

Afterlife Act 1 - Shame

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Chapter ---

Black. Everything was painted black. The buildings. The roads. The air, all the same color. The contrast of darkness. But every few minutes, it would flash. Igniting their urban jungle with a bright light. Allowing all the predators to once again outline their territories.

It came every ten years or so. The one storm that would allow everyone to see from a distance. Yes, it hurt their eyes, being so used to the shadows. But their lives were more important. Their territories were more important. Their possessions...

It was a terrible night to be scouting, the smaller creature knew. But it could taste the scent of blood that screamed at it to eat. Constantly reminding it that it was starving. That it needed to feast on whatever remained on the corpse at the end of the trail. Even if it would cost the creature its life.

It scampered across the streets awkwardly with its three legs. Two small ones on its left, and a very large one on its right that it managed to steal from a previous scavenge. Though it did end up losing its tail, it was a worthy trade. The arm allowed the creature to climb much easier, and get away faster than before.

A few small pieces of brick fell before it away down the sidewalk, instantly halting the small creature and standing perfectly still for a few moments. It was being tracked. Watched. It tried to slow its breathing down, but the fear started to get to it. And every inhale brought that delicious Want once again.

All at once, the small creature bolted for the direction of the scent. Hearing its watcher take heavy footsteps from above on the building. Only to have it stop for a few moments, and then break the smaller one's back with a large hoof. The creature tried to scream its pain away, but it was breathless, and beaten. Being pulled out of the small hole by its hunter, the large Minotaur-like Bull grunted at the creature. It would become one with it now. Be placed within its body and use the small creature's remaining life to enhance the hunter's.

To its surprise, the Bull tossed the smaller one aside. Discarding what essence it had left. Another flash filled the sky just as the smaller one fell into unconsciousness, and the Bull could sense it. There was something odd here. There was something odd with this storm. With this street. Only to have a rift of some sort open up before the Bull. Allowing it to leave its savage world.

Chapter 1

The alarm clock woke her up earlier than her body wanted. Her brain was still drowsy from staying up so late that it didn't want to get up for school. But she really couldn't miss too many more days, and her father wouldn't be pleased with her if she did.

So Leslie pried herself out of bed, still covered with books and sketchpads. Looking over the half finished Gorgon that she fell asleep drawing. So far, it was alright, but not much to her tastes as she'd like. Soon enough though, it will look better. She would just need to work on it another night before the commission was due.

Packing her bags, and taking a quick shower before changing clothes. She headed upstairs out of her basement room. Meeting her parents in the kitchen having breakfast. "Morning Leslie." Her father, Simon, greeted her.

"Mornin' Dad." The daughter replied sleepishly.

"Up all night again, were you?" Her mother asked. "I'm telling you, you should really take a night off and get some sleep. Stop drawing those creatures all the time."

"I get enough sleep, and this one is for someone else."

"Oh? Is it this Patrick that I've heard about?" Simon asked, taking a drink of his morning coffee.

"Kinda. It's actually his girlfriend's request. She wanted me to draw him something for a present." Leslie answered, getting a few things for her daily lunch. She really didn't want to go too much into detail about the commission. Mostly because, out of the many art students in her school, she was the only one who would do more mature requests. Something her parents actually didn't know about.

"And what exactly did she request?" Her mother smirked at her.

"A Gorgon." The look that her parents gave her was enough to let Leslie know that they didn't have a clue what it was. "It's like a half snake, half man thing." The two just shook their heads.

"I still can't understand why you're obsessed with such things." The mother replied, giving her daughter a plate of breakfast.

"I'm getting paid to do it, that's all that really matters mom." She accepted the plate, and ate only half of it quickly. "Okay, I gotta run or I'll miss the bus."

"Nah, finish your breakfast. I'll drive you in." Simon offered. "I gotta head to the office early anyway. This Agrumes case has really made a mess of things."

Moments later, the two made their way to the squad car parked in the garage. Backing out, Leslie's eyes caught on her neighbor's house. It looked so lifeless all of a sudden. "There's still no word from them." Simon said, catching the young woman looking at the white house. "Just after he asked for a warrant to search Agrumes too. That can't be a coincidence." Her father grunted. It left her heart feeling a little empty. The entire family vanished overnight with no signs of a struggle, no suitcases missing, just gone out of thin air. It made no logical sense to her, to the point where her imagination ran wild with supernatural ideas.

Simon's hand was felt on her shoulder. Though he was still watching the road, he continued. "There's a reason why people don't go after crime bosses. Even if they're in a good neighborhood like ours, these things can still happen."

"But are you sure it was him?" Leslie asked.

"What else could it be? Their cars are still parked in their driveways. There was no signs of break-in or forced entry. It's like they just got up and walked away, or they were threatened to leave on short notice. I honestly can't see Mr. Rhys agreeing to something like that. He was a good officer, he knew how to take care of his family." Simon sighed heavily.

Leslie remained quiet for the rest of the trip, gazing at the city in the background. The suburbs were not a bad place to live, but the city tended to be rather corrupted with crime. It honestly worried her and her family that their father was a police officer there. Knowing that someday the same thing might happen to him: he'll just disappear.

After getting to school and her first classroom desk, Leslie couldn't help but stare at the desk that's been empty for the past few days. Although she didn't know Zoe terribly well, she was still an important person in her life. Enough to call her a friend. "Still not back yet, is she?" Adam asked, sitting beside her. Leslie turned to shake her head at the black haired male. "You should stop worrying so much. They'll find her."

"I hope." She replied. "...Is it weird how I can't remember what she looked like?"

He gave a smirk. "A little, yes. Blonde hair. Brown eyes. The thinnest eyebrows anyone's ever seen?" She couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Seriously, you're stressing yourself out worrying about her. You look exhausted, Leslie."

"I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night. Was working on a commission, and I still didn't get it done."

"Well, you should really get some sleep. How's your report doing for Mr. Arcin?" She let out a large sigh, and her head hit the books on her desk. "Forgot about it did you? Want me to do it for you?"

"No, but thanks Adam. I'll work on it tonight. Then hopefully get the commission done for the

weekend."

"Just try not to overwork yourself. I'm here if you need me." He just smiled at her, and she smiled shyly back. As the day went on, Leslie felt something odd happening. Something she couldn't quite explain. Something wasn't right, be it about the disappearance, the school, or the city. She couldn't quite place it, but it disturbed her.

The young woman woke up in the dark library. Once again, she found herself fallen asleep while trying to do her work. The report was almost done, but it would still need about an hour's work to finish. Looking at her phone, Leslie sighed heavily at the late hour. Then noticed how fuzzy the screen seemed to be. Having a bit of distortion on the LCD. (It's never done that before. I hope it's not wearing out.)

She packed her bag once again, trying to remember the bus schedule. Only to discover that she already missed it. Grabbing her phone again while she walked outside, she dialed home and got a strange error message. "We're sorry, but we cannot connect your call at this time. Please try again later."

(Can't connect?) It rose the hairs on the back of her neck. Getting that disturbed feeling like before. (Perhaps maybe it's just this area?) With nothing else to do, she started walking a few blocks closer to the north side, where her home was. It wouldn't be the first time she walked the distance, but she really didn't like walking in the dark.

A few blocks down, she tried it again, but got the same message. The streets were quiet and uneasy. Once in a while, she could hear something scrape on the side of the buildings, above the lights. After a bit, she realized it was following her.

As Leslie began to walk a bit faster, the thing was still stalking her in the alleyway to the east. She began running a bit, as it trailed her movements loudly, until she saw it up across the streets in the dark and into another alley. The young woman stopped, letting the fear start getting the best of her breathing.

A faint rattling came from the darkness across the street, as she could barely make out the long creature in the darkness. It crawled down the building with several appendages, and slowly made it's way into the streetlights, only to hiss at them. Clicking loudly, and scanning the area for sounds, the creature's wide face began to turn to Leslie's location.

She tried to calm down a bit and control her breathing, perhaps should could distract it somehow and run away from it. A single step back, and the creature knew her exact location. From it's shoulder, it shot out a few spines across the street. Most of them missed, but one did manage to get her in the shin, and immedietly felt numb. Causing her to unable to keep her balance on it.

As the creature began to crawl closer to her, it began opening it's wide mouth, full of small, thin teeth and five tongues. The tongues shot out at her and stopped the moment something else landed behind the creature. Another one, a bit bigger than this grabbed it by the back legs and threw it into the wall of a building. Then threw the long one across the street.

Leslie scrambled towards the corner of the building, trying to hide from them a bit. Feeling the numbness climbing up her leg, she pulled out the small spine from her shin. Unable to feel it. Several crashes and slams came from the two creatures fighting. Grunts, roars, hisses, and snorts filled the streets for a few minutes. Then a loud crushing noise and a bit of a whine. Followed by a few more breaks and noises that almost made Leslie feel a bit nauseous. She could still feel the numbness going through her body, as the victor began to stomp heavily towards her. Again, she tried to hide herself in the shadows, but it helped little.

As the cold numbness reached her arms and chest, her breaths began to slow. Her eyes became unfocused, and the last thing she saw was that large creature. It's two red glowing eyes. Pupil-less. Solid Red. And she fell into darkness.

