

DEADMAN'S TOME

Jan 2012

FEATURES

Debt of Blood
by Philip Roberts

Deal Down at the Hospital
by Jason Sturner

and more...

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Introduction

Crowds of people gather at various spots in multiple countries to join in celebration of the dawn of a new year. During the celebration, it is often seen as an act of tradition to guzzle a mass amount of alcohol as if in hopes that a black out would occur. As if our survival of one year results in a debt that requires payment in something that could ultimately destroy one's liver, impair brain functionality, and result in some really stupid consequences. I'm not bashing a good drink; hell, I'm the one that often pours them in hopes to get some certain entertainment.

But this tradition reminds me of something else. It reminds me of a story that I received for this particular issue: Debt of Blood. Instead of alcohol, a character keeps the company of a strange creature with blood, and instead of yearly, it's practically nightly. Debt of Blood, written by Philip Roberts, combines several horror archetypes that blend wonderfully. Dead Down at the Hospital, by Jason Sturner, tells a witty tale with a very fatal ending. The Bone Cruncher explores the pact between guardian and child during a time of a hellish discovery that would forever change it. The issue contains several pieces of horror and concludes with the next chapter of the Bleeder Resurrection, a chapter that delves deeper into the strange underground world of the cult.

Well, my friends, I wish everyone a happy New Year, and hope for many demented blessings to rain upon us all.

Upcoming Events

Deadman's Tome needs to host another writing contest. It's been a while, but I believe it would allow for a very demented theme come spring. Rules? What rules? I want complete anarchy this time around. It's dark and chaotic.

Deal Down at the Hospital

Jason Sturner

"After I died," said seven-year-old Cassie, suddenly free of cancer and wild in the eyes, "there was this big red sky with a *huge* head floating in it like . . . like the *moon*, only super close. It was a old man, like a wizard, with sharp teeth a thousand feet high, and

gray lips and *no* hair – not even eyebrows – and his eyes were all white, too, and they looked sleepy.”

The little girl bounced on the hospital bed, feet dangling. She tilted her head and pinched at her blond hair, which was already starting to regrow. She couldn't wait to get her pigtails back.

“And he, and he *drooled* a lot too,” she went on, “like waterfalls that fell forever. And there were white fuzzies that floated into his mouth. It was a black mouth, except in the back where it glowed orange.”

She paused, clawing thoughtfully at her gown. Her blue eyes danced along with the memories as they came rushing back.

“Oh yeah, and there were all these tiny, funny-looking heads going around the big head like . . . like meteors. They were spinning and going around and laughing. They were so happy!”

“Mm-hm,” said the doctor, distracted as he went back and forth between charts, x-rays, and blinking machines. “Go on.”

“Then the wizard head *talked*, but not with his mouth though. His mouth stayed open the whole time like a stinky cave. But all the words went right into my head like, um, like tel-e . . . tel-e-*pathic*?”

“Telepathic – yes,” replied the doctor, scratching his head over an x-ray.

The girl stood up on the bed and stretched. Her spine cracked quietly. “Guess what he said?”

“I don't know, honey. Tell me. What did the wizard say?”

The little girl's cheeks reddened. “He said if I want to, I can live to be one hundred years old!”

“That was nice of him,” said the doctor with his back turned.

The little girl giggled and reached down for a scalpel, her thin shadow stretching across the man's white lab coat. She bent her knees and leaned forward, swaying from side to side like a parakeet about to fly out of an open cage.

“I just have to keep my promise first,” she said flatly, raising the scalpel over her head.

“Oh yeah?” said the doctor, remembering how much he adored little girls, “What's that

Red Icicles

Jason Sturner

A rare ice storm hit East Tennessee this morning, shutting down schools and causing car wrecks. It was strikingly beautiful though: a landscape of silver coated trees against a slate gray sky in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Countless icicles hung from telephone wires and the eaves of houses and shacks. Many folks were out taking photos.

But the storm wasn't much of an inconvenience for me. I'm a writer, I work at home. And in that respect the morning was just like any other. That is, until around 9:30.

I was bunkered down in my writing room at the time, the location of all my books, movie posters and monster toys – action figures, I mean – working on a short

story at my laptop desk. I was putting down a scene when a series of small bangs arose from the kitchen area of my prefab house.

“What the hell is *that*?” I said, glancing at the Wolf Man.

I walked out into the living room, all robe and threadbare socks, mug of cold coffee in hand, forehead furrowed beneath an uncombed head of hair. I made a right turn at the dining area – a spacious extension of the kitchen – and faced the sliding doors of the back patio. There, a bright red cardinal was flying against the glass.

“Dude,” I said. “What are you *doing*?”

The cardinal dropped onto a patch of snow, limp and exhausted.

“Don’t kill yourself, bird brain,” I said to it through the glass.

I wasn’t too concerned though, as birds, especially cardinals, had a habit of starting fights with their own reflections. A territorial thing. And they never seemed to truly injure themselves in the process.

I looked at the clock and groaned; it was too early for a beer. So I shuffled back to the writing room and took a moment to admire my favorite zombie action figure. That’s when a series of louder bangs began.

“Here we go again,” I said to the zombie. “Bird braaaains,” I imagined the zombie saying back.

This time, about a dozen birds were whacking themselves against the patio doors. *Pop*, went a sparrow. *Pop*, a wren. *Pop pop*, a pair of titmice.

“What the hell?”

I looked slightly to my left. Frankenwhiskers, my tiger striped cat, was staring at the lower cabinet where I kept his food.

“Don’t you *see* this shit, Frank?”

That’s when I noticed the birdfeeder I’d hung off the eave of the roof: it was completely iced over, the tasty morsels trapped inside. “Is that what you’re all so creased about? Can’t get to the birdseed? Well that’s a dumb reason to bang your skulls against my window!”

Frankenwhiskers walked up to me and began figure 8-ing between my legs. If I didn’t feed him soon he’d open the cabinet with his paw and start biting the cat food bag. That’s when it occurred to me: the birds wanted *inside* the house, they wanted the birdseed in the plastic green bin near the patio doors. No doubt they’d seen me open it each time I refilled the feeder.

“Okay, you can calm down now!” I said to the birds. “Jesus.”

Two mockingbirds flew up and hopped along the doors, chattering to one another and peering into the house. I went to get my coat and boots. That’s when the phone rang: my lovely fiancée calling from Chicago where she was attending a conference.

“How’s the writing going?” she asked. I may have lied when I assured her it was going “super superbly.” She hadn’t laughed at that.

What did make her laugh, however, was my “story” about the birds. “It’s true!” I said. “Here, listen.” I put the phone next to the patio doors but all was silent. The birds had gone.

“Ah hell. You bastards.”

“Okay, well, see you in a couple of days then,” she said. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

After turning off the phone I fed Frankenwhiskers, got distracted by another phone call, and then went back to my writing. Somehow I forgot all about the birdfeeder.

For the next couple of hours I was pretty much unaware of anything else but my story, although I did hear pitter-patter on the roof and the cracking of ice now and then.

At ten seconds to noon I was back in the kitchen eating a sandwich, patiently waiting to take a swig of beer. Suddenly, a windowpane shattered and a long stream of birds came rushing into the house. There were dozens of them – and they all had sharp icicles in their beaks.

Frankenwhiskers meowed “Shit!” and ran behind the couch. Pussy.

“Whoa, wait a minute. Waaait a minute!” I announced to the Hitchcockian gathering, my hands up, my back pressed against the refrigerator. A crow flew atop the birdseed bin and began to tap the lid aggressively with its icicle. “Okay, okay – you’re hungry. I get it. No problemo!”

I inched my way towards the bin, eying each bird cautiously. Some were perched on chairs and cabinets, others stood directly on the counter, their icicles pointed forward. A turkey – seriously, a *turkey?* – poked its head through the broken glass holding a large, double-spiked icicle of its own. The two mockingbirds from before zipped past me and landed on the floor by the couch.

As I reached for the bin the crow flew to the side and landed atop the kitchen table. It raised its body at me and gave me the cold eye, then “sharpened” its icicle on the edge of the table and pooped.

A second later, Frankenwhiskers yelped in pain and bolted out from behind the couch with two icicles stuck in his back. I nearly screamed and made a move to help him, but the birds were staring at me, their heads tilted. Silence followed. No sound but the *drip-drip* of a few icicles. So I held my breath, slowly lifted the lid off the bin and looked inside. I was all out of birdseed.

The Bone Cruncher

George Piper

"So where's the full moon?" Brian said.

"Dunno... must be cloudy or somethin'."

In the darkness of the two-man tent, Brian rolled toward his friend. He tried to see Jake's face in the dimness... hard to tell what he was thinking. Brian only knew that if Jake felt as scared as he did, then both of them would soon need a change of pants.

"Maybe the moon's not coming up tonight."

This time Brian guessed Jake's expression by the dismissive snort he made, "Yeah, right. The moon just decided it didn't want to rise tonight. Dufus."

Brian's parents had given him new camping gear for his fifteenth birthday. Now he kind of wished he had asked for an Xbox instead.

"That's what you are, but what am I?" He tried the old joke, but it came out strained.

"You're crapping your shorts aren't you, Dufus?"

"No... yeah..."

"I knew it!"

"Um, excuse me, but this patch of forest where we have decided to spend the night is exactly where the... it's, um, supposed to be prowling."

"You can't even say the name can you?"

"Yes, I can."

Jake got up on his elbow. His eyes seemed to hover like beacons in the dimness, and Brian could see the glow of his teeth, "Go on then."

Brian swallowed, "Why?"

"You can't can you?" Jake laughed, "The Bone Cruncher, the Bone Cruncher!" He leaned over Brian and made growling noise, "Watch out, Briney! The Bone Cruncher's coming to get you!" He growled again.

"Stop it!" Brian cried. Even in the dark, he thought he saw a glimmer of something off-kilter in the back of Jake's eyes.

"Oooh, wussy boy is scared!"

"It's not normal not to be scared, Jake. You're not normal. Seven people have gone missing in the past twelve years, in this patch of forest, right here."

"Just shows you how stupid people are to keep hiking and camping through here when they know--"

"You mean as stupid as we are?"

"Nobody has been taken for nearly two years now..." He flopped onto his back, and started giggling.

He's freakin nuts, Brian thought, I shouldn't have come out here with him.

