the tunnel, the werewolves heard a quiet susurrus, which made them move with more caution.

Rounding a bend, the scent of *other* was joined by a more human smell. The three werewolves could tell that their prey was close. Maya, her sleek black wolf coat making her even harder to sense in the darkness, began to slowly sneak forward, Annie next to her. She stopped when she barely saw Annie shift to her human form, reach into her pocket, and rush forward.

Annie’s feet made no noise on the concrete. Neither Maya nor Oscar heard a thing until Annie slammed bodily into the man, furiously stabbing anywhere she could with her little knife.

It was over in seconds, but Annie kept stabbing, sobbing all the while. Oscar caught her arm gently in his jaws. She stopped, and he shook his head ever so slightly. Annie nodded, but continued to cry as Oscar let her go. Without saying a word to one another, Oscar and Maya both shifted from wolf form to Dalu.

Noises started down the tunnel. Banging, footsteps — it sounded like a very large group was coming their way.

“That doesn’t sound good at all,” Oscar said.

“We should get out of here and come back when we have flashlights and stuff.” Maya started backing away from the sounds, pushing Annie and Oscar behind her.

“I think I have just the thing for that,” Oscar said, rummaging in his backpack as Maya herded them along. As they made their way back up the tunnel, they heard more noises from a side passage ahead. Without thinking, Annie shied away from the noise and turned down another tunnel. The noises harried them through a number of turns, sending them deeper into darkness. The echoes reverberated down the concrete walls, making their pursuers seem like they were running at the werewolves from all angles.

“We’re being herded!” Maya shouted to the others.

“I know! We need to find another way out of here, fast,” Oscar replied. He finished rummaging around in his backpack, pulling out a headlamp. He clicked it on, bathing the area in light, and put it on.

“Why do you have that?” Maya asked.

“I’ve had to do hardware work for some of the computer labs on campus. It’s dark behind a few of them, and I needed to use my hands. Are you complaining about it right now?” Oscar asked.

“No, it’s just not... oh, never mind. Let’s just get out of here.” Maya huffed. The glow from the lamp illuminated all three of their dirty, drawn faces.

Sweeping the light around, the werewolves saw that they were in a water run-off tunnel. Chest-height stains on the walls showed how high the flow could get. To the trio’s right, the tunnel branched, with outflow tunnels meeting the main.

The sounds of their pursuers came closer. Oscar turned and flashed the light in that direction.

“What are you doing?” Annie squeaked.

“I want to see what we’re up against,” Oscar replied.

The lamp’s feeble light had almost no effect on the impenetrable darkness, in a way that was unnatural. The noises came from within the darkness. Oscar noticed that their breath was visible in the air. They’d been so used to the winter chill outside that they’d hardly noticed that the temperature had dropped, and was getting noticeably colder as the cloud of darkness approached.

The three took off running down the corridor, as Oscar’s light bounced wildly off the walls. In the flashes of light, Maya tried to note anything useful — a branching passageway, a service door, anything.

A momentary glint of steel caught her attention. “There!” Maya pointed at rungs bolted into the concrete, leading up to a manhole cover. She ushered the other two up the ladder. Oscar hit the top first, putting his shoulder against the steel manhole cover and pushing for all he was worth. It barely moved. He quickly shifted form into Dalu and, with the extra strength and bulk afforded by the form, managed to get the heavy cover up and out of the way. He changed back into Hishu and scrambled up the rest of the ladder, leaning down to give Annie a hand up. Oscar called back down into the dark.

“Come on, Maya! Let’s go!”

She leapt for the ladder, ascending as quickly as she could. Just before she reached the top, the darkness caught up to her. A slimy tendril touched her ankle, and it was so *cold*. Even through her pants and socks, her skin blistered from the unnatural chill. With an extra effort, Maya dove out of the way as Annie and Oscar both pushed the cover back into place. It fell into place with a metallic *thud*.

“Holy shit, what *was* that thing?” Oscar panted.

Maya sat down and uncovered her ankle. The skin was an angry red and purple, although she could see it was healing. “I don’t know, but it did that to me as I escaped. It was like a... tentacle or something, I guess.”

Annie looked around, trying to gauge where they were in the city. The rising sun reflected back at her from the skyscrapers, showing her that they’d come east of the city proper. “Well, at least we’re out of there now, right? Do we have any reason to go back? I... I killed the guy, so that’s that, isn’t it?”

Oscar shrugged. “I suppose, although there’s still the matter of what the hell is down there. I don’t think we’re strong enough to take it on, though. I have some... well not friends exactly, but allies, I suppose. I could ask them for advice if we want.”

Maya looked hard at Oscar. “Oh, so we’re a ‘we’ now, is that it? I don’t remember that coming up in conversation.”

Oscar returned the look. “We could be. Or we could go our separate ways, and let that thing pick us off one by one. Up to you. Personally, I think we were brought together for some reason. A confluence, if you will.”

“Confluence? Really?” Maya arched her eyebrow at Oscar.

“What? It means a bringing together of people. That fits us, don’t you think?”

Maya nodded, when Annie cut in. “Wait, how do we know it’ll come after us? Maybe it just drove us away and won’t want anything more than that?” Annie looked hopeful at that prospect.

Oscar shrugged in response. “Maybe. Maybe not. I’ll admit I don’t know. But what I do know is that the three of us are better off together than alone. We could go ahead and form a proper pack, gain a spirit patron and everything, the whole nine yards. What do you say?”

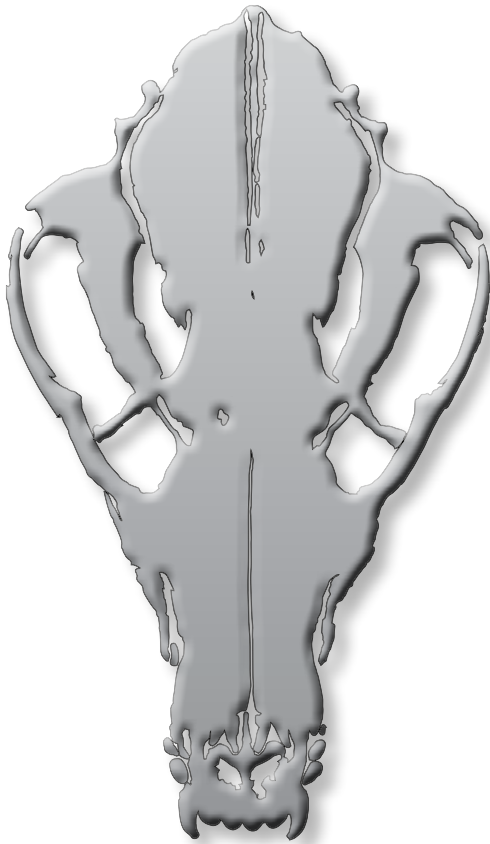
Annie chewed on her lip and thought for a bit before responding. “Yeah. I think that’s a good idea. If I lose control, you can talk me down, right?”

Oscar nodded, and then looked questioningly at Maya. “You in?”

Maya looked from Annie to Oscar for a long while, jaw clenched tight. “Do either of you have any idea what we started down there?”

Both shook their heads in response.

“Neither do I, but I know that I damn sure want to finish it. I’m in. Oscar, let’s talk to these allies of yours. Then we make that monster bleed, if it can.”



ONE VENGEANCE

BY AARON DEWBSKI-BOWDEN

The girl was crying blood.

She wept silently, scarlet tears running red tracks down her pale cheeks, and she made no sound above her whispery breathing. A moment's trembling was followed by more of the stinging pain she had felt earlier. She was cutting herself again, and again her guardians took note of the injuries. They were talking now, but the girl knew they were not speaking to her, only about her... and the thing that was inside her.

The stinging pain felt good. It dulled the agony that flowed through her body with every beat of her heart.

"Sweet Heaven, she's doing it again. I thought you took the knife away from her."

"I did. She's using her fingernails this time."

Stronger hands, the hands of her guardians, held the girl by her wrists. The stinging lessened, but the agony inside her blood returned with vicious force. Her guardians did not understand the delicate balancing of her pain.

"Look, she's... made... more of those runes. Not just the ones on her cheeks but here, too, on her forearm."

The girl knew her female guardian was close to tears again. In some strange way, she felt pleased by this. With that realization, something inside her stirred and writhed through her mind like a serpent. It, too, was pleased at the female guardian's grief. It was pleased with everything — saturated and content with the girl's pain as well as the emotional hurt of her guardians.

"What do these markings mean?" The female guardian spoke then, running her fingertip along the symbols the girl had carved into her own skin. They had been precise and neat at first, when she had used the kitchen knife to score the soft

surface of her flesh. When her guardians had taken the knife out of her grasping hands, her fingernails left ragged scratches rather than precise cuts.

The male guardian (perhaps he had been her father?) also came to look at the fresh markings.

“I don’t know what the newest ones mean. I know the one on her cheek means ‘sacrifice’ and this one on her neck means ‘eternity.’ I have no idea about the others.” He took a deep breath. “I think they’re magical in some way.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it hurts my eyes just looking at them.”

The girl knew that it was because the runes in her flesh were holy — sacred signs that meant something to the serpent-thing inside her. Both the signs themselves and her pain were holy to the thing inside her head.

“I can’t take any more of this.” The female guardian said in sudden anger. “I’m going to gather the pack.”

“They’re just as new to all this as we are. I told you, none of us know how to... exorcise... whatever it is.”

“Someone will. Someone in one of the experienced packs outside the city. They’ll know what to do.”

“We are *not* leaving the city. It’s hard enough to fight whatever horrors are running around our estate at any given time. We are not leaving the protectorate just to get killed by our own kind when they decide we’re not worth helping.”

The female guardian stood anyway, and walked to the door of the small room. The girl watched her stand in the doorway, and then felt the unwanted touch of the male guardian’s hand on her own.

“I’m staying here, honey. I’ll keep you safe.”

The female guardian spoke through tears. “You stay here and watch over her. I’m going to call the others, and we’ll track the pack that run outside the city. The ones we met two months ago. They had a pretty old Ithaeur, and he’s the best chance we have to save her. She’s your daughter, and as good as mine. We have to try.”

Daughter. The word sounded alien to the girl’s ears. The serpent-thing inside her head smiled at the thought of one of the guardians leaving, and made the girl wave her hand in farewell. The spirit spoke through the girl’s lips in the hissing voice of a snake-like demon.

“Bye, Mommy.”



The werewolf ran. For a couple of heartbeats, white sneakers pounded onto the dry earth as she sprinted away from the screams. It was one of her packmates screaming — screaming her name. For a moment, the wrenching cry hung in the

still air before sinking into uneasy silence. Then, once again, the other screams began. It was her whole pack dying back there. Still the werewolf ran.

The sneakers became clawed paws, two feet became four, and the wolf ran as though her heart would burst. Another scream shredded the night air, echoing with alien resonance through the metal and concrete labyrinth of the industrial estate. The screamer's identity was lost in the pain-wracked cry.

She had not found the other pack. She had found nothing but danger and death in the spirit wilds surrounding the city. Even here in the Shadow reflection of the industrial complex, there were faded, dying tree-spirits that moved like crooked old men and reached for her. Any comparisons to lecherous elders were instantly banished as they lashed out with their razor sharp branch-claws. She leapt aside and ran on. There was no thought of destination, no cohesive plan of escape. There was only the bitter, chilling sense that what was killing her pack would soon be coming after her. She howled as she ran, though her hammering heart and heaving lungs broke the wolf-cry as it left her throat. It was less a call for help and more of a cub's pining for its mother.

Something unseen, with the force of a horse kick, thundered into her ribs. Winded and unbalanced, the she-wolf lost her stride, crashing to the ground. As she struggled to raise herself on four trembling legs, she caught the coppery scent of her own blood. Pain bloomed like a living thing in her side, spreading out into her body like a rapid cancer. She whined piteously as she turned her head to see the source of her pain: an arrow, silver-tipped by the acidic feel of it, stuck out from her ribs at a crazy angle. Who could be so mad...? As she took hesitant steps forward, her paws shivered at the intensity of the pain. The silver tip scraped maddeningly against the bones of her ribs. Even through the agony, the she-wolf could think of nothing more than fleeing the scene where she'd left her packmates to die.

She scented the approach of others, but lacked the strength to run.

“And who are you, little wolf? Going somewhere in a hurry, whoever you are. Let's stop a while and talk about a small concept known as territory.”

The human words rang eerily in her wolf-mind, but she understood their meaning. She yelped as the arrow was unceremoniously yanked out of her body. Immediately the pain lessened, though it remained a constant, pulsing ache. With great effort, she shifted to her natural form, and lay on the ground, panting through clenched teeth. She looked through teary eyes at the four figures that stood around her in a half-circle. One of them spoke.

“Manners are such a simple thing to remember, yet so often they go unused.” He stepped closer, looking down at the woman on the ground. The speaker had lightly tanned skin and black dreadlocks that hung to his chin. He wore faded jeans and a nondescript white T-shirt, but in his hands he carried a long, slender klaive bow.

“My dear,” his sarcasm caustic, “this is the part of the conversation where you introduce yourself. And after the pleasantries are behind us, you can explain why the hell you are on our hunting ground.”

Standing unsteadily, she held a hand to her bleeding side, covering the hot blood flow with her palm. She spoke her pack name, as formally as she could manage through teeth gritted so savagely together.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she said in a small voice. “My pack and I, we’ve been looking for you for hours. We... I... need your help.”

The four figures, two men, a woman, and a teenage boy she now realized, looked at her dispassionately.

“You’ve found us.” The woman said with a raised eyebrow.

“What did you wanna find us for? What help d’you need?” The teenager’s curiosity was overcoming the derision written all over his face.

“My stepdaughter, there’s some kind of spirit inside her, and...”

The dreadlocked man, clearly the pack alpha, waved a hand sharply. “Forget that right now. Where’s your pack?”

The injured woman looked back the way she had fled, casting her eyes over the spiritual reflection of what had once been a forest, and was now an abandoned industrial complex. There must have been a great wealth of emotion invested in such a place for it to have manifested in the Shadow.

The pack turned their heads as one and followed her gaze. The dreadlocked leader blinked once and said, very quietly, “Oh. Fuck.”

• • •

The pack moved slowly past the ghostly echo of a factory. The injured woman and the teenager had shifted into Dalu form. The man and the woman of the pack loped along silently in the wolf form, stopping every few moments to sniff at the ground or the air. Only the dreadlocked leader remained in his human shape, keenly watching his surroundings and clutching his klaive bow in his fists. A steel-tipped arrow was nocked, ready to be drawn and fired at the first sign of danger. The factories and warehouses were deathly quiet, beyond the malicious whisperings of a few fading nature-spirits that somehow clung to life in such a place.

“How much further?” the pack alpha whispered to the werewolf that stood next to him. He noticed with a twinge of guilt that the arrow wound in her side still trickled dark blood. In answer, the huge figure merely pointed a clawed finger straight ahead. The leader raised his klaive bow, but did not pull the string. The injured werewolf stepped ahead of the others. Her worry for her packmates overrode most of the fear she had felt up to this point.

There was evidence of struggle outside the cavernous warehouse. Red splotches marked where the blood of her packmates had fallen. Several larger pools of

blood, still wet but no longer warm, told tales of where her brothers and sisters had died. While the area was devoid of any corpses, there were several messy trails of smeared blood leading across the tarmac and into the large, dark warehouse ahead.

The bodies had been dragged inside.

“How many were in your pack?” The leader’s sarcasm was gone now. Even in human form his Rage beat down his fear, and his face looked set in stone.

The word came awkwardly to the woman’s throat, and sounded like distant thunder. “Five.”

The pack looked at the five trails of smeared blood that led into the darkness.

• • •

“It’s okay, honey. She’ll be back soon.”

The girl ignored the repeated mutterings of the male guardian. Runes of pain and suffering ached like an acid alphabet on her skin. It did not feel good by any means, but she felt complete, covered in holy sigils of agony. The serpent in her brain was everywhere inside her now. Her fingertips were raw and blackened, and her fingernails had broken off. Her arms and legs throbbed with hot pain from all the wracking spasms. She could feel the serpent swimming through her heart and making it hurt with each pounding beat.

“She’ll be back real soon, honey. Don’t worry. Not much longer now.”

“The mother will be too late.” The serpent-thing said with the girl’s lips. “This host is pregnant with pain now. I grow satiated on its suffering. Soon it will crack into pieces and break like a used shell.”

The male guardian stood and stared at the girl. A thousand emotions flashed across his face, yet none took hold. His own hands began to shake.

“Get out of her.” It was almost a threat.

“Soon I shall do as you say. Perhaps then I shall bond with you, yes?” The girl choked and laughed, sounding like she was dying of lung cancer.

“Get out of her. Please.” It was not even close to a threat. It was simple begging.

“Soon.”

“Get out of her!”

The girl choke-laughed again and didn’t stop for some time.

• • •

The warehouse was a scene from Hell.

Blood-red cobwebs, each strand as thick as an index finger, layered the walls and floor, and ran in thick arcs across from wall to wall. There was little exposed floor or wall space at all, so dense were the scarlet webs that decorated the huge room in seemingly haphazard and random patterns. A dozen cocoons dotted the

web structure at irregular intervals. Each was the size and shape of a person. One was on the ground, a body bag made of red cobwebs, while the others were stuck to the walls at various heights.

“That one there. Look, it’s not finished.”

The pack jerked at their alpha’s sudden words.

“Sorry.” Even in the presence of this alien architecture, he half-smiled as he pointed. “That one there.”

All eyes turned to see. One of the cocoons against the wall was incomplete, still revealing the head and left arm of the man inside. He was obviously dead, head rolled back on his neck, eyes staring up at the cobwebbed ceiling.

The alpha used his free hand to run his fingertips through his dreadlocks. “Was he one of your pack?” he asked hesitantly.

The injured Uratha trembled a moment, before throwing her wolf-head back in a howl of devastating volume. The cry echoed around the warehouse with deafening force, causing the other wolves to flinch away and the alpha of the pack to slam his hands over his ears.

• • •

“Get out of her!”

The male guardian was losing the inner struggle against his fury, and began to change. He grew tall and hairy, massive with muscle. Claws glinted in the reflected moonlight that came through the window. The girl had never liked seeing her adoptive parents shift, but her eyes were caked with drying blood and she could barely see past her own nose. She hadn’t blinked in over five minutes. She couldn’t anymore.

The girl was beyond movement now. Agony ran through her body instead of blood, and the scar-runes split her flesh whether she raked at her skin or not. Her life, such as it might be, was now measured in minutes. The girl shivered, her face set in a serpentine grin as she fell into another set of violent convulsions.

The towering werewolf roared at everything and nothing, shaking the lights and windows with the monstrous howl. As the colossal roar died down, the wolf-man was breathing in deep, heavy grunts. He looked down, near-blinded by Rage, at the form of his daughter.

She was dead.

He roared again as he pushed himself into the second world, and the barrier between the two realms trembled with a mourning father’s fury.

• • •

The spider-human hybrid was the size of a horse. With a chattering, whispering hiss, it launched from the dark ceiling and landed squarely on one of the Gauru werewolves below. Eight arachnid legs, each as thick as a man’s thigh, clacked

and clicked on the stone floor as the creature wrapped four muscled human arms around the prone werewolf.

Howls and screams broke out as the pack reacted. The Gauru, pinned by the incredible weight of the creature, yelped like a puppy as the gigantic black-skinned monster bit down hard. Greasy, moving mandibles caressed the werewolf's shoulders and neck as the massive fangs sank into meaty flesh.

An arrow lashed through the chill air and broke against its smooth chitin skin. One of the two wolves was shapeshifting up into the war form. The other had fled in terror.

The Azlu took a second to swallow the mouthful of bloody flesh it had ripped from the now-poisoned werewolf, and launched into the air again. Above the milling, frightened wolf-changers, it watched from its web for a heartbeat, before dropping on its next prey.

The dreadlocked alpha watched as the huge creature smashed down onto another of his pack, pinning the werewolf under the immense weight. The beast's first victim, with a massive bite taken out of his back, had shifted into his human form and was writhing in spasms. Drool and froth foamed from his clenched teeth. The alpha sent another arrow at the spider-thing, cursing as this one also broke against the creature's skin.