It was raining. She could tell that. Only lightly, but she always loved the sound it made when it hit glass. Her mind still foggy, Leslie began to search her surroundings one thing at a time. The rain. The Cool air. An odd feeling mattress that she was laying on. And something large near her. Breathing calmly, and bracing her closely. It was hard, but warm like leather. A bit of fur covered it, but the density of built muscle drowned that little comfort. With the breathing coming from above her head, and slowly making out the black arms of the creature, her memories flooded back to her.

Her memories about her encounter with that long, insect-like creature with the wide mouth. How it shot her with some type of poison stinger. And how it was fighting something else... And Lost. Now that stronger creature was holding her captive.

Carefully, Leslie tried to study her surroundings. Perhaps she could slip out of the creature's hold, and find a way back home. Find someone to help her, and be somewhere safe. Slowly, she began to move a bit, slipping herself lower to get out of the beast's arms. Just a little bit of movement, and she stopped a bit. Making sure not to wake the creature up. Then a bit more movement to get her arm under it's-

Suddenly the creature's head raised, and grunted a bit. Followed by a low growl. It's breaths went from being rather deep and calm, to assertive. Leslie froze for a few moments, and a bit of light shined through the wet glass, painting it's stains on the walls. It's movement looked like a car's headlights, and the creature got up. Once again with heavy steps, it made it's way to the light to observe below.

Meanwhile, the young woman laid still on the odd mattress. She knew that if she tried to make her escape now, the creature would probably hunt her. For the time being, she would see how it would react. Before long, another car's headlights lit up the room for a few moments. Leslie turned around a bit, to get a good look at the creature standing at the large glass windows.

It was huge. At least ten feet tall, covered in complete black. It looked like a minotaur, but more Bull-like in it's face. The eyes were the ones she remembered before she passed out: Completely solid

red, with a faint glow to them. It's body was mostly muscle, designed a bit more like an ape than a humanoid. More stocky around the shoulders and chest, along with two large horns that omitted just above it's ears and shot forward threateningly. Even with all her fascinations with such creatures, she couldn't place what this thing was.

The beast gave a loud snort and left the room that she was in. Hearing it go upstairs to another floor above her. Faintly, she could hear voices outside. Voices of people... Men. Making some sort of arrangement within what she assumed was the middle of a series of abandoned buildings. As the beast walked on the floors above her, she could see where the dust fell from the ceilings when it took a step. It made it's way close to the men talking, and stayed quiet for a few moments.

A few of the men began shouting a bit, something she couldn't quite make out. It wasn't long after that she heard something heavy land on a car, followed by a lot of yelling and gunfire. This was her chance to get away, and Leslie began to scramble up on her feet. The numbness was still there, but she could still walk. Barely. The gunfire was being pushed away into the distance before long, and it meant that she didn't have much more time. She tried to make her way to the large double doors before her, but she heard the lower ones open and close. Followed by those heavy steps again.

Leslie got to her doors and tried to head upstairs, only to see the creature patiently walk towards her. "Stop! Stay Away!" She shouted at it, but it didn't listen. Instead, it just picked her up with a single arm, and carried her back to the mattress. Regardless of how much she tried to struggle, she was too weak from that poison to defend herself.

The creature set her sitting up for a moment, while it went to the window. Opening it, it grabbed a small bowl filled with rainwater and carried it to her. Those red eyes never changing. The beast stood still until she took the bowl with both hands, then turned around and sat near a table.

Though she didn't like the taste of rainwater, Leslie did feel dehydrated. Taking a few sips at a time, and trying to ignore the bad taste it tended to have due to the smog of the city. While the creature began doing something with it's chest. A few tings of a small piece of metal falling into a metal bowl echoed through the building. A few grunts came from it, but nothing to indicate any real pain. After it was done, the Bull seemed to stare outside the window a bit.

A long silence filled the room, until Leslie put the bowl down. The small sound got the beast's sharp attention for a moment, causing her to freeze a bit. Until it's gaze went back to the window. A few minutes later, she asked worryingly "What do you want from me?"

The Bull looked at her, and seemed to study her form. "...You were poisoned." It managed to say, in a deep, raspy voice. A voice that seemed like it never spoke a word for years.

"...And so you brought me here?" The creature gave a nod as it turned to the windows once again.

"...Here you are safe. Here your illness could be treated. Your... kind can't treat what that thing did to you."

"But you could?" Another long silence. "...I suppose I should thank you then." No response.

"...How do you feel?" The Bull asked.

"Still a little numb, but a bit cold as well." Leslie answered, only to have the beast get up and slowly walk towards her once again. It seemed to tower over her and look at her for a minute. "...What are-?" It slowly grabbed the young woman and she gasped for a moment, as it slid her down lower on the mattress. As she laid down, it began to cover her once again like before, and Leslie realized it. The Bull was not trying to hold her in place while it slept. It wasn't trying to contain her, or hold her captive. It was trying to keep her warm so she wouldn't catch a cold. Although it was a little wet from the rain, the beast was still warm to the young woman. "...Thank you." Leslie whispered to it, and it gave a deep sigh, and a faint nod. Soon enough, she fell asleep in it's arms.

For hours the beast watched over her. Listening to her sleep while he kept her warm. His mind wandering at the same time, reflecting on her. Eventually, his eyes caught hold of her phone, and a thought came to mind. Slowly he got up, being cautious not to wake her as he gently took her phone into another room.

Although it was difficult for him to use such a thing with his massive paws, he was able to navigate through her contacts clumsily. He picked one, and began the call.

"Hello?" The man answered sleepishly. It was still early in the morning. "Hello?"

"...You're daughter is safe." The bull said. Trying to make his voice clear as possible.

"Daughter!? You have her!? Who is this!?"

"...She was poisoned. But she will recover."

"Poisoned!? Who are you!? Let me talk to her!"

"...I'm keeping her until nightfall. I'll return her home after dark. If you try to trace this call, there will be consequences."

"What do you want?"

"...Nothing." And the beast hung up, taking a deep breath after. He found himself looking at her direction and staring into space. His mind wandering once again. Another deep sigh, and he returned the phone to it's original location. Watching Leslie's sleeping figure, something else came to his mind. A need of hers that he will have to take care of when she awakes once again. And he set off, while the darkness still covered the city.

This wasn't the first time the older man had been held up at gunpoint. Let alone robbed so late at night. Barely anyone was around for a witness, and now a days worth of income was just abducted. Stolen right from his hands by a younger man who just took off. Sighing to himself, he began to call the police, so they can let this robbery slip into a mountain of paperwork once again.

While hanging up, he heard the young man scream loudly from the alleyway behind his shop. He froze for a few moments, and began to slowly walk towards the back door leading to his storage, and leading to that alley. Only to hear a few taps on the glass in the front of his shop.

As the older man looked at what seemed to be two red lights on the other side of the glass, soon he could see the entire shape. Some sort of black creature. It used it's head to motion towards the door and began to walk slowly towards it. A few moments later, the shop owner followed it. Watching the beast as it stood outside the door, looking down the streets. Slowly he opened it partway, and the creature calmly returned it's red eyes at the older man. For a bit, they stared at each other in silence. The beast then lifted up a black bag. The one the robber had with all the shop owner's stolen money. The Bull placed it in front of the door, then dragged the body of the young man who robbed him. The older fellow held his breath for a moment. "...He's alive." The creature said, surprising the man. "Just has a broken leg."

"And this is...?"

"The money he stole from you." The beast leaned in a bit closer to him. "...I need some food for someone. A days worth."

The man looked at the creature, a little stunned by the request. "Y-yes. For this, I can give you a week's worth."

"A day's will do fine." The black one replied, once again looking down the streets. The older one took the bag back in and placed a few cold meals in another bag. Returning to the door, opening it fullway, the creature dragged the younger one inside the shop to get him out of the rain. Then took the bag from the older fellow.

As the man kneeled to check on the younger one, he asked "Are you sure he's going to be alright?" Only to find out the creature had vanished. Looking out onto the streets, he seen nothing, and only heard the faint echos of sirens.

Chapter 2

Leslie was woken up by the daylight. It took a few moments for her to remember where she fell asleep. The old mattress was a great reminder of what happened last night, though she was having a hard time believing it was real.

Partchment overcame her, as she looked around for that small bowl of rainwater. The bad taste still lingered, but it was still cool and satisfying regardless. After the drink, something in her reflection caught her eye. This faint dark stain on the corner of her mouth that had dripped down a bit. It was very dark, almost black, but it held a bit of red in it. Much like the color of her dyed hair. It worried her, thinking somehow she got hurt.

The young woman set down the bowl, and began to look around the room a bit. There was barely anything in it. A couple of small tables, the mattress, and a few bowls. Not even any signs of food remains, no possessions or trophies, it was very bare.

Her attention caught the smaller bowl on the table, within it was a few bullets. A very dark red liquid was dried on the tips. The gunshots from the night echo'd in her head. (They probably shot it a few times.) She thought. (I wonder where it is.) The woman looked around for her belongings, just placed at the foot of the mattress. Her cellphone still there as well. She picked it up to hear the big doors from below open and close. The heavy footsteps following it.

Leslie placed the phone in her pocket, and looked inside of her bag to make sure everything remained. The Black Bull walked into the room with a bag in his hand. With the daylight entering the room, she was able to really see him clearly.

His skin was the color of soot and ash. Barely covered by a thin layer of black fur. His feet were actually Hooves, which explained his heavy walk. But his eyes... No longer the glowing red lights. But that of a Bull's as well. The Iris was still a dark Orange-Red, and it was filled with something. It seemed to be still wild, savage perhaps. But logic remained. Reason. Something she didn't expect such a creature to have.