But in another way, Jake was probably the best kid to have on your side if you were in danger: say if a bone crunching monster decided you were on the menu. He towered over Brian and he was - as Brian's father often described the football hero - 'built like a stone shithouse'. Jake's physique could be partly attributed to his appetite. A good eater, Jake. Once he came to dinner and Brian had been in awe of how much roast beef the kid put away. Almost three times as much as a normal human teenager. But he would need all that protein: as well as the being the champion of three school sports, he was also a member of the army reserve and a state champion kick-boxer.

Brian played a pretty good game of chess.

"You seen my glasses?"

"I haven't got em." Jake said, "And about those, dear. I mean, you been wearing the same frames since second grade. Whyn't you get something a bit more... I dunno, cool?"

"Huh," Brian mumbled, "I'm getting fashion advice from Mr. Camouflage."

"You're lucky I spend time with you, I have many friends much cooler than you."

But none stupid enough to be lured out into the darkness of the forest where a man-eating creature is reputed to stalk the land.

Brian groped around the corner of the tent floor where he had thrown his sweatshirt. He remembered having placed his spectacles and his mobile phone on top of the shirt. His hand fell on the phone and he brought it close to his face, peering at the screen. 11.43. Out here in the bush, twenty kilometres from home, he could detect no signal.

"Where's your cam-corder?"

"Um..." Jake cleared his throat, "I, it's got a flat battery."

"You didn't bring it? But I thought you wanted to record the... the thing."

"I know, I know. Don't get your shorts in a twist. You'll be a witness anyway."

"But..." Brian let out a breath, "Well, maybe it won't show." He put the phone back, and continued to feel around for his glasses. He unzipped his sleeping bag and got up on his knees.

"Jake, what'd you do with the torch?"

"What am I, the freakin quartermaster?"

"Well, you were the last one to have it, when you got up for a pee earlier."

"Oh yeah." He reached across and fumbled around for a moment. "Here." he handed the flashlight to Brian who switched it on.

"Nice one, numb-nuts, now you've ruined my night vision!"

Brian swung the torch toward Jake, who winced and ducked his head into his sleeping bag, "What?"

Jake cursed and told him he was a dufus again.

Brian unzipped the tent flaps and peered out into the night. Not a beam of moonlight illuminated the landscape, and he wondered if Jake had got the wrong night. Just beyond the small clearing where they camped, the forest looked black and impenetrable. It seemed to breathe: a cold, secret exhalation of damp wood and rotting leaves. The stillness made the back of his neck prickle. Surely he ought to hear more noise... some movement. But he could detect not the faintest rustle of a foraging possum. He shivered, re-zipped the flaps and crawled back into his sleeping bag.

"You know," Said Jake, "some say the Bone Cruncher is a mutant dingo."

This time Brian's snorted, "Right."

"What about a Bunyip... or no! A werewolf?"

"Might be an alien. Just as plausible..." Brian paused, "How many times did you say you've been out here looking for the Bone Cruncher?"

"Every month for the last six months." He whispered.

"And you haven't spotted it once?"

Jake fell quiet.

"Have you?"

"I, um, I think I saw a glimpse once - it was... sort of loping away from the stump..."

The stump stood about 300 metres into the scrub from where they lay. The remnants of a giant hardwood loggers chopped down about 150 years before, the stump measured close to the size of a large kitchen table. Jake had been using it as a sort of altar where upon which he would place various small dead animal as offerings to the Bone Cruncher. He would then hide and wait and watch, in his bid to be the first person in the district to get video evidence of the creature.

"What do you mean, 'loping'?"

"Dunno... looked like it ran on all fours."

"You mean like a wolf or a dingo."

"Hmm... s'pose..."

Brian swallowed. What had Jake said before?

Werewolf...

Each month Jake's sacrifices to the creature got bigger. He had offered guinea pigs (reportedly, his kid sister's pets); brought chickens and other birds, then last time, Old Cal's dog. Brian did not question why Jake had been in possession of Cal's dog, or

how the animal died. Not out loud, at any rate. Although, going on rumours, and his own knowledge of how Old Cal treated all of his animals, to leave this mortal coil would probably have been a blessing for the poor mutt.

"So what time does it usually come and feed?"

"Between midnight and about two o'clock... don't worry, you'll hear it howling."

Brian's scalp contracted, "H-h-howling?"

"Yeah, that's what werewolves do, don't they? Or mutant dingoes, whatever."

God, I wish I'd asked for the XBox...

After a while, Brian said, "So how come you didn't bring any offerings this time?"

"Did."

"But... where's the the animal you're going to put on the stump?"

"Oh, it's a surprise, Briney."

He saw the white glow of Jake's teeth in the dimness and his heart stopped.

When they were ten, Jake burnt down Old Cal's barn.

Though Brian had nothing at all to do with the setting of the fire, he had been present, and remained to watch those awesome yellow flames lick up the sides of the shed. Burning the barn had been a deliberate act on Jake's part, but of course Brian testified to every adult that they both committed the crime, and that it had been a total accident.

Old Cal had thought the whole thing amusing and after that seemed to develop a real affection for Jake.

Because of Brian's loyalty, from that day Jake became Brian's big brother - not much older, sure, but definitely bigger. A sort of unbreakable bond grew between the two boys also. Since that day, Jake had never been bullied at school, never been left out of the baseball team (though totally sucked as a player), and never been so led astray on so many occasions. Though the boys had only got into mostly small-time mischief.

Jake and Cal together on the other hand...

Old Cal lived in a cabin in the forest some distance further into the wilderness from where the boys camped. Secluded. And for many years rumours circulated of less than savoury escapades involving Jake and Cal at his place. However, nobody seemed inclined to break the alliance between the boy and the old man. Parents and citizens generally agreed that any father figure Jake might latch on to must be a good thing, considering that his alcoholic mother did not actually parent her son. Cal was an avid hunter, which meant land-holders in the area felt reluctant to condemn a person who helped to keep their properties free of vermin like dingo, rabbit and roo. The worst thing Cal ever did (well, the only thing police could prove) was when he shot at a homeless wanderer who approached him at his cabin a few years ago.

As Brian grew older, while he understood that Jake probably longed for the attentions of a father figure, he felt that hooking up with that crazy, toothless old weasel, Cal, could only be an alliance completely unholy.

Thus, Brian tried, and latterly succeeded in distancing himself from Jake. Some months had passed since Brian had even spoken to him, so Brian had been kind of surprised that Jake suggested a camping trip.

And now, disturbing...

Brian gulped, opened his mouth, closed it, then finally squeaked out, "Wh-what do you mean, 'it's a surprise'?"

Jake made a low chuckle. Then so quick, Brian could not react, Jake rolled on top of him, gripped his arms and pinned him to the floor.

In the dimness, his teeth seemed larger than they ought to be. And his breath smelt bad, like he had recently eaten a big steak and not brushed, "I mean, it's an animal, Briney, but not a four-legged animal..."

Brian dashed forward. Cool forest air brushed his legs and he realised in his panic to escape, he had forgotten to pull on his jeans.

Darkness filled all the spaces in the undergrowth, leaked across the meagre clearings. As he raced, trees loomed out of the blackness only inches from his face. Inky shapes formed out of thick air... then whirled, exploded...

I have to run... chase...I have to--

A tree! He smacked into the trunk, wheeled back, fell on his ass. His mind spun. He greyed out for a moment, then shook his head and blinked.

Why the hell was out here in the middle of nowhere?

Flashes of recent events came to him:

Jake... He and Jake in the tent... Jake had... what did he do, now? Brian rubbed his eyelids, trying to recover more memories...

The sweetest flesh of all...

Sacrifice...

He yelps in panic, stuck under Jake's bulk. Jake starts laughing. "What's the matter?"

"You, you, you--"

"You think I'm gonna sacrifice a human?"

"I-I-I..."

"Well, technically, I suppose he is... but Bri, not you. Never you."

He rolls off and Brian sucks in a breath.

"Not you, Dufus. I need you to help me go fetch Cal. He's an old bastard, been doing things to me for years... just..."

Jake's sobs. Brian can't believe what he's hearing, yet he feels the truth of Jake's pain.

"I'm gonna make him pay, Bri! He's gonna pay good! You're the only person who ever saw who I really was Bri, liked me for me, accepted me." He sniffs, swipes a hand across his face, then passes Brian his glasses, "I hid em as a joke, I know you like practical jokes Bri."

Brian hates practical jokes, but he feels like crying for his friend. He takes the glasses, but realises his eyes have focussed just fine without them, certainly enough to see the pain on his friend's face, even in the dimness of the tent.

Brian stopped. He stood for a moment, panting, trying to think of a way around this.

Jesus, did Jake really intend to sacrifice a person to the Bone Cruncher?

Brian couldn't call anyone, his phone wouldn't work out here. How far away did the road lay? His dad dropped them off and they had walked for over an hour before they'd found the clearing.

Oh God, oh God....

His heart hammered, his feet throbbed because, as well as his trousers, he had also neglected to put on his shoes. He heard a whimpering sound and he realised he made the noise.

No! Stop it you big baby!

Okay. So obviously, he had to figure a way out of this for himself and Jake... and probably Old Cal.

A light came on: the full moon finally showing itself. It eyed him, looking cold and much higher than he thought it should be. But his heart stirred with feeling for that silver orb. He could use it. He could use the light to find his way out of here.

But which way?

Where am I? Oh God, where am I?

His stomach churned, his mind whirled. He peered through the undergrowth, expecting Jake to burst through the scrub at any moment and grab him, make him go fetch Cal.

First thing I gotta do is warn Cal... I have to find him.

Despite his revulsion at what Jake wanted to do, Brian vowed that when this finished, he would report that old bastard, Cal, to the police.

"Man... why didn't you ever tell anyone about... about Cal?"

"Who would believe me, Brian?"

"I would have... you know I would have."

"But... but it was like I had a dad, you know... we had some fun times together. I... I dunno... I think there's something wrong with me. I coulda told him to stop, I could take him down with one punch."

"No Jake! It's not your fault."

"I just didn't know how... didn't know what to do." He's sitting up now, his eyes blazing in the darkness, "This is payback Brian. I'm gonna get him good."

"No!" Brian gets up on his knees, grabs his friend's arms, "You can't, Jake, you can't! I'll help you. We'll go to the police, we'll get him arrested and--"

"And some judge will give him a slap on the wrist and he'll get out and he'll do it again to someone else."

"But--"

"No, Brian, this is the only way he'll get what's coming to him."

I have to stop him...

Brian ran. A sob tore out of him when he remembered the disappointment in Jake's voice, almost betrayal when he realised Brian would not help him in his grisly task. He also recalled how fast and strong Jake had been.