The multi-limbed horror reared like a horse, raising two of its thick, segmented legs. As the alpha drew another arrow and nocked it, he realized in horror that the two spider forelegs were bleached-bone, jagged blades. These two sword-limbs hammered down into the prone werewolf, drilling savagely into his body and moving like saws through the yielding flesh. The werewolf's scream echoed around the warehouse like the music of Hell itself.

The alpha let fly with his final arrow. This one flew true, taking the creature in the largest of its eight blue eyes. Screaming like a wounded bird of prey, the arachnid monster scuttled back, away from what remained of the pack. The alpha felt his blood boiling as he changed into the war form. At his side, the woman he'd shot earlier was the only other survivor of the spider-thing's assault. At their feet, two of the dreadlocked man's pack lay still, mutilated and savaged in death.

Instinct took hold, and the two werewolves charged as one. They roared and struck at the creature, slashing out with bared claws and snapping with powerful jaws. Brittle chitin skin, like that of an insect, broke and cracked under the furious onslaught. Thick, yellow blood gushed up, turning the air thick with the smell of cancerous flesh.

The creature roared a final time; the sound emerging from its throat was a woman's scream. The werewolves still struck out at the monster, lost in fury.

Rather than striking hard, chitin-clad flesh, the alpha found himself clutching two handfuls of tiny black spiders. They swarmed over his arms and chest, biting, biting, biting. The female werewolf had gone to bite the dying creature, and was choking on a mouth and throat-full of the small, black arachnids.

Of the massive spider-thing there was no sign, but around the two werewolves, thousands of tiny spiders swarmed closer.



The enraged werewolf tore into the Shadow reflection of his daughter's bedroom.

There, slowly rising from the bed, was the image of the pain-spirit that had murdered her. It resembled a child's skeleton with snakes for internal organs and the slitted eyes of a cat.

It laughed, even in the presence of the werewolf that towered above it.

"How does it feel, wolf-man? How does my revenge feel?" It had the voice of a hundred hissing snakes. "You come to the Shadow and sweep it clear of whatever displeases you. You slay and destroy whatever life you decide does not suit your tastes. You hunt the spirits of pain and suffering, killing them because they do not bow to you."

"No talk." The werewolf stepped closer, and the room pulsed with his insane anger. "You die now."

"Indeed? We shall attend to that presently." The little skeleton-thing nodded. "But is the lesson learned, wolf-blood? How does it feel to be hunted and tortured, simply because you are disliked by those who share your world?"

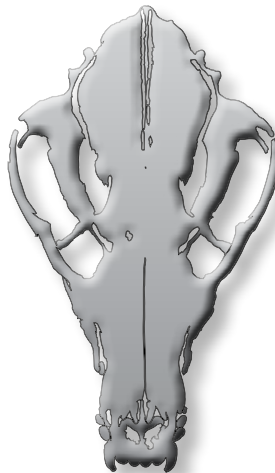
The werewolf moved like lightning, lashing out with his clawed hand. The spirit squealed as it was smashed against the wall.

The werewolf came closer again, growling in the First Tongue.

"Tonight. You sleep. In Hell."

The spirit grinned.

"Your pain pleases me, shapechanger. Let us get this over with so I can enjoy it all the more."



LAST RITES

BY CHRIS ALLEN

The sky above is a roiling grey haze, weeping down rain that spatters on my face. The smell of wet earth fills my nose. I breathe in the scent of the rich wood that cradles me, the fake and plastic reek of the artificial fabric that provides no cushioning whatsoever, the nervous sweat of my pack-mates. My vision is a rectangle of that grey, dour sky, punctuated by faces that are more familiar to me than my own — Cathy with her trademark scowl of concentration, Walker trying to keep the fear from his expression, Tanya a tapestry of scars that flex and shift as she coughs out the sacred words of the demand we're making.

I lie there, back already aching from the unforgiving bed I've taken. I remember what the Keeper carved into me: hold that pain in my mind, and let the Essence cascade through my being. Numbing cold grips my flesh. My breath stills on my lips. I let the tides of Essence breathe for me.

The grey sky is sharply, suddenly invaded as the lid slams down on my resting place, and then I descend, cradle and all, into the ground's embrace.

Shovels crunch, then wet earth slaps down, sealing my coffin beneath the loam.

I am dead and buried.

• • •

The worst part is the wait.

I am a symbolic offering; the child of Death Wolf, descending into the dark earth in the garb of a funeral. It's like a beacon to the master of this particular domain — a call he can't ignore. Tanya knows the laws of the Shadow like no one else, and I trust the rite will work. Still, as I lie there and wait, cold and breathless, I can't help the anxiety creeping in.

Where is the Keeper? Why isn't he *here* yet?

Funny, I call him a *him*. He's not, of course. A few centuries of death all rolled up in mud and brine, master of the dead of the sea. What the hell does gender mean to him? Those who drown in the Avon and the sea beyond, they're his crop to harvest; their deaths feed him. He doesn't know love; he knows *hunger*. He has children, sure, little gafflings of death and misery that cling to his skirts, but they're not born of passion or desire.

So I lie there. I wait. I feel that seeping sense of panic, clammy like the rain-water on my skin.

I take stock. I'm buried in a Bristol graveyard. The pack have done their work, so that's six feet of sodden earth on top of me. Shit, I can still hear the distant, wet noises through the dirt as they top it all off. If the rite had gone wrong, if it hadn't worked, Tanya'd be clawing me out herself. But we've never performed this rite before. What if it just doesn't do what she's expecting?

Still, I'm in no danger. I've opened the Keeper's Gift within me, a bloody river of Essence that has choked my blood and lungs. As long as I simply lie here and let the miserable cold chill me to the core, I won't need a single breath. I'm not going to suffocate. Even if the Keeper doesn't turn up, the pack will dig me out eventually.

We'll just have to go to the Bone Eater after all. No one wants to go out of town, go see the old bastard, go out of the Protectorate's protective grasp and into the countryside, so I'm down this *fucking* hole — damn, need to keep my grip, need to keep my cool. It won't do to lose it down here. It'll fuck the rite up good and proper, if nothing else.

Normally I'd try and measure my breathing to fight the panic, but right now that's no help. The animal bit of my mind is trying to tell me that I'm drowning or choking. I can't help it — I twitch and growl. The cold Essence in my veins makes it feel like I'm trying to wade through water, but the urge to breath, to sit up, is strong.

There's suddenly even less space. It's like a whole-body sneeze, a fleshy shiver of metamorphosis, and there's *more* of me. My blood warms a little as my hands shove against my coffin, my *cage*. Damn it, keep control. Talons rake at the shitty fake satin and tear into the wood beyond it. They're numb as they feebly scabble for freedom. There's no *space*. I'm trapped. I shove and shift and can't get out, can't sit up. Another growl escapes my lips.

I feel the anger rising inside. I'm not going to die like this. I am the hunter, the glorious child of the moon. I shine bright. I will tear my way out of here, rip aside the cage that would dare try to hold me, rise from the grave dirt.

Wood cracks and splinters. Panic and anger mix.

I'm losing control.

I am a man, I scream in my own mind, borne on the torrent of fury. *I am a man and I own myself. I am not a beast. I am a man and thus I have control.*

It's no good. I'm breathing now, the Keeper's Gift shrugged off, and my nose fills with the acrid scent of the treated wood as my claws dig into it. I can smell my own sweat, my own fear and anger, and it just sets me off more. I have to get *out*.

I am a man. Weak and feeble before the wolf, helpless before the rage.

My claws twist, bones popping and flesh warping into long talons. I open my mouth to scream as my face shivers and shifts. The howl is stillborn, just a rasping cough. Something chokes around my bulging, widening neck.

A dead man's gift. It hangs by a chain, its heavy weight on my chest. Memories, loss, death, they all suddenly crush down on me like a vice, down on my heart.

I am not a man. I am something far *more*.

I am a child of Death Wolf. I have nothing to fear here.

Memories wash through me, gifted by a dead man, and I remember why I am doing this. I remember who I am, and what I cannot have.



I feel quiet joy. The warm sun washes over my face and my bare feet as I walk round the car park, kicking autumn's earliest leaves from my path as I go. Sleeping cars wait in their spaces. It is Sunday. I hear the eternal, low hum of the city, and birdsong amongst the trees that punctuate the courtyard.

A tiny hand grasps my finger. Her face is pure delight as she patters along beside me, staring up at the birds, pointing at the cars and making engine noises.

The air is rich with the smell of cooking, wafting down from the block's open windows. We're in the heart of the city, and we are home. We are safe. The sky overhead is blue and clear.

She leads me round by my finger, round the park, eagerly babbling about everything that catches her attention. Her hair gleams in the sunlight.

It is one of those days where everything seems pure and crisp, every sense honed to perfection, the colors bright and dazzling. A perfect day.

It is my last memory of my daughter from that time of quiet joy. Come night-fall, when my memory flinches and falters with fear, the gibbous moon will rise and my life will change.

I can never have another day like this again. She is safe and well, but I cannot hold her as I did before. It tears at my heart, but I love her too much to risk a hair on her head coming to harm.

Maybe one day she will be able to understand. Maybe — and that spark of hope is a dangerous one — maybe one day she too will feel the Moon's kiss. I'll be able to hold her again, and she can hunt at my side.



I watch the raven fly.

The sky is livid purple, a fulminating ceiling that casts the twisted cityscape in violet light. The building creaks and moans around me, a tangled mess still wounded by the memory of the Blitz. There's no church here now in the Flesh, but the Shadow hasn't yet forgotten it. Up here, I can look down over this mad world, watch its streets and hunting paths for my prey. But I am distracted. Instead of looking down from my perch, I look up, and I watch the raven fly.

A small part of my mind spitefully tries to ruin the wonderment I am feeling. How does it *actually* fly? The very air here, the wind and sky, is wrought of spirit and symbolism. So is the flapping of those ebon wings needed? Do all the mechanics of wind currents and kinetic energy and whatnot apply, or does the air simply obey the spirit's will and the flapping is just theatre? And if it is theater, then for who is the show put on?

The raven doesn't look like a real one, of course. It's slick black but for crimson eyes. The wings are oddly jointed and twisted, and the talons are sharp and piercing. Strange patterns worm their way along its feathers before sparking off into the atmosphere, leaving a trail of half-made sigils glimmering in its wake.

I want to fly. I want that freedom. I imagine what it would be like to soar through the sky.

We are trapped in Bristol. The Council try and claim otherwise, but we are trapped here. The Pure roam the countryside, keeping us all locked away in our pound. The city is too *much*, too busy, too intense. We need wild hunting grounds to truly be ourselves.

Oh, to be able to fly and leave the city behind.

I watch the raven fly. In coming months I will seek it out, again and again. In time, I will learn new secrets from it, and come as close to friendship as I can with a spirit. They'll name me for it, for what I tease from the raven. It's the beginning of my path to Death Wolf's embrace.

Shortly, my packmate will find me staring up at the livid sky, and I'll get a chastisement I surely deserve for letting the prey slip past our ambush. For now, I watch the raven fly.

• • •

I am who I am, built upon my memories, my experiences. Father. Pack-brother. Lore-keeper. Dreamer. Bone Shadow. I feel Death Wolf's breath on my neck, and the whispers of love and concern from my pack. I am never alone. I am not a man, and I am not a beast.

I am the Raven's Scribe.

The rage and panic ebb away. I take another deep breath; the air is becoming stale. I reach inside once more, call forth the streams of cold Essence, and bind myself in death.

I wait.



One moment, I am at rest, cocooned in cold lifelessness. The next, my stomach lurches, everything goes sideways, and I am falling.

The cold Essence in my blood makes me clumsy and I hit the ground in a tangle, but the impact isn't hard. I realize why as I suck in breath and throw aside death's mantle. The numbness recedes, to be replaced with the sensation of squirming, wet mud sucking at my back and limbs. The air is heavy with moisture and the vibrant smell of moss and mold and rot. In the gloom, I can see the space into which I have fallen — a stream of mud in a tunnel of dirt and vegetation and bone. There are carcasses, human bodies partly consumed by fungus and tangled roots, but I can't smell the reek of carrion.

The sheer intensity of everything — the scents, the sights, the sounds — tell me I am in the Shadow. Weird, twisted shapes of vine scurry away at the edge of my vision, nestling into empty skulls and slithering through cracks. The wet earthen walls are ridged with hints of sigils and faces. The water whispers round my ankles as I haul myself up, trying to convince me to lie back down and let it wash over me.

I ignore it, and focus on the Keeper of the Drowned.

He smirks at me with his panoply of many faces, the arrangement of lacquered visages stolen from sunken ships: figureheads, bloated human skulls, waterlogged posters, and stranger things too. A seeping hydra, the Keeper's necks twine and twist and writhe together. The angular legs that hold up his oozing flesh do their eternal tap-dance of shifting and fidgeting, like the spirit's always got some pent-up nervous energy that it just can't help but bleed off. Sometimes, the wet meat of his body bubbles out a limb or vomits up a piece of rusted debris. One clatters out now, a child's doll all smeared with riverbed muck.

The Keeper of the Drowned, claimant of the sea-slain of Bristol. Hundreds of years of commerce and shipping, of slavery and greed, feeding his hunger and making him fat with power. The slaves who went down with the ship in the storm, the sailors gripped with malady who coughed their own lives out, the merchant-prince brought low by betrayal for the wealth in his coffers. All corpses passed into the Keeper's coffers.

He doesn't own their souls, though. I know that much. Festering cadavers and buried dead are his preserve, and all the flotsam and jetsam of the Bristol Channel, but he can't keep grasp of the ghosts for long. Every story carved in bone within the tribal Registry says as much. He tries to imprison them but they always get away, always go to wherever it is the dead are supposed to go. The Keeper of the Drowned is left with bloated meat and rotten bones, for all his power and ambition.

His smirks grow wider, and a drowned man's arms reach out in open welcome.



We walk through chthonic groves of fungus and corpses. The network of tunnels and caverns seems endless and disorienting. It's like nowhere in the Shadow I've ever seen before. There is no living wind here to whisper maddening syllables in my ear — just the dripping of water and oozing of mud. Sometimes, portions of the caverns shift and flow, the earth bulging like fat flesh as it sculpts itself. Other times, spirits of bone and vine lurch aside from the Keeper's path, watching me hungrily with eyes of blooming rot.

“Where are we?” I ask.

The rotten wood of a mermaid's head twists to look at me with a splintering sound. *We are on a threshold*, the Keeper says, and lips once painted bright red widen in a triumphant grin. *A border between places. The bank of a wide river. My precious gardens and the forefront of my future triumph.*

I nod as if I understand what he's talking about, but it doesn't make any sense. We're deep in the Shadow, that much is clear, in a place with no reflection in the world of Flesh. I listen to the Keeper babble about rivers and building a bridge, and it worries me but I do not have the context to translate his jabbering into something meaningful. Besides, it's not why I'm here.

The rite called to the Keeper and bound him to aid me. To my surprise, he doesn't seem to resent this, but there's no point pushing my luck. Best get this done and over with, and get back to the world of Flesh.

These endless caverns of the dead unnerve me.

“I need answers, Keeper of the Drowned. I need to know what is in the water, what is... washing in with the tide. I need to know what is going wrong.” The lurching monstrosity comes to a halt at my words, its crab-like legs dancing that mad little jig. “I am asking you to let me walk amongst the recently dead, so that I can see what they have seen beneath the water. I am asking you to tell me what you know of what is affecting Lady Avona.”

And there, at that name, the Keeper's dance intensifies. The bouquet of water-rotted faces twitch through a myriad of expressions. He fears Avona, like anyone with any sense, whether spirit or flesh. Still, I need to be blunt. The strictures of the rite demand it, and I don't want to give my once-mentor any room to squirm out of his duty.

Not asking, I think, for I am bound to obey.

I wince. So there is resentment there, after all.

But I will comply not solely for the chains that you so cruelly bind me with. Or for the recompense I am due. But because you are as a son to me, Raven's Scribe. Such long hours did we once talk when you tottered your first steps along Death's path.

The faces offer me a grotesque leer, and I feel my flesh shiver — not with the cold chill of disgust, but the warm anger of my patron's embrace. I snort and bite down on the rage, keeping my flesh reigned in from the urges of the hunt.

The Keeper notices, the leer widening.

You did bring my recompense, did you not?

I sigh, and nod. Out comes the folder from my jacket, filled with printed paper. It's crumpled and wet, but the Keeper doesn't mind; a pincer takes it gingerly. Grotesque tongues lick out, rasping the letters from the pages. Shipping reports, ferry timetables, passenger lists. The Keeper drinks them down.

You were ever so considerate of me. Always reliable. Of all the Great Predator's children you alone were so suited to my Gifts.

I say nothing.



The dead man's flesh is soft and yielding beneath my hand. I tilt his head back; there's not much left of his waterlogged face. Crustaceans scurry into the gaping spaces of his throat and sinuses.

Even now, I don't know how the Keeper gets his claws on the corpses. I stand in a grove of the dead, their sodden bodies half-eaten by the mossy walls. This man died at sea, yet somehow the tides conveyed him to the Keeper's larder. He died in the Flesh, yet somehow he has ended up in the Shadow.

We pride ourselves on our understanding of the realm of spirits, but we still only stand on the shore of knowledge. We cast our nets into endless fathoms and unexplored deeps. I crave answers to this mystery, but those answers are not the prey I seek right now, the prey the Protectorate *needs* to catch.

I focus on the task at hand and stab my fingers into the corpse's eye sockets.

There's just enough of the jellied organs left in there for what I need, despite the best efforts of the sea's scavengers. My nails dig in, and I hear the slithering chuckle of the Keeper right behind me, and I have to fight the urge to let the killer rise and turn and tear into him. A snarl escapes my lips, and I wonder why I feel the rage washing over me so swiftly. The Keeper is reprehensible, but he is not my enemy.

With the dead man's eyes at my fingertips, I feel the wounds on my spirit that the Keeper left when he carved enlightenment into me, and I call up the power that is his gift to me.

Just like that, I see what the dead man saw in his final moments.



Another carcass, another journey into the vision of the dead. It happens over and over again as we prowl the orchard of the drowned dead, the Keeper pointing out the bodies that will give me the answers I seek. I douse myself in dying minds, seeing what they saw, feeling what they felt. Pain, fear, terror, resignation. The despairing stream of guttering, flickering images washes over me.

The Keeper is always there, at my shoulder. He is gleeful as I feel each final breath rattle in a throat that is not mine. He puts me in mind of a trainer delighted

at the tricks their pet monkey performs. He — no, *it* — disgusts me. I want to tear those masks aside, and see what faces truly lie beneath. I crave its secrets and to feel its ichor dribble from my jaws.

Slowly, the picture comes together, pieces gleaned from the eyes of the dead. Like a masterful artist, the Keeper knows the carcasses that will add a new sweep to the image being painted in my mind. Each revelation feeds my fear and fury, and it knows it. It *delights* the spirit.

Something is rising, out in the water. Something squirms and flops in the mud of the Bristol Channel, surrounded by a crooning brood of wet, writhing progeny. Something breathes, down there in the murk, and the waters of the Avon carry in its tainted exhalations with each tide.

A dying man tries to scream, but his lungs are filled with water. He stares with bulging eyes as something immense shifts below him, sending up plumes of dirty brine. It looks back at him, and reaches out in an embrace. His skull shatters as questing tendrils break open the hull of his mind.

A woman cannot see what it is that writhes into her left eye-socket, but I can *feel* her pain and shock. She is slumped over the edge of the boat, blood pouring into the water, and then I feel a dark, alien presence in the memory and she is *gone*, replaced with something else.

The sky overhead is blue and bright as the man slips into the water, enjoying the freedom as he swims with confidence. Not a single soul is about to spoil his solitude. He dives down and, through the sunlit waters, sees the piscine, many-limbed shape the moment before it kills him.