Walking in, she noticed his mane. It almost looked like it was on fire, but it was very faint, and still black like the rest of his body. It only trailed down his neck though, and no further. "...You're up." He stated, walking across the room.

"Yes, I just woke up a few minutes ago... The Sun." He lightly looked in the direction of the glass. "Are you...?" His attention turned to her. "Alright?" A few moments of staring. "I seen the bullets in the bowl over there."

"I'm fine." The bull answered. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. A bit dizzy, but I feel fine." He came towards her and kneeled down. Leslie looked at him with a bit of worry and puzzlement. He reached around her back and pulled her forward, so he could place his ear against her back. After a few moments he set her back down.

"You'll be fine." He stood back up. "But I want you here for the rest of the day to be sure."

Her gaze eventually made it down to the small hole in her shin. "You said last night... That I was poisoned?" He nodded. "How did you treat it? I don't see any medicine here."

"I've hunted many things like that for a long time. Getting hit in the process." The beast pulled a cold meal out of the bag and handed it to her. "I've grown an immunity to the toxin."

"But...?" The woman remember the red on the corner of her mouth. "You fed me your blood?" She asked him, taking the food he offered.

"Yes. It seems to be working."

"What do you mean 'seems'? You've never done this to another human before?" A hint of pain was seen in his eyes, but he turned away from her. "...Nevermind, I'm sorry. Thanks for saving my life." She glanced down at the three-piece meal in her hands. "You didn't steal this, did you?"

The creature looked at her briefly. "...I did not steal it." And went over to the windows once again.

Leslie looked at the food for a bit, and began to eat it. "How long are you planning to keep me here?"

"Until nightfall. I want to ensure that you are safe." He stated. It worried her that the creature seems to have taken some sort of affection to her. "I also don't want to go out in the daylight."

"Does it hurt you? The sunlight I mean?"

"No. But I'm still getting used to it." (Means he hasn't been here long.) She thought to herself.

"...Can I ask you something?" The creature remained quiet. "Why are you helping me? Why are you so worried about me?"

After a few moments, he sighed deeply and spoke up. "...I know you..."

"You know me?"

"...I don't remember your name, but I know your face. I remember the day you first came home. Your mother was still weak from the anesthetic and your father ended up carrying her into the house. I was there. I remember holding onto you in my arms while I brought you into your home. I remember how you grew up. Nearly every stage of your life. Your face from every year of your life..."

Leslie couldn't help but stare at him for a few minutes in silence. She remembered her father telling her that story. But the one who carried her as a baby was... "Mr. Rhyans?"

The beast let out a shakey breath and placed his paw over his head. "Was that what I was called? I don't remember..."

"You are, aren't you? Our neighbor. The one that went missing for three days."

"Three days..." The creature sighed heavily. "That's why you're still the same as I last saw you..."

"What happened...?" The beast remained quiet for a few moments. "...Leslie. Leslie Boismere."

"Leslie... That... Fits." He said under his breath. "Your father..."

"Simon." And he repeated it. "And my mother is Margret."

"Margret..."

"You really are, aren't you?" The young woman got up and placed a hand on the tall creature. Although it didn't answer, she could see it in his eyes. There was something humane still remaining in what was turned into a beast. "Curtis Rhys." "

"Please... Don't call me by that name." He whispered. "I'm... Not that person anymore."

"...Alright. I don't believe you, but I won't call you that." She rubbed his muscular back for a bit. "But if you're going to keep me here all day, I might as well get some things done. Are there any chairs around?"

He took a deep breath to collect himself. "I can find you one." She whispered her thanks, and watched him as he walked out the room. When she heard the door downstairs closed, she pulled out her phone and dialed home.

"Leslie?" Her mother answered.

"It's me, yes."

"Oh, thank God! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine mom. I just called to tell you not to worry. I'm in good hands."

"Where are you? Who is holding you captive?"

"I can't tell you that. But don't worry. He won't hurt me."

"Leslie, Please. Be reasonable and just tell me where you are. I'll come and pick you up now."

"I can't. I know it sounds weird, but I really can't just leave. Trust me on this, I'm safe. I'm not being held against my will, and this... Person is only helping me."

"Who?"

"I'll see you later tonight, Mom. Don't worry about me."

"Wait-!" And she hung up. Returning to the bed to finish her meal, she couldn't help but feel more at ease. But at the same time, she didn't know what happened to him. And she was willing to help him through this, if that's what he needed.

As the young woman returned to her bag, she went through a couple of lore books about many of the supernatural creatures. Some of them were books from longtime going Roleplaying Games, others were just stories and legends. Quite a while later, she heard the large doors once again. Along with the Bull's heavy footsteps climbing the stairs to the old building. He returned into the room with a very large, cushion chair that was still in good shape. Leslie couldn't help but stare at it's odd, old fashioned design while he placed it in front of one of the tables. After he set it down, he caught her staring at it. "Will this do?"

"Y-yes. I just was expecting a lawn or fold-out chair or something. Where on earth did you get such a thing?" She got up to take a better look at it, and for a while he was silent. "...Did you...?"

"They won't be using it." He stated. Giving her the impression he 'stole' it from someone's storage probably nearby. She just gave him a little smirk and tried sitting in it. Regardless of how poofy the chair looked, it was actually quite hard. It made it better for her to reach the table easier, so she didn't complain. As the Bull began to pick up her bags and books, his eye caught on some of the illustrations. "...You like these things." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yeah. I was actually trying to find something that was close to you." The beast looked at her for a moment. "You don't want me to call you by your real name. I thought if I could find something that was close, I could get you another." He looked down at the books once again. "They're all not evil, you know. Many of them are actually good."

"But they're still considered monsters." He mumbled.

"That's because they're misunderstood. Here, pass me that one." And he did so. "See this one? It's called a Leonal. It's a type of Guardinal." The Bull looked at her. "It's a race of Celestial. Or Angel. They're often very peaceful and good to others. But when evil does tend to be in their presence, they will take up arms to defeat it. They're good creatures, not Monsters. And this one over here? It's a Golem. It's only as good or evil as it's master is."

The black one was quiet for a few moments. "So what do you see me as?"

"Well... The closest thing I found to your description in the books was a Minotaur... But it doesn't quite fit you. But I remember something that wasn't very well known." He looked at the woman again. "Have you ever heard of an Aatxe? {Ah-che}" The look on his face said no. "It's actually a bull. A flaming bull that's like a vigilante. It hunts down and hurts those who have done wrong or malevolent things, and punishes them for it. They also protect the innocent and the good, mostly by making them stay in their homes at night. I was thinking of naming you after one of them. Seeing as how you used to be..."

"So you would name me..."

"Actually, the full name is Aatxegorri. So I was more or less thinking Gorret {Gor-ray}."

"Gorret..." He repeated the name in a whisper, and eventually gave a nod.

"Do you like it?"

"It is acceptable." She chuckled at him. "Is there anything else you need?"

"Only a drink if you have anymore water." He walked over to the bag that held the foodtrays and pulled out a bottle of fresh water. Placing it on the table near her. "Thank you. Are you going back out?"

"No. I should remain here for the time being."

"You must be tired then, how about you get some rest. I'm just going to be finishing a school report and a drawing." He studied her for a moment. "Don't worry about me, if there's something wrong,

I'll wake you." A few more moments of silence, then he gave a faint nod. Made his way to the mattress and laid down, facing away from the light. She couldn't help but half smile at him as she went to work.

A few hours later, Gorret woke up. He got up to stretch a bit, only to hear a young woman giggle at him. Slowly turning around, he set eyes on Leslie, still trying to do her homework with a smile on her face. "I never knew something so intimidating could be so adorable." She said to him. Only to have the Bull snort at her and slightly smile himself.

"Did anything happen?" He asked. And she shook her head.

"You haven't slept for long. You can go back to sleep for a bit longer." The beast ignored her suggestion and walked forward towards the side of her chair. She kept her eyes on him.

"Lean forward." He said, and she did so. To feel his ear on her back once again. He kept still for several moments and she began to worry.

"...Is something wrong?"

"...You are still fine." He stated. Raising his head once again to look outside the windows.

"But?"

"...The blood may change you a bit." She looked at him with worry. "Your heart seems stronger. How do you feel?"

"Not much different. Perhaps it's the lack of sleep." He sighed quietly. "Don't worry, I'll be fine once I get back to another mattress. No offense, but you've kinda flattened that one." Gorret stared at his bed for a few moments. Then began to leave the room. "Where are you going?"

"To find you another mattress."

She couldn't help but laugh. "I don't need another mattress. I just need to sleep in my own." It didn't stop him. "Get back here, you!" She shouted jokingly, only to hear him exit the large doors. Leslie shook her head, and just continued on with her report. "I swear, he's stubborn as a mule sometimes."

A few minutes later, the young woman thought she heard something outside. Almost like a car. She got up and looked out the window, but nothing was in view. Shrugging, she returned to her seat to hear the door open and close softly. (That can't be right.)

Leslie made her way towards the stairs a bit, to see an officer slowly making his way to the bottom of the stairs. Surprised, he aimed at her with his pistol, and she raised her hands. "Are you Leslie Boismere?" The officer asked.

"Yes, but you can't be here!" She tried to whisper. "Go back, I'm fine!"