Do I really stand a chance of stopping him?

He must try.

He pelted through the trees. White moonlight flashed between the branches. He ran faster.

Keep moving, you'll be there soon...

But where?

Jake's not far now...

No, no, I have to go see Cal. Yeah, Cal is... is a sick bastard... Jake wants to kill him... I have to stop Jake...

In the tent, Jake stares into the back of his own mind. Brian can tell he is re-living what Cal has inflicted upon him. Jake's eyes glow in the dark, his lips pull back in a grimace. To Brian, his teeth look long and yellow. Brian's heart thunders. He knows he will not be strong enough to stop Jake if he decides to leave. Slowly, Brian reaches for the torch. His fingers close around it, he brings it up, flicks the switch.

Jake turns toward the light. His eyes have a sheen, like an animal's. His voice is a low rumble: "You don't have to help me, Brian, but I am gonna get him. You know you can't stop me."

"No, Jake!"

Jake's arm lashes out. He smacks Brian in the temple. The inside of the tent spins around... the world floats away for a while...

When he comes around, Jake is gone...

Jake felt a pain in his chest. As fit as he was, he had never run so hard, so fast.

The Bone Cruncher lurked out here. He knew it like he knew his own name; even though he had not seen the wolf-like creature yet.

His feet thundered across the ground. He crunched branches and twigs underfoot, and winced everytime he made a cracking noise announcing his whereabouts.

But he could not slow down. He must fetch Cal. He could not leave it another month, and deep inside he knew the creature lurked somewhere out here tonight. If he died himself he would not care - so long as he took that filthy old bastard with him. The creature would crunch his bones, but he would crunch Cal into oblivion too.

His lungs burned, his legs burned. He glanced up. The moon looked beautiful: its light pure and white, but failing to penetrate the thick underbrush. His foot hit a rock buried in the ground; his ankle turned, his knee wrenched, he stumbled. But he kept running.

His thoughts flashed to Brian. Brian would probably be safe if he stayed in the tent. He shouldn't have brought the poor skinny, short-sighted dufus out here. Should have come on his own; it wasn't Brian's problem, it wasn't Brian's fault.

Just ahead a tree branch lay across Jake's path. But he raced so fast he couldn't react in time. His shin smashed into the branch. He flew forward, hit the ground. He felt he sharp pain in his leg, tasted dirt, but scrambled to his feet.

That shin bone would hurt like a bastard tomorrow.

If you make it out of here, Jake, if the Bone Cruncher isn't picking his teeth with your tibia...

He raced ahead. He felt blood running down his leg, and wondered if the Bone Cruncher would detect him from the smell.

A few minutes later, he saw the unmistakable glint of moonlight of a tin roof. Cal's shack.

"Caaaalll!" Jake yelled. His breath ran out and he slowed to a trot, inhaled, then screamed again.

"CAAAALLL! COME OUT HERE YOU BASTAAAARD!!!"

Jake knew Cal never went to bed before twelve o'clock, and a few times not before two.

He stopped, his chest heaving. Sweat trickled down his temple, his shin throbbed, his thoughts swirled.

Something blipped in the back of his mind, but he couldn't pin the idea down.

WEREWOLF, flashes in his head and lets his mind go there...

What if a werewolf was responsible for killing people, taking the offerings he laid out each month? How did anyone know whether such a creature existed or not? Nobody could explain away why people had gone missing in this forest over the years. Nobody could explain why investigations had produced nothing but blood and small bone fragments. Were these unfortunates murdered by a human, or something else? Why had police never taken a single suspect in custody?

Jake couldn't stop this train of thought if he wanted to.

His throat closed up. Cal usually went to bed bewtween twelve and two... and the Bone Cruncher ate on the full moon... Cal lived right here in the forest where people had been taken. Of course Police extensively questioned Cal on several occasions, but Jake knew him to be the most deceitful, sneaky lying son-of-a-bitch ever to breathe...

And the most cruel and vicious person in the world... and he likes to kill animals... I should know, I helped him kill enough of them.

Jake racked his brain to remember what the heck Cal had done with those possums and lizards and wallabies...

He looked up at the shack. He had come so close: right on the edge of the clearing. His wristwatch read 11.57: almost the witching hour, the hunting hour, the changing hour...

The hour of the Werewolf.

And he might be running right into it's lair.

Jake's buttocks clenched. God, oh God, oh God... Did he hear me? He must have heard me, I yelled loud enough to wake the dead.

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, his whole body shook. He stared at the cabin. Pale yellow light shone through threadbare curtains. Cal (or the Bone Cruncher, Jake- a freakin werewolf!) must be awake. He was awake. Jake already knew he never went to bed before midnight.

Because he's out hunting...

He knew Old Cal liked to kill animals...

And eat them?

He whimpered, willing a human shape to pass by the window.

Shit oh shit, oh shit, what am I going to dooooo....

Then he felt all his energy fizz away, leaving a strange resigned lethargy in every muscle. He wondered what it would feel like to change from a person to a wolf? He thought the sensation might be a bit like the lethargic tide flowing through him now, because you couldn't do anything about it if that's what you were...

Then without even thinking about it, Jake spun on his heel and pelted off into the night.

As he runs, he can smell the way now, can smell things he never knew had smells. Could sense things he never could before...

Yet he knows all this is part of him as much as the life of sunlight and talking and living in a house as a human.

The movement of his limbs becomes easier. He relishes the beauty of the dark forest. The trees are his allies. The night is his guard, his salvation. It seems the faster he runs, the more his eyes adjust to the dimness.

His breath is regular, strong - rushing in and out of his mouth, born of his broad chest.

He runs. The moon drops lower, illuminating everything. He slows. He is near. The night appears to him in black and white, but clear and sharp. He sniffs the air, analysing. The placement of odours make up his map.

He can smell the feeding spot. Food ran everywhere in a place like this: possums, wallabies, lizards... but he knew of a special place food appeared which he did not have to hunt and kill. He sniffs, lopes forward a couple of steps, stops. His flank quivers, where a mosquito bites through the fur.

Memories of the humans and their human desires and passions fade. Life is so much more basic... somehow more profound than the higher thoughts and emotions of humans. Kill, eat, copulate, eat, kill...

A perfect harmony of physical wants that make an animal an animal... make it so efficient.

He is silent as he creeps forward - low to the ground, head down, muscles like loaded springs.

He is at the clearing, the stump...

The part of him that remains human recognises the person it sees. His nose twitches, sniffing for danger.

Though he knows this human, he feels no trust toward it. Human's are completely un-trustworthy. They are that strange species both foe and food at the same time - depending on how quick, how clever the animal could be.

He felt like his lungs would burst. He tripped on a tree root, staggered, almost fell, windmilled his arms, kept running.

Soon his legs became jelly. Now the flashing moonlight seemed to blind him more than complete dark. He didn't know where he was, what direction he headed...

He stumbled to a stop. His breath tore in and out of his lungs and sweat blurred his vision. He leaned back against something, his body floppy and spent as a rag doll. A few moments later it dawned on him where he had ended up, upon what he now propped himself.

He had draped himself over a large stump.

The stump.

As soon as that realisation hit him, he smelt stale blood. The wooden surface reeked of it.

The animal smells blood. Its legs fly in their galloping motion. The muzzle thrusts forwards, the long, yellow teeth are bared. Two metres from the prey, the animal leaps. Its long body flies through the air. It makes barely a sound, but a low rumble in its chest.

One thought passes through its head.

Human... the sweetest flesh of all...

He screamed. The noise tore out of him like a hurricane.

Huge paws thudded into his chest, cutting the scream short. He slammed to the ground, breath whooshing out. His sternum crackled under the huge weight, his heart felt barely able to maintain a beat under the huge mass. Instinct made him try and suck in a breath, but his ribcage had been squashed and he could not inflate his lungs a millimetre. Long claws dug into his body.

A dark shape eclipsed the light, filled his vision. He could see only yellow glowing eyes and a long narrow muzzle - so close to his eyes he couldn't focus. But he could smell the breath, panting into his face: hot, damp, reeking of spoiled meat. His eyes adjusted a little and he saw that the fangs appeared as long as his own index finger. Hot saliva slid off a canine and dripped onto his face. The black nose lowered... only

millimetres from his own... it sniffed... a low growl rumbled like quiet thunder, running along his nerves.

His mind wouldn't work, his body had become paralysed. His lungs burned; his whole body felt flat, but it didn't matter any more...

A calmness flowed through him and his muscles melted...

The black nose sniffed, the breath smelt foul, the eyes glowed.

As he stares into those eyes, with his last whisper of breath, he gasps: "Brian?"

The yellow eyes blink, the head cocks, pulls away. The weight eases a little and pain rushes along Jake's body.

Before he can grasp any logic about what is happening, someone shrieks.

"GIT AWAY, YOU UNHOLY MONSTERRRR!!!"

A cracking boom! echoed through the night, then the sharp yelp of a dog in pain. The weight lifted from Jake's body.

He sucked in a lungful of air, sobbed, then slowly dragged himself to his knees. He panted for a moment, then pulled himself upright against the stump. He grasped his chest and felt the warm wetness of blood. He looked around, but the animal had gone.

"Jake! What the hell, boy!"

Cal. The old man half hobbled, half trotted toward him with a shotgun under his arm, "D'you put yerself out here as bait? You stupid idiot!" He stopped, reached out a hand.

"No!" Jake's arm whipped out and he snatched the gun from Cal's grasp. "Do not call me stupid!"

Cal gulped, backed up, hands spread.

"AND DO NOT TOUCH ME EVER AGAAAIIIIIN!!!"

Jake brought up the barrel of the gun... aimed...

A dark streak flies toward them from across the clearing. A huge, elongated grey bulk fills the air between him and Cal. The animal snarls. Cal shrieks and throws up his arms. But he does not stand a chance. The animal slams into him. They hit the ground with a whump. The creature opens its huge mouth, Jake sees a flash of thick canines, then the creature burrows its muzzle into Cal's throat. It growls with what sounds like delight: the sound wet and muffled. Then it yanks its great head away, tearing off a chunk of red gristly stuff. Blood spurts into the air in a thick gout, then ebbs.

Jake drops the gun, staggers and vomits.

When he looks up, he sees the Bone Cruncher has turned Cal into red, raw, rag doll.

Jake is frozen. He wants to run, but can't seem to move. The animal lifts its head, its paws buried in the mass of red and purple and white. It falls very still. Its muzzle is masked in gore, right up to his eyes, but it is staring at Jake. It cocks its head, then turns its nose toward the sky, toward the fat white moon, and howls.

