

Afterlife Act 4 - Scars

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 1

The afternoon sun beamed through the opened windows, causing the curtains to flow with the light breeze. Nearly dancing as the wind was invited in to circulate the heat in the bedroom, an old rundown twin made for two was singlally occupied. Remaining completely quiet until the phone on the nightstand started playing music.

3 Doors Down - When I'm Gone

It got the man to lightly groan when the vocals started, causing him to take a deep breath while stretching- only to be interrupted by heavy coughs. Several after several until his mouth was occupied, turning to a nearby bucket and spitting out something rust colored. Taking a few more deep breaths, or at least attempting to, as each one ended the same way.

Breaking the cycle with just taking shallow breaths, he slowly looked at his phone and cursed. Seeing the battery life on it reading low twenties, swearing he plugged it in last night before passing out in his clothing. Following the cord to the wall's outlet with no issues, the same one the nearby lamp was plugged into. Giving that light a switch on and no response.

The blonde man knew what it was. Hoping it would last a few more days at least, but he was prepared for it. Grabbing a nearby white shirt to cover his bare chest and heading outside, ignoring the steady pile of mail for now and moving from his small home towards the side. A small little shed connected to it, and carefully attaching the cables to a car battery and seeing a small light within turn on.

He shut it off, silently thanking it to let him know everything was working fine before heading back. Picking up the pile of bills and mail and dragging it in. Setting it in a steel pot on the stove, a grate on top of it, and lighting a cigarette. Using the same match to light up the papers and putting a used frying pan on top of the grate. Taking out the last of his eggs from the still dead refrigerator and turning on the light overhead. This time of day always seemed to cast a shadow in the kitchen.

While they cooked, he moved his phone to a different outlet, one that looked like it was unprofessionally installed. Plugging it in and seeing the thing start to charge as it continued to play his morning alarm. Heading to the bathroom to do his morning 'business' and stopping at the mirror to look at himself.

Day after day, he looked more and more... 'Homeless' for lack of a better word. It wasn't far from the truth, really. He no longer legally owned this place, and any day now they'll kick him out with some paper and ink. Likely turn his lot into some warehouse or give some other poor soul some false hope in starting a new life.

With a heavy sigh, he filled up the back of his toilet with the last of his spare water. He'll have to make a few trips to the river soon, but without power it's going to stay cool after he filters it... One thing at a time. One day at a time. For now, he had breakfast to look forward to.

After, he loaded up the many jugs into a small trailer and connected it to his bike. Something that was running low on fuel too, but it was above a quarter. Taking a moment to look at his wallet and spotting a few bills that didn't add to much. That gas hike was really doing a number on him, and before he got that, he needed food.

Right now, he needed water. Starting up the motorbike and heading down to the river in the setting sun. Still finding the pier there and parking near it, adding filled jug after filled jug to the trailer as each one was replaced. It was enough to get by for a while at least. Maybe not the most healthy, but that hardly mattered at this point. Driving back and unloading them, starting the makeshift filter process he started, only to find a small leak in the filter. Needing to take it apart and fix it with whatever he could find.

That set him back an hour, seeing it already begin to get dark, and he still needed to get some groceries. Grabbing the trenchcoat that definitely seen better days; covered in stitches from cuts too close for comfort and checking his pocket to make sure that flashlight was still there. Almost taking a moment to study it and it's black casing.

Ever since they learned that UV light burns these creatures, he's been working on a portable one for those 'Just In Case' situations. Turning it on and waving his hand across the cone of blacklight, he could start to feel it burn very slightly against his own skin. Like that of a pocket lighter.

The man was nearly one of them, he knew. A 'Daywalker', so to speak. Able to still walk in the sunlight, but... Ever since knowing it, he could feel himself become weaker in the light. Almost stronger in the darkness, while being sensitive to LEDs and many electricity based lights. Nothing terrible, but it was definitely noticeable.

Turning the device off to conserve the battery, he placed it in a side pocket within the coat. Once again pondering exactly how human he was any longer as he drove through the streets. Many finally taking the Aatxe's warning to heart and avoiding being out in the darkness after the sun sets, to stay safe in their homes and let the creatures of the night roam and patrol the city. Fighting each other for territory... Fighting the black bull for territory.

But of course, there were those forced to work late as well. Sometimes the blonde man was thankful for such a thing, knowing he didn't have enough back home to eat until morning came. Ordering out was very expensive now, especially at night. Though the idea of health didn't seem to cross his mind anymore.

Even if he seen it everywhere in store: many healthy foods getting higher in price while the junk foods were at an all time low. Affordable food was nothing to complain about, and it didn't require refrigeration, which was a plus. Health may not be an issue for him, but it was still something for others to think about. Especially if all they could afford was these kind of foods.

Getting about two tote bags full in total and bringing it up to the cashier, a woman not looking too thrilled to be working tonight. That or she wasn't fond of the aura of smoke that seemed to follow the blonde man where ever he went. While she was scanning his items, another younger man waited in line behind Gene, giving off a bad vibe with his more nervous movements. Barely seeing something metal in the corner of his eye under the younger one's jacket while Gene pretended to look at the screen.

"Hold up." The blonde man said to her, gesturing the screen. "Those were half off." The woman double taked at the screen, then back to him.

"The system doesn't say they're on sale."

"The tag in the isle said they were half off, that's why I got them." Gene stated a little more sternly. "Go check it if you don't believe me. I'll wait right here." A near growl from the cashier as she rolled her eyes. Taking a moment to think about it and leaving the cash booth before heading in the store. Leaving the two men to wait for a few moments before Gene took out another cigarette, but didn't light it. "Don't do it." He said thickly again, but in a half whisper, getting the nervous man to double take. "I know things might be hard right now, but do not go down this road, kid."

No response, and soon enough the woman came back. "I'm not seeing any sale on these."

"Damn." Gene said a little bit on the lighter side. "I could've sworn they were. Oh well." An angry look from the employee as she quickly scanned the area. "I didn't touch anything. Why would I? There's a

camera right there." He said a little louder, actually making the nervous one double take at his gesture. Taking his wallet out and using a little over half of what he had to pay for the items. Grabbing his tote bags and heading out. "Have a good night." Of course she didn't say the same, especially after that.

Taking the bags out the glass doors, setting them on a nearby bench while he lit that cigarette... He couldn't let it go. Picking up a frightful tension in the store and cursing to himself. Leaving the bags and entering the door once again to see that nervous guy holding a small gun towards the cashier. Moving quickly and quietly towards him, hiding in the blind spot and not being noticed until Gene was in arm's reach.

He attempted to point the gun at the blonde one, but that wrist was grabbed tightly and forced away from the walking ashtray. Swiftly taking the back of the nervous man's head and slamming it against the checkout counter, hard enough to knock him out while drawing a little bit of blood on the surface. Let alone hear the gun click loudly while Gene disarmed him, telling him the firearm was empty.

Taking a breath of his cigarette as he let the limp body drop on the floor, pulling the smoke out while staring at the guy in both disappointment and sorrow. Then moving his gaze to her, still frozen in fear as he dropped the gun on the bagging area and left. Passing through the doors and to the bench where his bags were, only to find them missing. Taking a look around and hearing footsteps way off in the distance, Gene sighed heavily.

He got on his bike to chase after him looking a little nervously at the gas needle, now in the red. Skidding the motorcycle 180 degrees and heading down the street where he spotted somebody running with his bags, there was also a strange itch of fear Gene could feel. Just like when those damn creatures appear, and barely hearing someone cry out for help.

Abandoning his pursuit, the blonde man took off towards the cry. Reaching under his bike's casing for that sword and pulling it out with a single hand while steering, sliding around the corner to a back alleyway between buildings. Spotting it within the darkness, as well as someone attempting to climb up a fire escape that's seen better days.

The large, frog-like creature growled at the headlight and swung at it with a rubbery arm. Connecting and sending the bike forwards, unable to see the man jump off before the attack hit and land on the frog's flank. Almost wincing when his cycle crashed into the wall, but Gene would worry about that later.

The strange appendage swung at the blonde one like a whip, keeping him at a distance and parrying whenever the claws got close. Distracting the man while something started to build up in it's throat and unleashing a large glob with a loud gurgle. One the skittish human barely dodged, but not without getting some of the strange acid on his coat, burning holes into it that seemed to eat up his clothing on

contact.

Starting to take the jacket off, the creature seen an attack of opportunity and took it. Opening up it's four-way lower jaws and lashing out several large tongues, each wrapping around Gene's limbs save for his sword arm. Attempting to grab the weapon instead, only to realize it was bladed and letting go.

But the man was easily tripped with a yell, coat still half on and hearing the acid still burn through it. Being dragged into those jaws loaded with teeth, the blonde one seen the person in rescue climb down the ladder behind the frog, but flee the scene. Attempting to cut the tongues on his bound arm was taking too long! Instead charging his blade with that supernatural energy and throwing it directly at the monster! Cutting the thing in two without it even realizing what just happened.

The pull of the tongues went limp and the frog thing fell... Forwards. Right on top of Gene while he was trying to get away. Grumbling at it's heavy weight and the most awful of smells as it slowly melted into the darkness. Leaving behind a spirit of sorts while the man let out some groans of disgust. Looking at the very faint light and dismissing it before attempting to clean himself off.

It didn't help too much but at least the gunk caused the burning acid stuff to stop. Making him wonder if Leslie would find even something this disgusting 'Fascinating' while he continued to wipe himself and look over the damages on his bike. Headlight busted, several dents and cracks that likely couldn't be fixed. But at least it started up and the breaks still worked. He would just have to be careful on the way to the station.