"I'm here to take you-" A large black arm forced its way through the wall on the right side of the

officer and hit him across the room. As the arm retreated from the large hole it made, Gorret made his way through the door. As the young officer scampered to get up and collect his firearm once again, the Bull grabbed him by the face and slammed him against the wall.

"No!" Leslie said coming down the stairs. "No-no-no-no-no! Don't kill him! Please!" The beast growled at the officer, unable to breathe or see well through the black paw. "I'm sorry! I called home earlier to tell them not to worry! They probably traced the call. Just don't kill him!" Eventually the officer's struggles began to fade and his arms went limp. As the young woman held her breath and looked at the Black one.

"...He's just unconscious. He'll live." As the creature let go of the officer's face, he looked at his badge closely, and let out a sigh.

"You know him?"

"...Yes. I remember him as well." Gorret answered. "He was often careless. Trying to prove himself to his peers. It's probably what drove him out here alone." He grumbled. "Do you know how to drive?"

"I have my permit, but...?"

"I just need to you put the car in Neutral."

"What are you planning...?"

"To move him elsewhere before he wakes up. That's all. I don't need people knowing where I reside." The bull found his keys and tossed them at the woman. She caught them, and followed him outside.

A little ways out from the door was the squad car. Gorret opened up the passenger seat and set in the officer, while Leslie got in the driver's seat to put the car in neutral. "Not to completely ruin your plan or anything, but the ground is still kinda muddy and wet. Odds are they'll just follow the tracks back here, won't they?" She asked getting out of the car and closing the door. Only to see the beast pick up the front end of the car, then lift the rest of it over his head. "Good God..." She whispered.

"I'll be back in a bit. Until then, stay in the room." She nodded as he slowly walked away with the car. Shaking her head, she made her way back upstairs and finished her homework.

About an hour later, she heard Gorret return. Slowly taking his time up the stairs, she called back to him. "Where did you end up taking him?"

"Elsewhere." The serious, vague answer made her laugh. "He'll be safe there."

"I still don't see why you couldn't explain everything to him. I mean, they knew who you were at one point, right?" She looked at the door only to see a large mattress being carried by him enter the room. He placed it over the old one for a moment, then moved one of the tables out of the way. "Where

did you end up getting that?"

"Another building." Another vague answer.

"But really, why didn't you just explain...?" The beast stopped what he was doing. "I know it can be hard to, but people can understand."

"...You can understand. You've always liked creatures. Others..." He sighed. "What did you see?"

"What?"

"What did you see when you first seen me?" Gorret remained still, waiting for her answer. "Did you see a monster? Did you see an Animal? If you had a weapon, would you have tried to defend yourself?" He looked towards the window, barely being able to see some of the city. "I look like one of them. That creature you seen last night. I am one of them."

"No, you're not." She said.

"I am. In the eyes of every person out there. That can't be changed." He looked at one of his paws. Four apendages, one of them being thumb-like. The pads were very hardened, and the tips held a small claw. "I returned, thinking that somehow I could live how I was. But I can't."

"That doesn't make you one of them. What I seen last night... It was an animal. But you have Mercy. You have Kindness. You have Reason. You're different from what I seen, because you are still the same person as you left... But the only way you're going to accept that is if you tell someone what happened." Leslie got up and placed a hand of the Bull's back. "Gorret... Tell me what happened to you. Everything will stay in this room, I promise."

"...You said earlier, that you called."

"Yes, I called home. But I didn't tell them who you were. I just told them that I was in good hands. That I was safe." She reached up and gently pulled his snout towards her. "Gorret, tell me what happened to Curtis."

Chapter 3

The bull resumed what he was doing with the mattress. Placing it down with a space between the older one. As the black beast laid down on the old mattress, facing up, Leslie pushed the newer one closer and laid on top of it. Getting as close as she could to comfort the creature. "About four nights ago, after we all ate dinner, we were sitting in the living room. Zoe, my daughter wanted to go upstairs, but I

pushed her into staying with us. A little while later, we began to hear this strange noise. A high pitched one that gave me a headache. After that, there was this odd burning smell in the room, and these lights that seemed to claw at the walls of our living room. They clawed some kind of portal that pulled us in."

"But there was no signs of a struggle in your house. Did it only effect...?" The beast nodded. And she waited for him to continue.

"...We all woke up in a foreign city. It was black... Nothing but black. I almost wondered if I was just blind at first, but every once in a while, I could see the sky light up like a thunderstorm. We were in some sort of apartment building, trying our best to find each other. I ended up finding my son Zack first. Then my Wife, Heleen. We found Zoe on an entirely different floor... It's a wonder we made it to each other. Because they were watching us."

"They? The creatures?" Another nod. "What are they?"

"...They are nothing. They are not shadows. They are not creatures. They are not alive, dead, existing. But they are savage. Vain and Envious. They rip each other apart, in order to take what they have. Adding it to their own bodies. Limbs, heads, tails, claws. Even spines and toxins. They live to have territory and horde what they can off of others. And we were in that territory."

Gorret continued. "For about five days, I was able to keep them alive. Getting what little food I could find. Arming myself with more than my 9mm. But I... I still couldn't see them. Eventually they began to pick us off. Heleen first... Then Zack, my 10 year old son... And eventually Zoe, as well as me. But Death doesn't exist there. Those who died turned into them. Those who Fell would eventually become like them... And I was no different."

"For a while, I lost who I was. I couldn't remember, but I... I felt strong. Strong after I died. My anger before my death carried with me, and I used it to stay alive. I used it to become stronger. Destroy those who were in my territory. One encounter, a creature wandered into my section, and tried to fight me for it. The battle lasted for hours, and that was the first time I was ever poisoned by the same thing you were. Though I was ill, I still won. Barely. That creature was vicious, and it held something around it's neck. A small piece of jewelery, a locket. The same one that my wife used to wear. It was because of that locket, I remembered who I was. What I was before that place. That one small thing that I couldn't even make out the picture of... It was that thing that stopped me from being like them. I would hunt them, yes. And I would fight them out of my area. But I wouldn't claim what was theirs. That locket... It saved my humanity. Until I lost it in a fight a few decades after."

"...That first night I spent there. That storm, it only came every ten years or so. I remember seeing at least eighteen of them-"

"Eighteen!? A hundred and eighty years?"

"Time was different then, but it felt like ten years apart. It's the only thing that would change in that world besides the creatures. There was no sun. There was no other light. There was just the void, the creatures that claimed it, and the cold. On that last storm, I seen a portal. The first one I seen. And I took it. It lead me back here... Four days ago."

"Back at the time when you left?" Another nod. "And then you've...?"

"Tried to regain my memories. But I couldn't do it alone. I got some of it. Most of it revolving around my work as an officer. But my past... Who Mr. Rhyans was... I don't remember."

"And your family?"

"Before I turned. I carved their names on the wall. But I died before I could finish my own. I somehow could still remember how to read, even if I was just feeling out the letters."

"I see..."

"Since I came back, every once in a while these creatures leak through. All I've been doing was hunting them off my territory. Like I used to. Until the night I found you. You were the first person that came into memory that I've seen. And ever since then, I've felt more..."

"Humane..." Gorret remained quiet for a bit. "That's why you're protective of me?"

"Because I can remember you. I remember my daughter's name, but I can't see her face. But you somehow remind me of her..." All she could do was smile at him.

"So, what do you plan on doing then? Just protect the city from the creatures?"

"...I can't help myself from acting like an officer either. My job was to protect this city, even from itself and the people in it. But if I start being seen doing such things..."

"Then people will be afraid of you. The people who you protect. But what if you do it differently?" He looked at her brown eyes. "I mean, I'm kinda taking this idea from some comic book heroes, but what if you took the Vigilante thing seriously? I know from my dad that there is just so much red tape involved in his work that he really can't get alot done. But you... You really don't have to go through all of that. You just have to get through their bodyguards."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at you. You're a walking tank. You can do things that normal people can't do. You alone have the power to make a difference cleaning up this city. If you start fixing what's wrong with the city, I think people will see you more than just..."

The bull was quiet for a while, staring up at the celing. "Leslie. What do you want?"

"...What?"

"What do you desire?" The look in his eyes said that he was unsure. Unsure of what the correct answer was. Unsure of what he himself really wanted. As the woman leaned more into him, she thought about it.

"I want... My dad to just be safe. To come home everyday he goes to work. To not suddenly..."

"Disappear..." He finished her. For a long time, the room was quiet. Her deep breaths indicated

that she feel asleep beside him. As much as he wanted to as well, he wanted to guard her more. And so he did, until nightfall.

Leslie felt herself getting moved around, and eventually she woke up. Again with Gorret's arm covering her midsection, and she could feel the side of his head on her back. After a few moments, she spoke up. "How are you able to tell?"

"I've learned to see what I hear. You don't rely on your eyes in the darkness."

"So you can tell how healthy I am just by listening to my heart?"

"As well as your breathing, yes. And you're still fine. The toxin must have dissipated by now."

"Sounds like your blood plan worked then." He stopped listening to her back and raised his head to the windows. The sky was getting darker, leaving a bright pink color that outlined the clouds. As the young woman looked out the window as well, then at him, she noticed his eyes glowing red like before. "Why do your eyes do that?"

He didn't stop staring outside for a bit. "It's a different form of vision that I use in the dark. I can't explain it further." He sighed quietly. "Means it's going to be a sunny day tomorrow."