An old woman cannot explain why she does it, and her elderly limbs ache with age and effort, but she splashes down the muddy bank of the Avon. Her dress is ruined by the mire. Overhead, the lights of the Clifton suspension bridge burn a spar of lamination against the night sky. Her feet find the water, following the call that demands she dance to its tune. The tide is coming in. The moon overhead peeks through the clouds, and she feels its presence as she has felt throughout her life, though no one would ever believe the things she has seen. The rising waters carry something with them, something malign, and the spark of it is so vile that the Wolf-Blooded old lady's heart simply stops.

• • •

The tunnel ahead stretches out far into the gloom, well beyond my vision. Even the luminous, muttering fungi that prowl the earthen walls are too faint to reveal the destination to which my host is leading me.

“There’s something waiting in the Channel,” I say. “Its very breath taints the river. Every tide brings more of it. No wonder Lady Avona is going mad.” No wonder, indeed. The twin-aspected spirit of the river is being poisoned, even if I don’t really understand the nature of the venom. “And Jenny Greenteeth... the flayed bodies in the water, she doesn’t even remember killing them.”

The Keeper murmurs with pleasure.

“She’s going mad, both of her. Aren’t you concerned? Don’t you fear her?”

*More dead to join my court and build my bridge, the bloated spirit chuckles.
More dead men to decorate my walls.*

I glare at him — at *it*. The Keeper is not human. It is not my friend. I can’t afford to think of it as anything other than what it truly is. A spirit.

“She’s losing her grasp on the world, Keeper. Avona’s becoming even colder, but Greenteeth is getting more territorial. She’ll see you as a rival. She’ll rip you to pieces.” Each time I mention the great totem of the river, the Keeper gives that nervous chuckle and does that little jig with its crab-legs, but somehow doesn’t seem as worried as it should.

I know how to survive, my little wolf, a woman’s bloodless face lisps at me. I have existed since long before you were born in blood and flesh, and shall exist long after you finally go to the death you so eagerly court.

I come to a stop. I can hear the sound of lapping water from down the tunnel. The air is still wet, but now tinged with the taste of salt, with brine. The earthen walls bulge strangely, broken in places with the rotten spars of long-sunk vessels. It feels like I am walking down the gullet of a leviathan of the sea.

“You know what it is, Keeper of the Drowned. You know enough to point me to the dead who had answers, and you know enough not to be afraid for your own position. Tell me what is out there.” I meet the gaze of its many eyes, and let the anger that simmers inside reinforce my words with a growl. “Tell me as you are bound for the price I have paid.”

You have grown so much since first I took you in, since first I dredged you from Jenny’s hungry jaws. So strong, so confident. A predator to be admired and feared.

“You’re wasting my time. Tell me.”

Of course, my little wolf, my cub born of death.

Its tone mocks me, but at the same time it carries fondness. I think, then, that perhaps a spirit can feel love. Perhaps the Keeper truly does see me as its spiritual son, a vessel of Death that it has carved with its own claws.

What has woken in the sea is old, so very old. Far older than even I. Old as the world itself.

The spirit starts off down the tunnel again with surprising vigor, and I have to lengthen my stride just to follow it. Excitement rises in my blood. My prey is close, now. I hunt true understanding of the threat we face, and the chase is nearly done.

It is called idigam.

The word is strange. I speak it, let it roll on my tongue. It means nothing to me, does not help shape the picture I have of this foe.

It has risen from the deeps to harvest the crop it sowed long ago. To see how the seeds it planted have flourished. Its wet brood nuzzle at its flank, eager to rise up and take the world as their own. It is a tide of Essence, a flood, drinker-of-all, shaper-of-spirit.

“It is a spirit?”

Yes and no.

“Answer me clearly,” I snarl, that anger rising again.

Oh my little wolf. The lines are not as clearly drawn as you wish, it mutters with that same loathsome fondness. And though it pains me to admit, even I do not understand the Great Teacher Beneath The Waves. But I know this, that it hates you, you and all of yours. And that it has waited long eons for this time.

Ahead, in the darkness, I hear water rushing as if from a river. Something is gnawing at my mind, and a rising sense of unease floods my thoughts. Concentrate, keep focused on the task.

“How can we fight it?” I ask. I try to keep the hope from my voice, to sound like the confident predator that the Keeper thinks I am.

You won't

I scowl, lope ahead a few steps and block the spirit's path. Before I can demand it to answer me properly, I come to a realization. The stench of brine is growing stronger. We're worming out of the deep Shadow that the Keeper makes its lair. We're going out to sea. I turn and stare down the tunnel.

There is no rushing river. Something vast and aqueous is washing towards us. I can smell the tainted Essence in the air.

What would a spirit of death give to someone it thinks it loves?

“You've betrayed me,” I spit, anger rising hot in my blood.

Your rite compelled me to answer you, not to keep you alive.

“This is why you're not afraid. You're its *servant*,” I snap. My flesh quivers; bones crunch and lengthen.

The masquerade of faces, wooden and flesh, paper and metal, offer a series of serene countenances to me. *I am a survivor.*

“But you've forgotten who I am,” I spit, as my face warps and lengthens, my teeth twist into fangs.

You are my pupil, my spirit-carved child, and you are ready for the final lesson of Death.

“I am *Death Wolf's* child, Keeper of the Drowned,” I howl. The tunnel has become cramped, too small, like in the coffin. The Keeper has become small too, shrinking before my rage, and I reach out for it. “You have betrayed me! *Su A Sar-Hith Sa!*”

I rip the weight from my chest, the dead man's gift that bears more than a thousand years of memories within it. The Keeper wails in genuine fear as I wrap the chain that the ancient memento hangs from around its many necks. Armored legs and snapping pincers stab and slice at my flesh, but the pain is nothing, just a fleeting irritation. I scream my defiance in my mentor's face and twist the chain, bind it tight, forcing the amulet against the spirit's Essence-rich meat.

I yank and haul, fighting the old glutton's weight, straining until it seems even my rage is flagging. Desperate talons scrabble and rip into my guts. Blood and ichor mix with the salt-water at our feet, where the water foams and burbles with hungry glee.

At last, the Keeper's struggles cease. Its limbs fall limp as a stream of black fluid vomits from all its mouths, and I toss the dissolving carcass aside. The old sailor's charm burns into the corpse, blazing with Essence. It witnessed the spirit's birth, hanging around the neck of the man whose drowning gasps brought the Keeper into existence. Now it has seen the Keeper's end.

I raise my head and howl again. I give it all the fury, all the defiance, all the *hatred* I can muster. I can see it now, the *idigam*, a slithering bulk oozing down the tunnel towards me, but I will not show it fear. I was reborn beneath the gibbous moon. I will go down fighting, and I will give this horror scars to remember me by.

I let the rage take me.



The sky overhead is a cloudy patchwork, touched by the moon's light. The rain has passed, but the earth is still sodden wet, like the city always seems to be these days. Water and damp rising everywhere, the gutters overflowing, mold blooming in dank cellars and on old walls.

The pack haul the coffin up, the wooden casket covered in dirt. It's too heavy. They set it down on the graveyard's grass, and something inside sloshes.

Cathy tears the muddy lid off, trembling with rising anger and fear. She stares within, then staggers back, and howls to the sky. She doesn't care that they're in a city, and that the Council will be upset at her outburst. She doesn't care if anyone is watching. She lets her blood take control, and lets her flesh slither and shift, and she howls and howls and howls while Walker flinches back from the rage that boils from her.

Within the coffin is a soup of briny water, and a man's clean bones.

Tanya kneels at the coffin's edge, reaching into the fluid with one hand. She weeps as she takes hold of the skull, pulls it out, presses its brow to her own.

"We'll remember you, Raven's Scribe, brother mine. We'll remember you." A moment's will, and one finger lengthens into a razor talon. Another moment's work as she carves Death Wolf's mark into the Cahalith's skull.

THE FUNERAL OF ELI MARKS

BY MATTHEW MCFARLAND

The wind is biting cold, and there's nothing around to break it. The wind bites like it wants to hurt someone, and more than one of the people assembled on the hilltop wish they'd brought coats. They don't show their cold, though. They're strong. They've each seen more pain and bloodshed than most soldiers, most cops, most doctors — because these people are werewolves.

But more than one of them cries anyway. The grave is fresh. The headstone is simple granite, hand-carved by one of the werewolves with fresh tears on his cheeks. The Uratha look at the stone, and finally one of them steps forward.

He looks old. His face is worn with sun, his arms are scarred with many battles, and his walk is slightly bent. A stranger might peg him as 70 or 75. He is in fact nearly 100, but he's lost count. He isn't crying, because he's buried too many friends to have tears left for the deceased. Normally he wouldn't even speak... but this is Eli.

He looks down at the headstone, and sighs.

Here lies Eli Marks. Died alone, surrounded by his friends.

“Look, that's what he wanted on the stone.

“Eli's headstone is miles from anywhere. It's on top of a hill that no human being ever climbs, outside a cornfield that hasn't been tilled in decades, in a town where the people know to stay the hell inside on certain nights. It's the kind of place that Eli hated, but he wanted to be buried here. I imagine that's because he knew it would be quiet, and he figured that the People would come to visit his grave. He's right; here we all are.

“Eli's pack. Makes perfect sense that Eli would be hanging around with you people. You're all different tribes, and when I met you, that just boiled my blood.

But see, where I'm from, if you Changed you joined the *Suthar Anzuth*, or you left the area and never darkened a doorstep again, and that's just how it was. I didn't feel like leaving my hometown, so I became a Blood Talon, and I've never regretted it.

"When I met Eli Marks, he was just a kid, barely into his 20s. I was already well into my 50s. I'd seen my own son grow up, get married, and swear that he'd never talk to his crazy old man again. Eli asked all the wrong questions. He asked me if I had kids, and he asked me where my pack was. He asked me about my wife, and then when he'd picked himself up off the ground, he asked me why I'd hit him. And finally I got tired of putting him off, and so I talked about my son and my wife and my pack, and you know what that son-of-a-whore said to me?"

"Yeah, you do, because he said it to all of you. He said, 'Good thing you've got a tribe to support you.'

"Damn, but I got sick of hearing that. I never had much use for the *Thihirtha Numea* — sorry, but I don't — and I did not like him throwing it in my face. But you know, there were days that I got to wondering, where was my tribe when my wife was murdered? Where was my tribe when my son thought I was crazy for talking to shit that wasn't there? Where was Fenris when my packmates fell to their deaths? I know what this sounds like, but I'm standing over the grave of the Uratha that I —

"I'm sorry. Someone else can...."

The old man steps back. Another werewolf reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, and he flinches, but then turns and nods in thanks.

A woman steps forward. She is much younger, but she walks with a cane. The bandages on her legs are fresh, and the wounds there haven't completely healed. Several of the werewolves here have offered to perform a rite to heal those wounds, but she has refused. She brushes blonde hair, still stained with blood, out of her eyes, and she puts a hand on her packmate's gravestone.

"Eli Marks, I never would have thought you'd go out this way. I thought you'd outlive us all. But then I've never been right about you, never once.

"You know the first time I met him, I thought he was human? Yeah, I know how ridiculous that is, but he had that stupid ring on, the one that masked his scent. I actually hit on him. Stop that, assholes, I didn't know. He corrected me right away, and I ran.

"We were in DC, outside the reflecting pool. I was looking for spirits there, and Eli, well, he was looking for Uratha. He tracked me down at a coffee shop three miles away, and found me sitting outside chain-smoking and pounding down green tea or whatever the hell I was drinking back then. And we got to talking. He pegged me as *Farsil Luhai* right away, and he ribbed me about not knowing he was one of the People. And he said it to me, too, 'Your tribe would understand, right?'"

“And I wanted to say, ‘What? If I fucked a werewolf and gave birth to one of those god-awful things? Would *Sagrim-Ur* forgive that?’ But then I thought about it, and I wondered if he really would. Do you lose points with the Firstborn for thinking about this shit?”

“Anyway, Eli could get away with that kind of thing. He said it with a smile, and you had to figure that he was asking because he wanted to know the answer. And I had to think about it, because he asked, and I figured it out — it doesn’t matter if Red Wolf would forgive me. Red Wolf trusted me not to do stupid shit like that, and I don’t want to betray that trust.

“I’m sorry. I should be talking about Eli. Fuck. I’m no good at this shit.” She takes a step away from the gravestone and throws her arms around another werewolf. She buries her face in his chest and starts to cry, and he strokes her blood-stained hair. He has much that he wants to say, because Eli Marks was his packmate, too, but he can’t, not when she needs him. Instead, he nods to a werewolf standing at the back of the group, and the assemblage turns to face him.

The Uratha is younger than the first speaker, but he is clearly the most powerful Uratha here. He has a glimmer of silver to his skin, even though his marks aren’t visible. His name is Severn, and he leans upon a staff, into which he has bound a spirit of lightning. When he speaks, the rumble of thunder speaks behind him.

“Eli Marks shouldn’t have died this way. I know his packmates feel they fought their best against the Pure, and perhaps so. But for him to die fighting the *Imru* — and the *Anshega* are still the People, no matter what you might think — is a travesty. He should have died fighting something terrible from the *Hisil*, something that couldn’t think or reason. Eli Marks was a creature of reason, and this....

“But there is nothing for it, now. Eli died well, I’m certain of that, and my only regret in knowing him is that I never discharged my debt to him. When we met, nearly ten years ago now, I was a cocksure alpha of a pack of my fellow *Iminir*. I know that some here would say that things have not changed, but would you say it to my face?”

“Eli did. That was his gift. He somehow managed to say exactly the wrong thing in exactly the right way. When we met, he was trespassing on my pack’s territory, and we surrounded him. I demanded that he show his belly, and he did, but he said, ‘Winter Wolf must be quite proud of you, because you’re so strong.’ He didn’t sound sarcastic, but why would he say such a thing except to mock? And so I called down lightning on him, just to teach him a lesson....

“And the lightning would not come. Perhaps I simply failed to rouse the spirit of my staff, but I believed then — and I still do now — that *Skolis-Ur* disapproved of this show of power. And so I helped Eli Marks to his feet, and I dusted him off, and I told him that he was welcome in my lands.

“Three days later, our territory came under attack by a being that we could not see, feel, or track. And Eli Marks knew how to beat it, using a Gift that no spirit in

my lands could teach. And I told him then, as we stood on a battlefield marked with my blood, his blood, and the blood of that damnable creature that killed two of my pack, that I would repay him for his assistance and his lesson.

“I never did. But I thank *Amahan Iduth*, *Urfarah*, and *Skolis-Ur* that I was able to bleed with him that day.”

The thunder builds to a climax. Severn steps back, and heads around him incline out of respect. But Severn, too, is nodding, his head bowed to the gravestone. A long moment passes before anyone else speaks.

The Uratha who speaks next moves to the gravestone without anyone seeing him. He looks over the rest of them with a slight sneer. He is thin, black, and young, possibly the youngest present. He wears a pistol in a hip holster, and although the assembled werewolves can't see it, the symbol on the hilt marks him as *Meninna*, though he himself would not use the First Tongue name for his tribe.

“You all make Eli sound like a faggot.

“Hey, goddamn it, think how I feel! Eli was my friend, and here I have to listen to you making him out like he's some touchy-feely hippie guru pussy! Eli wasn't no faggot. He was People, and he was a fighter, and I don't know what the rest of you saw, but I didn't see him take shit from anybody. Not even me. Hell, I shot the fucker, and he didn't take shit from me.

“He rolled into Atlanta one night. He's walking through College Park like he owns the place, and I'm figuring somebody's gonna punch his card before too long anyway. But then I realized he's one of us, so I better roll on him before someone else does. I told him he'd better step off, and there's fucking Eli with his ‘Yeah, I guess you're right, I'd never see you coming, huh?’

“And I look around, and I'm standing in the middle of the goddamn street. Nearest cover is thirty yards away, and I can't exactly just change forms out in front of God and everybody.

“No, I didn't shoot him then. That was later, and that was over something I ain't telling you all about. But I punched him in the head, and he punched me right back, and there we are knocking each other down and he's not budging and neither am I. And finally I grab his ass and tell him whose territory he's in, and he says, ‘Oh, OK then,’ and asks me if his pack could maybe find a place to hole up for a while.

“I walked away from that shit bleeding and sore, and you damn well better believe I never rolled on anybody like that again. All that time I'm walking around Atlanta thinking what a badass I am ‘cause I'm a Hunter in Darkness, like the name means shit. Thank you, Eli, and fuck the rest of you.”

The young man hears some snarls as he walks away, but he doesn't turn. He sits down partway down the hill. He wants to leave, but he wants to howl for his friend, too, and he can't do that until the funeral ends.

Eli's Iron Master packmate has composed herself, and stepped away from the werewolf who comforted her before. He takes off a tan leather jacket and folds it neatly, handing it to her. Then he steps up to the gravestone and falls to his knees. He whispers in the First Tongue for a moment, and the wind dies down a little. The night is still cold, and only the barest sliver of moon shines. The werewolf traces the words on the granite with this finger, and then stands and faces the People. He has tears in his eyes, and like his packmate, his clothes and hair are bloodstained. They have refused to wash the blood from their bodies until Eli is put to rest, and tonight is to be the cleansing for them. He doesn't know about his packmate, but he feels like this blood will never leave him.

"I killed Eli Marks.

"I don't mean that figuratively. I mean it literally. But I want to explain what happened, how I failed. And then you can decide what to do.

"I was the last member of our pack to join up. The others didn't want to take me on because I was lousy in a fight. I guess you're expecting me to say Eli persuaded them otherwise, but he was the one who was most dead-set against it. Eli would tell me it was because I'd chosen the Bone Shadows. He'd say that we were so scared of death we'd made a religion out of it, and that secretly we just wanted Death Wolf to reject us so maybe we wouldn't die. Hey, we all know Eli said shit like that all the time. What's annoying is how often he was right.

"A month after my First Change, a murder-spirit started hanging around me. It looked kind of like a crow, but... shit, you know how spirits are. It wasn't a crow-spirit, you knew just by looking. It was waiting for me to kill someone. And finally I told it to fuck off, that I wasn't killing anybody, and it left. It was right, though. It was just early.

"When the Pure attacked us the other night, Eli was right next to me. The rest of the pack was half a mile away. They ranked us out. They hit Eli and me because we were the youngest and the weakest. Eli wasn't weak, but he looks weak. Maybe he looks harmless more than weak, I don't know. But they hit us, and Eli took the time to howl because he knew we were screwed on our own.

"We fought them off as best we could, but by the time the others got there — less than a minute — we were already pretty cut up. And then the *Zathu* opened up and all I saw was... crows. But not crows, these were murder-spirits. All one spirit. They were —

"If I hadn't done what I did, he'd be one of them. He'd finally have found a tribe, because those bastards would have forced him. I knew that. I knew it by looking at those fucking crows, because I knew that they weren't going to kill him. That's what you get for looking at death so long, daring it to look away first. You know when it's coming for you, and those murder-spirits weren't there for business. They were there serving that pack of *Anshega*.

"And they grabbed him. He was hurt, so hurt he'd dropped to *Hishu*, bleeding from all over. They were picking him up to take him away. And so I... I had to."

He falls to his knees again, but he doesn't cry. He waits for judgment. The assemblage is stunned, angry, but they look to his pack.

The Iron Master helps the Bone Shadow to his feet. She looks long into his eyes, and she knows that he is not lying. If anyone knows death and when it is necessary, it is the *Hirfathra Hissu*.

He thanks her silently, and then he changes to wolf form. The rest of the Uratha do the same, and they draw breath to howl. But when the howl comes, it is not the loud, dissonant howl of a pack of wolves. It is deafening.

It is the howl of the fear of night.

It is the howl of the taste of battle.

It is the howl of the last breath of the dying.

It is the howl of the fury of the storm.

It is the howl of change and chaos.

The werewolves look to the skies and see unbridled rage. There are shapes moving behind the clouds, five wolves that snarl with hatred and vengeance. The Firstborn of Father Wolf, the Chosen of Luna, the patrons of the five Tribes of the Moon look down on this assemblage. And they demand blood.

The assemblage runs, the ritual of laying Eli Marks to rest giving way to a hunt the likes of which this area has never seen. The werewolves hear voices echoing from the storm, from the ground, from the world of spirits and from the paved roads, and the promise of blood.