But the vehicle ran out of fuel before he made it there, needing to walk the last third of the way. Even the bright lights over the pumps were bothering him, as he pushed the motorcycle next to it and started adding gas to the tank. Feeling another coughing fit coming up, Gene moved to a nearby trash can and brought up some more rusted phlegm. A process that took longer than he expected, forgetting about the gas nozzle and cursing. Rushing back to it and stopping... Several dollars over what he had on him.

Sighing in defeat, he placed the nozzle back and strolled into the near empty store to pay. Expecting the odd look from the cashier; a man basically coughing out blood in a damaged coat and covered in God knows what. Likely seen better days, or someone you'd run into in a horror film, Gene pulled out his wallet and the last of his bills. "This... Is all I have." The younger man nodded nervously, adding it to the register before pulling out his own wallet. Making up the difference in a surprise turn of kindness for the night.

"This is the only time I'll do this." A sigh of relief from the blonde one. "You look like you've had a rough night..."

"Thank you, and don't worry. It's not human's." A noise in question from the younger one as he looked over the strange stains, now realizing that the light was reflecting a more reddish tone. Instantly making the cashier whimper. "Have a good night."

"You t-... Have a *better* one."

Chapter 2

The blonde man drove home, alright exhausted in the young night. Changing before falling into bed to rest while he pondered his food situation. Not even a minute later, hearing a familiar 'non-human' knock on his door and groaning. Slowly moving towards it and spotting the large cat in the jumpsuit, holding a tote bag. Gene's tote bag that was stolen earlier, one of them anyway. Handing it to the man while lowering his head to see him, the Charr being too tall for normal doorways. "I assume you wanted him to feed his family."

A heavy sigh left the blonde one, shaking his head but accepting half of his groceries. The good half at least, though still missing several things Gene wanted. Unloading the bag while the large cat squeezed in, opening a bag of chips and getting something in his half-empty stomach. "Is this what you've been doing all night? Following me?"

"He ran into something unpleasant. Let's just say that I recognized it was your bag."

"I tend to sign my stuff for a reason."

"I wasn't talking about your signature, but your scent." Eman stated, getting a near foul look from the man but paying no attention to him. Instead, scanning the area with those four ears and hearing Gene sigh at him.

"Don't-"

"What is wrong." Less of a question and more of an order to report, making the blonde one groan. "Something is different."

"It's nothing I can't handle, Tony." He grumbled, but the large feline ignored him.

"Your refrigerator is no longer running." A light squint at the lightbulbs. "That's dimmer than usual-"

"Okay." Gene nearly growled, taking a breath. "...I couldn't pay the electric bill." A calm stare from the large one. "...For the past few months. So I hooked up my system to an old car battery. That's what I've been using tonight." Eman's eyes studied him for a few moments then shifted directly to the wastecan that the man's been spitting in every morning. "Don't." The gaze returned to him. "...Please."

"Gene. How often do you help others." The man groaned at the 'question', knowing the lecture tone of the Charr by now and covering his eyes.

"Not now, Tony-"

"If you need help, then ask for it."

"I don't need help!"

"Of course not. You're just living in poverty with a constant death sentence being reminded to you everytime you breathe." Eman responded harshly. "After everything you've done for these people, the least that they can do is aid you-"

"The city doesn't give a damn about me."

"I didn't say **The City**." The Charr growled sternly. "A city is a structure. An elaborate construct of rules, regulations, and walls. The people inside are just its prisoners." No response as the man shielded his eyes with that baseball cap. "Is it pride then?" A glare from those blue eyes, replacing what shaken thoughts that were swimming inside and replacing them with anger.

"Do you really think this is about pride?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't suspect it." The two stared each other down. "I don't read people's emotions well. I can't sense sorrow or guilt as well as I can sense anger or fear. And right now, you're a strange mix of everything." A heavy breath from Gene followed by some silence, and the large feline changed the subject. Staring down at a small table with a dismantled contraption he recognized. "Have you made any progress on it?"

"Not really, but..." The man took a look at it from afar. "It's strange, Emmer-"

"Eman."

"-Tony." The large one sighed through his muzzle. "I've seen a lot of people's handywork, it's where I learned a lot of my repair skills."

"And?"

"And I know when something isn't homemade." Gene gazed over the disassembled device on the table. "This thing... It's a prototype, yes; not perfect. But it's not messy. It honestly looks like it was made in a factory." The feline perked an ear slightly. "I might be able to reverse it. I don't completely understand it, let alone know why it attracts those creatures. But I recognize the electrical setup... It's possible I could make them turn away from it."

"Repel them?" A slow nod from Gene. "It would be a useful tool to have to protect things important to us, but we should be cautious with it." A weird glare from the blonde one.

"What? Why?"

"If you drive the creatures away, where do you think they will go?" A slight shock of realization painted the man's face as he looked back at the device.

"...They can't return to their world...?"

"And if they do not, you are just threatening everyone outside of the city. Sending your problems to someone else is not a proper solution, but this can still prove useful." Some more silence filled the trailer. Soon enough the large feline turned about and started to open the door.

"Emmin." Eman paused. "...Gorret told me that you died before." Those orange ears flicked. "...What was it like?"

"Sleeping." He responded rather quickly. "It is a bit of a faint memory for that as well, whereas I do not sleep anymore since."

"You never finished that story of yours."

"There's little left to tell. I was set free, I offered my services to the human military, and we destroyed that base with my knowledge of the place."

"You destroyed your home?" A calm look from the large one.

"Charr have no Home like you do. Nor blood ties." Eman exhaled through his nostrils. "I was fatally wounded in the siege, but I managed to slip away once the fight was over. I remember collapsing in the forest and falling asleep. Dreaming of pain, searing pain within my chest. And when I awoke, there was a hole in it."

"Annnnd that's how you became a zombie?" A **very** slightly puzzled look from the feline. "Nevermind. What happened?"

"That is a very complicated question that would do nothing but waste both of our time." A noise in question from the man as the Charr closed his eyes for a moment. "I've been watching that lot a fair amount recently."

"The one with the lab in it? For these... Monsters?"

"That we suspected, yes. And I finally found the evidence I need to confirm them." A worried look from Gene, as the blonde one got closer to Eman and got his attention. The two locking eyes for a moment.

"Don't tell Gorret." The Charr's face went cross. "I'm not saying don't shut that down, but..."

"They're armed and trained to deal with his kind, I know. And it's likely that their weapons will also affect you." A bit of silence from the man.

"Can I trust you to do it on your own?"

"You can, if you're comfortable with me taking their lives." A near painful look from Gene as he

thought about it. "You do not have to say it. I know it's difficult for humans to agree with such a thing, especially civilians."

"I..."

"Do not concern yourself with it any longer, Gene. It is now my decision, not yours." That sank the man's heart as the large feline squeezed through the doorway. "I will shut it down tomorrow night, when I have more time and the weather is in my favor. For now, I've got another task to complete."

"Which is?"

"To fix your power situation." A double take from the blonde one as he followed the charr outside.

"Wait! Tony-!" But the orange one was gone before Gene could talk him out of it. Sighing to himself and checking his watch, lightly cursing at how late it's gotten. Disconnecting the battery power he made earlier and getting on his bike to meet up with the Aatxe.

The faint light nearly danced over his black paw like a slow flame, a completely different form of attention he got from where it came from. Still being able to easily recall where a nearly broken appendage and ripped off limb fell in the streets, what was once fear had now grown into affection for the Aatxe. Shifted his glowing red gaze from the dark light to the city beyond it, one coaxing him to accept such power to the clearly superior being.

It was strange to see it, really. Back in that dark world, these essences seemed like near flares in the black. Giving off the warm light of victory while signaling anything nearby that there was a body ready to be salvaged. Here; they were nothing more than a dim glow, and the corpses faded drastically faster. Only rewarding the essence to the better or more fortunate hunter.

The sounds of a nearby motorcycle parking didn't phase the black one in the slightest, too enthralled in his decision to start accepting such a thing. On one end, he believed that's what was keeping Gorret humane, but was he really? *You Can't Hang Onto Yourself*. That damn message the Shadow left behind continued to haunt him. *You Don't Have To Try Not To Hang Onto Yourself, It Can't Be Done*. Playing over and over. *And That Is Salvation*.

Salvation...? Such a thing never sounded so appealing to him. To finally give in and just accept the fact that the Aatxe was just that: an Aatxe. A monster. Inhuman and inhumane. Attempting to hang onto such an ideology was only making him weaker, only making the beast suffer. Distracting him to what was really important: His Territory. And keeping everything out of it. **Everything**.

"Don't do it." The walking ashtray actually snuck up on Gorret, getting him to growl as his short coat raised over his black hide. Glaring at the stick in a trenchcoat, cigarette lit and hanging out of his mouth casually, even though his expression was everything but. "I know-"

"Why shouldn't I." Gorret growled almost coldly, his red vision once again enthralled by the dance.

"Because it's a bad road to go down, man." No response. "Remember what Tony said." The black bull shifted his gaze again, and some tension fell for a moment. Making Gene roll his eyes. "Tony the Tiger. Emmin-"

"Eman?"

"Whatever." The beast exhaled through his nose loudly. "He said that thinking these things grant power is a-"

"This isn't about Power." The Aatxe growled, once again focusing on the essence. How it nearly lapped at his paw- embraced it. Wanting to become one with the beast.

"Then what?"

"It's about *feeding* him." That black paw strained, resisting to close and accept the bounty dancing in his hand. "Every one I reject and leave behind, He gets-!"

"We don't know that." An angry exhale from the beast as he felt a gentle grasp on his shoulder, as well as the scent of cigarettes grow stronger. Smokes and... Something else. Something more concerning. "Nobody knows what happens to these things on the... 'Other Side'." The Aatxe took a heavy and frustrated breath. "We haven't seen a single sign or appearance of the Digital Shadow since. For all we know, whatever dumb plan he had didn't work and he died." The bull closed his eyes, but they remained illuminated due to the night. Giving off the impression he was staring at the bounty debating. "Gorret, don't fall too far from who you are. Especially when risking these superstitious assumptions."