"What? The sky?" The Bull nodded as he got up. "I guess I should start packing then. My parents must be worried sick." She chuckled, getting up herself.

"You should probably eat before we leave." Gorret handed her another cold meal. "It'll be a long trip on foot."

"How far away are we from the suburbs?" She asked, accepting the meal.

"The other side of city." She sighed heavily. "Can I trust you not to..."

"I won't tell anyone where you are. Don't worry." Leslie assured him, and the Bull gave a nod. Waiting patiently until she was ready to leave. As the woman walked out of the doors, she took one last look at the large room.

"There will always be a mattress for you here, if you need to feel safe." The beast said. She stroked his arm and whispered her thanks, heading down the stairs afterward.

The night came quickly as the two walked towards the city. Never noticing how dark and empty the warehouse district was at night. It's no wonder people often came here for illegal dealings and exchanges. The grounds had dried up from the rainfall the previous night, and it made it easier for her to walk. But she couldn't help to think that the trip might take hours. "I'm half wondering if I should call somewhere and get them to pick me up. It would save a long trip." Leslie suggested to the Bull. Not getting a response for a bit. "That, and they might be waiting for you in the suburbs-"

"They are." He stated, getting a surprised look from her. "We'll go to the Station to the north a bit. They probably won't search down to the southwest."

"What if they do though? Will you...?" The beast grunted a bit. Not really having an answer. His first instinct would be to kill any trespassers, but Gorret knew that she wouldn't want that. Chasing them off would only result in more and more coming, until his inevitable capture or...

"I would most likely have to relocate." He said, giving her a solution that would not worry her.

"...I know you probably don't want me to say anything about... Them. But do you want me to...?"

"It's better that they do not know. Whatever they claim it to be will do." The Bull looked at her, his eyes once again solid red and hiding any remorse that was held in his Humanity. Then he looked down the street where the streetlights began to illuminate the roads and buildings, grunting once again.

"What's wrong?" She asked, only to be picked up by one of his arms again, omitting a small yelp. He walked over to one of the buildings nearby, and began to climb it with the raw power of his arms and legs. Once they reached the flat top of the buildings, he didn't let go of her. Instead, he walked towards the edge. "You're not thinking of..."

"Don't scream." And she did her best to keep her mouth shut, almost whimpering when he took a powerful leap and landed on the other building. Taking it one building at a time, they made it to the West station, and he made his way down the building carefully. For her sake.

"That wasn't what I was expecting, but okay." Leslie said, finally glad to be on the ground again.

"Are you afraid of heights?" He asked. It didn't sound very concerning.

"Kind of. But that kind of question would've been better off being asked Before doing something like that." She shuttered, looking into his face once again. "Thank you, for everything, Gorret." She held the beast's muzzle between her hands, as he slightly nodded. "Take care of yourself. I'd like to come visit you once in a while, if that's okay."

"That would be fine. But you'll have to bring your own food supply." It was then that she actually realized that she never seen him eat or drink. Only rest for a few hours.

"I'll try to pack some extra then. Perhaps leave a few things at your place for future visits?"

"I'll see if I can find some as well, to add to the collection."

"But no stealing, okay?"

"I will not steal." He assured her. And she gave him an unexpected hug. The bull did his best to return it without harming her, nearly picking her up in the process.

"Okay, I should call them." And they let go.

"I'll be watching from above, in case of any trouble."

"Just keep yourself out of sight." He nodded, as he climbed back up the building.

Several minutes later, Gorret witnessed Leslie's parents drive up. Getting out of the car to hug her and say how much they missed her. Trying to get any details of the event that took place the night before, but the young woman kept her promise. Only stating that she was in safe hands the entire time. As they walked her to the car and got in, the Bull mumbled to himself, looking at her parents. "Simon... And Margaret..." Holding a side of his head as the drove off. Trying to remember their faces from before he was taken away.

As the car made it's way up the street, Gorret followed them from afar. Slowly tracking them at a distance, making sure that she made it home safely. His heart ached when he seen his previous home beside hers, almost being able to remember the address of it. How it looked up close. What the lawn looked like in the daytime. Their backyard, and it's possessions. It was a life he no longer had. A life he only faintly remembered, but was unable to return to. All because he was no longer Human.

Tracing his way back to his habitat, but scouting for trespassers on route, he stopped on top of an apartment building for a long while. Being able to overlook alot of the city, and picking out certain landmarks that seemed to glow in his memory. Trying to remember why they illuminated in his mind, slowly piecing together fragments of memories that he had with Them. But he couldn't make out an entire memory just yet. He almost wondered if it would ever return. Or if maybe he was better off not remembering.

The door leading to the roof screeched open, and a middle aged man came out, searching his pockets for a lighter. Gorret remained in the shadows, not paying much attention to him. As the man lit a cigarette, he exhaled loudly. Enjoying the cool atmosphere the night brought out. For a few moments, he was quiet. Until he began to half heartedly sing.

"What's it mean to be alone now?
How's it feel to be by yourself?
You got me, I didn't get you back
Then you got me again

You got inside through a hole in my defenses
And how you fit, I'll never understand
But you got into me, and I got into you
And now, I..."

The man paused there for a moment. "I'm not sure if I want to do it again." The last sentence was out of phrase. "You really messed up this time, Gene." He said to himself. Exhaling again he turned around and sat down on the ledge. Looking up, he could see the red eyes of the Bull, but took a few moments to actually see the entire thing. "Now that's just creepy. What are you doing up here listening to me sing?"

Gorret just looked at him patiently, then returned to looking at the city. "You're the thing that

Murry seen, aren't you?" Gene continued. "The thing that broke Rick's leg. Man, I told that kid that he shouldn't be doing that stuff, now he won't be walking for months." Still no response from the beast. "Murry said you spoke to him."

"I did." He finally spoke up.

"And that you returned the money. All of it. Even though no one believes him. Even the doctors say that the X-ray looked like a horse stepped on Rick. I honestly didn't think it was true, but you've been spotted a few times the past few days." The man got up, reached into his pockets and came to the Bull, offering it a Cigarette.

Gorret looked at them for a few moments, more looking at the man's chest. "Four years."

"Huh?"

"That will kill you in four years from now, if you keep smoking them." The creature's gaze returned to the city.

Gene looked at the small package, and shrugged. "Eh, not like I'll be missing to much anyway. Seems like everyday we're not living, just surviving. There's a reason why that kid was stealing that money. Honestly, we all need it. So deperately that we often try to get loans just to pay rent. And when the banks don't let us, the syndicates will... At a price. I think the entire country is like that now." Once again, the Bull stayed silent. "What're your thoughts?"

"...What does it mean to be Human?" Gorret seemed to study his paw and it's shape.

"Hmm?" The man double-taked at the sudden subject change. "Well... If I had to guess, it would probably be a mix of the seven Vitrues and the seven Vices." The beast looked at him. "Seven Vitrues: Chastity, Temperance, Charity, Diligence, Patience, Kindness, Humility. Vices are basically the seven Sins: Pride, Greed, Sloth, Gluttony, Lust, Envy, and... Crap, what was the last one?"

"Wrath."

"Ah, so you know what I'm talking about then?" Gene only heard him exhale. "Murry said you were smarter than you looked. But yeah, I'd say it would be a mixture of those is what makes a human. Some would say it's intelligence, but there are alot of stupid people in the world." Silence once again. "You're trying to make yourself human? Is that why you're here?"

"No." Gorret answered. "I'm trying to regain it."

"Regain it?" The man questioned him. Then it started to make sense how this creature knew so much about the world he was in. "I won't pry anymore. But if there's some type of apocalypse happening or something, at least give us a heads up, will ya?" No response. "What are you anyway?"

"I'm..." He wasn't sure how to answer that question. ("What I seen last night... It was an animal. But you have Mercy. You have Kindness. You have reason. You're different from what I seen, because you are still the same person as you left.") Leslie's voice echoed in his head. (I told her that I was the

same as them, and that they were Nothing. But perhaps maybe, She's...?) "An Aatxe."

"A what?"

"...I'm a Vigilante. Come to fulfill the desire of a young woman."

Chapter 4

The long night's sleep is just what Leslie needed. Waking up a little past noon, she got up to get some 'breakfast'. Greeting her mother in the kitchen, Margret gave her an odd look. "I know that look, mom. What's wrong?"

She sighed. "I called a therapist for you today. They're going to see you tomorrow afternoon."

"A Therapist? Why? I don't need one."

"Leslie, you've just went horrible event, and you've yet to say anything about it except saying that 'I'm fine'. If you don't want to talk to us about it, that's okay. But you should really talk to someone about what you went through."

"What is there to talk about? The man saved my life-"

"How though? Your father said that you were poisoned."

"I was."

"By what?" Margret asked, trying to get a thorough answer.

"I don't know what it was."

"But he did? Are you sure that he wasn't the one who poisoned you?"

"No, he wasn't! He saved me!"

"And he wanted nothing from it. It sounds to me like some sort of plot. What did he give you to treat it?"

"I... Can't tell you that."

"Why?"

"Because you wouldn't believe me..." Leslie sighed, unable to look her mother in the eye.

"This is why I got you a therapist. You won't talk to us, it's doubtful you'll talk to any one of your friends about it, so we're getting you to talk to someone who deals with situations like this."

"Mom..."