The old Blood Talon feels Fenris's Fire, and he knows that Fenris never abandoned him. But Fenris cannot succor his children in their despair; he can only feed their fury.

The young Hunter in Darkness knows that Black Wolf is there in the forest of the city, and that he has served her well and kept his territory sacred. Bullets or claws, his territory has never been violated.

The revered Storm Lord knows that he can repay his debt tonight, and his many silver marks blaze white-hot like lightning for a moment. He takes the lead and howls to the People to follow.

Eli's packmate, the Iron Master, spies a rail-thin wolf behind a tree, and she knows that she was right, that Red Wolf does trust her, and that she was right to be curious.

At the rear of the pack, a Bone Shadow stumbles. His guilt, his grief, drags him down, and he feels cold teeth on the back of his neck. Not yet, Death Wolf whispers, picking up her cub and setting him on his paws. Not tonight.

Somewhere, a pack of Pure werewolves looks at the sky and shudders. They are right to fear. The *Lushar Iduthag* are coming for them.

Tonight, Eli Marks will be avenged.

DESERT DREAMING HUNT

BY LEATA SHEALES

In the darkness under the star-spattered sky, John Tjangala Stonewood, Ithaeur and Bone Shadow of the Irretye Dreaming, hunted *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* as his prey.

Sha'gash Nuningsisa had spewed into the Shadow from one of the many drunken nights in the town of Alice Springs. Had the Forsaken held the town, the spirit would have stayed in the *Hisil*, feeding on the Essence of humanity's obsession with intoxication. Instead, Fire-Touched Anshega controlled the territory and cared little for protecting humans from the *Hisil*'s residents.

Sha'gash Nuningsisa was tougher than its kin and fattened on a feast of lesser spirits of alcohol and revelry. It was a reflection of human addiction — it needed its fix and pushed limits to get it. It rode drunks and urged them to excess, imbibing beyond the point of injury and death. It thrilled in the sensations and abandoned its poisoned hosts without a care.

The spirit hadn't meant to leave Alice Springs. Its latest doomed host had stepped into a car with three other drunken humans, and smashed into a feral camel less than fifty miles from the town. The unrelenting dry had forced the animals closer to human settlements in search of water and they wandered across dark roads in ignorance of any danger. Only foolish drivers braved the desert roads after dark — most knew to watch the scrub carefully for the unwitting, wandering killers. Under the effects of *Sha'gash Nuningsisa*'s influences, the humans were intoxicated beyond the point of foolishness.

When *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* woke from the blackness its host was near death — the other humans were already dead. It was confused and lost. The dark sky sparkled with stars, not street lights. It was afraid and vulnerable, and accidentally fled further away from town and into the darkness.

Sha'gash Nuningsisa had a three day head start by the time Stonewood arrived at the scene of the car accident. The trail was already colder than he preferred, but John knew tricks to warm it. He was favored by Eagle's Dreaming, and the soaring hunter saw nearly everything from high in the sky. Something from this crash would lead him towards his quarry.

The wrecked car was off the side of the road, upside-down and twisted from the accident. Stonewood sniffed at the wreckage — old blood, oil, plastics, the stink of human sweat in the ruined upholstery — then opened up his senses to *Hisil* and sniffed again. This time he found the spirit of the car, jolted awake by the wreckage trauma.

Stonewood leaned in close and whispered to it in the First Tongue, spilling a flicker of Essence through the Gift in his soul. The spirit cried out in despair and pain at the damage to its vessel, but Stonewood hushed its complaints with a snarled command. The terrified spirit obeyed in fear of the Uratha.

Satisfied at the spirit's compliance, Stonewood barked questions at it but quickly realized the spirit knew almost nothing of what had occurred. The Ithaeur clenched his jaw with forced patience and teased out what little the spirit knew, hoping that it would have at least seen which direction *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* had gone. After much coaxing, Stonewood learned that his prey had fled away from Alice Springs. Stonewood grunted in satisfaction — if the spirit had returned to the town, it would have entered Fire-Touched territory and been beyond the Forsaken's grasp.

Stonewood knew almost nothing about his prey. The wolf-blooded police officer who alerted the Dreaming Lodge had taken some description from the victim's confused ghost, but it didn't know it had been spirit-ridden. Although Stonewood's Gifts allowed him to see the lingering shades of dead humans, the weak ghost lacked the motivation and anchors to keep it tethered to the physical world and had faded with the sunrise.

What little Stonewood knew was enough for him to claim the right to hunt *Sha'gash Nuningsisa*, even though he didn't yet know the spirit's name. The Bone Shadow placed his battered satchel on the ground and removed what he needed to perform the *Siskur-Dah*, the sacred rite of the hunt.

He grasped long brown wing feathers from a Wedge-Tailed Eagle between his fingers and curled his hands into fists. The feathers jutted outwards and fluttered in the wind as Stonewood extended his arms and danced a lazy, spiraling circle around the shattered car. He swooped in close to examine it and see the caked blood on the metal and glass; a dull rust darker than the red desert sands. He threw his head back as he circled back away from the car and shrieked the piercing scream of Eagle into the sky, declaring his dedication to the hunter of the skies and proclaiming all that flew, walked, swam, or slithered below him as his rightful prey.

The Ithaeur's spiraling dance took him away from the wreck and circled to where *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* abandoned its host to die. The remnants of flesh streaked the

barren, rocky dirt. Desiccated pools of blood and life-giving fluids stained the earth to mark where the Shadow had transgressed against the flesh and violated Father Wolf's laws. Stonewood leapt high into the air, arms outstretched, head forward and down, and landed with violent force on the victim's death-stain. His bare feet clawed at the ground, grasping the prey in the talons of his totem, as he struck at the air with his beak, rending and tearing at the imagined ephemeral flesh of the spirit.

Stonewood felt the power of the rite flow through him as he danced the Eagle's hunt, casting the spirit as the prey in his shadow hunt and himself as the predator. He danced and swooped and struck and killed time and again before whirling away and repeating the steps, each time binding his Uratha nature closer to his sacred duty.

When he felt the dance reach its climax and the rite's power settle into his flesh and spirit, Stonewood stood as straight as he could with arms outstretched and screamed the Eagle's shriek once more into the desert. All creatures within earshot shuddered and fell silent as the Uratha staked his claim. For a moment the world paused and held its breath before releasing it again to empower Stonewood to conduct his hunt.

The Bone Shadow packed his belongings into his bag and growled a respectful thanks to the wrecked car's terrified spirit, before shifting to Urhan and disappearing as a sleek black shadow beneath the unrelenting sun.



The hunt's beginning was frustrating, even with Stonewood's long-practiced patience. He learned the name and nature of *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* from the local spirits whose domains it had trespassed. He learned *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* was young but was hungry, possessing a savage predatory sense. Its consuming nature soured its interactions with the local broods. Wherever it passed, it fed. The natural spirits of the dry, barren land all fell prey to its ever-hungry maw and fled from their own domains. *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* grew stronger and bolder with each new victim.

Stonewood felt he was closing in on his prey. Increased traces of humanity warned that he approached one of the remote Outback human camps. Vehicle tracks, prey animals' wariness, and predator's cautious curiosity all spoke of human habitation. *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* had detected humanity's spoor.

Stonewood smelled blood and smoke on the shifting winds hours before he laid eyes on the human camp. He had approached cautiously from downwind, taking a circuitous approach to scout the area. The strength of the scent was more than he could believe from a spirit-urged night of excess drinking and partying, and he feared the spirit had violated more of Father Wolf's laws.

The Ithaeur crouched flat at the edge of the bushland surrounding the camp, concealed by a clump of stunted tea trees, and drew the shadows closer to his sleek black Urhan form. He watched and waited, motionless.

The camp wasn't large; just four government houses arranged in a square, each looking onto the central fire pit. Stonewood had seen dozens like it scattered across the desert — it probably housed between ten and thirty people depending on the season. Torn and dismembered body parts were scattered across the red-brown dirt between the buildings. Arms and legs lay haphazardly away from their bodies discarded on the dirt. A dozen heads stared lifelessly in random directions. One faced Stonewood from less than ten yards away, dead eyes unseeing through half-closed eyelids.

Stonewood suspected the carnage was all a lure to draw in Uratha hunters. He wondered how prepared *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* was for confrontation. Were the body parts ritually arranged in a way that could bind or injure the werewolf, despite their seeming randomness? To the Bone Shadow, these were valid and dangerous questions. The prey was deadly and a certain respect was its due, so Stonewood waited and he watched as the sun beat down and baked what congealed blood hadn't been slurped down by the thirsty desert.

As the last rays of daylight slipped behind the horizon, Stonewood silently rose from his crouch and padded into the camp. The iron tang of blood on the air had faded as it soaked into the ground. The bodies had the early stench of rancid meat, and the stink of shit from their evacuated bowels overlaid all other scents. Swarms of angry flies buzzed swarms away from their grizzly meals as Stonewood padded through the settlement. The Uratha moved carefully, but after checking the entire area he was confident that the slaughter was as straight-forward as it appeared.

With the soft snap of twisting tendons and the grinding of reshaping bones, Stonewood shifted to Hishu and stepped up to the closest house. He could smell more blood and meat inside. Its door was ripped from the hinges and lay discarded on the porch. Stonewood touched as little as he could as he moved through the house. More bodies were inside. The carnage resembled the dream-remembered scenes of *Kuruth* that haunted Stonewood's sleep each night.

Stonewood quickly searched the other three houses. The severed heads showed thirteen people had lived at the camp when *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* found it — three men, seven women, and three children. The humans had gorged themselves in an orgy of bloodshed and violence before they died. Most body parts had human bite marks, and soft human nails had scratched deep into flesh, but the dismemberment was done with a blade like a meat cleaver or machete. It appeared that *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* wanted its victims to tear each other apart, but they lacked the natural weaponry. Unless *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* had manifested a physical form — which Stonewood hadn't seen any evidence of — the butchery of each body meant the spirit had possessed another resident of the camp and forced the host to perform the bloody excesses.

Back in Urhan, Stonewood found footprints reeking of blood and shit walking away from the camp. The killer appeared to be heedless of anyone tracking him. Stonewood was unhappy that he hadn't prevented the slaughter, but he knew his

prey couldn't be too far ahead. Even a human body driven by a monstrous spirit relied on two legs to walk. On four paws, Stonewood could move faster and easily track the strong trail the spirit left behind.

The Ithaeur had another task before he abandoned the dead camp. He opened his senses to the spirit world around him, steeling himself for the spirits of murder, violence, and blood that would be drawn to this scene like the buzzing flies. The pale, white light from the thin sliver of moon made everything appear more vivid. The buildings' dull colors gained depth and vibrancy, but so did the pools and splatters of blood across the camp. The human bodies were pale, unreal things to the spirit sight, but their blood called to the denizens of the Shadow. Swarms of tiny, hungry spirits writhed over the slaughter scene, but the greater spirits of murder and bloodshed were absent. Stonewood frowned. In his experience, this absence meant that either *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* had consumed them as rivals, or it was collecting a brood.

This discovery changed the hunt. Stonewood didn't know how many he now faced, and didn't want another slaughtered human camp. He had to tell the Dreaming Lodge what he had found, and prepared himself to perform another Rite.

Stonewood used a blood-stained stick to trace a circle through the dirt, representing the unending bond shared by the Dreaming Lodge and the support its members gave to one another. He shifted to Dalu and stepped within the circle, reflecting on what his Uratha heritage meant and showing the Moon Mother his right to call upon her power. He held another eagle's feather in his right hand, and with his left hand he flicked a thin, wet mixture of victim's blood and beer he had found in one of the houses, marking what he had to share.

With the symbols of his Dreaming Rite satisfied, Stonewood sat cross-legged in the circle and allowed his thoughts to drift over the hunt and what had brought him here. Though he had still not seen *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* itself, he brought the spiritual scent to mind and released it to the dreaming winds. He brought to mind what knowledge the Wolf-Blood cop had learned from the ghost and willed it on. He recalled information from the spirits he had encountered and bundled them into the magic. He imagined the clearest images and scents he could of the camp's carnage and opened his eyes to sharpen the detail. Finally, he thought on the absence of spirits that should have been present and added that to the mix.

The Bone Shadow took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, feeling the combined memories, thoughts, and impressions rippling away from him, carried by the bonds of the Dreaming Lodge. The Rite marked where he was and the direction he would go. It included the urgency, but Stonewood couldn't rely on help before he found his prey. The distances were great and the Uratha were spread thin. The Dreaming Rite was insurance if he failed and was killed by the prey. If that happened, the Dreaming Lodge would take up the hunt and finish the job.

With his lodge duty complete, the grim-faced Uratha stood from the circle and gathered his things, then shifted to Urhan and leapt into the darkness after his quarry.



Barbara Perrurle Petyarre arrived at the camp two days after Stonewood sent his call. A Cahalith of the Goanna Dreaming, she didn't come with stealth; she bounded forwards in Urshul form, howling her arrival and challenging any prey to face her.

Old-man Crow stood beside the circle where Stonewood had sent the dreaming. He watched the massive near-wolf land near him, staring at him with yellow eyes and a drooling snarl. The Rahu didn't look away. He didn't move. He wasn't frozen with the panic of prey. His lack of motion was confidence. He could tear her apart, if needed.

Barbara stared at Crow. Crow stared back. Then Urhan melted away as she shifted to Hishu, never taking her eyes off the Rahu, but with recognition and respect instead of challenge.

"Angepe," she greeted Crow in the tongue of their human ancestry.

"Barbara," he replied. Both Uratha were long survivors of the harsh desert, and had hunted together many times for the lodge. Both had answered Stonewood's message.

Crow pointed in the direction Stonewood had gone and shifted to Urhan, ready to race across the hot desert after the prey. Barbara stepped in front of Crow and held up her hand. The large red-brown wolf looked up at her questioningly.

"I reckon I know where the spirit's heading," she said. "Either it's made it to the next camp, or Stonewood's taken care of it. I've got a car waiting nearby."

Crow shifted back to Hishu and grinned at her. "Car? Getting old, Barb?" he teased.

She snorted, "Look who's talking, Old Crow. There's more gray in your pelt than red now."

Both laughed with comfortable familiarity, and then two wolves raced through the hot scrub towards the car by the road.



The two Uratha watched the next camp in fading daylight. It was quiet. A few mongrel dogs wandered about, looking for scraps among the rubbish strewn across the ground. The humans were nowhere to be seen. The mingled scents of alcohol, vomit, and blood carried on the soft, hot breeze. Crow looked down the sights of a rifle he'd retrieved from Barbara's car, while she channeled Essence through Gifts that expanded her awareness and saw more than what eyes alone could see.

Neither werewolf was fooled. They watched the dogs carefully, seeing alien purpose behind the eyes. The dogs' routes were too predictable for their movement to be purely driven by the need for food. The spirits riding the canines worked to cover every approach, and quickly moved to fill any gaps.

The human absence was intriguing. This camp was probably three times the size of the other one. Even allowing for the heat of the day and hangovers, someone should have been outside — even if it was just children. The scent of blood was also much fainter than in the other camp. Blood had been spilled, but not to the devastating amount they had seen earlier that day.

Crow looked sideways to Barbara. “Thoughts?” he asked.

She chewed at her bottom lip. “If Stonewood isn’t dead he’s around somewhere. Either he’s waiting for us or those Urged have him.” She paused, looking at how the dogs watched for intruders. “Dammit, we’re not Irraka. We hunt in the light. I say we play to our strengths and go in hard.”

Crow nodded. “You find Stonewood and the spirit. I’ll keep everyone else busy.” He saw her expression. “I’ll be as soft as I can, but if they push back too hard...” He trailed off. If the hunt went bad and either of them slipped into *Kuruth*, anything could happen.

“A bunch of these spirits are probably just along for the easy meal,” Barbara said, “I’ll give them a scare and see if we can’t thin the herd a little.”

Crow adjusted the rifle’s sights as Barbara slipped away to circle around and approached from another direction. True to her Cahalith nature, Barbara did not approach with stealth. She walked towards the infested camp confidently in Dalu form. The dogs noticed her and snarled but she ignored them, breathing deeply and never slowing her stride.

She walked to the center of the camp, surrounded by the spirit-ridden dogs, and spoke with clarity and authority, her words enhanced by the Gifts of *Atnyentye Meye*, the Moon Mother.

“Hear me,” she said in First Tongue, as her words were meant for spirits. “I am Barbara Perrurle Petyarre, chosen of the gibbous moon. I come from the Dreaming Lodge, and our prey is *Sha’gash Nuningsisa*.” She paused so the weaker spirits purely here for easy Essence would understand their peril. “Many of you know of me or of the Lodge. You have transgressed the rules of Wolf and Moon. Leave now, give up your claim on the flesh world, and you will fall beneath our notice today. Stay, and you are prey.”

The camp was eerily silent, but Barbara felt the invisible flutter of fleeing spirits. They recognized that their meal ticket had come to an abrupt end.

One of the possessed dogs tensed to lunge at the Cahalith. A supersonic crack split the air, and its head exploded in a spray of blood, bone, and brains. The other dogs looked around, trying to pinpoint the location of their attacker instead of running to hide. Crow took the heads off two more before the rest of the stray pack finally saw sense and broke off in different directions. The Rahu took another down with a fatal shot and caught one in the flanks, dropping it to the ground. The animal’s body shuddered as the spirit abandoned the hurt and confused dog. Crow put the animal out of its misery and jumped up from his sniper’s position to close the distance to the camp as a racing Urhan.

Barbara was already moving. She had caught an Uratha scent from her deep breaths walking into the camp, and knew it was in the building to her right. Stonewood was there; the scent was fresh and strong without traces of death. She was willing to bet Stonewood was alive, and *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* would be there with him.

She threw her muscular shoulder into the solid wooden door and felt it splinter. She stumbled as the door resisted more than she expected before suddenly giving way. Barbara turned the fall to her advantage and shifted to Urshul, landing heavily on all fours. One murder-spirit-ridden human just beyond the door swung a nulla nulla war club at the Uratha's head. The Urged's manic grin faded as Barbara twisted towards him and caught the brunt of the blow on her shoulder. She grunted from the heavy strike and rammed her heavier mass into the human, forcing him into the wall. His ribs cracked with the force, and the air was forced from his lungs. He slumped in the hole the impact had made. The fight was gone from him.

Barbara bounced from the man wedged in the wall cavity and leapt at a woman who had just appeared in the doorway. The Cahalith landed on the woman and crushed her to the ground, and used the momentum to keep moving. Barbara knew spirits were unused to feeling physical pain, and would probably be stunned long enough for her to find her prey.

She crashed through a thin bedroom wall and found Stonewood chained to a metal table. Another spirit-ridden human had been concentrating on guarding the door and was caught off-guard. She knocked the human off balance in Urhan, shifting suddenly to Dalu before clutching the man's head and smashing it against the doorframe. His skull cracked from the force and he fell to the ground. Barbara turned back towards Stonewood and saw a boy, barely in his teens, slip through the open window to the ground outside. She debated chasing him, but decided to free Stonewood first.

The Ithaeur was naked and gagged. His torso was a pincushion of blades, broken glass, old metal, and sharpened wood. He breathed shallow puffs, and fresh blood oozed around a knife stabbed into his chest moments before the boy fled.

Barbara pulled the knife free, and Stonewood gave a muffled cry through his gag. The wound began closing immediately as Stonewood pushed his regeneration into overdrive to preserve his life. Barbara removed the gag and plucked out the other protrusions sticking from him. Stonewood grimaced and whimpered as the barbed pieces tore more flesh.

"Stonewood?" Barbara asked, unnecessarily. She could smell the spiritual trace of the Dreaming Lodge on him, as well as something repugnant she'd encountered before.

Stonewood nodded. His breathing grew stronger with each breath but his throat was still damaged and sore. "The kid..." he croaked.

"*Sha'gash Nuningsisa*?" Barbara finished. Stonewood nodded. "Figured as much," she said. Barbara tugged at the chains and frowned. She gripped the links and tensed her arms. "If we both pull they might break."

Stonewood shook his head and held up a weakened hand. “Wait,” he gasped. He turned his head to where the padlock held the chains and snarled. “Off, now!” he commanded with a cracked but stronger voice. The simple device slipped its catch and the chains fell to the floor.