A few moments later, the large one faintly nodded. Finally rejecting the essence and letting it fade into

what he could only hope was true nothingness, even though his own paw was already missing it's warmth. Taking a deep breath and looking over his partner, those same red flares hiding the Aatxe's worried gaze as he heard the man's inner workings. "Don't look at me like that, you know I'm right." Gene half grumbled.

"I wasn't..." Gorret mumbled, but dropped it.

"*Saaaay* it." Or at least tried to drop it, leaving the black one to exhale loudly. "Come on."

"...Gene, you're always right."

"I am. Keep that in mind." The stick pulled out another cigarette and lit it.

"Did Eman find anything?" A distinct change in the man's heartbeat and tension was detected by Gorret, making him release a grumble as the blonde one sighed.

"It's not that." An inhale and exhale of a thin cloud. "We... Had a little chat earlier. One that made me..." He trailed off, not really knowing how to explain it. But the beast nodded slowly, unable to reveal his slightly saddened gaze to the man. "I've been trying to make sense of that damn device the Shadow left behind, but I've been... Distracted by other things."

As much as Gorret wanted to pry about such things, his instincts caught something else in the air besides smoke. Instantly grabbing his attention and letting out a low growl. "They're persistent tonight, and coming out earlier every day." Gene stated, explaining the strange stench coming off him. "It'll probably be a busy night." The man turned about, but got a sudden strong paw on his shoulder, stopping him. Causing the two to lock eyes for a few moments before the bull spoke.

"...Thank you." A solid nod in return as the stick gave the black hand a few taps.

"That's what I'm here for."

Chapter 3

"Again." The Charr stated rather thickly to the tired woman, watching her give off a signal with a single digit. "You've only done three so far."

"I'm just..." Another few breaths from Leslie. "Not used to it."

"Strange how your body tends to send out exhaustion signals so quickly." Eman stated rather calmly, as he watched the younger one approach the schoolyard fence again. Attempting to climb over it quickly, but didn't get halfway before needing that break again. "Gather some speed first. You're attempting to do this task with as little energy as possible, causing you to fail and spend more recovering and trying again." He coached.

"I'm not as tall as you." She chuckled through her breaths, getting a slight strange look from the large feline; flicking a slightly perked ear.

"Excuses will not reduce the difficulty of this task. The fence does not care about your shortcomings. It is an obstacle." Another chuckle as she tried again, getting over the other side but failing the landing once more. At least there was soft grass on either side, but such a thing was beginning to stain her clothing. "Two more times."

"You said that the last two times."

"And I will count one when you land properly: when your side does not touch the ground." Eman stated, calmly waiting on the opposite side for her to rest up and try again. Observing her movements and witnessing her land well this time. "Good. Two more times."

"Another two?"

"Unless you want to exit the fence the long way; two." The rather smart answer was once again met with a slightly wheezy chuckle, actually making the large one smirk very faintly. Watching her nearly

vault over it and land a bit sloppily. "I see your body is neutralizing the 'Danger' of the situation."

"It doesn't hurt as bad as I expected it would."

"I find it very strange how your species is so terrified of pain." Another strange statement that made her laugh halfway through the last attempt, causing her to need to restart the motion and complete the task. "Has a life of luxury really made you so afraid of work?"

"Not..." A few breaths from the woman as she rested against the chainlink fence for a few moments. "Not everyone. Some people crave it."

"And you're not one of them?"

"The daughter of a police officer, dad always wants me to be safe." No response from the large one. "That's probably over your head, isn't it?"

"Quite."

"Because Charr have no families."

"Not in the sense that you know of; based on blood. But we make our own through our Warbands. Or, what you would likely call Squads or Divisions in your militia. Our... 'Bonds' with one another are similar to the ones you call Families."

"And you don't feel the need to protect them?"

"Not from 4 foot falls." The young woman burst laughing out loud, a mix between his quip and his rather serious tone. "To keep them alive is one thing, but injuries build character. They make you stronger and give you experience." A few more moments as she recovered, collecting her school bag and double taking at his rather serious but curious stare. Making a noise in question, nearly readying herself for a rather blunt statement barely in the form of a question. "Why did you decide to do this?"

"You mean learn how to jump a fence?" He nodded in response, getting her to look at it and put a hand across the top. "I've... Been thinking a lot about what you've been saying."

"About what."

"Everything." She replied, losing a little bit of her cheery mood. "From the way our world works, how our species thinks and such... Many of your suggestions kind of boil down to one thing:"

"Change." He stated rather firmly, getting her to nod.

"Something that's not easy to do." That small smile returned when she looked back at him. "But... You keep telling me that I have a choice in my future."

"You do."

"And... I want to make an improvement of some sorts. Even if it means-"

"Starting small." A chuckle from her.

"To you it may be considered small, a fence has never stopped you!"

"It has never stopped you either." A noise in question from the woman. "It's your idea of the fence that causes you to think it is impossible to pass." The two started walking. "That sheer thought is enough to hold you back like an anchor. This is one reason why I never enjoyed your form of Fahrar."

"You've mentioned that word before... Your form of school?" A solid nod from the large feline.

"Correct." The woman giggled a little bit, getting Eman to flick a perked set of ears at her.

"Spying on how our school systems work as well, are you?"

"It is important to know how a world functions. Let alone a species as impactful as humans." He stated rather bluntly before lightly sighing through his muzzle. "I cannot say I'm impressed."

"Of course not." She nearly teased the beast, the two still getting rather surprised looks from bypassers.

"Why is it that your teachings promote a fear of failure? Especially when failure is how your species adapts and overcomes?" A light hearted chuckle from her. "Your fahrar encourages you to memorize the correct answers and formulas, but from my observations, your minds do not retain that information."

"We remember stuff." Leslie shrugged, trying not to break her composure when those blue eyes narrowed at her. Failing quite terribly at that and releasing a few giggles.

"What were you learning when I first arrived?"

"Oh... Uh, what class?"

"It was your last period before you left." She pondered for a moment, then gave a slightly guilty look that basically proved his point. "What you call The Quadratic Eq-"

"Equation! I almost had it." A loud exhale through that feline muzzle. "How do Charr remember stuff?" The large one adjusted one of the bands on his arm and lifted through some of the fur in his coat. Stopping at a patch that's likely seen better days due to scarring underneath.

"Keep an eye out, be it for your enemies or your warband. Weapons and projectiles harm whatever is in their way." Another scan through the fur in his neck, finding another much larger scar as he kneeled down to give the young woman a closer look. "Trust no one completely. Just because they have the face of a comrade does not mean that they are one. And of course..." The dark orange one motioned for her hand and she lent it, gently guiding it to his chest while giving it a firm press. Feeling the hide leather-like jumpsuit cave into his chest cavity much more than it should have. "You do not get to choose your end. Often what you perceive it to be is merely just a beginning."

She gave a sad smile to the Charr as he stood back up, continuing. "Creatures of all kinds learn from experience. Be it personal, what they witness, but rarely what they are told. It is true that some wisdom can be handed down, but it takes constant use of that information to be memorized. Often replacing it with something else."

"I understand, but this way we get to choose what career to follow by getting a small sample of each one."

"Yet, most of it is mandatory, is it not?" A noise in question from her. "If you do not... 'Pass' a certain subject, you are deemed unfit to join the job market. Even if it was something you do not need to pursue your 'Career'." A small breath from Eman as he gazed off into the distance. "I was never interested in Alchemy or engineering siege weapons. My connection was in the wilds, but I did not specifically need to learn how a trebuchet functions or the recipe to hide poison in drinking waters to become a Scout."

Leslie was about to add something, but a nearby police vehicle caught her eye. One parked in a driveway across the street. "Pause that conversation. I want to talk to my dad real quick." A vocal in

confirmation from the outsider as they carefully crossed the road, Eman staying at the edge of the property and keeping an eye out as the police officer stepped out of the resident's home, greeting his daughter with a bit of surprise, as well as caution when the large feline was inevitably spotted out in the open.

The Charr knew it would eventually come to this, crossing his arms and standing quite tall compared to the rest of them. What was nearly considered a vigilante to them with mysterious motives, not operating by their own laws and creating a strange line between friend and enemy. Especially when his daughter was considered friends with such a creature. However, it slightly surprised the large one when the father casually waved at him, perking the feline's ears a little while returning a very small nod.

Whatever tension was created by the presence of the 'Jesus Cat', what a few people within that law enforcement have nicknamed the Charr, was quickly melted away while the three talked. Overhearing the conversation and dismissing it as not important, Eman studied his surroundings. Now that the Shadow was gone, he didn't really know what would be considered a threat or not. If there was one at all.

His absents was a mess, the Charr knew that. Making tensions and risk to everyone in the city already relatively high, at least to those who are requested to protect it. The creatures have been more daring or they've been getting hungrier. Some of the smaller ones even starting to come out during the late daylight, scavenging not just for corpses, but also waste. Trash cans and dumpsters, attaching pieces of metal and cardboard onto themselves possibly for protection.

Such thoughts were put away for the moment as Eman kept his gaze at an elderly woman over the henge. Struggling with taking in her recently bought groceries while battling with a persistent screen door. Yet, he did not move to aid. Just observed from afar while his ears scanned the surrounding area, catching the tail end of the conversation with the father and daughter as they moved towards the pillar in a jumpsuit. "Dad, this is Eman; the Charr without a name."

Those ears spaded slightly at her teasing tone as the man chuckled. "We've talked about this, if he doesn't have a name, then what is Eman?"