"WOOOOOO-oooooo...."

Jake takes off. He runs like he has never run before.

Debt of Blood

Philip Roberts

Less than two hours after Estella Deloge put up the room for rent sign a man knocked on her front door. He wore clothes once meant for an office, but crumpled and stained from too much use. She suspected he was once a portly man from the wrinkles in his face and the looseness to his clothes. Now his weak smile was embedded in a gaunt, hairy face below reddened eyes.

“Delmar Pascoal,” he said.

An alcoholic, she thought, stepping aside as she smiled and gestured for him to enter. He glanced around the front hall; tapping lightly on the hardwood flooring, nervous gaze jumping between the well lit stairs leading up, the darker hallway to the kitchen on the right, and the bright, pastel colored living room to the left.

He accepted her offer of tea, took the hot cup with unsteady fingers, drinking it down so fast she suspected he hadn't had anything to drink in awhile.

Eleven years earlier when Jeremiah had first suggested they rent out the upstairs bedrooms, he would've shown Delmar the door, but Estella was more understanding than her cynical late husband. “I just want to ask you honestly,” she said, leaning closer. “Do you think you'll be able to get the rent in at least close to the due date? I do enjoy the company a renter provides, but I'm afraid I also need the money myself to get by each month, so please be honest with me.”

Delmar lowered the cup. The eyes he fixed on her told her of a past life of respectability before whatever troubles had torn it away, and told her as well some part of him still maintained a dignity his appearance no longer reflected. “You have my word,” he told her.

She believed him. After three hours of light conversation he handed her the first months rent and carried a single suitcase up to the second floor bedroom.

For almost the full sixty-two years Estella had lived she'd been a night owl, rarely in bed before three and almost never up before ten. Jeremiah had tried and failed to wean her away from her schedule, his one great failure, he'd once mused, and they'd gone out of their way to find a church able to match Estella's sleep patterns.

Most renters turned out their lights well before midnight, but she still heard the creak of movement up above her around one in the morning when she glanced out her open window and saw the shape moving along the far side of the backyard. She muted the TV to get a better look at the dark shape moving swiftly along the fence.

The fence extended down the side of the home, ending near the backyard where her property line butted up against a stretch of undeveloped land owned by the city. She might've assumed it an animal, but she'd never had one venture into her yard before, and something about the shape looked off to her, larger than most dogs. She would've concluded it looked like a man running on all fours but the preposterousness of the notion dismissed it from her mind. By the time she'd gotten up to stick her head out the window she didn't see anything.

Back in her seat, finger about to un-mute the television, the clatter near the back of the house made her freeze.

She went for the gun cabinet rather than the phone. She hadn't fired the gun in ages, but Jeremiah's distrust of the world had led to classes, and the two loaded guns in the cabinet. She held one of the weapons close to her while she listened to the click of nails against wood, the faint grunt of effort, and what she knew was a window sliding open.

Delmar, she thought, and hurried up the stairs as fast as her body allowed. All four of the doors in the upstairs hallway were closed, but the far window had been pulled open, and in the glow of the moonlight she could see the smears of red on the glass. A trail of it led from the open window and down the hall towards Delmar's closed door.

The doors had no locks; a point of concern from many previous tenants over the years, but one she'd never cared to alleviate. The door swung open into the sparsely decorated bedroom, showing more clearly the streaks of blood smeared across the floorboards.

Delmar sat on the floor with his back to the bed, bottle of dark liquor held tightly in his right hand. He glanced over at her and the gun she aimed at him, almost smiling, she thought, at the sight of the weapon. The trail of blood ran further in the room, beneath Delmar towards the back corner in a crevice between the end of the bed and the wall. From there she could see the hint of movement, of a dirty hand gripping onto the metal bedpost, the face peering around the corner towards her, but it ducked back as soon as she caught sight of the bald, scabbed head. The stink of dirt and flesh blanketed out the smell of the bottle Delmar drank from.

"I would get rid of the gun," Delmar said quietly, took a swig from the bottle.

"Just what trouble are you into," Estella whispered. The head inched towards the bedpost, the image of seared flesh briefly visible before it ducked back again.

"I'd lose the gun," he said. "Doesn't like weapons, you see, especially if they're pointed at me."

"If you mean to threaten me I'll call the police."

He shook his head no while guzzling down his liquor, and Estella almost grabbed the bottle from his lips to stop him, but any time she moved even a little closer to the man, she saw that scabby head peering out.

"So long as you hold the gun it'll consider you a threat to me, and trust me, it only tolerates threats for so long."

It really wasn't as hard as she'd thought it'd be to set down the gun on the nightstand right inside the door. The gun didn't seem to give her any authority in that room, she thought, and so losing it didn't alter the balance of things. She felt just as confused and helpless with it as without it, and when Delmar reached over and picked the gun up, she knew he had no intentions of pointing it at her.

"It's okay," he said, staring down at the weapon.

The man crawled over the back end of the bed onto the mattress, though once she had a good look at him, she couldn't say if she stared at a man after all. The size of the body appeared to be closer to a teenage boy than a man, the bone structure narrow and thin. Scars covered every inch of him, some years old, others still crusted with dirty red. He had no hair that she could see, not even between his legs where his genitals had apparently been removed, nothing left but a warped mound of skin.

Yet she saw aspects of the scarred boy that didn't look human at all. The eyes he watched her with were like solid orbs of dark green, larger than any eyes she'd seen

before, only a pinprick of light reflecting where pupils might be. When he sat on the bed, hunched more like a dog than a man, his head seemed to sink further into the body than it should.

Still, she chose to ignore the abnormalities and focus only on the clear humanity. "What was done to this child," she asked.

Delmar snorted, smiled, and savored a mouth full of liquor before answering. "Who knows who did the old scars too him, but the recent cuts are all mine."

The inhumanity of the concept dwarfed her ability to comprehend. "How could anyone-"

"He isn't human," Delmar said without looking at her.

"Is that how you justified it? People are born with deformities."

Delmar pulled himself up, still holding the gun, and turned towards the bed. He motioned towards the boy and immediately he complied, crawling up to Delmar, though the green eyes never left Estella's face. "Open," Delmar said. The boy opened his mouth. Before Estella could react Delmar put the gun in the boy's open mouth and pulled the trigger.

The back of the head detonated out, sprayed the wall with thick blood and gristle, Estella's shock too complete for her to scream. Her hands clasped in front of her mouth as the boy's body tumbled back, jawbone hanging limply against the chest from when the bullet had shattered the side of it, those green eyes gone black.

Before her shock could end the body jerked forward, eyes lighting up, fleshy tendrils reaching out of the head towards the shattered jaw and pulling it back together. Flesh poured from the back of the skull. In less than a minute the boy had regained life, green eyes still fixed on Estella's frightened gaze as if she were the real threat in the room.

"She won't harm you," Delmar said. "See, I have the gun." He waved it in front of the boy's face.

In the silence that followed Delmar knelt down to pick up his liquor and finish the bottle off. He held the glass over his tongue to get every last drop, and once finished, shattered the glass against the wall, making Estella jump. "Got anymore in the house?" he asked her.

"I don't drink."

He knelt in front of the boy. "There's a liquor store about two blocks over. Go get me a bottle of whiskey." He glanced over at Estella, and then back at the boy. "Come on, you know she isn't going to touch me."

Reluctantly the boy pulled his gaze away from Estella and crawled over to the window. He slid the glass open and leapt out into the night. Once he had left Delmar motioned with his head towards the hallway and Estella followed him down the stairs.

Only after they'd taken up seats in the living room in what felt like a mock reenactment of their first meeting earlier that day, did Delmar say, "I condemned someone to die. It'll go to the liquor store, and it won't be seen on the way. It's good at avoiding that when it wants to. And then whoever working in that store is going to die. I've seen it kill. It'll shove those fingers into the person's neck and rip the head clean off." He drew a line across his neck with his finger, smiled at her.

Her gaze hardened at the man's humor. "I'll call the police if you don't tell me what's going on."

She saw a twitch in Delmar's eyes. "I called the police," he said. "I watched it disembowel three officers. Took its time on the last one, oh yes it did, making that man suffer as long as it could.

"I have it, you see." He leaned forward as he spoke; gnawing on his fingernails between words, digging in so deep Estella saw the trickle of blood running down them. "Went for a stroll through a park near my home and I saw that thing about to be killed by a man. Guy looked crazy, like me, if you want a mental picture, and I know now why he looked like that, but at the time, I just saw him with a knife and that scarred boy at his feet.

"Thought I was too late. He tore out that boy's neck before I could reach him, but I took him down, and in the heat of the moment, I killed him. That's what started it for me. Boy healed instantly, and it started following me. Couldn't make it go away, and the second anyone would make any motion to attack me, it would kill them, gut them with a look of pure joy. I've tried killing it. Won't do. Tried running from it, but as you can see, it always finds me." He leaned forward, eyes locked on Estella. "I even tried suicide. I took a gun to my temple but no less than three hours later I awoke with its face peering down at me, fully healed myself. Unless something else kills me, I don't think I can even die anymore."

The rustle outside the window drew both their eyes, brought Delmar to his feet with a tired smile. "My whiskey," he said.

The boy crawled quickly through the window with two bottles in his hands. His arms were drenched in dripping red, feet leaving prints on the floorboards, even his mouth wet with both saliva and blood.

Delmar pulled out a red-stained handkerchief to wipe the blood off the bottles he was given. "A useful tool I quickly learned," he said. He collapsed back into the seat; the boy perched in the corner, once again dutifully watching Estella's every movement.

"Can he speak?"

Delmar snorted. "Not in words, but he understands most things. Can usually get him to run simple errands. Tell him something too complicated he won't do it. Oh, and he will act on his own, and I'm afraid you aren't going to live through his. No one gets to see it and live. No matter where you run, it'll find you."

"Why did you come here?"

The boy inched closer to Estella, but the movement caught Delmar's eye, and he jerked his head towards the boy. "You don't do a thing until I tell you." The boy eased back, head low like a hurt animal, eyes narrowing at Estella. She saw wet lips pull back to show her sharp teeth. Delmar ignored the boy. "Thought I was finally rid of it. Cut it up into five pieces and buried them all about two weeks ago. But here it is. Think I've finally accepted there's just no getting away."