Stonewood sat up onto his elbows; the deepest wounds had closed. “Water,” he asked and Barbara obliged from a nearby faucet. The Ithaeur gulped down the drink and nodded his thanks. “*Sha’gash Nuningsisa* was strong but stupid,” he explained, “I needed time for you to come. The spirit is excess; it would have killed every human to stop me.”

“So you let yourself be captured,” Barbara said. Stonewood nodded. He felt exhausted from keeping control during the torture and not giving in to the death rage. Barbara nodded her respect. “I can smell Bone Shadow on you, and I’ve had nothing but trouble from your lot. You might be one to prove me wrong,” she said.

Stonewood kept his expression neutral. Prejudice against the *Hirfathra Hissu* was common in the Dreaming Lodge. “*Sha’gash Nuningsisa* runs. It has lost the advantage. Now we make the kill,” he said, focusing on the hunt.

As Barbara and Stonewood stepped into the fading sunlight, Crow was at the center of a circle of broken bodies. The nine humans he’d already dispatched writhed in agony on the ground as the Rahu whirled in violent motion. He snarled, twisted, and broke his foes with economical fury.

Crow’s last three enemies were caught in bloodlust inside their human puppets. One lunged at Crow from behind. The warrior sensed the attack and spun to meet it, grabbing the attacker’s arm. He pulled and chopped the side of his flattened hand on the upper arm. The bone audibly cracked, and the attacker howled in agony. Crow grabbed him by the shirt and threw him at the two remaining enemies. They stumbled with the impact and fell over their fallen comrades. Crow pressed his advantage and leapt at them, grabbing each by the throat and dragging them to the ground as he landed in a crouch. Both struggled beneath the Rahu’s iron grip as he choked them to unconsciousness. He released their necks when they fell still.

He stood and looked at the fallen bodies with a calculating eye. “They’ll live,” he said to Barbara. “Stonewood?” he asked the other Uratha. Stonewood nodded. He recognized the elder Rahu as a lodge legend.

Stonewood checked the scene with his spirit senses. “The spirits have fled this flesh,” he said. “We bring an end to *Sha’gash Nuningsisa* now,” he growled in First Tongue to the cowering, lingering spirits. He turned to his temporary packmates. “Ready?”

Three wolves darted from the camp to bring the story of *Sha’gash Nuningsisa* to an end.

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Sha’gash Nuningsisa was lost, frightened, and hungry — torturing the werewolf hadn’t yielded much Essence. The spirit had planned on feeding on the re-

maining humans in a violent Essence-filled orgy of celebration, but the wolves had come too soon.

It didn't understand these werewolves — it only knew those from Alice Springs from a distance, and those hadn't interfered with its fun. The other spirits in the camp were terrified when the female Uratha walked into town, but *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* didn't know why.

The sun had set, and the darkness made seeing difficult. The human host stumbled and fell to the ground, dropping its machete. The body was hungry — *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* had filled the void with alcohol and other substances, but it didn't understand human nutrition and didn't care. It would find a stronger host when this body stopped. It forced the weakened flesh to retrieve the weapon and keep running as the first wolf howls sounded in the still night.



When *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* stumbled, Barbara took the cue and struck with snapping jaws. The spirit whipped the machete at her flank but only struck air. Barbara had faded back into the darkness, her distraction successful.

Crow fell on the spirit's host from behind. Great claws raked its back, and the giant Urshul's teeth sank deep into its shoulder. The Rahu pulled and twisted, tearing the boy's arm from his body. The machete fell uselessly from the twitching arm. Both boy and spirit screamed, and *Sha'gash Nuningsisa* abandoned the doomed flesh.

The spirit rippled away from the Uratha, who were focused on its former body. It congratulated itself for its survival cunning, but its elation was short-lived. Stonewood, the Ithaeur, waited in the darkness for exactly this moment. The spirit-master leapt from the darkness at the invisible spirit. Stonewood's claws raked at the intangible form, empowered by the *Siskur-dah* he had performed at the beginning of this hunt.

Sha'gash Nuningsisa twisted and threw every attack it could muster at the Ithaeur. Stonewood dodged the first but he was still slow from his wounds. The spirit's next blows struck hard at the Ithaeur, forcing his glands to misfire and toxins to be dumped into his system. Stonewood's body heaved at the chemical imbalances. He curled over in pain and vomited blood and bile into the dirt. As Stonewood's body fought against itself, the spirit pressed its advantage with follow-up attacks that made the Uratha's blood vessels rupture and his organs fail.

Stonewood refused to surrender or be bested by this upstart spirit. He changed again, standing upright as he took to Gauru. Father Wolf's fury took hold of the Bone Shadow, and his wounds knitted together at an impossible pace. The blinding pain of the Uratha's supercharged healing was masked by the Gauru's rage. Stonewood grabbed the spirit in one massive clawed hand and shredded at *Sha'gash Nuningsisa*'s unflesh with the other.

The spirit tried to fight the monstrous Uratha, but the contest was over.

“Stop!” *Sha’gash Nuningsisa* begged in First Tongue, “Please, I yield. I have Gifts and Rites, secrets and treasures taken from the broods I met. All are yours if you spare me.”

Stonewood paused, his claws shaking with the force of will needed to resist Gauru’s killing urge. He was *Hirfathra Hissu*, a collector and keeper of Shadow secrets. Who knew what knowledge *Sha’gash Nuningsisa* had stolen from the nature courts it consumed, knowledge that would be lost if Stonewood simply devoured the spirit?

Stonewood was also a member of the Dreaming Lodge, and *Sha’gash Nuningsisa* had clearly violated the physical world with its orgies of death and torture. The Ithaeur was agonized with the impossible choice.

Su a sar-hith sa. Pay each spirit in kind — that was the Bone Shadow’s oath. *Sha’gash Nuningsisa* had devoured other spirits with wanton excess. It had slaughtered humans for its own amusement. It had broken the laws of Wolf and Moon, and *Kamduis-Ur* expected her children to choose difficult paths and execute justice.

Stonewood grasped the spirit’s ephemeral form in both clawed hands and tore it apart, deaf to its pleas and its final scream. Even in rage-filled Gauru, the Bone Shadow wept at the lost knowledge he would never know. A pain the other tribes would never understand.

Stonewood drank deeply from *Sha’gash Nuningsisa*’s final Essence, unmaking the spirit was his right from the *Siskur-dah*, but it brought him no joy. He threw back his head and howled his sorrowful triumph to Luna’s last sliver as she rose into the night sky.

He slumped to the ground, broken yet triumphant, and let Gauru melt away and shrink back to Hishu. The other two Uratha approached Stonewood carefully, confused by the Bone Shadow’s response.

“It’s done,” Stonewood said to the unspoken question. He looked up at his companions. “The boy?”

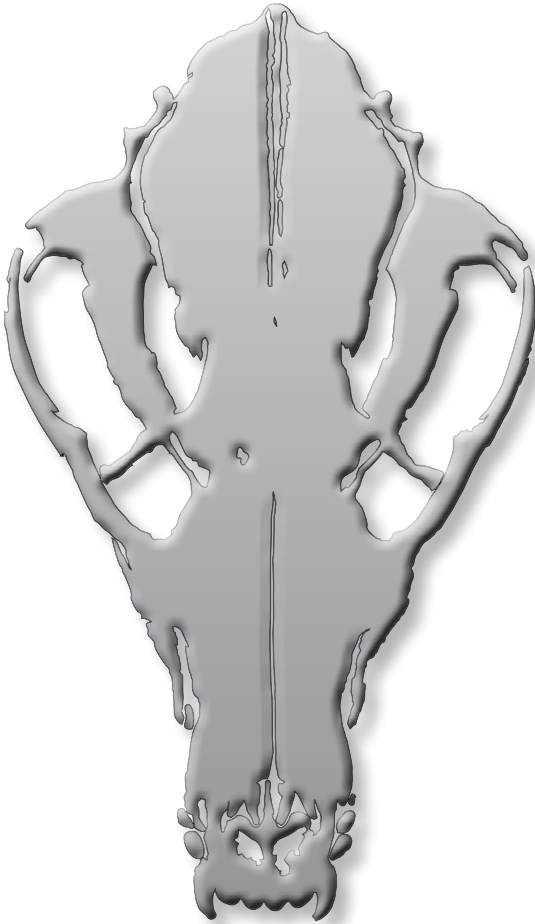
Crow shook his head. He was soaked with fresh blood. “It was quick.”

Stonewood nodded. He was exhausted. The hunt was done. His body didn’t need more time to heal, but his mind and spirit needed time to think on the events of this hunt. He needed to learn from them, mourn what he lost, and find better ways to satisfy the needs of knowledge and justice. It was a challenge he knew he’d never overcome.

“Come on,” Barbara said to the two men, “Let’s get to the road and find the car.”

• • •

The three Dreaming Lodge members spent the night at Barbara's camp, surrounded by Wolf-Blooded and humans. They ate and shared stories, reflected on the hunt, and discussed plans to eventually evict the Pure from Alice Springs. By the morning Stonewood and Crow were gone, running back into the desert where the Lodge's work was never finished.



THE WORST KIND OF ENEMY

BY JOHN NEWMAN

The worst kind of enemy is one that knows you. Not one that just knows your name or where you live, but *who* you are. Down to the marrow. That's the kind of enemy that can kill you. The shotgun blasts were like the opening whistle to announce the start of a game. The shots came in rapid succession, *bam, bam, bam*, only those *bams* are the palest sort of imitation to the thunder a real gun makes. I didn't even know a shotgun could fire that fast. Later, I found out about military issue shotguns with barrel drums designed for urban fighting. Ziggy learned about the rate of fire the hard way when silver buckshot nearly ripped him in half.

Most of what you hear about silver bullets is bullshit. Silver is a crap metal to make bullets. It's too soft and silver bullets deform before they even hit the air, making accuracy something of a joke. The joke isn't as funny when you pack silver into a shotgun shell. A shitload of tiny BBs don't give a fuck about deformation and a shooter doesn't have to be all that accurate from just behind a door. Ziggy had just reached for the farmhouse's door handle when the shots tore through the flimsy wooden barrier and through his chest. Just as fast as that our fucking *Blood Talon Rahu* was laid out on the porch, kicking and squealing. Two more *bams* put an end to the noise. He didn't even have the chance for *Kuruth* to take him before he was dead.

• • •

We'd heard rumors about a pack that kept to itself out in the country, miles from anything as civilized as a convenience store or sushi restaurant. Cassius figured if it wasn't in our territory, it wasn't our business, so we left the rumors to hang. They had continued to hang for almost a year, getting drier and staler all the time, when we first heard about the kidnappings. Other packs in the city came looking for missing kids, and they weren't too gentle about it, either. After a few disagreements about territory, Cassius took our two Blood Talons, Ziggy and Ra-

mona, to talk with the other alphas about the kidnappings. No one in town knew nothing or saw nothing. That dipshit Ziggy told the others about the rumors, and it suddenly became *our* job to do a scope and snoop. Ziggy always was a fuckin' idiot.

So just like a good little band of Scooby-Doo investigators we piled into the Mystery Machine and drove out to count some cows. I objected. Vigorously. Cassius told me to shut it, and arguing with a Storm Lord is like arguing with a brick wall. Check that. At least the brick wall won't cuff you for cracking jokes about Scooby snacks. Did I mention Cassius was born under a full moon? I won't say he went looking for a fight, but he went looking for a fight. That dumbass Ziggy just kept riding me after that. "Don't be such a pussy, Marvin. Is that piss I smell, or is it just Marvin?" I've known rocks smarter than Ziggy. Seriously. Go check out rock spirits sometime.

Ramona wasn't much better. She fiddled with her klaive short sword the entire trip. It didn't take long to get tired of the sound of a whetstone or the smell of oil. Sparx was at least willing to concede it was possible we might not be acting rationally. He was mainly irritated he couldn't get a good look at the house using his smart phone. The area around the farm house our rumors pointed to was a big green blur when viewed from satellite. I asked him if that was normal and he just scowled at me. Some days I think maybe the Ghost Wolves have the right idea.

We parked a good two miles away from the farm house in a building development that appeared to have gone tits up. None of the houses were more than framework, and the circular road that connected the houses to the outside world was still packed dirt. The entire project had a neglected look to it which was perfect for our purposes. This, of course, immediately made me suspicious. Nothing is ever convenient or perfect in the real world. Any time you hear a story and the heroes discover something that seems too good to be true, it generally is too good to be true. I told Cassius the place gave me the heebie-jeebies, and gave him my theory about convenience, but he just ignored me. Ziggy yawned broadly and pretended to stretch, smacking me in the face in the process. You can maybe understand why I'm not more broken up about that dick getting shot.

Cassius locked up the Mystery Machine and shifted to Urhan. The rest of the pack followed suit. Here's something else you might not realize. City kids become city wolves. Sure, the instincts are all there, and, okay, smells are easier to discern without the ever-present stink of exhaust fumes that permeate every city, but it's undeniable that we were way outside our territory, and deep into what was essentially an alien landscape. I wanted to complain some more, but knew it'd come out sounding like a whine, so I kept my snout shut. Maybe I was the only one that felt uncomfortable, because Ramona and Ziggy were bouncing around like cubs. Cassius and Sparx were sniffing the same patch of ground with interest, so I loped over and had myself a noseful. Dog piss. Big dog, though. Maybe a German Shepherd, and more than one. Unable to help myself, I whined bit at the smell and Cassius

growled at me. Sparx took a quick look around, and chuffed once to get the pack's attention before bounding off to the south. We followed.

It was a short run by wolf standards before the lot of us were hunkered down on a hill overlooking the farmhouse. It wasn't very impressive. I've seen cardboard shanties that looked like they might stand longer. The occasional bit of peeling paint hinted that the walls might have been white at one point, but now only gray-ing wood stared out at the world. From our point of view it had a definite lean to the left, as though a giant had tried to shove it over but got bored halfway through the attempt. Miracle of miracles, the house still retained glass in the majority of its windows, through the windows on the bottom floor were mainly covered over with splintered boards.

The farmhouse was accompanied by a collapsed barn and rusting grain silo. The lawn was bare of trees and featured knee-high grass that probably hadn't been mown in months. A single pickup sat in the dirt driveway that led to the house, and it looked as though it might have been brand new when Nixon was trying to convince America he wasn't a crook. My pack stared at the place for several minutes before Cassius turned and trotted back down over the crest of the hill. He shifted back to Hishu and beckoned us to him.

"What do you think?" he said.

"I think we've found a lovely summer home for you, Cass," said Ramona with a grin.

Ziggy and Sparx snickered at that, but Cassius just glared at her.

"Anyone have a useful opinion?" he asked.

"It seems awfully quiet," I ventured. "I mean, you'd think if they had a bunch of stolen kids down there it might be a bit more active."

"Not if they started beating on the little fuckers," said Ziggy. "Give someone a black eye or a fat lip and they learn to shut up. Usually." He eyed me and cracked his knuckles.

"I got no bars," said Sparx, holding up his cell phone like that would improve reception. "I don't see any wires running to the house, either. If people are inside, they are way off the grid."

Cassius looked around to see if anyone else had something to offer and met a sea of blank faces. He scratched his chin thoughtfully, fingers scraping across his five o'clock shadow.

"We can't just leave without something to tell the others," he decided. "Let's hang around until dark and see if anything changes. We can watch in shifts. Sparx you're with me."

Ziggy and Ramona nodded, shifted, and headed back up the slope. The rest of us sat down and pulled out snacks or drinks. We watched the place for the rest of the night, each of us taking our turn on shift. It was the most boring shit imag-

inable. I mean, during a stakeout on the cop shows they always spot something interesting right away, or the show just zips forward in time. I had no such luck. Not only did we not spot anything, it began to rain around 2 A.M., making me miserable as well as bored. Even Sparx started getting testy about the continued lack of service. Eventually he put the phone away and began to disassemble and clean his favorite .45.

When the first rays of dawn spread across the sky, Cassius finally called it a bust. We trekked back to the Mystery Machine to find a ticket from local law enforcement on the windshield for illegal parking. At the time, that ticket just seemed like the kicker on a shitty night. Looking back, I think it was a warning: *We know you're here, fucknuts. Don't come back.*

We should've figured that out. We should have at least fucking suspected it wasn't a coincidence, but we didn't. The worst kind of enemy is one that knows you're watching.



Cassius almost ran the brat over. That might have saved his life. Unfortunately for him, he saw the little bitch lying in the road before the Mystery Machine turned her into road pizza. Deceitful, lying little shit. Two more seconds with his foot on the gas would have saved the whole pack. What I wouldn't give to go back and time just to distract him and watch him run her over, brains squirting out her lying head like toothpaste out of a tube. Bitch.

We were on the way back from scouting out the farmhouse when it happened. One minute we were bouncing along gravel roads, the next the Mystery Machine was fishtailing, brakes locked up with Cassius swearing and fighting for control. He managed, just barely, to keep the van from sliding into the ditch that lined the road, and brought it to a stop with the front pointing more or less in the right direction.

“What the fuck was that about?” snarled Ramona. She'd been napping in the back, and the sudden stop had hurled her unceremoniously to the floor.

“There's a little kid lying in the road,” Cassius snarled back, already getting out of the van.

And there she was, lying in the middle of the road in a stained white night gown, barefoot and covered in mud to the knees. The back of the night gown near her left shoulder was stained a deep red in a blotch about the size of a basketball. She couldn't have been more than twelve years old. She wasn't moving, and we could see skid marks in the gravel near her head where the van had passed within kissing distance.

“Fuck me,” said Ziggy.

“Not even if you grew tits,” I replied, almost automatically, as I moved forward to check on the child.

Now, I'm not what you'd call a doctor, but I'd seen my share of serious injuries since I started running with the pack, and I'd become at least competent at setting bones and sewing stiches. Yeah, we heal fast, but a couple stitches never hurt anyone until the healing kicks in. Other than being covered in mud, the girl's main problem seemed to be she was freezing. It was chilly enough for breath to cloud the air, and she was only wearing that thin nightie. She was also wet, probably a result of the same rain that had made my night so entertaining.

"Let's get her in the van," I said.

We got her inside and wrapped her in one of the blankets we kept on hand for wardrobe malfunctions or really cold nights spent outside. Cassius started up the van and cranked up the heat. Before long we were all sweating, and the girl had stopped shivering. I examined her while she warmed up, and found a hole punched through the back of the gown that was just about the right size for a 9mm bullet. I poked around under the hole but couldn't find a wound, but I did find a dot of freshly healed skin that was already beginning to scar over. Cautiously, I poked my tongue out and touched it to the bloodstain. My mouth immediately filled with a familiar taste.

"She's one of us," I said. "Uratha. Someone shot her."

Ziggy cursed at that, and Ramona resumed polishing her klaive with new vigor. Cassius' hands tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white.

"Huh," was all Sparx said. He moved in to get a closer look at her face, then pulled out his phone and started messing with the thing.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Other packs gave us pics of the missing kids," he said, not looking up. "I'm checking to see if she matches one of them."

The kid started to moan and thrash. She opened up her eyes and looked around wildly. I reached out to touch her shoulder, to tell her everything was gonna be alright, and she tried to bite me. I yanked my hand back and her teeth snapped on empty air. She started screaming and clawing her way toward the back of the van. I'll give her this; she was a seriously talented actress. Nobody that saw that performance would've doubted its authenticity.

Ramona dropped her klaive and grabbed the girl, wrapping her up with strong arms. The kid bit and clawed, snarling. Ramona ignored the blood running down her arms and rocked the girl back and forth, humming and whispering soothing words to her.

"Gonna be all right, baby girl," she said. "You're with your own kind. Let it go. Calm down, now."

Slowly, by degrees, the girl began to calm down. She stopped attacking Ramona, instead turning to her and clinging to the woman like a lost child. The girl started to cry and the van filled with the sounds of her fear and terror. The rest of

us said nothing, watching Ramona cradle the weeping child. Sparx put away his phone and shook his head at our silent queries. When the child quieted at last, Cassius pulled off the road and turned off the Mystery Machine. He turned in the chair to look back at the rest of us.