"I'm just worried about you Leslie. Your father has a lot of enemies, and if this guy was one of them..."

"He isn't."

"How can you be so sure? Because he told you?" The young woman couldn't answer back. She knew it was a trap her mother set. "You can't believe everything that people tell you, especially if they are strangers."

"But I know who he is. I can trust him."

"And you know this how?" No response. "I can't understand why on earth you would go this far to protect him."

"If you knew who he was... What he was, you would." Leslie mumbled, leaving the room.

After she ate, the young woman tried her best to unwind. Though the thoughts of her trying to explain this to a therapist kept her tense. For a while, she would just shove that thought and think about something else. Think about... Him. Gorret. And what he did for Leslie. Though she did already thank him with words, she felt it wasn't quite enough. But the thoughts of a small gift might help, and so she began brainstorming.

She wanted something material, that's for sure. Was almost thinking some type of food, but then she remembered that he no longer required such things. The question did come up though: was he actually able to consume anymore? If so, where would it go-?

Once again, stopping herself from thinking too much, the woman got back on track. The next idea was something homemade. Perhaps a piece of jewelry for a male? Something that he could wear to show people that he wasn't like those other creatures. That idea led to another for making him a set of clothes as well, so the Bull wouldn't be trotting around the city naked.

But one thing at a time. Her first thought was a Noserling, though it seemed a little stereotypical to her. It's not something a normal person would wear anyway, and the idea of the gift was to show others that Gorret was more humane than what he seemed. Leslie went through the basic ones: Rings, Earrings, Piercings, Bracelets, even Collars and Capes. Though the Cape was more just a silly joke to her.

But none of them really fit. Mostly due to the idea of him often being in physical contact with others, she wanted to give him something that he wouldn't easily lose or break. Let alone, be used against him, like the Noserling probably would.

Laying back down on her bed and staring at the ceiling, she was trying to think of something that wouldn't get in the way. Her thoughts wandered off to his story, and the small locket that he had lost. It was almost enough for her to go next door and see if she could find some old possession of Heleen's, but A: Stealing is wrong, even for a good cause. And B: Odds are, something with such value might end up hurting him more, and cause the beast grief.

But the idea of the Necklace; much more humane than a collar would be. If it fit right it could stay out of the way, and if durable enough, would unlikely break or be lost in a conflict. The idea of more or less, an Amulet for him. Held on with a thick chain and create a symbol for him.

Leslie quickly began to get out her sketchbooks. Although she wasn't terribly great with metalworking, she knew someone who was. But the symbol is what she wanted to work on. Drawing out different designs and layouts to see what would suit him best.

She came out with a shape that somewhat resembled a five-pointed star. Each point was room for a smaller symbol, most likely in Chinese Kanji. From each point, there were bent lines, much like a very thin Crescent Moon leaning to the center, connecting the points to their adjacent sides. From the bottom left, to the top, to the bottom right, to the upper left then upper right, and finally the bottom left once again. Completing the symbol's cycle.

It was a bit complex, and unlikely be able to do much more than to carve it on a steel lid, then connect that lid to a chain. But with the right amount of effort, it could be something worthy of Thanks.

It was still early afternoon on that Sunday. Early enough to still catch a ride into the city with her mother. While Margaret went in to get a few things, Leslie was dropped off at a friend of hers for a few hours. Though he worked in a less crowded and not a very clean workspace, he still did a fantastic job at many crafts and repairs.

As the young woman approached the large garage shop, she was looking around to see if she could find the man outside. Let alone casually browse the many piles of scrap that was left around, to see if she could find something ideal for her gift. "See something you like?" Her friend asked, catching her going through a few things.

"Not just yet, Gene. How've you been?" Leslie smiled at the middle aged man, though he often wore overalls at his workspace, he only wore the bottom half until he needed the rest. Often in white shirts, which irked the young woman to no end, due to them often getting dirty and then hearing him complain he had nothing nice to wear for a date. His face was actually quite handsome to her, when he was cleaned, though he didn't seem to like to shave very often. His dark, strawberry-blonde hair was always able to be seen on his face and under the baseball cap Gene tended to wear.

"I've been... Eh. Things happen, you know how it is." He said, almost hiding something from her that she didn't want to hear. Getting yet another cigarette out of his pocket and quickly lighting it as if second nature to him. "I heard you got kidnapped over the weekend."

"You heard about that?"

"Everyone heard about that. It's a wonder no reporter has gotten to you yet." Gene studied her a bit. "At least you're safe then. Did he do anything to you?"

"Just took care of me, nothing more. But I really don't want to talk about it." He gave a nod in understanding. "How's Cherl?"

He let out a small chuckle which puzzled Leslie. "That's something I don't really want to talk about." He half teased. "We broke up."

"Awwh. Why? I liked her."

"I donno. She said I changed in the past week, and well... She wanted to move on." He shrugged. "Okay, what broke and how much are you paying me to fix it?"

The question made her laugh. "Actually, I was thinking of making someone a gift." The man raised an eyebrow as she dug through her pockets to her small drawing. "I wanted to make this, out of metal or something."

"What exactly is it? A warning sign?"

"It's like an amulet. Something they can wear on their neck." He looked at her again, and looked back on the drawing. "He helped me recover, and I wanted to say thanks."

"Your kidnapper?"

"Don't call him that." She playfully shoved him, looking through another pile of scraps. "But yes, it's for him."

"Well, it seems up my alley, but..."

"Is something wrong?" Leslie asked.

"I'm assuming that this is going to be in chains and such, right? I don't have anything that small that's not going to give them neck pains."

"You don't need to worry about that. He'll be fine." She pulled out a rather long chain that was a tad rusted. But otherwise in good shape. "This should actually do well."

"That? It's eight feet long."

"Well, we'll cut it first. What do you say to it though? Will you do the commission?"

Gene looked at the drawing one last time. "Sure. Something this detailed will be about 20\$. How's that?"

"Sounds great." She replied, getting a good measurement of Gorret's neck with her arms. "We'll need about this much of it." Again, the man just looked at her in thought. Then seemed to scan the area.

"What's wrong?"

His attention turned back to her when he made sure they were alone. "Aatxe." And Leslie's eyes widened a bit. "Is that who this is for? For that Black Bull thing that's been going around at night?"

"...How did...?"

"Murry around the corner was robbed the night you were kidnapped, and he seen it. Rick almost got away with the money, but that thing broke his leg and returned it. Murry also said he asked for some food for someone." (He really didn't steal it then.) She thought to herself. "And last night, that thing was on my roof."

"You didn't..."

"I only offered it a cigarette, and it told me that I had like four years to live..." He sighed. "A year more than the doctors gave me ten days ago. That's why Cheryl left me."

She remained quiet for a little while, staring at the chains in her hands. "...He's a good person. He's just..."

"A little lost. Yeah, I know. But I'll do this for you, and I'll keep my mouth shut about him." She whispered her thanks. "Your third clue was well..." He walked up to her and retrieved the chain that she had. Holding her measurements in place. "This isn't an amulet for a normal person, it's a belt." And they shared a chuckle.

"So, you spoke to him?" The woman asked, following Gene inside his garage.

"Yeah, a little. He asked me something about what it is to be Human. And that he was trying to reclaim it." He explained, setting up a machine to cut the chain. "I didn't ask for anymore details past that. No one should."

"What was your answer then?"

The man shrugged half heartedly. "I said the first thing that came to mind. A mix between the seven Virtues and Vices. Something my old man wanted me to study alot. I guess it finally came in use."

"Virtues and Vices...? Hmm." Leslie was a bit quiet, then she looked at her design once again. The idea of having a symbol at every point of the star was still blank for now, but... "What were the Virtues again?"

Gene looked at her in a bit of disappointment. "Seriously? Am I the only one who was forced to learn these things?"

"Yes." She replied jokingly. "Now what were they?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "Chastity, Charity, Temperance, Patience, Diligence, Kindness, and Humility."

"What did Chastity mean?"

Another glare. "Means alot of things. Mostly Purity and Honesty. Refraining from the decadence in life and not giving into alot of it's indulgence. It also means to actually be a human being, by respecting other people, as well as yourself. Not just socially, but physically as well."

"Okay, Charity?"

"Generosity, Self-Sacrifice. Not exactly what the modern term states of a Benevolent Giving, but it works too."

"That kinda fits... Temperance?"

"Restraint, Self Control, it's often associated with Justice and Honor as well. But mostly constant mindfulness of others."

"I'm not sure if that really works..." Gene looked at her. "These five empty spaces I have, I left to see if I could find symbols that would fit him as a whole." Leslie explained.

"And so you're thinking..." He nodded a bit. "Patience: Peace, Mercy, etc. Resolving Conflicts, usually in a non-violent manner."

"Kindness?"

"You skipped Diligence: Persistence, Effort. Using one's time wisely, and mostly not being lazy. Kindness is Compassion and Friendship for its own sake. Empathy and Trust without Prejudice or Resentment."

"And lastly, Humility: To think less of yourself?"

"Actually, it's more just thinking of yourself less. People often get that one wrong nowadays. I remember the textbook said 'The Courage of the Heart necessary to understate tasks which are difficult, tedious, or unglamorous, and to graciously accept the sacrifices involved.' Although, I've still yet to understand what that really means." Gene said, starting the loud machine to cut the Chain, and giving her the time to really reflect on what they mean. After a moment, the noise died down. "So which five are you going to pick?"