Before either could speak again they both heard the car pull to a stop outside the house. Through the open window they could see the cop car, along with the lone man getting out of it. The gunshot, Estella thought, and started to rise, ignoring the rumble from the boy, her intent to warn away the man trudging up the sidewalk towards the house, but Delmar lurched from his chair before she could.

His dirty fingers wrapped around her mouth as he pulled her away from the window. A motion of his head sent the boy hurrying out the side window. "Going to have to see this to understand," he whispered, his arms too strong for her to get away as the

first knocks hammered the door. She screamed into his hand, and heard the shift of movement as the officer heard her, but the rustle of the bushes along the house told her the man's fate.

The officer managed a startled grunt but nothing more before the boy crashed into him. Delmar let Estella go and walked up to the front door. As soon as it opened the boy hurried through, pulling the officer's body into the living room. In the bright lamp light Estella saw the bloody tear in the man's neck where vocal cords had been severed, but she saw as well the way his eyes darted around, still conscious, trying to grope for his gun.

The boy drove his fingers through both shoulders. He opened a mouth dripping saliva to bite ravenously into the officer's face, tearing loose the nose, but doing only superficial damage. She could almost feel the joy emanating from the warped creature, delighting in the pain, and she finally dropped any belief in its humanity.

So caught up in its efforts it didn't notice her at first when she went for the gun cabinet and picked up the other weapon. Delmar watched her from the far side of the room, his own weapon by his side, tears glistening in his eyes and on his cheeks.

He brought up his gun and fired before she could, clipping the side of the boy's leg, but the pain didn't seem to bother it, or slow its attack on the cop. "Don't forget about her," Delmar shouted, pointed towards Estella, and now the boy brought up his head, fixed those dark green eyes on her, smiled wide at the approval finally given.

She fired twice into its chest as it pounded towards her, slowed by both her shots and Delmar's, but it still moved faster than she could hope to dodge. Both hands tore into her stomach, ripped out the back of her, the pain so intense it seemed to cancel itself out, dull itself into nothing and allow her to bring up the gun as if it could still help her.

She fired twice more, but the bullets only made it smile wider, pull free a hand and drive it into her again, avoiding her heart or lungs, drawing out the torture. Staring into its face she accepted her death, let the gun begin to slip from her fingers, but before she could she felt other hands on hers, lifting it up, and saw Delmar in front of her.

He aimed her gun at his forehead. "If it hurts its master it dies. I know this now. Second you kill me you're its master, and its already hurt you bad. Trust me," he whispered.

She did. She saw in her mind the look he'd given her when he'd handed her the rent, the look of a once honorable man driven by circumstances. She pulled the trigger.

She didn't see the bullet tear through his head and fling his body back, but rather, focused on the shriek of pain the boy uttered, face contorted into a look of terror as it tore its arms free from Estella's body. She felt it try to soften her landing, felt the wet touch of its melting flesh as if its hands had been bathed in acid.

How Delmar had come by his knowledge of what would happen, Estella couldn't say, but she smiled at the sight of the creature's death. It died faster than her, the effects that started at its hands moving up the body, thick liquid spewing from its mouth, leaking from its ears and eyes. Something in her felt pity for the thing in those last fleeting seconds, wondering if whatever had made this monster had forced the fate upon it, or if it had willfully become a slave.

The origins didn't matter as it stumbled away from her and collapsed in on itself, body hissing. A thick puddle was all that remained when the process finally ended and brought the room to silence. In the calm she heard the gasping remains of the officer's

life, and the wail of approaching vehicles in the distance, her hands clutched over the bloody holes in her stomach. Whether she heard cop cars or an ambulance she couldn't say, and suspected it didn't matter.

Daddy's Home

Elias Siqueiro

Marquitos thought about his name as he got out of the shower. He could smell the cake his mother was baking and he felt that now that he was eleven it was time to be called Marcos like his father. He looked in the mirror and combed his hair carefully the way his mother liked, a neat straight part at the side. He dressed in the clothes his mother had left for him, a pair of white slacks and a nice blue shirt. He left the bathroom and he could hear his mother singing a Spanish pop song in the kitchen. She always seemed so tired lately and now she was happy again. He wondered as to all the things he would do with his father when he came home.

He went into his parent's room and opened the top drawer of the dresser. It was his father's drawer and in it, among the various metals and decorations, under a stack of letters from his loved ones sent to him during the first desert war and a portfolio sent by the Department of Veteran's Affairs, lay a 44 Magnum, chrome and pearl-handled, that rested in a leather holster. Next to it was a photo of his mother as she was before he was born. It was Marquitos' ritual to first pick up the photo and marvel at how young and thin his mother once was, almost like a different person, and then when this no longer fascinated him, he'd pick up the gun. Because of the weight of the object he needed both hands to lift it but rarely would he take it out of the holster. The smell of the leather was smooth and sweet. It made him think of his father's travels, the women on the other side of the world with those long black sheets and their dark eyes peering and solely visible. Now and then, though, he'd take the gun out of the holster. The chrome reflected his eyes and when he breathed upon it then it would cloud over and then it reflected nothing. With both hands he would aim it around the room, knowing he was doing bad, and praying internally that there were no bullets in the revolving chamber. He would sometimes aim it at the mirror and whisper the word *POW* as he imagined himself in a fight against heavily armed intruders.

The boy wanted to touch the gun one last time before his father arrived. He held the gun but didn't take it out of the holster this time. He smelled the leather and placed it back in its place without incident, wondering if it looked as he had originally found it when his father went away to war after being on active duty for almost a decade. He closed the drawer and went back into his room, thinking of his father, Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Gutierrez. He thought how nice it would be if his father dropped him off at school tomorrow in his uniform, visibly standing by his car while Marquitos went in, all the other students growing jealous of him having a hero for a dad.

Marquitos met his mother in the kitchen and she sent him back to his room to put on the dress shoes she had bought him. "You can't wear those tennis shoes with such nice pants."

Marquitos went back into his room and put on his dress shoes and when he had finished doing so a car pulled up outside and he looked out the window and noticed it

was a yellow taxi and a man in uniform was paying the driver. "Mom!" Marquitos cried, "Daddy's home!"

Dolores dropped a pan in the kitchen. Marquitos ran out of his room and saw her struggling to take her apron off, revealing the nice red dress she'd recently bought at Last Call. "You saw him?"

"Yeah. He was paying the taxi!"

They heard the taxi speed away and went to the door and opened it. Marcos, tall and thin in his uniform, cap cocked to the side, held one large bag over his shoulder and held the other by its strap. The sun was behind him so that his face was not visible.

"Oh, Marcos!" Dolores embraced him while kissing his cheek. The man seemed startled. He embraced her half-heartedly and seemed to stumble. When she kissed him on the mouth he didn't close his eyes but looked around the room. Dolores took a step back, looking to the floor, her hand moving up to her mouth. She smiled again and took him by the hand and led him to her son. Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Gutierrez looked at the boy as if he didn't recognize him. He then smiled. His teeth were very yellow and his gums were dark.

Marquitos took a step back.

"Son," his father held out his arms for an embrace.

"Go ahead, Marquitos." Dolores smiled endearingly. "It's Daddy!"

Marquitos walked slowly toward his father and embraced him. His father's body seemed to have thinned out in his absence. Marcos returned the embrace but it was weak. He then looked down at Marquitos. "Have you been good?"

Marquitos nodded and looked to his mother for support because he heard something in that voice that did not belong there. But his mother did not seem to hear what he heard. She ran to her husband and embraced him again. He broke from the embrace and walked to the kitchen with plodding steps. "Cake?"

"Yes," Dolores said and she was about to tell him of the type of cake in the oven when he walked over to it and reached in and took a chunk of the unfinished cake out of the oven and ate on it while the family watched. "It's not ready yet!" she yelled. He looked at her with his head cocked and mouth full of cake. "Lemon?"

"Lemon's your favorite," Dolores said and then she almost cried because the cake was now ruined in the oven.

"You...you...like lemon, Daddy."

The man nodded and looked to the floor with a sad heaviness on his brow.

"Honey," Dolores said. "Do you want to get some sleep? You look very tired."

Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Gutierrez smiled a great big smile, his large dark gums seeming endless. He turned from the kitchen and started walking to his bedroom and then stopped in his tracks, turning to observe his wife who stood at the center of the room, uncertain. He came back and grabbed her by the arm and took her to the room with him. "Wait," she said. "Wait, wait! Marquitos, turn off the stove!" They entered the bedroom and Marquitos went into the kitchen and turned off the stove. He then went outside because he did not want to hear the noises already coming from the room. He sat on the steps of his porch and watched the sun go yellow and dim in the sky and make its way behind the mountains.

####

In the evening Dolores was alone with Marquitos in front of the TV set and he asked her what his father was doing.

Dolores smiled and patted his head. "He's tired. He's been through a lot."

"Is he sleeping, Mommy?"

She shook her head. "He keeps looking out the window. He walks around the room a lot. Marquitos, I want you to do me a favor."

"Yes, Mommy."

"I want you to have patience with your father. I want you to be nice to him."

"I am, Mommy."

She nodded that this was true. "I just want you to know it will be some time before Daddy is normal again. He has been at war and when men at war comes home it is very hard for them to go back to normal life. They've seen terrible things."

"I know."

"They see things they can't talk about to their wives and sons."

"I know, Mommy. They see things."

"So, will you be nice to him?"

"Yes, Mommy."

"Good, Marquitos. That is good."

"Mommy," Marquitos looked down and found it difficult to formulate the words. "I don't like how he looked at me."

Dolores nodded while looking down at him.

"Or how he walked, Mommy. I don't like how he smelled."

Dolores looked away from her son and fumbled with a loose thread on her dress.

"Mommy, when he reached down to hug me his mouth smelled like rotted meat."

Dolores closed her eyes, shook her head.

"Mommy, it smelled like Bolo's did." Bolo was a dog the family had a few summers back.

Dolores struggled for her words and could hear the heavy footsteps in the bedroom. He had made love to her with his boots on and refused to remove them. "I think Daddy might be a bit sick, Honey."

"Mommy," Marquitos said while looking down at his hands. "I don't think Daddy likes me."

"Oh!" she embraced him and held him tight. "Of course he does, Sweetie! He loves you! He loves you very much!"

####

The following day at school Marquitos avoided all questions as to his father. His friends wanted to know what the war was like, how many people had his father killed.

Marquitos wished that the day would pass quickly so that he did not have to answer so many questions. They didn't understand why he had so little to talk about and so they left him to walk the playground alone, now and then looking in the direction of his house with a terrible foreboding. He asked his teacher if he could go home early during the last class of the day and he exclaimed to her that his father had just come home from the war and was eager to see him.