"An Alias for the persistent mindsets where everything should have one." The large feline stated somewhat thickly, but the father didn't take any offense.

"Mr. Invisible, this is my dad: Simon."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." The officer's statement finally caught the attention of those blue eyes,

studying him for a few moments before looking down at Leslie and doing the same with a very- very slight questionable gaze. "I hear that you've been protecting Leslie on her trips home."

"By request, yes."

"And not because of her personality, I get ya." The man teased, getting a double take from the young one as she gave an overdramatic look.

"Dad!"

"Honey, if you're going to introduce me to your boyfriends, then you should've expected this." Simon joked, chuckling at her rather blushing expression before looking at Eman's stonewalled one. No movement whatsoever other than a few twitches of his ears at movement nearby. "No reaction? That's disappointing."

"That's pretty normal for this one." Leslie chuckled, still not getting a reaction as the officer studied him.

"I must say, it's almost surreal to see one of your creature obsessions in the flesh." That actually got the Charr's attention, or at least Simon thought. Spotting those blue discs actually looking past the man and towards his squadcar, the radio inside soon coming to his ear. "Alright, I should look into that. Are you going home soon Les?"

"That's our next stop." A faint nod from the officer as he looked back at the large feline, still as stoic as a statue.

"And I can trust you, right?"

"Whether or not you do will not affect my work, nor will it relieve Leslie of my protection."

"By who's request." The man got rather serious, actually making the younger one uncomfortable. Especially when those inhuman eyes looked to her for an answer. "Hers?" A slightly guilty look from Leslie as the Charr's gaze fixed back to the man's.

"The Aatxe's." A sharp return to the large feline, causing Simon's jaw to stiffen at the answer.

"What does he have to do with my daughter?" He barely asked the beast in a desperate whisper, once again getting no reaction from Eman. "I was hoping to get the answer out of you because she won't tell me."

"And you think there's more to it than she saved his life." The man looked at him half puzzled.

"What do you mean? That thing rescued her, not the other way round..." He looked at the young woman for an explanation, but only seen that guilt of her hiding something. The radio from the squad car once again calling the officer to no avail.

"Simon." The giant feline stated rather sternly, getting his attention again. "You have a job to do. Leslie will be safe under my guard." A long silence that nearly made the youngest one tense, wondering if she should get inbetween the two. Eventually seeing the father close his eyes, caving into the beast's conviction. Gazing at the young woman with a much more worried look.

"You trust him, right?"

"Absolutely." She stated without hesitation. "Not as much as I trust you, but very close."

"So, not at all then." Simon's light-heartedness returned, making her chuckle. However, it was short lived, as the man looked her over a bit sadly. "Are you sure you want to go?"

"Yeah... I feel like I should be there." A slow nod from the father.

"I'll pick you up from school then. Stay out of trouble, okay? No risks."

"No gambits, I know." She hugged her father. "Love you."

"I love you too. Tell your mother that I'll be home after dinner."

"That way when you appear before dinner it makes you look good, gotcha." A faint chuckle and a prideful smirk that his humor was rubbing off, returning the hug and heading to the squad car. Taking one last look at the Charr; still staring calmly down at him. The look in those blue discs gave Simon the feeling that someone was walking on his grave, something he had to shake off once he was out of sight and Les tugging on the beast to get his attention. "Everything okay?" She asked, getting the same look.

Chapter 4

The rain started to peck at his shoddy windows as the black beast laid on his mattresses. Lying awake but barely flicking an ear at the distant rumbles of an oncoming storm. The darkness that his curtains attempted to black out actually triggering the red glow in his eyes as the aatxe stared into space.

It was so real to him. The heat. The roaring of the flames. The sounds of those coats tearing from the bull's grasp. The collapse of the second flooring that sent them both to the first. Giving the beast the advantage over the Shadow as his instincts took over. Replaying the first skull crack in his mind again and again. That same splitting, the squirt of dark fluids and how it stained the surfaces. Trying to make out what the bull was doing through his other senses, whereas the flames were so bright...

And Gorret awoke like he always did. Before he could force his eyes open and see past the blurr. Past the horrid glare of the hot lights and witness once again what the beast had done... What he had done.

You Don't Have To Try Not To Hang Onto Yourself. The words on his walls chanted, long after he tore off the Shadow's final message to his obsession. *It Can't Be Done. And That Is Salvation...* How the aatxe hated it, haunting him every night since. Lingered like the scars upon his body, repeating the mantra over and over again. Begging him to see the reason of it all: *That Is Salvation. To Give Into One's Instincts.*

A deep breath in near frustration as the black one struggled to hold onto his humanity. Swearing it was growing more and more fragile by the passing day, able to tear apart from the very rumbles of thunder that nearly called to him. It was going to be dark out sooner tonight, lifting his head slightly to see the near black clouds through a small space between the curtains. Meaning they would come out sooner, and that the night would prolong.

His ears picked up the sky's growls again, nearly slipping his mind into memory of that place. Remembering the storm vividly and how so many of them were terrified of the light. The fear replacing the coarse atmosphere of his territory and longing for that place once again. As if the bull was homesick for the complete darkness, the comforting black abyss and the silence. Where his instincts ran wild and his nature was no longer held back.

But his humanity was worth holding onto, yes? It's what kept him separate from all the others from that realm, it was the source of his strength... Or was it just a handicap? A limitation that was restraining Gorret's true potential as a hunter. What part of him was really giving him power? (*"Because assuming that such essence gives you power is an even greater error."*) Eman's voice echoed in the black one's head, the quote that resurfaced several months ago on the night the two first met. Though, the statement was not meant for the aatxe... It didn't stop Gorret from questioning its truth.

The beast's gaze shifted back to the painted message, now clawed out from one of his rude awakenings. Still able to read the words hidden within the damage, echoing in his head. What would really happen if he let go? Leslie wanted him to protect people, but they've already started hunting his kind. Now apparently capturing and possibly dissecting them for study... And his instincts were swaying him to hunt them. The ones who harmed the aatxe... For now.

His attention suddenly moved to the doorway, spotting the Charr standing there observing him with a rather cross stare. Creating a bit of an awkward silence after the bull released an instinctual growl. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Not very." Eman bluntly stated. "What were you pondering." It was barely a question, but something Gorret nearly grew to expect from this one. Making him take a deep breath and exhale it through that dark snout. Feeling the pair of blue eyes shift off him and elsewhere, following the feline's eyesight to the damaged wall and causing the aatxe to sigh.

"That was... Out of anger." No response from the outsider. "You would think I would have an easier time to control it, being here for so long."

"Instincts are a difficult thing to maintain." The Charr finally spoke after a few moments. "The more you restrain them, the harder they will fight back." A slow nod from the bull as he gazed over the wall himself, able to still see that message.

"What are you doing here?"

"To tell you that Gene will be a little bit late. He's working on that device that was left under that van a

while back." A concerned look from the black one. "The thing that called the creatures. He's hoping to reverse it, but it's a dangerous thing regardless; working or not." Eman looked towards the curtained window. "I would rather just destroy it, myself."

"...Did you ever find the answers?"

"To that base? Where I tracked them from?" A slow nod as the two stared at each other. "No. Not yet. And I'd rather make sure that I have the correct area before I make a move-"

"**We** make a move." The feline's gaze narrowed as the bull let out a low grumble of anger. "I know they'll have weapons against me, but I can't stop thinking about them. I need to be rid of it, once and for all. Before anyone else gets in the crossfire." No response. "So when you find out what you need, tell me. We'll take it out together."

"...Until then, I'm leaving it be. And so should you, no matter what your instincts tell you." The black beast closed his eyes and released a heavy breath, though those red lights over his vision remained. "Attacking an innocent place will not help your image-"

"And it'll make me look like a threat, I know." A low grumble from the aatxe as he sat up, hearing the floor whail harshly against his weight. "But many of them are not so innocent."

It worried him how he was starting to be able to sense these things, though just slightly more so than the heavy rain making the roads slippery. Bad enough he was riding that bike at a higher speed, but those signals... There were a lot of them. Heavily fuzzy to him, like looking through warped glasses, but Gene could feel their location from afar. All closing in on an area of town... No, the outskirts? Lower class? But that place was recently relocated.

...'Relocated'. That's what the suits called it and gave to the media, but the blonde man knew better. They were not 'relocated' because of some danger, they were evicted. Forced out of their homes probably due to someone else buying out the land. It was enough to make the man-

Run a red light and get honked at loudly, apparently. Having a hard time to see through the rain and wishing he brought some goggles with him. The baseball cap was helping, but not a whole lot against such a harsh storm. Pulling up around the building he was supposed to meet the Aatxe and hear the

beast shout from the rooftop. "**Gene!!**"

"I know! I can feel it too!" The blonde one shouted back. Shielding himself from the pellets of water for a moment. "Head over there! I'll be right behind you!" He couldn't quite tell if the aatxe nodded or not, but Gorret then jumped to a different rooftop. One leading towards where the other signals were being felt. Giving the man a foreboding feeling about all this as he drove down the streets in pursuit.

The rain drenched his fur, but the large feline kept perfectly still. Observing the single floored building from afar, at least on the outside it looked like all one floor. Suspicions of his told a different story though: a basement deep underground, one that connected to an old tunnel that reached out towards the river.

Some wind harshly blew the rain sideways, but still those blue eyes didn't waver. Intensely studying the two guards on the dark porch, rather heavily equipped for just building security. One having a smoke, acting like a laser sight targeting the guard as he was chatting someone up but too far away to make out what it was. The Charr's best bet was to have some sort of diversion. As much as he wanted to set a nearby building on fire, there wasn't one close enough that would alert them. No... He would either have to sneak in or...