"Well... He's no longer Pure, so Chastity doesn't quite fit. In a way, Temperance doesn't really fit him either."

"Doesn't know the meaning of restraint, does he?" He chuckled.

"But the other five... Erm."

The man rolled his eyes. "Charity, Diligence, Kindness, Humility, and Patience."

"Yes, those probably would fit him."

"So, Sacrifice, Bravery, Compassion, Mercy, and Ethics. These words would sound like him?"

"Yes. They would." She smiled, looking out at the sky over the city. Wondering where exactly he is now.

Chapter 5

"I don't remember it being this dark at night." The man said, holding his date close as they walked down the night streets. The sky was unusually cloudy in the area, and there seemed to be a thin fog creeping in.

"Let's just get home, Steven. I really don't like the look of this." The woman shuttered. "I feel like something is watching us..."

A half a block forward the fog began to thicken, and a few crashes could be heard down the street from time to time. "What was that?" Another one. And then another partially came in view. What remained of a street lamp was cut down by some sort of sharp object. "Is that the streetlight?"

Another few crashes came from their surroundings. One by one, slowly hearing the two where to go. Then silence. "Steven..." She whispered to him once again, trying her best not to scream. Strange footsteps could be heard from the west, barely being visible by the now poor light and the fog. It was a tall creature, nearly twelve feet, but thin. Walking on two long legs, and dragging something heavy behind it.

The creature exhaled in this odd combination of a roar and a howl, as lunged forward, jumping into the air, and swung its heavy weapon down on the two. It was then, the woman couldn't hold her scream, as they both stumbled backward. Only to see the large weapon caught in midair.

The thing was long. Rusted, and chipped over many decades of use. Nearly every inch of its eight feet was covered in this black-red liquid, staining what Masterwork Quality it once had. On the leathal end, it was caught by two large black paws. Paws belonging to what looked like a black bull with red eyes. It caught the weapon at its sides, and its raw strength was beginning to crack the blade's body.

Gorret parried the large weapon and pulled on it with his left arm. Causing the Wielder to stumble forward, right into the Bull's Body Blow. With the creature still on his right fist, the beast lifted it off the ground a bit, and then completely overhead of the Bull. Slaming the Wielder hard on its back, and damaging the road a bit.

As the two people scampered away, they couldn't help but stare at the two monsters fighting. Gorret glared at them and roared "Leave!" causing the two to nod and escape safely. As his attention returned to the outsider, he barely dodged the wild blade swing of it. Just nicking the Bull's horns.

A series of furious swings kept the Beast at bay, along with the occasional thrust trying to keep it at a distance. The way the creature was using the large blade, it seemed like the weapon itself was attached to its limb. Though the creature looked scrawny, Gorret knew that these things had great strength regardless. It was a bit risky, but the bull remained at distant until there was an opening in the creature's offense.

And there it was. Another swift parry of the beast's forearm, and Gorret got in close. Holding onto what should've been the hilt of the large sword with one paw, and hammering the creature's face with the other stunned it. Allowing the beast to grab it by the head and slam his horns into it. Again. A third time before tossing the creature on its back once again, and giving its throat a heavy stomp with a hoof.

Gorret's hoof then slammed on the creature's chest. Grabbing the sword with both hands, the Bull began to pull heavily on the wielder's limb. Causing it to eventually tear off, and give a mix of a howl and a whine. Turning the blade around, the beast nailed the creature to the road with it, with the blade pointing towards its head.

Imploded and bleeding, the creature desperately tried to find a way up. But the large blade went right through the road beneath it, and was unable to lift it off with its other limbs. While Gorret walked slowly towards the Wielder's lower half, he grabbed one of its long legs, and began to drag the creature's body through the sword. The sounds of the rusted, dull metal cutting through bone and flesh, and the creature's cries of pain filled the streets. Until it got to the Wielder's voicebox. One last strong pull of the creature's leg sawed its head in half and stained the roads with a terrible black ooze.

Breathing heavily, the Bull studied the fog and clouds around the area, and soon they were disappearing. With the bright moonlight illuminating the streets once again, Gorret paid witness to what he had done to the creature. (At times like this, I don't know if I can go back to being human. I've been an animal for so long...) Slowly, the creature started to decay into fragments of nothingness. As if it was being pulled down by the earth that was stained by its death, as if the earth pitied it. (...I wonder if I'll die like that too someday.) The Bull sighed, and left before anyone else seen him.

The night was very warm to him, and the sky stayed illuminated with the help of the stars and the moon. Though it had been nearly a week since his return, Gorret was still having a hard time with the change. Any light was almost too much for his now metamorphosed sight, and his body wasn't designed for such warmth. At least it didn't effect his performance when it mattered. Though it didn't look like it when the Bull fought, he often fought with his eyes closed unless they were in complete darkness. Even then, Complete Darkness still wasn't the same as before.

The beast stopped to observe the city on a nearby roof. He did admit that his landing was a bit

loud, but it was a habit he was learning to break. He often used it as a warning noise to trespassers. If they heard the heavy beast coming, many of the smaller ones would often stay away from him.

After moments of study, and not sensing any more traces of Outsiders, Gorret did what he often did in the nights when it was quiet: try to reclaim his memories. Although, little luck has been brought to him of the past few nights. Not since he found Leslie, he hadn't been able to remember anymore.

The door to the roof squealed open, and a man within his forties stepped out with a 12-gauge. As usual, the Bull paid him little attention, until he heard the firearm cock. "You! I see you, get out of the shadows! Slowly." The man shouted in a raspy voice. The beast just slightly looked at him. Seeing those red eyes appear out of the darkness painted a surprised, and frightening expression on the man.

"I'm not here for you. But if you fire that thing at me, I will hurt you." This time, Gorret actually looked into the man's face. Though he was standing in the light, the Bull could see some sort of familiarity to him. A large scar on his left cheek triggered it. Like a window shattering in his mind, it came back to Gorret, causing him to hold his head once again. "I... Know you..." He grunted angrily.

"You know me?" The man questioned, only to have the beast quickly disarm him and overpower his strength. Slamming the man hard against the wall with one large paw.

"I know you! You... The worm who murdered his own wife. The bastard who raped his own daughter, then killed her too! I remember you threatening to do the same for mine!" The beast roared at him, nearly crushing his skull. "You killed three others before I caught you, and instead of the death penalty, they gave you four years! How are you out here now!?"

"How do-!?" The man yelled in pain, interrupting his sentence. "They let me out! Parole!"

"Liar!" Gorret Barked at him. "You found a way to slither out of your punishment! You always have!" The Bull pried himself to let the man loose, in fears that he might just kill him with rage. "If I ever learn that you've hurt someone else since then I will rip you inside out, Insect!" One last growl before he forced himself off the man's roof.

A few blocks away, Gorret collapsed. Bracing the back of his neck hard, and digging his claws into himself, he roared away that rage loudly into the night. He almost killed that degenerate man. He wanted to, badly. Rid his territory from that taint that stained it. But at the same time...

It was his instinct. His primal instinct that demanded that he gave in. To run back there and crush him. Paint the roads with the man's blood, and use his misdeeds as a warning to others: Stay in your homes at night. Don't do harm or bring suffering to others. If you do, he would find you. The Aatxe would find you...

And so, he gave into those demands.

The alarm radio was a better form of waking up than the merciless buzzer. Wasn't nearly as rude or annoying, but the morning news anchors confused her a bit. Thinking that she somehow fell asleep in front of the TV once again. As usual, the news was nothing shocking. Stories of drug abuse, animal attacks, and violent murders that lacked any graphic information. After a while, the definition of 'Shocking news' shifts and changes.

The day overall was long. The usual expectations from Leslie's parents and her classmates. Asking her if she was okay, is everything okay. How she felt. There was no real answer for such questions. And the lack of a correct answer began to irritate her. The idea of this aura of pity that seemed to give off just from a few words and gossip. It was false attention. Adam was her only real friend in the school, and the only one who acted like nothing happened. She couldn't thank him enough for that, though she never said it.

Leslie delivered her commission, went on through the school day, and tried not to get stressed by the students. She ended up doing what she usually did when something was on her mind; doodle. Often just by instinct. As if her hand knew what was troubling her, and was asking questions in a secret language.

Most of them ended up being small, chibi versions of Gorret. A black, bull like creature with red eyes. Sometimes calm and cute, other times solid, like during the nights. She couldn't help but smile at them, trying to imagine what he would say about them. Behind her, she could hear Adam sigh. "I thought you'd take interest in that."

"In what?" She asked.

"The rumors going around. They say there are things coming out at night, and that several people have reported some black bull being seen. Even spoke to a few of them apparently." He rolled his eyes a bit. "I know quite a few people nowadays are on drugs and are probably seeing things, but..."

"What if he was real?" She asked, looking at the drawings.

"He?"

"Or she. What do you think they would want? Why protect those people?" Leslie half knew the answer herself, but it was more just an act. She was also curious to what her friend thought about him.

"I donno. I can't imagine the police or government allowing some wild animal run around the city at night. Sooner or later, it'll get caught. And we'll get alot of answers from it. You watch, it's going to be some alien that was imprisoned by the CIA or something." She couldn't help but chuckle.

When school was over, her mother called her to remind the young woman about the therapist session she was suppose to go to. Though she agreed with her mother, she really didn't want to go. With the extra meal to accompany the afternoon's session, she skipped it. Heading to his whereabouts for the

afternoon.