The teacher was a sister to a soldier herself and she said, "Of course, Honey. Just go to the office and tell them I said it is okay. Here," and she wrote on a yellow paper her permission for the boy to leave school.

In the office they detained him for a bit, checking his address several times to make sure his home was in walking distance before they let him out.

His father was in the yard staring into the street. The boy passed him. Neither said anything to the other. The boy reached the door and turned to look at his father and now his father was looking back at him, smiling a big toothy smile with his purple gums exposed. He held open his arms and said, "I love you, Son."

Marquitos walked slowly to his father and embraced him and the grip of his father was now very strong and the boy could smell his horrible decayed and moldy breath again. Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Gutierrez patted the boy on the back and continued to look into the street. The boy took a few steps back. "What you looking at, Dad?"

He was looking at the house across the street but said nothing.

The boy went back to the door and entered his home, seeing his mother seated at the kitchen table. "Why so soon?"

"I asked if I could come home early."

Dolores made him a sandwich and made him a mix of fruits for the side and gave him a glass of chocolate milk. She watched him eat and now and then he'd look up at her because she would sigh and run her fingers through his hair. "Did you see your daddy go out last night?" she finally asked.

"No."

She went to the window and saw her husband now standing at an opposite end of the yard staring at another house. He seemed to be sniffing at the air.

"Did Dad leave last night?"

She didn't answer.

"Did Dad leave last night?" he repeated more forcefully.

"Oh, yes. I'm sure he went to meet a friend out. I'm sure a lot of men are coming back to the base now."

Marquitos said nothing. His father came in and kissed Dolores and when he turned from her she ran her hand up to her mouth. Then he went and sat next to his son and watched him eat.

The boy put his food down. "Daddy, why are you staring at me like that?"

His father didn't answer him. He seemed to try to find the words but they would not come and his face tightened into a confused gesture. He smiled and his yellow teeth seemed excessively vulgar, the lips pulled back. "I love you."

Marquitos was frightened by his father's smile, by those intimate words said without feeling. He looked to his mother. "Mom, can I be excused?"

Dolores was visibly disturbed as well and said for him to go to his room and that she would be there in a moment. She took up the boy's glass and plate while her son

walked away. She then told her husband that he was acting strange, that he hadn't slept enough. Dolores placed the dishes in the sink and then she told Marcos that he had to make a greater effort and think of the future now. Marcos didn't answer. He went into his room and looked out the window.

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"He's getting better." Dolores stood by the door in Marquitos' room. The boy was sitting at his small writing desk and looking at the floor. "He said he loved you." Dolores moved to the drapes and pulled them back, pushing the window open. "It's so stuffy in here."

"Don't be alone with Dad," Marquitos said.

"What?"

"Don't be alone with Dad. Let's go to Grandma's."

"Now you're being silly, Honey. Your father's okay."

"I don't like him, Mommy."

"Marquitos, you stop this at once! Your father is a war hero. He needs time to adjust."

Dolores left the room and closed the door behind her. Marquitos waited a few moments and was about to follow her out, plead his case, but then stopped at the door. He heard shuffling along the floor on the other side. He sensed it was his father and as the doorknob started to turn he quickly locked it from the inside. The doorknob turned to where it locked and could not open. Then the boy heard the boots moving away from his door.

He breathed hard and heard his mother laugh. This was a good sign, that she was laughing. He lay in bed and thought about his father and sleep overtook him.

It was in the evening when he had awoke. He heard a door opening and closing and his room was completely dark. He stepped out of bed and the lights were all off in the house. At the end of the hall, past the bathroom and his parent's bedroom stood the cellar door which was open with its light on. Marquitos neared the open cellar door and saw the beginning of the wood stairs that descended into it and looked in and could see only a few boxes and an old tool box and worktable which had belonged to his grandfather on his father's side. Marquitos could hear the heavy steps of his father and he could hear things being moved around. He thought that maybe his father had not gone out the night before but had been working down there in the basement. He was about to descend the stairs but then remembered that the second stair creaked and so with foot midair he stepped back. He looked toward his parents' bedroom. The door was slightly ajar and it was dark in the room. He walked toward it trying not to make too much noise. He fit his face into the open space of the door and looked in. It was dark. He could make out the bed but nothing else. The moon could be seen through the drapes of the bedroom, but only a white blur of a moon, undefined. "Mommy," he whispered. He looked back to the cellar and heard his father grunt. "Mommy!" Something heavy moved down below

and a metallic object fell. The sounds of footsteps moved about in the cellar and Marquitos called for his mother one more time.

“Son?”

Marquito jumped, not having realized his father had moved up the cellar stairs, now watching him.

“Come here, Son.” Marcos now came out of the cellar and closed the door behind him. He stood over it protectively and stared at the boy. Marquitos did not want to near his father but he did.

His father breathed heavily as Marquitos approached. It was almost like a wheeze and there was dark around the chin and the bottom half of the face.

“You know I told you not to be snooping before I left?” He said the words with a slow and drawn speech as if the air in his mouth had trouble coming out.

“I know, Dad.”

“Have you been...listening...to me?”

Marquitos nodded.

“I want you to stay out of there, boy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to be a good boy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to leave your mother alone. She’s sick.”

“She’s sick?”

“Yes,” his father said and smiled. The boy could see the large yellow teeth of the man even in the darkened space of the hall. “She’s been like that all day.”

“Can I see her?”

“No,” his father said. “Go to sleep now. Tomorrow she...will be better.”

Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Gutierrez entered his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Marquitos glanced toward the cellar and then walked to his room and locked the door. He watched the doorknob for sometime before falling asleep. He thought of what his mother had said, that his father was sick. ‘Maybe it’s the same sickness,’ he thought. ‘Maybe we’ll all be sick soon. Everyone at school.’ The idea of everyone at school staggering like his father and wheezing like him frightened him and then he fell asleep

####.

Marquitos readied himself for school and went into the kitchen. His father was sitting at the table, shirtless, staring at a newspaper that had arrived. The newspaper was unopened. He looked at the front picture of a Space Shuttle.

“Where’s Mom?” Marquitos asked.

His father ignored him, eyes on the newspaper.

“Where’s Mom, Dad?”

Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Gutierrez lifted his head as if awakened from a sleep. He looked at his son, eyes focusing, and then a hint of recognition came over the unshaven face. "Grandma's."

"Grandma's?"

His father nodded. "She's sick...had to go to Grandma's."

Marquitos looked toward his mother's bedroom and wanted to cry.

"She sure looked pretty," his father laughed. "That day. That day I came home... Red dress."

"She looked pretty, Daddy."

"Red dress," he laughed and looked back at the space shuttle on the newspaper cover and then he stopped laughing and stared at the boy.

"I have to go to school now, Daddy. I have to get my bag." Marquitos went into his mother's room and checked her closet. All her clothes were still there as was the purple luggage she always traveled with even if for an overnight visit. The luggage sat in the same spot where it'd been all year. He began to cry and then told himself that it was not his real father. That his real father was a war hero and so he must not cry. He stopped crying and he walked past the entrance to the kitchen very quickly and out the front door.

At school Marquitos sat alone and did not speak. When it was over he went to a friend's house and played there with him and told him about his father but did not tell him everything about his father. Marquitos stayed there until he smelled the fried chicken and his friend's mother said that he had to go home now because it was supper time and his friend had to eat. "Yes, Ma'am," Marquitos said and walked home slowly, watching the night sky take hold over the neighborhood and a pinkish moon ascend over a line of pines where the park was. He entered his house and was surprised to see his father still at the table staring at the same picture in the paper as before. Marquitos passed him by without being noticed and went into his room, locking the door. Marquitos lay down on the bed with his eyes on the doorknob and he did not take his eyes off the doorknob until he heard his father's heavy boots in the kitchen and the sound of the backdoor opening.

Marquitos waited a few moments and then got to his feet and opened his bedroom door. He moved into the kitchen and saw that his father had left the backdoor open. Marquitos went outside. His father was standing on the rock wall that divided his house from the neighbor's house, walking along the wall then jumping down onto the other side. Marquitos followed but found it hard to scale the wall at first until he found places he could fit his shoes into. He saw his father on another wall at the other side of the neighbor's yard and he jumped off of that one too. The boy ran across the yard to this other wall and when he climbed it he gave himself a deep scratch on the stomach when he tried to climb down the other side. He felt the warm blood on his stomach and he placed his hand over his t-shirt and pressed tight on it. Three houses away he saw his father scale a wooden fence and then he saw his father take off his shirt and wrap it around his hand and bust the window of the red-bricked house out. His father climbed into the window without effort and Marquitos neared closer until he heard a woman's scream that had suddenly been muffled. He heard pans fall and a glass break and then he heard the woman scream again and there was something terribly wrong with this scream, so terrible it broke the boy into an instinctual run toward the first wall back toward his house. He had trouble scaling the wall and then he fell over and hit his knee fairly hard and then he heard footsteps behind him and he knew his father was coming back, only

much faster than before. He tried to make himself small against the wall and tried to make himself invisible by not moving at all. Marquitos looked up and his father was standing on the wall above him carrying the broken body of the woman over his shoulder. Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Gutierrez jumped off the wall and landed sharply on the ground then ran toward the other wall, the woman's head bobbing up and down on her broken neck. He then scaled this wall just as easily as the first. Then he was gone.

Marquitos squatted in the dirt, crying. He did not know where to go. He wiped his tears and walked in the direction his father had gone, in the direction of his own house, knowing now that Mother had not gone to Grandma's. He wiped at the tears at his cheeks with the back of his hand.

Marquitos approached his house and was not surprised to see the back door open. He walked toward his parents' room without making any noise and saw the cellar door closed at the end of the hall with light seeping through the edges. He moved into the bedroom and did not think about his mother anymore. He thought of his father's gun, the real father, the war hero. He looked into the dresser drawer and removed the picture of his pretty mother and gave it a kiss, placing it gently to the side. He pulled the gun up from beneath the official papers and felt its great weight in his hands. He unsheathed the gun from its leather holster and watched his large and red eyes reflected off the chrome of the barrel. He rummaged around until he found the box of bullets. He pulled a few out with shaking hands and many bullets fell out of the box and hit the floor, rolling every which way. He struggled to free the chamber and placed four bullets into it and clipped it back into place.