“Can you tell us what happened?” he asked the girl. “What’s your name?”

She turned away from Ramona, though she continued to sit on the woman’s lap, and looked around at the rest of us with red-rimmed eyes.

“I’m Dora,” she said and started to shiver.

Ziggy picked up the blanket and laid it over her. She smiled at him, just a little smile, but it was enough to fill that idiot’s tiny brain with big-brother-type affection. After that smile, he would’ve died for her. Did die for her, actually.

She spun us a story about how she’d been kidnapped from the city. The people that took her kept her and the other children in the storm cellar under the house. There were six of the bad guys, all men. She said she’d managed to escape last night when the kidnappers had gone out to look for intruders.

“I squeezed past the chains that hold the door shut. None of the other kids were skinny enough to come with me. I ran out of the house and heard a loud bang, then my shoulder *really* hurt. I fell down and crawled through the grass, but when I found the road I was so tired I fell asleep.”

We, of course, had seen none of this the previous evening. Suckers that we were, we asked her if she was sure it’d been last night, and of course she said she didn’t know. Must’ve been the night before! The one hole in her story and we covered it up for her. Maybe Ziggy wasn’t the only idiot in the pack. We gave her some food and made a little bed for her by Ramona. She went to sleep and Cassius turned the van around.

“We’ll have to go back,” Cassius said. “We can’t leave the other kids in that house. This may not be our territory, but we still have a responsibility to the People.”

Ramona and Ziggy agreed with him, though quietly so as not to wake up Dora. Sparx shrugged and I sighed.

“We could go get some backup?” I suggested. “We don’t even know how many there are, or what they are, or how they are armed.”

“Little girl said six bad guys,” said Ziggy.

“She said she *saw* six bad guys. Doesn’t mean there aren’t more,” I replied.

“We’ll have the advantage of surprise,” said Cassius. “That always improves the odds.”

“Maybe we will and maybe we won’t,” I said. “Didn’t Dora say the bad guys went out looking for intruders? That might have been us.”

“Wasn’t last night,” said Ramona. “Remember? Couldn’t have been us.”

“What’ll we do with the girl?” I demanded. “I don’t think she’ll want to join your little crusade.”

“She can wait in the car,” shrugged Ziggy.

“It’ll be fine, Marvin,” said Cassius. “And if it isn’t, I guess you’ll get to say you told us so.”

I scowled and shut my mouth.

The worst kind of enemy is one that knows you’re coming. We made our way back before noon and did the Urhan thing again, scouting around the farmhouse. It still looked as empty and abandoned as before. We moved in closer, each of us slinking on our bellies through the lawn’s long grass, ears twitching at any unusual sound. That was a whole lot of twitching by the way. You remember me telling you we were city wolves? An extra day in the country hadn’t changed that, and we still didn’t know the terrain or the normal types of noises to expect. It might sound like I’m making excuses for what was about to happen, but I’m not. I’m just trying to give some context to the results.

Ziggy shifted to Hishu and motioned to the rest of us to cover him as he moved toward the porch. We ghosted along to his sides and rear. He mounted the rickety steps up to the porch, paused to give us a toothy grin and a thumbs up, and reached for the door handle. He was dead before you could say “shotgun.”

No sooner had the shots begun to echo against the hills than Sparx was returning fire with his .45. He put a good four shots through the doorway in rapid succession and was rewarded with a scream from inside. Ramona shifted to Dalu and leapt for the entrance, klaive held reversed in her left hand, blade flat against her forearm. Her toenails had no more than scabbled for purchase on wood before a werewolf in Gauru charged through the door and hit her like a Mack truck. The new wolf was black as pitch with nary a spirit brand on him. The two of them skidded off the porch and flew into the yard, both snarling and snapping. I saw Ramona’s klaive flash once, and the black Uratha yelped before he gained the upper hand, pinning her with his bulk and slashing with his claws.

Cassius shifted to war form and started to move toward Ramona and her attacker when more shotgun blasts poured out of the doorway. *Bam, bam, bam.* He took three solid shots to the back, and promptly dropped, letting the next two shots fly harmlessly overhead. Sparx’s .45 answered the shotgun for a second time, putting four more shots into the darkened interior. The scream was longer this time, with some gurgling to go with it. Good old Sparx never did miss a chance to reload. Not knowing if Cassius was down for good or not, I started skulking toward Ramona, thinking I might bite big, black, and hairy on the ass.

About that time I heard a high-pitched whistle, the kind designed to call to dogs. Big, black, and hairy heard it too and bounced away from Ramona, streaming blood from a slice on his torso. He took two steps and *leapt* up and through one of the second story windows, glass shattering. I may be a lot of things, but a fool isn’t one of them.

An enemy that runs away when he’s winning is always cause for alarm. I backed

away from Ramona, staying low in the grass. I'd taken about two steps when *five* goddamn German Shepherds came running out of the house, growling and snarling.

Anyone that says dog is man's best friend has never witnessed the fuckers when they've been trained to attack. Three of them charged at Ramona, and the other two peeled off to chase after Sparx. Ramona had just managed to get back on her feet when the dogs hit her high and low. She went back down again, slashing at them with her klaive and biting at anything she could reach. Sparx responded by dropping his gun and shifting to Urshul.

Those dogs must've been trained by someone that knew his business, because they didn't even flinch before attacking a larger enemy. One circled to Sparx's left while the other one darted in to nip at him. He was faster than they expected. Sparx slapped the one in front of him away with one paw, sending it tumbling back, and turned on the other as it rushed in to attack his rear. It was already in too close to back away, and his fangs closed over the back of its neck. A couple vicious shakes and the dog yelped as its neck snapped.

Ramona wasn't doing as well. She had, to put it simply, lost her shit. Bleeding in half a dozen places, she'd shifted to Gauru and was laying about her with her klaive, stumbling and hacking down dogs as they bounded in to attack her. Her eyes blazed with berserker fury, and hot foam drooled from her mouth as she turned and sliced the last of the dogs in two. Its back legs twitched spasmodically for a moment before it went still.

Ramona held her klaive above her head and howled in triumph, eyes scanning for her next target. I'm not sure who Murphy was, but he had it right: anything that can go wrong will go wrong. I doubt Cassius really knew what was happening. He was half shredded from silver, and even trying to think while that shit is burning away at you is really, really hard. Imagine if someone shot you with three or four rounds of rock salt. Now squeeze some lemon on that and you maybe, *maybe* can come close to the agony silver causes. Half out of his mind with pain, Cassius picked that exact fucking moment to stand up and take a shaky swing at the nearest mobile figure: Ramona. She reacted as you might expect in the midst of *Kuruth* and buried her klaive to the hilt in his stomach.

Time seemed to stop. The horror of what she'd just done snapped Ramona out of her rage faster than a bucket of cold water. She stared down at her klaive, then looked up at Cassius' face. He tried to say something, coughed up a lungful of blood, and toppled over. Ramona let her klaive fall with him, still staring. A yelp and a sharp crack from her left brought her out of it. Sparx had caught the last dog and broke its neck in his jaws. He dropped the body and returned her gaze, sorrow in his eyes.

"I didn't mean..." she began, and her head exploded.

The sharp report of a gun with a serious caliber rolled out of the house as her blood pattered around her headless corpse. She fell, and her body was swallowed

by the high grass. Sparx shifted back to human, and began low-crawling through the grass over to me. We huddled down in the grass, still as statues, and could hear the *snick-clack* of a bolt action weapon being reloaded.

“Well,” he said, smiling at me with bloody teeth. “I guess you were right, Marvin.”

The black werewolf reappeared in the doorway, in Urshul this time. It howled and we heard answering howls come from inside the house. Two smaller uratha, one grey, one brown, came out and flanked him, also in Urshul.

“Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck,” I said.

“No shit,” said Sparx. “You need to run, Marvin. Head back to town. Get some help. Don’t let these cocksuckers get away with this.”

“But...”

“No fucking buts,” he growled. “We can’t win. You run, I’ll distract them.”

“No fucking chance! You’re coming with me!”

“Don’t argue with me, damn you,” he said. He sounded tired. “I won’t get away. Look at my leg.”

I looked. The back of his right calf was a bloody mess.

“That last damn dog hamstrung me when I started moving to help Ramona. Stupid. I thought I’d hit it hard enough to keep it down.”

I stared at him, tears welling in my eyes.

“We don’t have time for that, Marvin. Get going.”

With that he shifted to Gauru and staggered forward, roaring his defiance at the enemy werewolves. I ran and didn’t look back. Have you ever listened to a packmate die? Takes survivor’s guilt to a whole new level. I ran as fast as I could manage. Sparx lasted for maybe two minutes, but that was enough to give me a head start.

I ran up the hill and directly toward the Mystery Machine, leaping fences and tearing through brambles. I didn’t stop until I was close enough to touch it, shifting on the run. I tore open the driver’s door and hopped into the van. I panicked for a second when the keys weren’t in the ignition, then remembered Cassius always put them in the glove compartment. I lurched across the seat and slammed it open, yanking out the keys. Feverishly, I fumbled with them, searching for the right one.

“What happened?”

The sound of her voice almost made me crap my pants. I turned, nearly dropping the keys, and saw Dora sitting up in the back, blanket wrapped around her.

“We have to go. Gotta go right now. No fucking time like the present.”

I fumbled with the keys for another second before coming up with the right one. I slid it into the ignition and turned it. The Mystery Machine roared to life. I put it in gear and started to back up when I felt something round and cold pressed

against the side of my neck. Looking into the rearview mirror, I saw fucking Dora holding a gun to my head. Bitch!

“Cool it, Marvy,” she said. “I think my brother will want to talk to you.”

I considered mashing down the pedal and hoping it knocked her off-balance. As though she knew what I was thinking, she jammed the gun into my neck harder.

“Don’t even think about it, Marv. Turn it off.”

I did what she told me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Do you know what my family in the city was like? My crazy father, slut of a mother, and their pawing friends. My brother did me a favor bringing me out here. *You* aren’t invited. This is our territory.”

A sharp knock on the window made me jump. I turned to find a man standing outside, dressed in distressed blue jeans, a torn and bloody Affliction T-shirt, and a fedora. His pure doucheiness astonished me so much I almost forgot to be afraid.

“Get out, bro.”

I turned off the engine and left the keys in the ignition before getting out of the van. Dora followed every move I made with her pistol, even going so far as to point it at me through the window when I got out.

“Good job, little sis,” he said. “You can get out now.”

Dora glowed with his praise. She hurried to the sliding van door and hopped out. She almost ran to get around the van to stand next to him. Staring me in the eyes, he took a few steps forward and, without even a sideways glance at the girl, the guy whipped out his dick and started pissing on the van. He must have been drinking coffee to stay awake or something, because it seemed to take long time for him to finish and zip up.

“It’s like this, bro,” the man said, still staring me down. “You don’t wanna come back here with another posse. These kids *want* to be here, and you won’t take them. I’m gonna let you live because you stink of fear. No glory in offing a coward. Get the fuck out of here, and tell the others in that shithole of a city that the farm is off-limits.”

I stared at him.

“You’re dismissed, asshole.”

I got in the van, closed the door and started it up. Dora and her “brother” stared at me as I backed out. I could see movement on the other sides of the van, and spotted the smaller werewolves from earlier stalking me as I turned around and headed for the road. When I hit the gravel, I looked back one final time and all of them were gone. I was alone. Alone with my shame, and fear, and self-loathing. Alone with my cowardice. I almost wished he’d killed me. You know what the worst kind of enemy is? The worst kind of enemy is one that lets you live.

ONLY ONE WAY TO WIN

BY PETER SCHAFER

Colt Mesa looked like the corpse of a giant, long dead and turned to brown stone.

That was how Henry Thornpaw saw it, sitting cross-legged on the dusty hills and watching it. There would be another attack soon, he knew, because the locus was too rich a prize not to. After the last year fighting with the damn Pure Tribes all over the flats and canyons of Utah, he had seen an attack every month. The dead giant felt like an apt metaphor for the body of the long war: tired, laid down to sleep, and petrified.

In the first month of Lee Godspeaker's war for territory, Thornpaw's pack had taken part in four raids and fought alongside seven different Forsaken packs. Once, as many as twenty-four of the People Raged against their enemies in a two-day hunt up and down Pipe Springs Canyon. Seven of the Pure died that day; Thornpaw personally killed two of them. He still woke up sweating, seeing the Predator King fall down the scree-covered slope and go howling over a cliff.

Two months after that, Thornpaw's ritemaster had given the Funeral Rite to their two other packmates. "Killed in action," the military called it, and Godspeaker used the same vague term. Thornpaw supposed that fighting frantically to survive was active, but the Fall of Night should never have been left behind to guard that locus in the first place. It was just the first in a week of losses that returned Godspeaker's war to the uncomfortable balance that had started it in the first place.

After that, the war had stalled out. It turned into the sitting and waiting that turned men into bodies and bodies into stone mesas. Four battles a month, two thrusts from each side at utterly predictable assets, always blunted by the swarm of defending packs that would appear to chase off the attackers. Thornpaw didn't know about the enemy's leader, but Godspeaker acted surprised.

He growled, and flicked his sight into the Shadow Realm. The Shadow version of Colt Mesa was there, lumpy stone and chimney-like rocks exaggerated. It radiated puffed-up importance, like a peacock or one of those inflatable fish. Colt Mesa had changed over the course of the war. Before the locus up top became contested ground, the mesa had looked like the smallest of the giants — a big table of stone, dwarfed by its neighbors. Not anymore.

Thornpaw looked across the rest of the spirit wilds. Nothing he saw surprised him: a coyote-spirit chasing down a hare-spirit, while the spirit of a stunted tree sat nearby. The spiritscape had constantly darkened while the war progressed. The spiritscape's high, clear sky still looked oppressively hot and the sands looked especially grainy and harsh, but it had lost the feeling of threat. Thornpaw stared over it blandly, absent the gut feeling that he could get lost among the stone, beaten down by the sun and die thirsty on the sand.

Colt Mesa's environs hadn't made him feel that for at least six months, and he didn't think it was he that had changed. A long breath later, Thornpaw's eyes were back in the material world. There was a woman sitting next to him, also cross-legged, straight black hair cut short. Thornpaw grunted.

"North face clear, Thornpaw," she said. "You sure something's going down tonight?"

"It's the full moon tonight, Marcy," Thornpaw told his packmate, "Even *they* know it's a night for violence." He gave Shadowthief a moment to mull on that, then added, "Besides, my little birds tell me the Spine Eater pack have left their place to the east."

Shadowthief Marcy gave him a little grimace when he mentioned his spies, but she didn't say anything. They'd had this argument often enough in the past, and he was still alpha. She crossed her arms and leveled her smug, I-know-something gaze at him. Thornpaw almost wanted to ignore her, but he rolled his eyes and looked her in the eyes. "Out with it."

"Kid Changed in Provo last month. Godspeaker thought we could use some help out here. Without a real alpha, he's yours 'til he gets a pack." Her mouth twisted like she was sucking on something sour, and Thornpaw took a moment to figure out what that meant. They didn't really need any help, not until the attack came, and Godspeaker knew that Henry Thornpaw was no friend of his.

"You think he's a plant?"

"He's more rat than wolf, boss."

Thornpaw grunted again. Godspeaker spent more time worrying about politics and staying on top than he did hunting the enemy. Thornpaw raised an eyebrow to ask a question when his ears tried to twitch. He looked over his shoulder to see a tall young man, sleeves torn from a jacket to show a mess of tanned muscles. The alpha followed the werewolf with his eyes until the newcomer was standing in front of him.

Just a little too handsome for Thornpaw to like him, the boy flashed a bright smile and held out his hand. “Hi, I’m Miller —”

“— Rahu, Blood Talon, had a crow for lunch, a little more tired than you want me to know, no deed name yet.” He could see Marcy’s smile growing as Miller’s faded. Thornpaw hadn’t taken Miller’s hand. “Well,” he said, finally smiling and putting some false encouragement in his voice, “we’ve been needing another hand here for a while, so it’s about time Godspeaker saw fit to send one over. Besides, could always do with another Blood Talon. Being alone with my Bone Shadow over there gets a little old.”

The boy had relaxed again, and Marcy knew Thornpaw’s leadership routine well enough not to get angry. Thornpaw gestured down the hill with his head, and Miller obediently fell into step beside him.

After a few minutes in silence, Thornpaw took the next step. “Now, kid, this is a dangerous place, and it’s gonna get worse tonight. I know how you feel. Your moon’s in the sky, and you want to show it you been blooded. You’re not in my pack, but —”

“Lee Godspeaker told me to treat you like my alpha.”

“Fuck Lee Godspeaker. Godspeaker’s a weasel and the Shadow’s whore. He don’t cleave to man, you know. Godspeaker finds more to do with the spirit courts than just speak.” While Miller stared at Thornpaw with wide eyes and a gaping mouth, the alpha had a hard time not laughing. “Listen, Miller. Leader of this war or not, Godspeaker spends more time in the *Hisil* with his Shadow buddies than with us. And he seems to think we can organize like a spirit court, taking orders and getting in line.

“We’re not spirits,” Thornpaw said, looking Miller straight in the eyes, “we’re the People. I’m not your alpha and you’re not in my pack, and Godspeaker can’t make it so. You don’t *smell* like my pack, so don’t pretend you are.” He poked the boy in the sternum. “Know thyself. Somebody famous said something important about that once, I think.” He turned around and gazed at the mesa.

Angry as Miller was, Thornpaw almost thought he could feel the glare on his back. He *could* hear the deep, slow breaths Miller was taking, and the sound of grinding enamel and tight, rubbing skin. After about a minute, it stopped. Shorter, arrhythmic breaths preceded a hesitant voice. “Th —” Another breath. “Thornpaw? You’re... probably right. I almost went crazy right there. Almost —” An embarrassed laugh. “— almost tore your head right off. I, uh....” He trailed off.

“That’s the Rage,” Thornpaw sounded fatherly, now. “That’s why we’re not pack and alpha ‘til there’s trust. If we ever trust each other.” He let a little hope creep into his voice at the last, but he had to clench a fist behind his back to keep from growling at what he was doing. “C’mon. Let’s get back to the hill while there’s still light.”

Night came fast. Before long, the sun was a sliver on the horizon, and Mother Luna turned her full face on the hills, and on the Shadow Realm. Thornpaw sent Shadowthief Marcy off to tell Godspeaker about the attack, and the alpha's glare kept Miller from wondering aloud about what attack that might be. Then Thornpaw showed the young Uratha where he'd be waiting.

Miller was whining in the exact same way Thornpaw couldn't stand with his own kids, until he'd just stopped going around. "Why've I gotta wait all the way out here? It's gotta be a couple miles to the locus from here! There'll be nothing to do but watch, and *I'm* not a watcher, *you're* the fucking watcher..."

And it went on. Thornpaw stared off toward the locus, a bit farther north on Colt Mesa. That was how they'd come up. There were a dozen trails that required a bit of climbing but weren't too hard, especially for a wolf. This side of the mesa was too difficult to scale, at least pre-assault, but could make for excellent escape routes. He cut off Miller's ranting, using what he liked to call the "butter knife through a hot tank" method. His voice was almost too quiet to hear, and so, of course, Miller shut right up to hear it.

"I *need* you here, Miller." Thornpaw spoke so softly that the emphasis was almost imperceptible, but the alpha knew that a werewolf's ears would notice. Especially when it involved an admission. "I've been worn too thin for too long," he continued, still quiet and staring at nothing down the mesa's slopes. "Usually, I cover the entire south face while the battle goes on, but I'm tired. I just... oh, Jesus. Help me, okay?"

Miller could hardly say no to that. Confidence from a pack alpha a couple of decades his elder wasn't something he expected, and his body gave away the youth's excitement. Standing taut, quivering like something was supposed to happen — the boy wanted to fight for dominance, even if he was too young to know it yet.

"So here it is. You watch the east side. Center your surveillance about three miles east from here. I'll be around here watching the other side. Marcy will be guiding the defense on my behalf. And if I leave my post, you have to take the entire south face." Thornpaw looked over to see Marcy pushing through the brush, so he finished up. "I'll be depending on you if I have to go take care of something."