Another harsh wind actually made Eman look the other way to shield his eyes for the moment, immediately catching something he could use resting in the corner of the rooftop; on the building beside his residing one. Overlooking it from afar, then back at the pathway towards his target structure. Identifying a large streetlight that might just be sturdy enough...

"Then the footage shows this fucker actually taking the cable to the fucking elevator the crew were going to install the next day, and starts actually using it against Bowmen's guys." The guard scoffed, taking another inhale of his cigar while the other one spit over the railing.

"Fuckin' unreal."

"Yeah, but those assholes had it coming. Fucking jealous though."

"You can't be serious. You seen what it did to his guys. Some of them are literally paste right now."

"That's the beauty of it, dickweed. This thing used a fucking elevator as a weapon! You ever hear of any of them actually taking up arms?"

"I dunno, I've seen a few carry some kind of blades and shit."

"Those are like already attached to them or some horror-shit." Another inhale. "But we just shoot them and they're down. They're fucking animals, but this thing... This thing is like..."

"A monkey?"

"Smarter than that. It's like... Fucking human, and I've always wanted to hunt one."

"You've been watching too many movies. You want to hunt some poor shit?"

"Man, when they've got nothing left to lose, they'll give you one hell of a fight. And I heard there's some island that'll actually let you do that. If I can nab the big guy... That's gonna be one hell of a bonus...!" One last inhale as he tossed the cigar behind him, letting it bounce off of the dry porch floor sheltered from the rain, but didn't step on it to put it out. Letting instead just burn out carelessly. "I gotta piss something fierce. Think it over, I could use a buddy on my hunt."

"We ain't friends, I keep tellin' you that." The first guard went back into the building. "Or you can keep ignoring me and living in your own delusional world, that works." The second guard grumbled, taking a step forwards to look out into the rain for a few minutes of peace and quiet.

Only to soon hear some metal bending and the street light ahead to flicker. The wind blowing harshly as the man in black looked closer, seeing a flash of lightning almost highlight something on the top of the arm along the pole. Getting the guard's face to turn cross and immediately pull out his assault rifle, turning the blacklight on and pointing the purple-light cone towards the figure. Attempting to chase it off with the UV light, even though the rain made it difficult to still make the creature out.

But no sounds. No hisses, growls, or whails of pain. Yet... He could see the thing's eyes, or so he at least thought. With the rifle still drawn, the man made it out into the rain for a closer look. Still trying to focus that light on the figure above, but the heavy rain made it nearly impossible to make anything out aside from... Something metal hitting the lamppost. As much as he wanted to just shoot at it and call it a night, he recalled the last time they ended up firing at some stray monster and got sass for having

several bullets hit a nearby apartment.

Nearly growling at the rain as it blew into his face, the guard took a flashlight from his belt and shined it above the light. No longer seeing any figure atop of it, but something hanging off of it. An old chain, rusted like it's been out in the weather for too long. Lightly drumming against the light's shelter, well one end at least. Taking the flashlight and following the other end straight down the pole and onto the ground beside-

A presence was suddenly felt, causing the man to nearly panic and grab his rifle while turning around, dropping his flashlight in the process and cursing the fact that this weapon's light was so dim! Scanning the area as nothing was seen, he knew what he felt! He swore it was right behind him! ...That it still was-!

Something long and harsh was suddenly wrapped around the guard's neck from behind! Getting him to drop the weapon and try to pry it off, but the creature just had too much strength! Feeling the flexible metal 'rope' squeeze his airway tighter and tighter until it collapsed! His vision starting to fade before feeling a small bit of relief- but only a little!

Then a sudden pull upwards as the chain rattled loudly against the streetlight's metal arm! Pulling the guard's entire body up with it as the opposite end was pulled down! Soon feeling his neck actually break as his vision blur and darken...

The first guard returned back out the door, grumbling at the sudden colder shift in temperature as he bundled up his flack jacket. "Fuck this rain, man. I can't wait to return to the south and leave this shitstain of a state-" The man interrupted himself, now noticing the porch was empty save for his cigar still burning away. Leaning back in the building and giving a shout to those inside. "Hey, did Spoon come back in?"

"Naw, haven't seen him. Why?"

"He ain't here, dillweed."

"Then he's probably out back takin' a piss because you occupy the bathroom like a woman."

"Shut it!" The first guard scoffed, almost slamming the door in response before cursing the rain again. Only for it to start to lighten it's fall, giving the man an eerie feeling as he searched around the building

from the shelter of the porch. Still not seeing anything, but double taking at a metal creek from the streetlight. Looking closer through the somewhat light rain to see... Something on top of it and smirking. "Finally, some quarry..."

The man leaned down with his long rifle and opened the scope for a better look. Taking a moment before finding the streetlight from above, but the creature escaped. Yet... Something was swinging into the light. Something large. Re-adjusting the scope to focus, only to see Spoon's corpse appear in the light's cone from the darkness.

The guard screamed loudly as he scampered backwards, dropping his rifle and causing it to fire into the night. Alerting the men inside even more as they rushed towards the commotion, only to have the lights go completely out. One of the farther away guards pulled up to open a window to the side of the building to see for themselves, leaning out to see something swinging in the distance- only to feel something brace their head in place and slam the window down on their neck. Cracking it loudly and letting the guard yell in pain as he was pulled through the window and got a blade to his skull.

The noise attracted the group of several inside as they rushed back. One arrived at the window sooner before the Charr could climb up to the roofing and fired through the opened window from afar. Witnessing Eman disappear in what almost looked like a small cloud of thick smoke, only for him to appear mid-air at the guard's side and come down with a heavy dropkick of sorts. Striking the man in the chest and sliding on his body for a moment before using that momentum to jump over the others in one fluid motion.

The far back guard, now the one closest to the beast, nearly panicked when he heard Eman land behind him. Whipping around and losing his balance a little, such dumb luck saved him from getting a slash in the belly from the roped dagger but it also made the soldier lose grip of his rifle. Letting the firearm swing from the strap over the man's shoulder as he leaned back, attempting to avoid the dagger's return; this time to his neck. Feeling the blade stop horizontally across his throat, he thought himself saved until a tug pulled him closer. The beast grabbing the rifle with his off-hand and pulled the guard into the blade where it sunk in nearly silently. Just as the others finally discovered where the large feline went and once again one fired.

Yet the creature escaped into the darkness of the room and into the next. Hearing a door get shoved open and one of the guards barked loudly: "He's out the front door!" Motioning them to follow as he led the charge through the darkness, getting a few steps ahead of the others and making his way to the porch steps. Just as the lightning flashed and he seen something large just beside the doorway. Turning around and trying to warn the others, but it was too late: the second guard coming through that door felt the pierce of a blade in his throat in what felt like a fraction of a second.

It felt like time slowed to a crawl as the beast moved in front of the stabbed soldier and hit the man at the top of the steps with a rotating kick; sending him into the gravel hard. Then a forward knee to the soon-deceased man as the blade was ripped out, sending his body back into the line of others. The one directly behind catching the wounded one while the next fired at the Charr. Once again seeing that strange smoke before crashing down heavily onto the soldier in the gravel; that armored kneepad crushing his chest and letting the bonesnaps echo over the rain as the roped dagger was once again raised. The guard's from afar roaring in denial as that same weapon took the life of another.

Tossing the body aside, the men rushed out the doorway in a series of bursts. Losing the beast in the darkness but taking quick sprays around in hopes to either hit the Charr or use the muzzleflash to find him. Running through the entire magazines before taking a pause to reload and exhale in anger. "Any sign of target!?"

"Nothing over here!"

"Nothin-Wait..." One of them called, spotting something glowing in the distant bushes. "What is-!?" An arrow of light shot out at their foot-level, missing all the guards entirely but hitting that lit discarded cigar directly into its still burning ember. Causing a large flash and funnel of flames to explode behind them, not creating a lot of motion in force, but setting the guard's protection on fire.

The wave of heat that flew out into the rain created a cloud of steam around the porch. Though the fires on the men didn't have much to feed off of, it did get them into a panic long enough for the Charr to slip into the fog and cull them one by one. Taking care of any small flames about before heading inside the building and towards the guarded back. Those ears flicking, picking up a presence along the outside walls whimpering while attempting to stay out of sight. But that was okay... Eman wanted a witness, and that spooked sniper would do fine.

Chapter 5

The charr tore open a secret door within the dark room, one leading to a set of closed ones made for an elevator. Prying them opened next led to a dark elevator shaft, the large metal box seen several dozen feet down. Using the cables that held it up, Eman slid down and landed on the elevator softly. Carefully

taking a listen and picking out footsteps along the hallway nearby, waiting for them to pass before finding the emergency trapdoor that leads inside the elevator.

The large feline squeezed inside, but barely. Making a bit of noise in the process and creating a bit of suspicion in one of the sets of footsteps. Lighter than the ones upstairs. Shoes, not boots. Pulling out a roped dagger just in case and staying along the side of the elevator just as they came into view, stepping outside while grabbing their white clothing by the chest. Spinning and nearly throwing them up against the wall while pinning them, bloody dagger at their throat, all in one fluid motion. Staring at a rather chubby faced man who only lifted their hands slowly in surrender as that beast narrowed his blue eyes at him.

Releasing a very quiet growl from his throat before speaking, the charr demanded. "Where are you keeping them." With a shaky hand, the man pointed down the hallway. A moment of study before Eman finally withdrew the blade and let him go. Turning the direction he was led to but keeping the weapon out, able to sense the creatures somewhere nearby as those ears flicked.

"Y-you're...?" The man started, not getting any regard from the large feline. "You're not one of them?" No response as the scientist followed the beast down the hall at a distance. "Are you here to... Rescue them?" That time he got a glance from those blue discs.