Marquitos moved toward the cellar. It was quiet down there. He lifted the cellar door and prayed that it did not creak. It opened soundlessly with only a little thud when it came to rest against the wall. The room was well lit. He saw the stairs and the familiar storage boxes and the tool box and ancient work table. He breathed heavy and wished that the gun was not so heavy and that he was a grown up so that he could carry it with only one hand. He put his weight on the first step and then on the second. He skipped the third altogether and almost slipped off the fourth when his foot landed but he regained his balance. He descended the stairs lightly and pulled back the hammer of the revolver. He looked around the room when he was at the bottom of the stairs and saw blood stains along the walls and various bones here and there. In a corner of the room his father sat, legs spread eagle, gnawing on a human femur. He was so engrossed in his feeding he did not even notice his son come down the stairs. Marquitos then saw the body of the broken woman recently murdered and she was of one piece and nude. He looked to where her dress was and there was various clothing there, what looked like a pair of children's shredded pajama pants, his mother's pink slip.

"Dad!" Marquitos cried.

His father, stunned out of his feeding, dropped the large leg bone which thudded upon the hard floor. He licked at his hands and looked at the boy.

"Dad!"

His father stood up, looking at the gun and then looking at the boy. He began to walk toward Marquitos, smiling, with his blood red hands outstretched. "It's okay, Marquitos. I'm okay."

"Stay there, Dad." The boy began to walk backward as his father walked forward.

"It's okay, Son. Mommy's coming home tomorrow."

“Stay there!” the boy walked backward until the back of his foot hit the stairway. “I’ll shoot you, Daddy!”

Marcos came closer. “I haven’t been well, Son. You know that. But I’m okay now.” His outstretched hands were now very close to his son. He stopped smiling. His large yellow eyes were devoid of any moisture. “I love you, Son.”

Marquitos pulled the trigger of the large gun and was thrown back, hearing the bang of the gun only many minutes later when he had awoken from having been knocked down and out from the powerful recoil. He moaned on the ground, still hearing the awesome explosion of the gun. He sat up and saw his father’s body mixed in with the carnage of bones and clothing along the cellar floor.

The End

The Bleeder Resurrection: Instill the Madness

Jesse Dedman

A solid bash startled the caking dust from off the door, tossing clouds of settling dirt and wood shavings deep into the darkened hall. Bolted with the strength of a dozen deadbolts and chains, the weathered planks of dried wood refused to give in to the intruder’s will. Another bash followed by another but the iron bolts were lodged deep into the stone, preventing anyone from getting in. Silence lingered, allowing the sound of the falling dirt to rise just above that of a whisper. The tiny particles regulated themselves into the grooves that lined the floorboard.

Silence was not a promise for relief and peace for the decaying ingress. Instead, it allowed the intruder to equip herself with an instrument that slammed through the door’s surface, smashing through the graying boards, projecting splinters like that of a shotgun. The first attack allowed the sun to shine through and graze across the stagnant bottom, but the second attack shattered the door into a collapse where only the hinge remained.

The champions of the moment stepped through with their guns and flashlights out. Orbs of light sliced through the chamber, shifting in size while guided by dedicated hands. The two descended the few shallow steps without a change in stance. The trouble with the door aggravated their intent, turning what was to be a simple search into a campaign laced with paranoia delusions. They turned the corners when available with guided focus, but the enclosure was the size of a one-bedroom apartment, slowly diluting the need for such defensive, guarded behavior.

“This place fucking stinks,” said Darren. A clean-shaven young recruit with brown curly hair.

“Look at this,” said Vivian, shocked and drawn by what intrigued her interest for a minutes. An assortment of half melted candles with pools of hardened wax at the base circled a horrible sight with even placement. A dark red stain smeared under the candles, tracing into a circle that framed an image that dominated her focus, drawing her closer until it became too clear to refute. Four bodies, placed symmetrical to one another as if to symbolize directions of a compass, lay completely naked for all to see. Mutilated torsos with gutted chests left behind a rotting cavity with a mound of organs at the side. Flies fought one another for a taste of the decaying intestines, swarming with indecision guiding their little wings as they lingered over the butchery. Breasts sliced open like halved melons grayed and wasted into the slimy gunk through the process of death. Dried white globs hanging on thin strings were eyes gorged out from their sockets. The sliced skin, dark and bloated, housed a carnival of delights for the squirming pale critters that populated the bodies in flea-market numbers.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” said Darren. “We definitely have a sick motherfucker on our hands.”

“I feel for these victims. Why is it that we’re just discovering this now,” asked Vivian, she pinched her nose and flashed the light on the other bodies. “I figured the situation with the cult was bad, but I didn’t think it was anything like this.”

“You think it was done by him?” Darren covered his mouth.

“Creel Heller? It’s hard to tell. No wonder his little girl is so fucked up,” said Vivian. Searching the room for the tools used to create such a horror. “According to the reports, she would follow that bleeding freak around. Creepy, huh?”

“Fucking insane. Is there something in the water? I mean what is up with the people here,” asked Darren, squatting near for better inspection. “The sicko left behind a chalice.”

“Then grab it,” said Vivian, peeking over her shoulder. “Don’t be afraid to touch that mess.” She returned her focus to a table that sat against the wall. A red strip of cloth stretched longwise to hang by a few inches on either side. A set of narrow iron candleholders sat atop the cloth with an aged tome sitting in between. Oxidized pages were lined with a pre-indo-European writing, Basque in appearance, with each paragraph introduced by an emphasized letter.

A glare washed the back wall, casting a distorted shadow of Vivian along the shrine as Darren approached with chalice held in a gloved hand. “This ought to get us something,” said Darren, lively.

“So will this.” Vivian turned a few pages carelessly as if unclear as to the significance of the ancient scriptures but nevertheless intrigued by the find.

Darren closed in, beaming another splotch of light on the strange relic. "A pretentious bible of some sort. I doubt it's any better than those trashy Necronomicons that people buy."

"I wonder." She closed the book, filling the air with an abrupt glob of dust. Vivian waved her hand to clear the air and turned around. "Where are you going?"

Darren wandered off to the other corner in a pace that increased the closer he got to the wall. He left her question to dissipate without an answer, lured by a curious indentation.

Vivian followed, carefully. "What did you find?" Her stern tone wouldn't tolerate anything less than a reply.

Darren pushed and shoved on the wall with one hand doing the majority of the work. "Hold on, let me check something." His words filtered through gritting teeth, but the moment of strain was worth the reward. With a smooth slide, a narrow passage was revealed, inviting the duo with guns in mind.

"What the fuck? It looks like a church," said Darren, astounded. He paced up the uneven steps, hearing the crunch of loose gravel under his feet, and set foot on gray and brown flagstone. He scanned the vast chamber, and besides an asymmetrical row of pews, a sacrilegious shrine lit by dim candlelight, and an organ that appeared broken beyond repair, the place was empty. Beams of oak ran up to the arching ceiling and extended with arms that provided support for the overlooking balcony that framed the interior.

"We'll need a whole squad for this," said Vivian, failing to hide the disturbance in her voice.

As if teased by some elusive deity, Vivian's cell phone suddenly blared and the acoustics of the strange church powered her already irritating ring tone into a doughty, exasperating outcry of mockery. She fumbled for her phone, reaching into her pocket while holding the flashlight between her shoulder and cheek.

"Jesus," said Darren, shooting her a quick, unchecked face of disdain.

"I know. I know." Vivian flipped out her cell. "You called at a bad time."

"I'm sorry," said Nava, jokingly. "I thought you wanted me to check in with you."

"Like you would listen anyway," she said, Her tone low and heavily distracted. "Could you call back later? Darren and I just found a fucking treasure trove. I was right to hone down on my lead."

“That’s fantastic,” said Nava, spirited. “I feel bad for doubting you. I didn’t think Abigail’s father would lead to anything.” His words stalled. A mind redirected, distracted, and shrouded with doubt. “I’m about to do my part. I know you wanted to be there, but we got to watch what we say to Agamat. It’ll be best if I do it alone.”

“The gunman is going to be there.”

“I hope he shows,” said Nava, words spilling fast. “I’ll be ready, so I’ll have the advantage. The hard part will be speaking with Agamat. Wish me luck.”

The lieutenant ended the call. He drooped forward in a couch with elbows on his knees, while cupping the slick electronic device in his hand. Two neatly placed stacks of Rolling Stone magazine occupied the center of the glass, framed with mahogany, coffee table. A miniature mock water fountain sat in the glow of a tall standing lamp that radiated with a soft, inviting aura. The flowing water broke into smearing streams on impact with the grayish pebbles, harmonizing the space with a relaxing artificial sound of a creek.

Nava shifted his weight against the back of the couch, digging into the firm leather, while adjusting his plain black tie. He rolled his eyes thinking about the amount of effort it took to exhume the necessary, suitable outfit for his meeting with Agamat. The wool coat, though doused with AXE body spray, was still contained the dusty, moldy scent that comes with being stuffed under a pile forgotten clothes in a bottom drawer for God only knows how many years.

Bored, waiting for the meeting to begin, Nava took the opportunity to get a feel for this prestigious financial advisor. Framed along the wall were his numerous victorious ventures and bloating awards. A collection of World Finance Exchange and Broker award certificates, branded with their glorified seal, represented recognition for his expensive advising. Photographs of CEOs from various current and long fallen conglomerates such as Enron, Ford, Exxon, AIG, GE, and others, illustrated the sweet taste of victory and the blindside of ignorance. For the amount they spent, you would think Agamat’s words would shield them from future problems, but instead, a curse seemed prominent with his guidance.

“Mr. Agamat will see you now.” A woman dressed in a red suit that was formed to her modest figure stood before the dark wooden door.

Nava paused, glancing at her, thinking of it odd that he didn’t notice her enter the room. Her brow rose from the awkwardness, the green of her eyes drenched with charm as she gazed steadily at him.

“Agamat doesn’t have time to waste, so please, go ahead and see him.” She gave a slight, innocent, and yet questionable smile before leaving for the hallway. Her high heels knocked against the polished pine.

Nava, with hand on the knob, fought for a moment of clarity, forcing his doubts into a gutter somewhere deep in his mind. He entered Agamat's office, observing in one glance an office that screamed of wealth and extreme elitism.

Agamat stood near a wide window with a blood red drink in hand, examining the hustling streets with little amusement. "You care to get on with this," he said, as if bothered.

"A simple matter," said Nava, smoothly. He closed the door behind him, locking it.

Agamat eyed the paranoid officer from the corner of his eye. "A simple matter, is it?" His voice rose on the last bit.