The look on his packmate's face, the slight twitch of the head and her sidelong glance at Miller told them both that she didn't want to talk in front of him. Thornpaw overrode her. "Out with it, Marcy, let the kid hear."

She chewed the inside of her cheek for a second before she started speaking. Her voice was flat as she said, "Godspeaker has 'other priorities' right now. He doesn't think the locus is in 'appreciable danger' and believes we can handle it with the little pup he sent us. The *bastard*," she hissed, "made it perfectly clear that if we lose the locus, he'll be condemning us tonight. He wants us *gone*, Thornpaw, and I think we should oblige him." Marcy spoke directly to her alpha and ignored

Miller completely. Such disdain — showing it, at least — was very unlike her, but Thornpaw didn't give it more than a second's thought.

"We're alone," he muttered. "See why I need you right here, Miller? Marcy, get your Winchester and find a spot downwind of the locus you can set up." His packmate didn't flinch when she knew he was staying, she just nodded. "Make sure not to actually settle there —"

"You're going to use a *gun*?" Miller coughed out the last word as if it had stuck in his throat.

"Lesson one, Arguing Miller: Use what you have, and what I have is Marcy and a fine rifle that can blow your head off at three hundred yards. Lesson two, Arguing Miller: Don't settle for a crappy deed name. I'm sure after tonight we'll have something better for you. Now go off, watch your side and shut up."

Marcy waved as she walked away for her rifle. Thornpaw smiled weakly, gave Miller a blank look as the youth shifted into Urhan, heading for his own section of the mesa. Thornpaw watched them go in silence. Then he went behind a tree a few yards away and reached under one of its twisted roots and pulled out something wrapped in cheesecloth. Before he tucked it away in his waistband, the rising moon betrayed a glint of silver.

In the form of a wolf, Thornpaw moved silently and quickly back and forth in the area he'd assigned himself. Occasionally, he'd stop and talk to nothing at all. When the spirit Nuhahim told him exactly where the Spine Eaters were, Thornpaw paid for it with a surprising bounty of Essence. The spirit's surprise showed in its dust-pile face, and Thornpaw told it, "Because we're not all bad." Then it was gone.

The first rifle shot rolled across the mesa like thunder and echoed off the nearby canyons. Ten seconds later, there was another one, and ten seconds later another. Then, three howls rose from the area of the locus. Thornpaw leapt from his perch in a short tree and hit the ground as the near-wolf, already running. Howling meant they'd found Marcy's trail, and three howls meant she'd killed one, or at least put a bullet through his throat. She needed her alpha now.

Dirt and stone, root and wildflower all flew under his paws as he raced, his feet like mist. A howl was growing somewhere within him, an urgent message to tell the pack he was coming, and he quashed it. All he wanted to do was run.

He passed the hunting Spine Eaters a mile to their west. They were still on Marcy's trail, but she had the lead. Thornpaw knew where she would lead them, and how she might escape. He circled around to the locus, then took Urhan form for stealth.

Creeping up to the locus, he could feel its resonance in his bones. *Freedom*, it seemed to say, *free and happy is the mesa*. He could wish it wouldn't be tainted with blood, but he knew a bullet had already done that tonight. Concealed at the locus's center behind a tree, he closed his eyes and watched the scene with his ears.

Four feet, moving together: Marcy, running to the locus' strongest point. Crashing and panting from beyond marked her three pursuers, who arrive and fan out around her in Urshul form. Crunching pebbles but no real movement: Marcy's Hishu again, because she likes making mock.

“Goodbye, fuckers.” Thornpaw could almost hear Marcy's smile. “Good luck putting his brain back — haahhh.” She ended her farewell speech with her last breath and her alpha's silver in her back. His quick twist halved her heart and ended the pain of Luna's curse, then Thornpaw let both the woman and the knife fall to the ground. He hit his knees at the same time.

“I know you won't kill me,” he addressed to the three monster-wolves facing him. His voice quivered with emotion. “You can't kill me because I hate them . . . so much. I can't die before *they* do,” he growled, heavy with hate.

Then the beating began. A kick to the face came first, and everything else was only worse. But none of them took Gauru form, so they had decided not to kill him yet. Through it all, he was smiling, crying, and laughing. Even when he was curled up like a ball, the tears flowed and his laughter kept it up. He even thought the sport of pain might have distracted the Pure from noticing Miller as the youth ran away into the night.

The next night, Lee Godspeaker swept down on the Colt Mesa locus with three full packs, but only Shadowthief Marcy was waiting. Miller ran Godspeaker's errands and fetched alphas of all the packs who had sworn to the war, and they convened over the locus. Marcy's Funeral Rite was touching, and two Cahaliths began composing howls to commemorate her bravery.

Godspeaker's speech that evening was full of the same passion that had driven other packs to follow him into the war so long ago. He roused in his audience a fury that matched each Uratha's inner Rage, and the war burst into flame all over again. A dozen packs launched a dozen attacks in the next week, and within a month Utah was clean of the Pure Tribes, at least for the time.

When Miller confronted Thornpaw again, it was at the mouth of a canyon with a dozen other Forsaken arrayed behind him. Rocks, skin, teeth, and blood flew everywhere in the most climactic battle of the war. Strengthened by his Rage, Miller made sure to square off against Thornpaw. Miller's fellow warriors were all busy, and Miller had the bastard traitor to himself. He intended to enjoy it.

Thornpaw had only one thing to say before Miller's inch-long claws shredded him and great arms tore him limb from limb. Thornpaw's very red eyes bored into Miller. “Lesson three, pup: Sometimes, there is only one way to win.” Then he grew into Gauru form and died quickly. Miller kept his head.

In an emotional gathering over Marcy's grave, Godspeaker and the other alphas declared the war ended, the Pure defeated. Their oaths complete, the packs began carving new and expanded territories out of the rubble. The People had their own lives and began to forget the war's specific events — but they always remember Thornpaw the Traitor and Shadowthief Marcy.

THE WOLF MUST HUNT

BY CLAIRE REDFIELD

Brent threw the empty bottle in the sand and stumbled away from the fire. Raucous laughter followed him. His class always threw a hell of a beach party, but now he just had to take a wicked piss. He reached the rocky outcropping and used one hand to steady himself, the other to pull down his pants. Behind him and just over a sandy hill, out of sight, the party raged on.

A strange sound like a person gargling impossibly loud came from the other side of the rock. It startled Brent so badly he let go and came away with a hand dripping warm fluid. “Goddamn it.” Shaking his wet hand, Brent moved to look. “Hello?”

A person stood there, back turned to him. She was naked, but her skin was covered in growths, like warty bumps. Even in the moonlight he could see her sickly pallor. “Hey, you okay?” She responded with the sound again, a gargling moan. Brent reached out to touch her with his dry hand. “Hey, you sound kinda —”

She whirled on him with a wet shriek. Brent fell away in disbelief as her one huge, yellow eye fixed on him. Tentacles dominated her face, spreading wide to reveal a quivering, toothy maw. Thick flecks of slimy drool spattered him as she pounced, tentacles wrapping about his face and stifling the scream in his throat.

When his friends finally found his remains, they didn’t stop screaming until the police arrived

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A red sun sank beyond the horizon, staining sea and sky the color of blood. Waves lapped lazily at the sand. The beach was eerily quiet and empty. Yellow police tape surrounded a large section of beach, fluttering in the breeze.

As the last rays receded from encroaching dusk, a group of swiftly-moving animals loped along the beach. Onlookers would have mistaken them for stray dogs,

the kind that comb the beaches in packs, looking for carcasses washed ashore or trash left by visitors. These were most certainly not dogs — a closer look would reveal the spine-chilling sight of a wolf pack on the hunt.

The wolves spread out, searching with uncanny deliberation. They called to one another with small yips and barks. The five of them moved together with instinctive, unspoken purpose. At their head ran a lean wolf with golden-brown fur, followed by a larger gray-furred wolf, a slender one with black fur save for her white paws, a light-colored wolf, and at the rear a massive wolf nearly the size of a lion. They were no mere wolves; they were Uratha, the deadliest hunters to walk the earth.

Amari Calls-the-Sun was the closest thing the pack had to an alpha. She had Changed under the crescent moon on the eve of her fourteenth birthday, fleeing into the spirit wilds. The local Uratha found her at the break of dawn as she sang her lament to the heavens, and so she earned her name. Her wisdom, patience, and cunning often saw the pack through difficult hunts and aided them against their spirit prey. She was the second youngest behind White-Paw, yet without her guidance they felt lost.

Peter Mathis followed her. He had nearly twenty years on Amari, not that it showed. A man in his prime, covered in scars that revealed years of deadly hunts, Peter was tougher than anyone Amari knew. The Rahu never fought so fiercely as when he protected his family.

White-Paw, the youngest, looked up to Peter like an older brother. She learned from him and he protected her, but she kept his anger in check. She was as soft-mannered as an Uratha could be, but Amari never doubted her courage or ferocity. She was Cahalith, and every bit the hunters as were her packmates. Of all five, she was the one closest in touch with human life, and helped keep the others grounded.

Erik Red-Shadows stole across the beach, sticking to patches of deep shadow, barely visible against the sand. He hunted unseen along the paths others could not walk, an Irraka of tremendous skill. Next to Peter he had the most experience, and Amari treasured his perspective. Their territory encompassed a large stretch of beach, and the ability to sneak and scout the borders between flesh and spirit as well as land and sea proved invaluable.

Alex Harper was their Elodoth, a strong presence when the pack needed one. He fully embraced the savage duality of Uratha life, at once a man of culture but also a pragmatic warrior. His was the hulking Urshul form, which he preferred for the hunt. Its size and fierce strength matched his own passionate spirit.

Amari slipped past the yellow police tape and shifted back to Hishu form. Lupine features melted away as she rose up into the form of a slender young woman, dark fur giving way to long black hair and olive skin. Her feet sank into wet sand. She surveyed the beach and frowned. *Not good. This place is wrecked.*

Peter knelt down, nose inches from the sand. “Whatever that thing was, it’s been here again recently.” His Dalu features wrinkled in disgust. “Smells fucking horrific. Like wet dog and rotting seaweed.” None of the pack needed his observation — the monster’s trail was plain for anyone to see, even by moonlight. Whole sections of the beach had vanished. Huge divots like giant bite marks pockmarked the beach.

It can’t be, Amari thought. The damn thing would have to be the size of a whale.

The rest of the pack combed the beach nearby. Though waves had erased the monster’s tracks, the stench of its spoor remained. Two of their wolf-blooded packmates, Jason and Harley, had vanished down that thing’s gullet two weeks ago in a similar attack. Now the pack hunted it in turn, following an unmistakable trail.

Amari walked along the beach. A pale object wriggled on the ruined shore. She stooped to get a closer look, then blanched. It looked like a cuttlefish with clammy skin, human eyes and fingers where its tentacles should be. *The police already carted off some remains. This must be new.* The police had cordoned off the area with warnings of a shark attack. *Bullshit. Say “shark” and people will believe any weirdness with the ocean.* Sharks didn’t devastate beaches like artillery shells, or devour whole groups of party-goers. Not a single soul from that night remained to tell the story of what happened, but to Amari the story was clear. *This is no damn shark.*

“What the fuck are we dealing with, Amari?” Peter joined her, thick hair bristling all over his muscular body. The Rahu could barely contain his anger — Harley was his cousin, and they’d been close. He wanted to find whatever had done this and carve it into pieces.

Amari shook her head. “I don’t know, Pete. This isn’t like any spirit I’ve ever seen. They don’t just... I mean, look at that thing.” She pointed out the little cuttlefish.

Peter took one look and then stomped it into an oily stain. “*Duguthim?*” Amari shook her head. He swore and spittle flew from his snarling lips. “So, what? It’s just making these things from the pieces of what it eats?” Silent realization settled heavily on Peter: their packmates might have suffered similar fates.

Amari looked grim. “If it’s a spirit, it comes from the deeps, Peter. It’s not like anything I’m used to. And I don’t know why it’s up here now, but I want to find some answers. Let’s go.”

A howl rose up from somewhere ahead and abruptly ended with a yelp. As one, the pack rushed toward the sound, around a bend in the beach. Near a rocky outcropping, White-Paw’s Urhan form lay motionless in the sand. A sharp pang of guilt and fear stabbed through Amari’s chest — White-Paw was as close as a younger sister. Peter felt the same, snarling as he rushed to her defense.

A hunchbacked creature stood over her. It had a vaguely lupine head, a slick, inky body, and a second, fleshy mouth nearly bisected its chest. They surrounded it, and its mouth opened and belched out a gurgling, malodorous roar. The smell was like a heap of dead fish, and even Peter nearly retched. White-Paw shuddered. Seeing that she was still alive drove the pack to swift action.

Peter struck first, seizing it in growing Gauru claws. It uttered a liquid shriek, and he fell back. He was so shocked that he reflexively returned to Hishu form, staggering away from the creature. “Eyes! It has Jason’s eyes!”

Amari shifted to Dalu form, her night vision sharpening. She saw the creature’s eyes more clearly: human, pained, sunken deep behind a hairless snout. The others cried out in alarm as they recognized the eyes of their former packmate. She could have sworn its wet cry sounded like a plea for help. A sick feeling churned her gut.

There was only one way to help this creature now — whatever of Jason was still in there.

Alex lunged, biting deep into the Jason-thing’s leg and shaking his huge head. It stumbled, fell onto its webbed hands. Erik dashed in and brought his knife down on its back. Peter struck the killing blow, leaping on the fallen creature in Gauru form. He clamped his jaws on its neck and tore its head free in a spray of black blood. Peter fell ripping and snarling upon its spasming body. Oily ichor splattered onto the sand. His packmates all felt the growing fury bristling along their backs as *Kuruth* threatened.

Amari shouted at him, but he barely heard her. “Peter! *Peter!* It’s dead, let it go!”

The Rahu stood, gore dripping from his claws. He whirled on his packmates with wild-eyed rage. For a moment, understanding crept into his gaze. Peter couldn’t bear the thought of threatening his pack, his family, with *Kuruth*. With a savage howl he turned and charged into the waves. Peter wanted to get away before it was too late.

“No, come back! Peter, damn it!” Amari ran into knee-deep water after him but he was too fast, giant muscles carrying him away with broad strokes. “*Peter!*”

Peter turned to her. Amari briefly hoped he’d come to his senses. As his Gauru bulk began to shrink, he called out to her. She never heard it. The waves swelled, and a yawning darkness opened around him. A tremulous bellow drowned out the screams of his packmates as something massive rose from the water, easily the size of a tugboat. White foam cascaded from its round, quivering sides. Peter howled as a mouth large enough to swallow several Gauru whole slammed shut around him. The leviathan dove back into thrashing waves, and its long body took several moments to vanish.

Then it was gone, and so was Peter.

“You ready?” Amari ignited the zippo lighter with a flick. Her packmates nodded, their faces lined with grief. Down to four now, they’d lost their best fighter to something they didn’t understand. A monster, but unlike any sea creature or spirit Amari had ever encountered. They needed answers. The uncertainty only deepened their anguish.

The pack had scraped together everything they could to buy an old fishing trawler. The search took days because Amari needed one old and well-used enough to cast a spirit reflection. Now they sat in the *Hisil* upon a small boat that seemed pitifully fragile, not far from where Peter had been swallowed alive. Overcast skies smothered cold gray waves in depressing gloom. The spirit world was often quieter than the physical realm, but Amari felt a tension in the air despite the silence. The usual spirits of the sea were gone — no greedy gull-spirits, no serpentine water-spirits. Even the weather-spirits, often clashing and cavorting in the skies, seemed to avoid this place.

What could do this? This is madness. She felt as though they sat in the calmness heralding an oncoming storm.

Amari nodded at her packmates and then tossed the lighter. They’d filled the physical boat and its spirit manifestation with fuel and homemade explosives Alex had crafted. The lighter landed and immediately filled the air with the smell of burning gasoline. They didn’t have long to get to a safe distance, so Erik and White-Paw, both in Dalu form, started rowing. Amari took Urhan form and began to sing a low song of ancient spirits in the lightless deeps. She offered them the sacrifice of Man’s tool for oceanic hunting. “Let this vessel feed your endlessly hungry belly! We offer it as chiminage. Rise and devour it, as the sea has claimed so many!”

A loud explosion, and the boat’s reflection cracked apart. Amari’s eyes clouded over as she stared through the barrier between worlds, and watched both halves of the trawler plunge into the waves, leaving only twisting tongues of smoke in their wake.

Nothing happened for many minutes. The pack remained silent, while Amari leaned out far enough to look down into the water. Suddenly her hackles rose and she stiffened. “Something comes.”

A stone’s throw from their rowboat, the water hissed and bubbled. It surged as something large surfaced, but only part of it: two glistening bumps, each dominated by a round yellow eye. Amari caught the hint of tentacles writhing in the water below, reaching far enough to pass under their boat.

The spirit spoke with a voice like the dull roar of silence. “I am Abyss-of-Ink. I accept your offering.” A loud *crunch* rolled through the water below. “Why do you risk your life so, little Uratha? This is not your territory. Here you are... *prey*.”

Several tentacles arced up from the water, dripping slime. Amari saw that they were lined with hooks, but she didn't flinch. "I am Amari Calls-the-Sun, and I seek answers."

The spirit laughed, a wet, barking sound. "What answers would you ask of me? I hunt the abyss. I care nothing for your world, wolf."

"Maybe so, but the thing we hunt invades your realm, great spirit. It births abominations. It devours land and sea like nothing I've ever seen before. Do you not know of this?"

Abyss-of-Ink let out a gargling trumpet. Its tentacles slapped down into the water again. "Yes, wolffing, I know it. This creature you hunt is the Tidal Maw. It swallows all in its wake. My prey is long since vanished into its monstrous gullet. It is *Gagh-Azur*."

"What manner of spirit is it? Where did it come from?"

"Spirit? It is no spirit! This thing defies flesh and Essence. Its appetite is endless. It sought even to swallow me up, wolffing! Me, the greatest of the deep-dwellers in this place!"

"But you escaped? How?"

"I fled, little Uratha, and so should you! Your prey is something that should not be. It comes from the time before, when the great wolf-god lived. *Gagh-Azur* will eat you, too! I warn you: not everything it devours dies within its belly. "

With that cryptic warning the ancient spirit sank below the waves. Amari watched its tentacles disappear into the inky black.



Amari stood outside Occult Addiction, a little oddities shop downtown. The store had all the trappings of typical New Age nonsense: trinkets, "spooky" statues, shelves lined with dusty old tomes and the latest UFO abduction autobiographies, and artifacts with no mystical significance whatsoever. Most of it was junk, but Amari knew that quite a few of the books contained good information. Many of the authors only had a small sliver of the truth, but a dedicated researcher could find some references to actual spirits and other entities. She hoped to put together some puzzle pieces.

The store owner, Jessica, greeted her. "Hey, 'Mari. Looking for anything specific today?" Jessica's faux-Gothy appearance was just as much a façade as her store's. She was also part of their pack, and the only human who knew their secrets.

"I don't know. You ever hear of something called the Tidal Maw or the Mouth of the Depths?"

Jessica shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Doesn't really surprise me, though. There are so many superstitions and myths about the ocean that you could spend your whole life studying it and not come close to learning it all."

“Yeah, tell me about it. I’m going to take a look around anyway, okay?”

“Sure thing. Let me know if you need any help.”

Several hours later, Amari pushed away the books she’d been reading and pinched the bridge of her nose. A hundred different images and twice as many names filled her mind. *Living whirlpools. Whale-like beasts that swallow everything in their path. There must be a thousand of them.* Some shared enough traits between descriptions that they could describe the same thing: an ugly, slimy thing with a maw that seemed big enough to swallow the whole ocean. Most seemed to describe something prehistoric, and many dated back to the seventies and eighties, right at the height of the New Age movement.