"...No." He stated thickly. "I'm here to cull them."

"But you can't-" A whimper when that glance turned into a glare, actually causing the Charr to stop and half turn towards the man as he cowered. "I-I'm no threat to you... Whatever you are. But we worked hard to capture these things!"

"To weaponize them?" Eman barely asked, continuing down the hallway towards a large set of double doors. Ones that were reinforced.

"Weaponize...? What? No, we're trying to study them. To collect data so we can protect ourselves if they attack us."

"Is that what you've been told?" The familiar chittering was getting a tad louder now for the feline.

"Look... These things, they're like a virus to our planet." The scientist took several steps closer, once again stopping when the beast looked at him. "We *need* to study them, to find out how they function. How they-"

"Can be lured." A rather questionable look from the man. "To collect data so we can protect ourselves *if* they attack us."

"What?"

"That's what you said earlier." The large one released a low growl. "You don't even realize that they've already been attacking. Or you do, you just don't see those being targeted as human."

"That's..." The man sighed in remorse. "It's not that, we can't do anything about what happened in the past, but we can prepare for the future. That's why collecting this data is so important."

The stare from those inhuman eyes intensified, as if to piece something together suddenly. (*"And I know when something isn't homemade."*) Gene's voice echoed through his head. (*"This thing... It's a prototype. It honestly looks like it was made in a factory."*) "...What data." The beast barely asked, nearly making the man whimper and take a step back. Turning about fully to face the scientist and demand an answer. **"What. Data."**

"T-the reports f-from the... Uh, Autopsies! W-w-we need to find out what t-they're searching for in... Order to-" A growl from the Charr as he moved to open the armored doors. "Survive-!" Upon doing so, several hideous growls and roars came out as a wall of sound, dozens upon dozens of the creatures were caged up, from big to small. The hallways inbetween were lined with overhead blacklights as Eman walked up to the closest cage. Ripping open the locked door on it, pulling out the squealing small creature, and gutting it with the knife. Hearing the thing cry out in pain before tossing it back into the hallway where the scientist was.

It caused the man to panic to a fall as the beetle-armadillo-like creature struggled to get away, both from the feline and the light. Eventually bleeding out and began deteriorating in a matter of seconds. Within the darkened room, shadowed by the blacklights, were those intense blue eyes. "Autopsies." He growled, still staring at the man with near fury while ignoring the roars and screams from the real threats surrounding him. "This entire time..." The beast growled over the monsters. "I thought it was the Shadow that left those devices that attracted these things. But it was you!"

"N-n-no! I-i-it wasn't-!"

"Then who was it." Eman walked forward heavily. "Who do you work for!?"

"I-I don't know! I don't know where the data comes from, I swear! I-I just!" The feline put away the dagger and pulled out a rod, letting it fold out into its six arched bow. "I don't-!"

"A Name. Give Me A Name-!" The large one's ears suddenly shifted, causing him to look off in a direction behind him. Puzzling the panicked scientist... And then he could start to feel it. Tremors, in a pattern. As if something giant was walking overhead. Making the Charr growl and get impatient, aiming the ranged weapon at the man and pulling back on the threads of light. Hearing the futuristic bow nearly roar with power as charged up. "A Name. Or Your Life." Eman demanded without raising his voice.

"Va... Vatla." A slight noise in question at the man as he surrendered. "Vatla Inc. T-they sign my paychecks." The Tremors continued, one right after another as if counting down to something fierce, yet... Not moving. But the feline didn't stop his aim. "That's all I can tell you! Please!" That gaze narrowed and Eman stayed silent for several moments as a drumming echo was starting to be heard. Suddenly turning about towards the dark room and releasing the shot at the blacklights overhead. The 'arrow' absorbing the same properties as the UV lights before exploding into a bright nova and incinerating all the creatures trapped within the cage in a series of painful roars. "No!!"

"Give 'Vatla' a warning: Do not ever let me catch them collecting these creatures again." The Charr growled, leaving the same way he came in a hurry.

Several Minutes Earlier...

The signal was getting stronger the closer the blonde man got. Attempting to rush towards it like it was calling him, but needing to watch the road closely. Especially in the harsh rain and these terrible old roads, ones that haven't been replaced in a decade. Able to make out growls and roars nearby through the pelting drops, as well as something moving in the darkness towards his direction.

Turning a corner, the headlights from the bike created a cone through the rain. Causing quite a few of the smaller creatures to scatter from it while the black bull entered it, fighting off a few larger ones. Slamming one into the ground before pulling one off his back and tossing it into the darkness. Stepping on the prone one before lifting up and tearing it in half; the arm that ascended being used to backhand another approaching one. Stunning it for a grab as Gene slid the bike to a stop, taking his sword out of the compartment he made with it, and giving the airborne creature a quick slice with that purple wave.

The blonde one approached to help the Aatxe, though getting closer allowed him to see what the headlights displayed: the house ahead literally crawling with dozens of them, attempting to find a way inside. Barely being able to hear children inside occasionally yelping in fright. "Gene!" The man snapped out of it, sensing a nearby danger and barely dodging out of the way of what looked like an organic scytheblade. Taking a few quick slashes at the dark centipede-like creature with a lizard's maw, but it swayed out of the way.

However, upon ducking another swipe, a dumpster flew over the blonde one's head and knocked the creature back. Grabbing the attention of Gene for a moment and seeing the bull recover from the throw, gesturing the house next. "FIND IT!"

"Alright! Don't get overwhelmed!" The man replied, taking a few steps then turning back to Gorret. "Any more than you already are, I mean-"

"GENE!"

"Right!" He rushed up to the deck, cutting a few of them down quickly before trying to open the door. Feeling it locked but sliding something heavy against it from the other side, telling him it was already broken down before. A small creature crawled on his back and Gene rammed his back against the door, causing it to squeal a little and scamper off. Pushing the door just open enough for him to slip through, along with a few claws.

He slammed the barricade against them, getting growls and hisses of pain from the other side, but they were persistent on not letting go. Instead using that power to sever every digit and slam the door shut. "HEY!" The blonde man shouted inside the house, getting a few upset noises of youth. "Hey! I need some help over here!" He started to get some of the furniture to move, but with the creatures badgering the door, it was difficult. That is until the bull came around and drove them away, hearing a few get grabbed and crushed.

It was long enough for Gene to reassemble the barricade and hopefully be enough to keep them out. Taking out his flashlight, which he forgot for a moment was his blacklight, and searching the area. Seeing a poor family of several huddled under the stairs away from the windows. "Hey, I'm Gene." A little boy slowly stepped forward when the man kneeled down. "What's your name?"

"Jeremy."

"Okay, Jeremy... Listen, I know it's really scary right now, but I need you all to keep quiet. Okay?" They nodded, obviously frightened. "Have any of you seen a strange metal box around?"

"N-no."

"Shiny? No words or logos on it. Couple of lights and a switch?" They shook their heads, but he could feel it was around somewhere. "That box is what is calling these things and in order to drive them out, we need to find it. Can you...?" The man stopped himself. He was not just going to ask these children to risk their lives. Instead, he turned the flashlight upwards like a torch and handed it to the boy. "They don't like this light, it'll drive them away. So I want you to take it, and if any of them come your way, I want you to shine it on them. Okay Jeremy?"

The boy was hesitant at first, but he took it. "The button is on the top. Try to keep it off until one of them is near, okay? I've gotta find where that thing is."

"O-okay."

"Stay here and protect them, got it?" With a faint nod barely seen, the man ran up the stairs. Instantly spotting one of the creatures scurrying across the window but along the outside, and hearing the roar of the bull outside doing quite well distracting them. Scanning the room quickly... Gene could feel it, but it wasn't upstairs. Down on the first floor for certain, it had to be... Or was it...?

Below the house? Taking a moment to feel for it, and while coming down the stairs. Following the strange signal towards one of the walls and following it around, it was definitely below the floor. "Hey, kid- erm... Jeremy. Does this house have a basement?" The blonde one could barely see the motion through the darkness, making the adult grumble a bit. "Did they place it under the house...?"

Of course nothing had to be easy for the ashtray for once, and by the sounds of it Gorret was definitely too occupied. The one time Eman had to not be here... Cursing under his breath, he moved to the staircase again with the family. "Okay, listen to me. That box is under the house."

"How can you tell...?" The man frowned at the boy, not really knowing how much he should tell.

"It's hard to explain, but I need to get back outside unless you have some trap door around." He half joked, but getting a serious answer of a head shake. "Means I'll have to get out the old fashioned way. I don't trust the door to stay shut, so I'm going to go out the window, okay Jeremy?" A nervous nod. "I'll use a flare to keep the creatures away, but it won't last long. I need you to close and lock the window after I'm out, okay? Then don't make a sound until I tell you, you got that buddy?"

"Y-yes."

"Okay." Gene reached into his coat and pulled out a home-made flare tube from one of the pockets. He hated these things for how much they stunk while exposed, but he'd deal with it for now. If it meant saving them. Unlocking the window and waiting for one of the creatures to pass by it, flinging it open only for another to hiss and attempt to get in.

Once again the blonde one cursed, stepping back and evading the whip of its weaponized tongue. Punching the thing hard in the snout to distract it long enough to charge up an ethereal blade made from his fingers, Gene cut off a good chunk of its head as it cried out and retreated. Leaving the man to pant for a moment, breaking the flare to ignite it, and tossing it out as it nearly burned his skin.

Creatures outside scattered away from the hissing light, as the blonde one looked at the frightened looks of the people inside the building. No longer seeing the man as a form of help, but one of the monsters outside. Something Gene could not blame them for. "Take care of them." He told the boy before slipping out the window fluidly.