"I just need a moment of your time for a few questions," said Nava, as he paced towards the man's desk.

"Of course, why else would a man of your profession want to see me," asked Agamat, lazily shaking the drink in his hand. "Don't bother answering the question." Dressed in an Italian power-suit, the world's answer for financial advice turned around with a sarcastic smile. "Why on Earth would you be wanting to ask me anything?"

Pressing his fingers on the man's desk, Nava twisted his mouth while sizing up the words he cooked for this moment. "I understand you're a very busy man so I'll make this brief. I know you've heard about the devastation caused by a man referred to as the Bleeder, but do you know anything about the technology that could make something like him possible?"

"Have you gone mad," asked Agamat, in a harsh tone usually reserved for calling out witches. "You think I would know a damn thing about that?"

"Well," said Nava, heavily. "Someone claims that you do, and that someone has information that links you to this."

"So some psycho spills this shit and you lap it up like it's worth a damn," roared Agamat. He went for the desk, clenching his hands around the back of his executive chair.

"An engineer reports that his company did business with you. Specifically, he mentioned a certain project under the named Sekume. How do you explain that?"

"I don't have to. A story this absurd could easily be dismissed as some lunatic conspiracy theory," said Agamat, slowly calming down.

“Not with the information we’ve gathered. We have teams searching the streets up and down for information pertaining to this horror, and we will find it.” Nava stood upright, crossing his arms.

“But this Bleeder, this horror you speak of. Where is the body, where is the proof. You have reports, you have photos, but you don’t have anything that could prevent anyone from denying such crazy bullshit.” Agamat’s wrinkled lips formed into a mocking smile.

“Some place where I doubt anyone would find him,” said Nava.

“Oh, I bet,” said Agamat. “Got to go about this quietly as to not disturb the citizens. How terrible it would be for them to hear from authorities that a monster, a real life nightmarish creation from a laboratory, is slaying people by the dozen in the streets.”

“I’m not here for you to inform me of what I already know,” said Nava, leaning closer. “Tell me what you know about the Sekume project. Look, the sooner you give me names, the sooner I will leave you alone on this.”

“I think,” said Agamat, reaching for his phone. “I think I should have my lawyers handle this. Let’s see how they handle your outrageous claims.” He grabbed the cordless phone. One, two, three shots punched through the glass, sending slugs to graze past Agamat’s extended arm. The lieutenant rolled out from behind the desk with a gun discharging a hasty reply, buying time for him to haul Agamat away from the assassin’s view.

Agamat tumbled onto the floor, rubbing the fine texture of his coat along his Persian rug. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Giving you a reason to trust me,” said Nava, too busy with the crafty gunman to pay much attention. With courage in his steps, Nava exposed himself to one of the windows, observing a swinging cleaning platform. He moved further, slowly working his way to the fractured pane. His pounding heart peaked at the sound of a knob turning. The side door, by Agamat, was on the verge of opening and in a rush Nava forced the man away. The door swung open with nobody behind it, but Nava readied his gun regardless while pacing towards the main door with Agamat hauled around by his clothes.

“If you hadn’t questioned me,” yelled Agamat. “You asshole, dumping this shit on me.”

“Not the time,” said Nava, as he pushed the door open with Agamat’s weight, shoving him into the waiting area. The lieutenant shot off a few rounds to keep the gunman from zeroing in on them, and stormed down the stairwell with his suspect close by. Ignoring the questioning cries that rolled in from just about everyone walking the floors, Nava stormed out towards his vehicle. He pressed against it with his arms

stretched over the hood and collected his breath. Agamat stood beside him, his back pressed against the glass of the backseat door.

“Where,” said Nava, in between breaths. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“I can take care of myself,” said Agamat as he fixed his crumpled collar. “You’re lucky I don’t sue you for damaging this suit. You have any idea how much this cost me?”

“I don’t, and I don’t care.” Nava opened the passenger door. “Get in.”

“You think you can protect me. I’m already dead,” said Agamat. He rubbed his face, touching his graying hair with his fingertips. “Looks like somebody doesn’t want me to talk.”

“Agamat, you are coming down to the station with me whether you agree to or not. Get in!”

Agamat frowned, glanced back at the building and finally followed command.

**

“All I did was finance the project and provide a cover,” said Agamat, finally after a long battle pertaining to the permission to record the interrogation. “But you won’t find any records of it. All of it was off the books, cold hard cash, nothing traceable about the operation. And, well, rumor has it that the company I worked with is beginning their search for the body.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the body,” said Nava, handing his suspect a cup of coffee. “What company did you finance?”

“You think I have a name for you,” said Agamat, his lips leveled, framed by white scruff. “You should already know that the name is of no importance.”

“You know something important.” Nava’s nose flared. “That assassin was close to add you to his list of victims. You and Mr. Keller must have something in common.”

“Mr. Keller?” Agamat shuffled in his seat, drifting his gaze sluggishly. “I had no idea.”

“Agamat,” said Nava, harshly. “I don’t want to waste any more of your time. Tell me what you know.”

“But I did,” said Agamat. “I provided financial support. A man by the name of Gibson introduced himself and proved his claims with a briefcase of credentials.”

Everything about him was layered and covered, but he worked with the military, and needed support for a project he described as a medical breakthrough.”

“Did you receive any shipments,” asked Nava, rubbing his chin.

“All I know is that boxes of strange equipment changed hands during the day,” said Agamat. “The men that received them weren’t to be questioned, they weren’t to be stopped.”

“Why would someone with your reputation make such a risk,” asked Nava, intrigued. “You didn’t even know the name of the company?”

“I wasn’t going to pass on banking on a military contract, and the company name, Sekume, contained no leads, none whatsoever. I searched, I had my people search, and I had my close associates search, but no history, no report. Nothing.” Agamat paused, tapping his finger against the cup. “Gibson promised a lot of money in return. He offered an advance that snuffed my inhibitions. All I had to do was comply, which was very easy. The crew went in and out almost undetected.”

“And you know nothing else,” asked Nava, as he stepped away from the table. Reading his blank face as a negative. “You sure you aren’t holding anything else back?”

“Lieutenant, no offense, but this goes up and beyond your pay scale. The company has non-disclosed contracts with the military, so unless you are a member of the FBI you wouldn’t have a chance to do anything with it.” Agamat, pleased by his own voice, drank the coffee.

“This crime happened on our turf, I’m going to get the fucker if it’s the last thing I do,” said Nava, pacing away from the table to keep his cool. “Start talking, and do something good for your city.”

“Inspiring words, Lieutenant. How you impress me. I kind of enjoy this struggle of yours. You won’t find a damn thing, I haven’t broken any laws, not that you can trace anyway, and you expect me to fear.” Agamat leaned forward. “Should I walk myself out, or do you need to waste some more of my time?”

“Hold on,” replied Nava. He exited the room and stood in company with Vivian and Darren.

“Any luck,” asked Vivian, using the tips of her toes to catch a glimpse of the gentleman.

“The guy talks, but what he revealed is nothing useful. A common last name and that damn company again. Worst part is I fucking gave him a pass for the chance to catch something big.”

“What an asshole,” said Vivian. “But don’t worry. We found a whole bunch of stuff. Best of all, we brought in two members of that Nzulmbi cult. Not only did we link them to the murders there, they informed us of a congregation set for tonight at this address.” Vivian exposed a piece of paper with black ink scribbled on it.

“These people described it as a ceremony above all ceremonies,” Darren added, prideful of their discovery. “You have to come.”

Nava looked away from them, failing to hide his frustration.

“What’s wrong,” said Vivian.

“We have a solid lead that gives us shit and a bunch of little ones that take us around in circles. What do you mean, what’s wrong? I think it’s fucking obvious. We can’t keep Agamat here, but I don’t trust him for a second. He was targeted by the gunman.”

“The gunman.” Vivian caught her concern a bit too late and tried to cover it by biting her lower lip.

“That’s what I said.” Nava went to leave, but stopped midway. “I’m gonna drop him off at his building and keep a firm watch on him. He knows something more than what he’s telling. I can feel it.”

“Trying to offer protection from afar,” asked Darren, begging for a change of mind. “Get someone else to escort and watch him. You don’t want to miss out.”

“Can’t risk it,” said Nava.

Vivian, contemplating a lurking thought, hesitated before nodding in agreement. “Then it’s settled. You’ll go with your lone wolf bullshit and leave us hanging when we need you.” She pulled back her banes and walked away in disgust.

“Wait,” said Nava. “It might be better if Darren drops him off.”

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Dimly illuminated by the pulsating, flickering embrace of titian tones, the cracks drove deeply along the surface of the large desert stones, forming jagged, irregular grooves. Blocks pressed into one another with solidification all the way to where the light failed to glow, rising into a shroud of darkness. Columns of carved rock provided support, reaching above to the unknown heights. The vast openness of the chamber made it seem above ground level, but the hum from above and the occasional sound of running subway cleared that misconception. Abigail was more than certain, more than ever, that her time was near, that this underground shelter would be her grave.

Defeated, tired, and soiled, she pressed her weight against the bars of her cage looking lazily, this time without a flinch, at another offering the cult revealed to their recovering horrific idol of worship. Two women, dressed in torn clothing, were forced up onto a circular platform framed by a thin iron ring. Frozen in terror, the poor victims stared helplessly at the bulky mass that sat in a deep wooden throne before them. A welding mask, shattered at the mouth, covered his face. A stained, ruined, frayed, and torn duster partially covered his otherwise exposed a patchwork of gray flesh interlaced with metallic plating. Denim jeans, splattered with recent blood, trailed down to heavy, steel-toed boots. A cubic device composed of thick steel illuminated with a number of dials and displays readable only by a select few of the Nzulmbi clergy.

“Please, spare us,” cried a woman. “We didn’t mean to impose our lord and savior on you people.” She grasped for air, eyes wide as ever. “Our God is the same god, we believe in you. We believe in your teachings,”

The women screamed as a set of cables shot out from the cubic device, slamming into their frail bodies with a force that knocked them back. Claws of sharp steel clinched tightly on their flesh, peeling and tearing, while a sharp needle drove into them deeply, sucking them dry.

The crowd cheered as the Bleeder drained the offerings of their blood to the last few drops. For the fourth time, the cult fed their monster, enriching him with the substance that gave him strength. Their clapping and praising echoed off the walls, drumming the inclosing approach of death, but Abigail merely watched, hoping against the odds that the decaying manifest would remember her.