No references to a “Gagh-Azur,” but that’s not surprising. It was a First Tongue name, although words of that primordial language occasionally cropped up in human texts. Still, a few of the common references matched what she knew: the thing appeared during the full moon, when the tides were at their highest. Always at night. Strange creatures never before seen from the depths, people with fish-like faces straight out of an old horror story, all said to appear during those times. Even seemingly unrelated stories shared those details. *That thing with Jason’s eyes, and the strange looking cuttlefish. It’s no coincidence. Not duguthim, but something different.*

Amari took a couple of books, a journal and some newspaper clippings up to the counter and Jessica bagged them for her. “Find what you needed, ‘Mari?”

“Maybe. I’m just not sure that it’s something I *want* to find.”

Jessica’s eyes widened and she whistled. “That bad, huh?”

“Yeah. Just do me a favor.”

“What’s that?”

“Stay out of the water for a while, okay?”

• • •

The pack met up the following night at the boat rental place that Alex owned. After hours the lot was empty and quiet. The gentle slapping of nearby waves filled the night air. The full moon had given way to its waning crescent. They sat around a fire, but it wasn’t an occasion for mirth.

Near their fire pit sat a huge, rusted anchor, dating back to World War II. It served as their locus, a symbol of crossing realms between land and sea. The ship to which it belonged had sunk in 1941, killing everyone aboard, and the anchor spent decades buried in silt until modern treasure hunters salvaged the wreck.

Alex was first to speak. The normally level-headed Elodoth was uncharacteristically bitter. “Okay, Amari. What did you find out?”

Red-Shadows, paced impatiently. “More importantly, how do we find it and kill it? This fucker’s taken out three of us now. I wanna make a fucking *castle* out of its bones.”

Amari sighed. "I don't have good news."

"Gee, that's a switch," snapped Erik.

"Let's just hear her out," said White-Paw, who sat on the sand, hugging her knees. The Cahalith hadn't been her jovial self since Peter died. Her long black hair couldn't hide the sorrow in her eyes.

"I've been looking through news reports," Amari said. "It's tougher than you might think. Every shark attack draws a lot of press, but most of them are sensationalized garbage. There are a few with similar details, though. Most from the '70s and '80s." She handed some newspaper clippings around the group. Then she held up a leather-bound journal. Its pages were yellowed and warped from water damage. "And this. This is the interesting one. A captain who claims his fishing boat was sunk by a whale. No one believed him at the time; he went to jail for insurance fraud and the disappearances of his crew. He claims one of them came to him in a dream, only it had the crewman's face on a squid's body. They found him dead in his cell of drowning, but no one could explain why. It went on record as a suicide."

Her packmates perused the articles: dozens of shark attacks reports, mostly dealing with multiple fatalities and disappearances. In many cases, local authorities caught a large shark in the area, but none ever held human remains. Not that zealous shark-hunters ever cared. Some scientific studies detailed unexplained die-offs in large sea life.

"That's another commonality," Amari continued. "Whenever these so-called 'shark attacks' occur, they're always accompanied by a big hit in aquatic populations. Doesn't exactly make sense that sharks attack people when they're all vanishing, does it? This thing is eating anything it can catch."

"Yeah, that's great, Amari, but how do we find it?" said Alex.

"Look at the locations. All up and down the coast, east and west. This thing travels a lot. It approaches the shore during high tides on the full moon. But I think it spends the rest of its time down deep. It's why we've never seen it. It's huge and old, and when it feeds, it's probably sated for months at a time. After it's exhausted its prey in an area, it moves on."

Alex nodded impatiently. "Okay. Great. But what *is* it?"

Amari shrugged and shook her head. "I don't know, Al. It's not a spirit like we understand it. Even spirits fear it. And those creatures it creates, I suspect it creates them from... from the things it eats."

White-Paw looked up sharply. "You mean... Peter?"

"I don't know for sure. But between what we killed on the beach, the other stuff we found, and what the stories say, it seems like this monster digests its prey. Then it creates something new from the parts. Or it somehow mutates them, *merges* them, from the animals around it. Either way, these freaks of nature aren't

duguthim or *magath*. Which means this thing's using some magic I've never seen before. That spirit hinted at it, too."

Erik swore and crouched down beside White-Paw. She looked stricken as she spoke. "Amari, if Peter... I mean, if he's out there, we can't leave him like that."

Amari's eyes glinted in the firelight. "I know. And we can't let this bastard get away with it. I want revenge just as much as you guys."

Erik picked up a stick and poked at the fire. "Amari, *can* we kill it? You said it's been around since at least the seventies. That spirit said it lived before that, back in the old world. How can that be?"

The Ithaeur stared into the fire, as though she sought answers amid the swirling flames. "I don't know. I mean, if the stories are true, wouldn't *Urfarah* have killed it? And if *he* couldn't, how are we supposed to?"

Alex spat angrily into the fire. "Bombs, depth charges. Ram it with a fucking nuclear sub. I don't care! We'll find a way."

"I don't have all the answers," said Amari, "but I know someone who might help us."

As one, most of the pack shifted to Urhan form, clothes and gear vanishing into the fur that spread over their wolf bodies. Alex shifted instead into Urshul, his favored form for. They gathered around Amari. The young Ithaeur felt the weight of responsibility on her shoulders, especially now. Where they were going, she was the pack's best chance for survival.

Amari willed herself past the Gauntlet, with a sensation like sticking her snout through a warm, wet curtain. The rest of her body followed, and she felt a rush as the unseen barrier between worlds closed behind her pack.

The shadows deepened around them. Clouds blotted out the moon. The beach resembled the one they had left behind, and the anchor stood upright in the sand. The nearby shacks were gone, giving way to a vast expanse of beach that extended well beyond the borders of its material reflection. The myriad buildings encroaching on the beach cast no shadow in the spirit world — it was the beach itself that held significance. Dunes became hills of shifting sands, sibilant with the whisper of tumbling grains.

The pack ran, paws sinking deep into cold sand that immediately swallowed their trails. It didn't matter; they had their noses to guide them, and Amari's knowledge of the area. Their wolf eyes saw clearly even in the dim light. They followed her closely, climbing the steadily rising hills of sand. She sought one in particular, a reflection of the one most used by beachgoers. During the day, spirits of warmth, joy, and desire dominated the area, but at night they gave way to spirits of the sand and sea. Amari found the hill she sought and the pack climbed, struggling against crumbling waves. Above their heads circled Winged Dawn, their totem, a sun-spirit.

Atop that hill, the whole beach stretched away beneath them like a desert. The ocean horizon melted into the night sky, making it seem like they stood upon a plateau overlooking a blue abyss. There the crescent moon shone its brightest, breaking through the clouds. Silvery rays illuminated the hill.

Amari basked in their pale glow. She threw her head back and howled a call of beckoning. Motes of silvery-white light danced amid the moon's rays above their heads. Amari howled again and the motes coalesced into a shimmering figure, its shape barely visible amid the luminous haze.

"I come to answer your call," said the spirit, "but why do you now seek the Ithalunim, Amari Calls-the-Sun?"

Amari bowed her wolf head low in a gesture of respect. "Night's-Eye-Veil, I have need of your guidance."

"What would you ask of me?"

"A new foe has hurt us. It's like nothing we've seen before. Its name is *Gagh-Azur*. All I've learned has told me it's ancient, but only reappeared in the past few decades. It consumes flesh and Essence alike. Do you know of this creature?"

The spirit was silent for a long time. Finally it hissed an answer. "*Idigam*." The word lingered in the air, and Amari sensed the spirit's disgust.

"What is *idigam*? I've never heard of such a thing."

"Long ago banished, but its appetite never dwindled."

"Banished to where? How did it come back? Did *Urfarah* hunt this thing?"

"Endless hunger for life's secrets."

"Secrets? What secrets? How do we kill it?"

The spirit floated higher, its voice fading. "*Gagh-Azur* consumes, kills, creates, and consumes again. Its cycle is that of the seas."

Amari shifted to Hishu form reflexively, reaching up for the spirit. "Please, wait! I need more answers. I still don't know how to kill it, or what it is!"

"Its spawn die but do not live. Bones into nothingness. *Gagh-Azur* seeks permanence, but finds only fleeting mockery."

"Permanence? It's trying to create life?"

The spirit said no more and vanished into the sky.

Amari turned to her packmates. "That was surprisingly helpful for a crescent moon spirit."

"Great," sighed Alex. "We still don't know how to kill it, or really what it is."

"No," Amari replied, "but we have a name: *idigam*. And now we know what it wants. It's trying to create life. That makes sense. It swallows its prey, and somehow digests them, mixes them together, and... *vomits* out those things. So it wants to create something lasting. Permanence. Bones." Her gaze went distant in deep thought as she slid down the hill.

“So this thing is tied to the seas somehow. It wants to create something permanent but can’t. Bones of the sea. Coral reefs? They’re permanent, they’re made of coral skeletons. Maybe it’s related somehow?”

Alex laughed sardonically. “What, we going to scuba dive and ask some coral-spirits to help us out?”

Amari’s eyes lit up. “That’s not real far from my idea, actually. But we have some more work to do. Even if it’s not a spirit, this *idigam* follows a pattern. Seems like it might be driven to keep this cycle — it did it back in Father Wolf’s time, and after its imprisonment picked right up where it left off. I think it can’t help but to try. Just like we can’t help but to hunt it. And that’s our chance.”



“You sure this is the right place?” Erik shifted uncomfortably on his feet, twitching as he fought the urge to change forms. He was *Meninna*, like Amari; he felt distinctly uneasy outside of his own territory, and more so in human form with its weak senses. They hadn’t encountered any signs of another pack, but ten miles south of their own territory, all bets were off.

Amari pointed ahead. “Yeah, I’m sure. Look.” Ahead on the beach stood a hastily-planted sign that read *Beach closed due to shark attack until further notice*. Two swimmers had gone missing overnight, and, more telling, several schools of fish had washed up dead on the beach a few nights before. Amari was sure she was on the right track, now that she knew what to look for. Given time, she was sure the local marine biologists would report an unexplained dip in aquatic populations.

“Alright,” she called, gathering everyone around her. “Listen. There’s a chance we might find him here. Whatever he’s become, he’s not Peter anymore. There’s nothing we can do to help him but put him out of his misery.” She looked intently at White-Paw. “I want everyone to stay out of Gauru for this. We’re all too strung out over it, and I don’t want what happened before to happen again. Got it?”

Her packmates nodded, and they all took on Urhan form, save for Alex in Urshul. They spread out to comb the beach, keeping their noses low. The going was difficult, as mingling scents of fish and seaweed and salty waves were hard to separate. In the fading sunlight, Amari caught a glimpse of what looked to be a sandbar not far off-shore, and fervently hoped that *Gagh-Azur* couldn’t or *wouldn’t* come on land.

White-Paw let out a short, high-pitched yelp of alarm. She’d found something. As one, the pack loped up the beach to join her near a dingy old bait shop. The smell was atrocious, like wet dog wrapped in rotten fish-meat and briny seaweed. Amari growled. If it was Peter, his scent no longer remotely resembled a werewolf’s.

The pack kept together now, circling the shop and finding indiscriminate tracks in the sand. A scent-trail led behind it, toward the old wharf and its rotting piers.

Several dark shapes littered the sand in their path. The pack surrounded the nearest; it was a crab, its shell split by the sun. More lay near it, perhaps two dozen of them. Amari whined. *Something must have driven them from the water to certain death in hot sand.* She hated the thought of being right.

Erik growled menacingly. He drew back as something approached from the pier, cleaving through the sand like a blade — or a shark's fin. Sand and dirt flew as a shape exploded from the earth. Amari caught only glimpses of it before it seized Alex, cracking bone and slicing away flesh. It hurled Alex from its jaws and he landed in a red-stained puff of sand.

The creature stood eight or nine feet high, on two digitigrade legs, with a long, barbed tail for balance. Rough shagreen covered its body, and its arms terminated in razor-sharp fins. Its head resembled a wolf's, but with rows of shark's teeth lining fleshy lips. And then there were the all-too-human eyes. They recognized those eyes.

Peter.

The wolf-shark-thing roared and leaped upon Alex. Before it had a chance to deliver the killing blow, White-Paw struck it in Gauru form. Amari cried out angrily as both monsters tumbled, clawing and biting one another.

Alex willed Essence into his ruined leg. Splintered bone and frayed muscle realigned with a wet *pop*. He scrambled to his feet, limp vanishing as he sprang after White-Paw. Erik circled around to stand between them and the water's edge.

White-Paw came away from the grapple torn and crippled. The beast that had once been Peter still possessed his strength and rage. Alex leaped through the air and slammed bodily into Peter, knocking it away. His skin tore on the monster's shagreen, strewing big tufts of bloody fur across the beach.

A bird of fiery golden feathers dove upon Peter, searing his crazed eyes with sudden brilliance — the totem that once guided him. As Peter staggered, swiping blindly at the air, White-Paw leaped again. Her wounds closed in the span of a few heartbeats. She tackled him to the ground and sank her fangs into his throat. His malformed jaws tore into her neck. Blood and sand splattered over them.

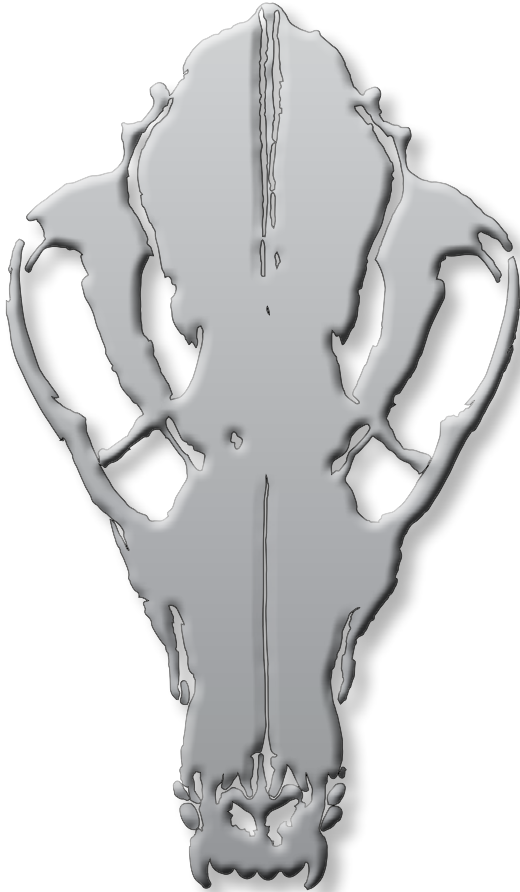
White-Paw fell still and shrank to her Hishu form. Peter screamed, thrashing like a fish out of the water. Alex pounced upon him and seized his neck in terrible Urshul jaws. The snap of bone and cartilage ended Peter's struggle. Nearly as soon as he died, Peter's body began rapidly decomposing into sizzling gelatinous goo.

White-Paw lay choking on the blood in her ruined throat. Her gurgling breaths came rapidly, then began to slow. Torn flesh mended itself within seconds and she spit up mouthfuls of blood — some of it Peter's. She struggled to her feet, supported by Alex and Erik. Amari studied the decaying remains of their former packmate. After a minute, she sang a mournful howl. The others joined her, except for White-Paw, who trembled with a mixture of rage and grief. Their voices mingled into a

guilt-laden dirge. Amari looked out over the waves as the song ended. She knew their hunt had only just begun. *Gagh-Azur* had done them grievous harm and still lurked out there somewhere. They wouldn't rest until they had repaid it in kind.

Whatever its nature and its goals, *Gagh-Azur* was now their prey. The four of them swore vengeance on Peter's behalf. Amari knew its name and its purpose. *I understand at least that much now. You have your cycle. We have ours.* She let out another howl, this one a declaration of *Siskur-Dah*.

The wolf must hunt.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris Allen wears a lot of different hats at the small magazine publishing company he runs with his wife — writer, editor, layout guy, marketer and more besides. A long-time gamer, he has freelanced as a writer for several RPG publishers and has also worked in miniatures wargame design.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden lives and works in Northern Ireland. He has worked as a writer for various RPGs and video games, including for the World of Darkness, RuneQuest, and Warhammer 40k.

Jim Fisher still has “new freelancer smell,” like he’s a car just driven off the lot. **Werewolf: the Forsaken** is his favorite nWoD game, and there simply aren’t words to describe how excited he is to have worked both on this book, and on **Werewolf: the Forsaken Second Edition**.

Matthew McFarland, also known as BlackHat Matt, has been writing and developing roleplaying games professionally since 1998. In 2012, he and his wife Michelle Lyons-McFarland founded Growling Door Games. In Matt’s day job, he is a speech-language pathologist for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

John Newman enjoys all things nerd, including movies, video games, miniatures, and tabletop RPGs. A freelance writer, he is still astonished when people pay him for the things he’s made up out of his head. John currently resides in Cleveland, OH, with his wife Yvonne and their two yappy dogs.

Claire Redfield is a freelance author, editor, gamer and game designer and part-time zombie fighter. She has worked on **Blood & Smoke: The Strix Chronicle**, **Demon: The Descent**, and **Werewolf: The Apocalypse 20th Anniversary**.

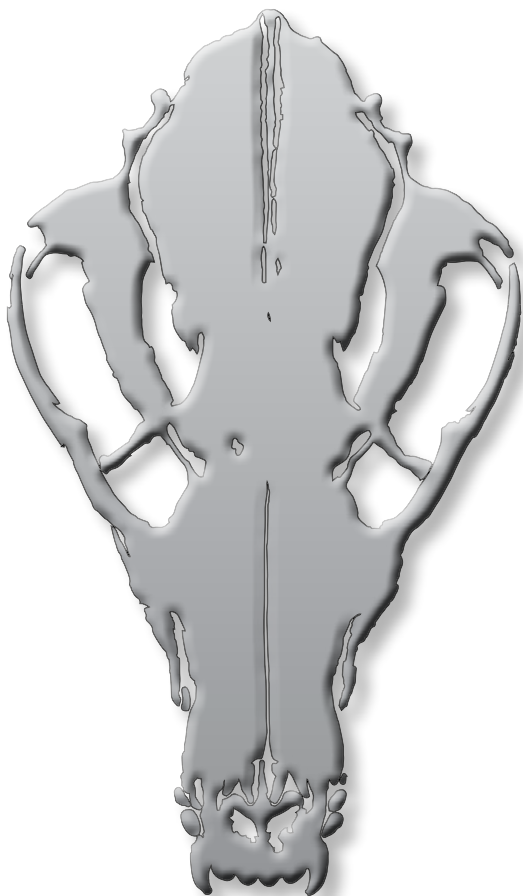
Peter Schafer has a B.A. in English Literature with a creative writing background, and he loves to write science fiction and fantasy.

Chris Shaffer has been making things up and writing them down since he could grasp the concept. This is his first time contributing to **Forsaken**, but he’s

no stranger to werewolves in either World of Darkness. He's eagerly awaiting the return of his first true love, the **Trinity Continuum**.

Leath Sheales began writing for Onyx Path Publishing in late 2013 when a chance referral brought Stew Wilson to his (virtual) door. Since then Leath's goal is to improve the representation of Australia throughout both the Classic and New Worlds of Darkness — and possibly write about werewolves and such in the margins.

Amy Veeres is a writer, gamer, nerd, and is probably human. She lives in Philadelphia, where her sinister schemes for Earth unfold to this day... when she's not playing video games, anyway. You can try to uncover her master plan for the human race before it's too late by following her on Twitter @amyveeres.



THE IDIGAM CHRONICLE ANTHOLOGY

On the hunt, your blood races. When something hunts you, it runs cold. Your blood carries the future of Uratha and the burning fire of kuruth. It's powerful, but ultimately transient.

You know things in your bones. They change with your forms but stay strong. The power of your teeth and claws comes from your bone. It runs deeper than blood, a slow power that doesn't fade.

So you hunt. It's what you do, a key part of your psyche. You hunt people and spirits, hosts and other werewolves. But those things hunt you in turn. Werewolves are always one bad choice away from being the prey.

The Idigam Chronicle Anthology contains 11 short stories (7 original to this collection) of bestial violence and supernatural terror, in celebration of the second edition of *Werewolf: The Forsaken*.

Featuring stories by:

Chris Allen, Aaron Dembski-Bowden, Jim Fisher, Matthew McFarland, John Newman, Claire Redfield, Peter Schafer, Chris Shaffer, Leath Sheales, and Amy Veeres