The UV rays still burned what even felt like was through his clothing, as the man quickly searched for an opening under the house. Covered in a cheap cross-wooden fence. Unable to quickly find one from two sides of the building, he gave up searching and made his own. Cutting it before slipping under with the aid of the wet grass, and now realizing just how damn dark it was. Wishing he had a flashlight now, but he could at least still sense it.

Climbing under the structure as if the floorboards were nearly a ladder, he could sense the signals as if they were pulses. Growing louder and louder to the point of deafening, almost being able to physically see it before a large single claw ripped through the wooden fence! Reaching Gene and easily cutting through his long coat and giving his leg a gash, nearly snaring inside his flesh as the man cried in pain. "Gorret!" He called out for backup once, attempting another but found himself in a coughing fit. Throwing another ethereal blade where the wound came from and hearing it cut through the fence easily...

But not the creature. Continuing to climb with a limp as he searched for that signal, almost passing it as it echoed strange pulses. Causing him to crave its source like a hypnosis as it nearly made him forget about the pain. At least he didn't have to stand on the leg for now, though worried about it getting infected and dealing with that hospital bill. Finally finding a dim red light under the home between some boards and prying it out. Feeling around for any type of switch to shut the thing off, and finally it stopped. Giving Gene a sigh of relief... Until a sharp pain in the same leg and he was dragged out-

The armored leg finally caved in under the black bull's hoof, breaking the bone in the shin as he slammed the turtle-like shell into the building. Actually caving in the wall of the abandoned home as the Aatxe pulled the armored creature out for another slam, barely sensing an incoming blade coming from the side. Using the shell as a shield to stop the weaponized limb upon contact without so much as a small gash to the cover.

"Gorret!" He barely heard his partner's voice over his instincts. Parrying the blade to the side, keeping a hold on the 'turtle's' collar with one hand and swinging a backfist. One that the nimble creature ducked under, but didn't manage to get away from the incoming armored one being used as an improvised weapon. Knocking the nimble sloth-looking one away, far enough for Gorret to slam it into paste with the very shell while ignoring the bite from the turtle against the grappling hand.

It's teeth weren't really enough to pierce his hide very far, barely drawing blood as the bull reached inside the opened neckhole. Ignoring the flailing claws of the creature as Gorret struggled to get a good hold from the inside. Eventually roaring and taking hold of the opposing side of the collar, starting to pry it open as the thing cried. Feeling some of its own flesh begin to tear as the armored shell started to split from the sheer power of the beast's raw strength. Giving a slight pause to gather momentum before ripping the shell in sections, breaking the sides where it was most vulnerable while keeping the front and back shields pretty much whole.

With one last pull the shelled creature was torn in two while its inners sprayed in the dark. Thrown down against the previous mess before getting a heavy hoof to its head, adrenaline still surging through his large body that those ears nearly muffled out the desperate cries for help until a painful yell snapped Gorret out of it. Instantly turning his head to the area; the home Gene was inside!

Did they get inside!? The hiss of a flare was detected somewhat nearby, but the light wasn't bright enough to harm the Aatxe. Moving towards it near recklessly as he started to make out the man's voice fighting off one of the creatures and encountering a few of his own in the process. "**Gene!**" The black beast roared at him, trying to signal out where the walking ashtray was, unable to even smell him in the heavy rain.

Throwing aside the medium sized creatures as they growled at the bull's lack of attention towards them, he moved around the home to follow the sounds of struggle. Thinking maybe he could grab a hold of the one that got in through the wall, but it was... Outside? The man was outside? Just about when Gorret was about to turn the corner to find them...

It was a sound he knew that would haunt him for the rest of his life, swearing it stopped the very rain for several years under Gene's shallow gasps. Hearing the claws pierce his tainted lungs and denying the man one last call for help. For once during the dark, the Aatxe opened his eyes to witness what his other

senses told him: that centipede creature pulling out of the blonde one. Taking something glowing out of his very chest.

Shock turned into rage. Filthy and unguided as the Aatxe released his own roar that nearly deafened the very city, actually getting the attention of the insect before it could claim it's bounty. Barely avoiding the sudden lunge of the bull's and the wild swing that tore through the very wall of the house; the only thing that saved it from being decapitated by such unreal strength.

As that limb started to accept the essence, it was suddenly taken hold of by a black paw with the gripping force of a thousand mechanical vices. Literally crushing with it's sheer grip before the other hand struck the centipede, causing that limb to be ripped off in the process. Preventing the insect's claim as it scampered away from the blow, feeling the warmth of Gene's light rest on that black paw. Causing the Aatxe to stare at it in conflict, barely seeing the man's body over its faint light.

Only for it to be snatched away by something smaller, instantly becoming the target of the bull's rage and barely escaping the first leaping slam to cut off the crab-like critter. Attempting to escape under a nearby dumpster and scurry to the other side, but it was easily tossed aside. Given no time for another escape plan before it was executed by a black fist, once again just barely retrieving his friend's essence.

Once again, Gorret took a moment to look it over. Roaring in emotional agony as he accepted Gene's bounty; his very first. Still seething with rage as growls left that black muzzle, those red glowing eyes looking at the dozen creatures as they cowered at such a sight. Barely being able to sense the ethereal blades coming off his claws as they flexed with intensity.

The Aatxe Would Deal With Them.

Every Last One Of Them.

And One More; One That Left A Trail Of Blood Behind...

Chapter 6

Painful cries and whails echoed in the distance, actually breaking the sounds of thunder and heavy rain. Further encouraging the centipede to scamper away along the abandoned railroad tracks, hoping that the strange falling waters would somehow cover the scent of his wound.

The damn thing ached but it was just an arm; one out of a dozen. And it wasn't even a good one either, just a simple spike it claimed out of some lowly scavenger. Easily replaced, not like it was the heavy scytheblade along its other side. Making the insect wonder if it could've taken that beast down with just one good sweep of it-

A dark chill ran down the creature's spine as some thunder rolled overhead. Now realizing just how quiet it got from a distance. That bull... It couldn't have dealt with all of those creatures already, could it? The centipede actually pausing its escape for a moment to scan the area, swearing it was receiving mixed signals... Swearing something was out there, watching it.

It was just the rain and this... Damn storm. It had to be. Continuing towards the train cars that seemed mostly abandoned save for a few natives to this land. Ones its kin have already picked clean, so it was unlikely the creature would find a replacement limb here. Not like these things had anything of value, but that strange multi-digit claw at the end of their arms could prove useful-

A sudden heavy landing nearby got the insect to crouch and flatten itself along the ground, nearly fitting perfectly between the two rails along the tracks. Its hearts racing with near fear as it detected the beast's heavy breathing. It was... Just a single bounty. How could the centipede enrage such a creature? Surely it was outside of the Aatxe's territory by now.

Maybe just a little further. Slowly crawling under one of the train cars made for large cargo, keeping it's pulse faint and it's movements gentle. Granted, the large blade attached to its arm was making the task a bit more difficult. Swearing those large black ears were twitching from every faint contact it had with the rails, even under the heavy rain.

One step caused that scythe to omit a slight scratch, causing the beast to growl loudly and the insect to completely stop. Following the heavy hoofsteps and relaxing a little when they began to move away. It didn't detect the centipede, and as long as it remained completely still, it could escape. It could live another day-

Only for that entire train car's side to be lifted up and fall over, exposing the creature as it raised with an upward slash of that heavy bladed limb! The very tip of it nearly connecting to one of those devilish eyes as that black paw gripped the scythe tightly! Instantly causing it to stop, but not without wounding it! Smelling the blood come off of the dreadnaught of a limb and forcing the centipede to stare directly into the gaze of vengeance.

Tighter and tighter that black paw became, as the insect struggled to break free from it's hold. Attacking the bull with it's other smaller limbs, but unable to get through that thick hide! The organic-metal starting to warp as the creature whimpered in denial, the nerves through that deadly appendage signaling fainter and fainter until all at once it erupted in a sharp pain! The blade shattering in the black vice that was the beast's paw!

Its instincts to crouch with the wound saved its life as the now disarmed blade was transferred to the Aatxe's control. Slashing at the insect's head but only managing to cut off the antennae. Once again aiming some of the weaker claws at those glowing eyes but they were blocked, caught, and ripped off with unreal strength! Hissing loudly, its main body pushed down to the ground where it scampered away between two train cars.

The black beast was heard grabbing one end of a car and slamming it into the other; attempting to crush the centipede in the process and barely escaping such a demise. Slowing the creature's escape just enough for the bull to wildly swing at the air, creating a purple blade that cut through the metal boxes and severed a few legs of the insect's, as well as a bit of it's rear end.

A deep wound, but not unsurvivable! Using the low and tight spaces to crawl through to aid in it's escape between the cars as they were thrown aside near effortlessly! Suddenly no longer detecting those hoofsteps before they crashed down onto one of the containers, and pinning the insect underneath! Trying to hold back the hiss of pain that shot through its spine, a heavy pinch as it's nerves were completely cut off...

Until that car was lifted and tossed aside, now allowing that pain to echo through the centipede's body as it attempted to crawl away. Detecting a heavy stomp to snare the creature in place, but only for a moment as a black paw flipped the creature over. Forcing it to look at those red glows once again as a hoof pinned it down...

And the bull started ripping off it's legs. One by one. Regardless of it's cries. Regardless of its attacks. Regardless of the wounds the insect made, the Aatxe just made a new one. Moving from limb to limb until there was none left. Taking the near seizing insect by its upper half and slamming it against the back of a train car. Forcing it to stare with what little consciousness the worm had left; the enraged face of it's hunter.