After getting to the west bus station, the rest of the trip was quiet. She tried to make sure she wasn't followed, and that he wouldn't suddenly jump down and think she was a trespasser. She got to the old building where she was kept over the weekend, and gently opened the door.

The room was dark, but she could see a few things covering the ground floor now. Before there was just an extra table. Now there was a large weight set with a dumbbell, along with several extra weights around. Improvised shafts that look like they've been broken from strength alone, to make several smaller weights that he could lift with one hand.

She calmly started up the stairs. Trying not to be too loud, but also trying not to be too quiet, in risk of startling him. Still being cautious, she slowly entered his living quarters, only to find the Bull staring at her, laying on his mattress. He let out a silent sigh, and rested his head once again. "Hi again." Leslie greeted him. Only to hear him grumble something about blood.

"What are you doing here?" Gorret bluntly asked, as he usually did.

"I thought you might miss me, so I decided to drop by." She placed her bags on the table. "What was that about blood?" No response. "How'd you sleep?"

"...I can't."

"What's wrong?" She came closer, placing a hand on his shoulder. Only to once again not get a verbal answer, but a long deep breath that said 'I don't want to talk about it.' (He probably misses them...) Leslie thought to herself. "I got a couple of surprises for you." That time, an ear flicked in her direction, and it made the young woman smile.

"Surprises?" He asked, while she returned to her bags. He rolled over, leaning against the wall while she brought a couple of things over. Something wrapped in a cloth, and a sketchpad. As she sat down, and leaned forward to flip through her notebook, he couldn't help but look at her back once again. And he began to wonder.

"See?" She pointed into the book at the small drawings that she did of him. "This one isn't much, but I just wanted to get some practice in..." She trailed off after looking into his eyes. They were not filled with the odd responses that she expected. That mixture of puzzlement and insult. Instead, she read worry and sadness. "What's wrong?"

"...I can't get it off." He finally said, looking at his paws.

"Can't get what off?"

"The scent of blood." He mumbled.

(Does he mean of the creatures? He's probably been fighting them at night again.) "It's alright. You did what you had to do to protect people." He looked at her. "There's been a few sightings of you and other creatures the past few nights."

"It's not theirs." He said, once again looking at his paws. With that she knew. That brutal murder on the radio that morning.

"...Tell me what happened. Who was it?" She closed the book, wrapping her arms around his one.

"...I don't remember his name. But I remembered what he did. He... deserved it."

"Did he attack you?" The bull shook his head. "What did he do to deserve it?" Leslie asked softly.

"I... Don't want you to know the details. But he killed a few people before I caught him... Before... This."

"Gorret... You can't just fight the creatures and attempt to save the city. Sometimes you do have to..." She couldn't really say it herself.

"I know that." He mumbled. "It's... how I did it." The beast got up and kneeled towards the windows. "I've been in that place for so long. I thought I could hold back this primitive nature, but..." Another look at his paw. "I don't think I can return to your world. I can't stop thinking like, or being... An animal."

"Not alone, you can't." A man's voice came from downstairs, and the Bull let out a loud growl.

"Gene?" Leslie asked in surprise to the voice.

"You were followed?" Gorret asked her.

"I didn't think I was, but he's a friend."

"A friend to both of you." The man said, entering the room, and giving a quick study of the Beast. Along with a faint nod of greetings. "It's alright, Aatxe. Your secret hideout is safe with me." Another low grumbled from the Bull.

"How did you...?" The woman asked.

"I've always been good at stealth, Leslie. I used to be quite the ninja when I was younger." Gene smiled at her slyly. "Anyways, you can't do it alone. Not without drastic measures."

"How could you possibly understand what I mean?"

"Take it from someone who's tried to change a bad habit at least thirty-two times in his life." He took the cigarette out of his mouth and studied it for a moment. "Even after being told time and time again that it would be the death of him. Of course, your situation is different, but it's the same in essence. You can change, regain control with the help of others." The beast looked at him. "But only if you really want it. It won't be easy, and you might not like some of the conflicts it will cause."

"What exactly do you have in mind?" Gorret grumbled, his ears folding back.

"Well, you're a Vigilante, right? Kinda like a badass superhero that plays by his own rules. You could use a sidekick that would keep you level headed." Gene looked around the room a bit. "You might

want to come out of your shell as well. Still keep the place to live in privately, but it's better that you show the world who you are. Leslie could even help on that one, by explaining what happened over the weekend." Another low growl. "The more you show yourself to these people, the better understanding they'll have of you. If you announce who your enemies are, the people will grow a better acceptance for you, and the criminals will think twice."

"You mentioned a sidekick before? Who is stupid enough to do that?" The woman asked, only to have Gene rub the back of his neck awkwardly. She then exhaled, covering her eyes. "It's you, isn't it?" She asked half heartedly.

"Well, I wouldn't really describe it as stupid..."

"But you could get hurt! You could be killed!"

"That's not saying much for someone who has less than five years to live. And half of that will be next to an oxygen tank. I might as well do something worth while with my time. And beating up thugs at night while trying to spare their lives from the wrath of a giant bull creature seems like a good way to live."

"Yep. Stupid fits." she said, smiling and shaking her head, while Gene let out a chuckle.

Corret ended up staring at the man for a few moments. "You realize what you're suggesting." He stated. "It's not just people that I've been hunting."

"I know. There's other things that go bump in the night. Things that you can handle and show no mercy to. I doubt I'll go near them." The man shrugged. "Besides, who else would you suggest?"

"You're willing to put your remaining time in this world at risk for... This?"

"Are you?" Gene asked the Bull. They ended up staring at each other for a few moments. "If you can't keep your five virtues straight, who will?"

"Five virtues?"

The man looked at Leslie with a bit of puzzlement. "You didn't give him it?"

"Give me what?"

The woman reached behind for the cloth and gave it to the beast, who carefully unfolded it. Inside was an amulet with a series of strange symbols carved onto it with a large chain attached. "I thought of the design, and I commissioned Gene to make it. The five points all have symbols of five virtues: Charity, Diligence, Kindness, Humility, and Patience. While the center..."

"It holds the symbol of Wrath. No man is pure, and well... I thought it would add more of a human feel to it if we put on your biggest Vice."

"Wrath..." The beast spoke in a whisper. To finally speak it out loud gave it a strange embodiment. For now that primal instinct of his had a label. A name. Staring at the gift in his hands, he

couldn't help but thinking about it's meaning.

Charity: The act of giving. The act of love, for love itself is a form of self-sacrifice. He indeed felt something for the young woman when he first found her. A person that he could not remember the name of, but those feelings stayed with him even after death. He loved her, like a daughter.

Diligence: Will to fight. Reason to fight. The Want to fight. Not just the Want to Fight, but the Want to Fight Well. Smartly. Strategically. For if he did not, he would most likely pay a price. Another price...

Patience: Accepting the Grace to Forgive. Wanting to resolve conflicts through non-violent nature, as well as to show Mercy. Though it is Wrath's opposite, it defined who he used to be in the past. It was his link, his connection to his old self.

Kindness: Unselfishness. It is Compassion. The willingness to help those who need help, and want nothing in return. Voluntary, without being Bias or Spiteful. It's what allowed him to care in the first place.

Humility: Self-Examination. It is a form of kindness and empathy. The action of giving credit, not taking it for the glory of oneself. It resembles Courage. Refraining from Dispair and the ability to Confront Fear, Uncertainty, Intimidation.

This amulet. This gift that Leslie had given him, as well as this man... It was more than an accessory. She had given him what he thought was lost for centuries. Ever since that locket went missing. What was written on this gift was Himself. The amulet itself was him. It defined him. Not only in present, but his past self as well.

The realization was enough for him to want to cry, but the Bull's body could not. After a deep exhale, as well as several long moments, he spoke up. "...Thank you."

"Do you like it?" The woman asked, only getting a nod for a reply. As she slowly got up and closer to him, she softly took the amulet out of his hands and linked it around his neck. It was slightly snug, but with the shape of his horns, it would not fall off easily. "Don't go breaking this on your first hunt. We worked hard on it." She teased him a little bit, finally getting a slight smile from the beast as he was staring into space.

"They will be able to identify you with that. It's quite reflective, but it shouldn't shine in your eyes." Gene said. "The people should know that you're here to protect them. That you're not a monster."

"And you're here to keep me from becoming one." Gorret stated quietly. As the beast rose up to his near full height, he turned to face the man. Although he didn't enjoy the smell of the walking ashtray, he appreciated everything that he's done for him. As well as everything he's done for Leslie. "...Gorret." The bull stated, gesturing a human handshake.

"Gene. Gene Drift." He shook the beast's hand. Noticing how careful he was being not to hurt the man.

"That cannot be your real name." The bull grumbled.

"It isn't. But it's what people know me as around here. My real name was left at my hometown."

"Right, you ran away from home, didn't you?" The woman asked.

The man shrugged. "They called me a walking disaster. So I think they're better off without me."

"You sound like you're going to be a reliable partner." Gorret stated. Only to hear Leslie begin to laugh quite heavily.

"Did you just make a joke?" She asked between breaths.

"I think he did." Gene smiled at him. It got the beast to think about what he said a few times. The more he did, the more he could understand their reaction. Another smile grew over his black muzzle, and for the first time in almost two centuries, Gorret did something he didn't know that this body could do...

Laugh.