...Then the Aatxe pushed the car away. Dropping the insect on the opened railway and turned around. Walking away heavily as the worm struggled to get up. Mercy...? The creature didn't question it, limping itself along the ground and attempting to possibly escape. Only to hear the bull grab a train car by the end, swing it up overhead, and roar.

Slam!

("Now that's just creepy. What are you doing up here listening to me sing?")

Slam!

("Four Years.")

("Huh?")

("That will kill you in four years from now if you keep smoking them.")

("Eh, not like I'll be missing too much anyway.")

Slam!

You Can't Hang Onto Yourself.

Slam!

("You can't do it alone. Not without drastic measures.")

Slam!

("If you can't keep your five virtues straight, who will?")

Slam!

You Don't Have To Try Not To Hang Onto Yourself.

Slam!

("And it only takes a moment to make a mistake.")

Slam!

("So I'm going to die.")

("Not any sooner than you were expected to.")

Slam!

It Can't Be Done...

Slam!

("Are you going to be okay here alone then?")

Slam!

("Don't do it.")

("Why shouldn't I.")

("Because it's a bad road to go down, man.")

Slam!

And That Is...

Slam!

"Hey!"

Slam!

Salvation.

Slam!

"Stop! It's Dead!"

Slam!

("Don't fall too far from who you are.")

Slam!

A paw against his black shoulder half snapped the Aatxe out of it, but not out of his wrath. Just shaking it off and swinging the heavily damaged train car along the opposite side of the charr, then slamming it overhead where the dark stain was. Winding up for another as the bull roared in rage. **"GORRET-!!"** The last slam screeched as the overhead arch sent off a large purple wave overhead, dividing the very storm overhead and wounding the clouds. Stopping the rain and letting the sharp light of the moon shine through, the very display causing Eman to step back twice. Recognizing the power.

The heavy silence fell over them, as if stopping time itself. Bringing the Aatxe out of his instinct and finally listen to his burning muscles. Too stiff for him to even collapse, forcing him to only breathe heavily for several moments as that blue gaze looked over him. Then turned to track where Gorret came from. Without a single word, as if the Charr knew what had happened.

Chapter 7

Approaching the now abandoned homes was like entering a warzone, something the Charr had a lot of past experience with. Even when the rain nearly flooded the area with its downpour, it was painfully obvious where each target was nearly eviscerated. Large black spots like spilled oil were still slowly disappearing, something that always seemed to speed up when opened to the light.

Including the moonlight now overhead. It made scanning the area easier, but it also burned away evidence. Some faster than others, while gashes in the structures would remain permanent. Wide, much larger than what Gene would make. Made in sets of three vs the blonde one's four main digits. Meaning Gorret obtained his power here.

It didn't take long for Eman to find the body of his comrade laying next to a home. Already stripped of weapon, hat, jacket, and boots. Beginning to slowly deteriorate the same way the other creatures do, but many tracks of other humans surrounded him. Likely scavenging what they could find from the lives those the malefactors have taken.

A kneel closer to the remains as the feline studied it, looking slightly remorseful. The large leg wound that nearly made the pants useless, explaining why they were not taken and likely searched through and left behind. The wound was large, caused by that of a large blade or hook. A closer inspection... It was two cuts; one dragged from the opening of the other.

But the stabs in the torso was the finishing blow. Following the blood underneath the house made the Charr a bit puzzled. His ears flicking off to the side as he detected something getting closer, hiding from sight. Small... Frail... Human. "Come About." Eman called in the direction, hearing a faint whimper of fear. "I'm not one of them. I won't harm you."

It took a few moments for the small boy to peek around the corner, barely seeing those blue eyes glance at him in the medium distance. Though a gesture from the crouched feline to come closer, his larger body nearly hiding that of the fallen one. "What happened here." The Charr nearly demanded softly, waiting patiently for a response.

"T-there was... Something..." A very faint motion towards the crossed fence that walled the underneath.

"A monster?" The boy shook his head.

"A box."

"A box...?" Eman repeated, nearly growling when he understood. The battleground made more sense now. "One that called them." A frightful noise in agreement as the child looked sadly through the large one.

"He..."

"Tried to help." Another nod as the boy nearly teared up, hearing the beast sigh through that muzzle as Eman stepped closer to the hole. Laying down in the grass and overlooking the area in the dark. Reaching inside quite a ways to take a hold of the 'box' and bring it out. Studying its near flawless shape and nearly hearing that voice again: *"It honestly looks like it was made in a factory."*

"Did...?" The boy's voice didn't interrupt the feline's thoughts. "You know...?"

"Gene. Yes." Eman sighed through that muzzle, not seeing any logo printed over the device to confirm what the scientist told him. "We were comrades."

"He gave me..." Those ears flicked in the direction as the child showed him the flashlight. "I didn't steal it." Those cat-like eyes looked over the portable blacklight. "You should have it."

"I do not need it." The large one replied, slowly but bluntly. "Go home. Use it to keep your family safe." A sad look from the young one that made the Charr take a breath. "Let me look around a little more, and I'll guard your family until daylight-" A sudden hug from the boy made the large one grumble with discomfort. Emotional, not physical.

The storm repaired itself before too long, allowing the rain to continue over the city. Making it dark enough for him to observe from afar on top of a building, out of sight from those attending in the graveyard. Dressed in dark as he was, as if the bull was destined to attend such an event.

He couldn't quite make out what they were saying over the noise of the cars passing by, but he could guess. Old memories of too many funerals for others flooded back in jagged shards, be it old comrades or even his own parents. Ones that seemed so faceless when he attempted to piece them together, it has just been too long.

And now it was Gorret's turn. Well, Curtis Rhyans. His wife Zoe. His children; Heleen and Zack. Even if they did leave him so long ago, longer than they've been gone from this world. This event was for them; the ones down there. The beast already had decades to himself to grieve over his family.

However, for the Aatxe it was still a time for mourning. Still numb from the aftermath of the previous night's events, even though a large portion of it was vacant in his memory. Still occasionally hearing Gene call out his name for support, causing those black ears to flick in real time, as if the beast was still living in that moment. That the blonde one was still just a few dozen feet away from Gorret. That his comrade was just around that corner and he needed to act, to provide backup, to save his friend's life.

And now, within a single moment, one of his very few ties with his humanity was severed. He didn't know what to think or feel anymore, being so long for the bull since he lost someone he cared about. And now he was once again vulnerable; able to lose those around him that have grown close to the dark creature. The question was... Who would be taken next?

Such a thought actually struck his chest and paralyzed him, not flinching in the slightest when the black one heard the Charr softly land on the same roof. Pausing for a moment before moving to the aatxe's side and leaning down with him. Staring in the same direction. Waiting silently in the rain before finally speaking up. "...Such events always eluded me."

"...Funerals?" A noise in confirmation from Eman.

"Along with their concepts of grief. Their attachments to remains and wanting them to be glorified, their stories written in stone to better weather the tests of time." No response from Gorret. "Vengeance, I can understand. Especially if it was one that was cared deeply about. Past that is beyond me, but I've

even seen some Charr begin to do such a thing."

"...You don't want to be remembered?"

"No." The large feline stated. "I don't want people to know where I came from or what my favorite color was. I want my actions to be immortalized. I want people to remember not who I was, but what I did. And if they can forget who even accomplished such a thing, all the better."

"What do you mean?"

"Who invented the Wheel on your planet?" A stare in question from the bull as the feline examined the funeral from afar. "Who thought of shelter? Be it hiding in a cave or even the concept of making your own roof elsewhere? These actions changed the course of human history and how they lived. They were not specifically necessary for survival, but they drastically altered the lives of even those today. To be without them is considered a form of Poverty." Those blue eyes gazed at the Aatxe's orange ones. "I am not looking for fame or recognition, Gorret. I'm looking for Change. And I couldn't care less about how that would be written in their history, so long as it makes a difference."

The Charr turned about, placing a paw on that large black shoulder. "Do what you feel you need to. You were one of them after all. But there is still a lot of work to be done." No response. "Would you like me to inform her?"

"Leslie?" A solid nod from the large feline. "She shouldn't."

"She is going to realize it sooner or later, Gorret." With a heavy sigh, taking a moment before the bull nodded faintly in response. As Eman left, he focused his orange gaze on the cemetery in the distance. Attempting to discover what it was he needed to get through this...

It was a little bit easier on her, knowing that at least one of them was still alive. Even if the young woman's neighbor took a different form now. However, there was still the case of the other three. While everyone else still had this uncertainty about their fate, being missing... Leslie knew the truth. But on the drive back, she couldn't help but feel there was still something off about the day. Blaming it on the

funeral, she just had this bad feeling all night. Swearing she could fall asleep in the back of the car while her parents talked in the front. Staring out the window as it continued to rain, swearing she just seen someone with Gene's coat walking around.

At least he was still alive. That only left Eman, still feeling a tad uneasy from his and Simon's standoff the other day. Knowing there was tension between them, like they were hiding some secret that the other one knew about. Nearly shattering her hopes of the Charr and Gorret actually finding more human friends, as naive as it sounded. Not everybody viewed 'Monsters' like she did.

In many ways, Les could understand that. It made sense for them to be afraid of anything remotely alien, from the media and stories from the past, to the so-called 'misdeeds' they may perform. And she did fear some of them... Especially the ones that lurk in the dark. As fascinated as she was of them, some part of her naturally feared them as well.

Yet, there were rare others out there too who were just trying to survive or defending themselves. After spending time learning about what Gorret sees and how his instincts react, Leslie started seeing it in many other creatures too. Territorial, thrown into a different world with a blinding light. Both in the day and at night. Making it difficult to hide from such a thing as they scavenge for resources.

...And the most haunting fact of all: that every one of them used to be human. Or at least some sort of intelligent being. Possibly. That was the case for Curtis and his family in any case, but does that mean that the rest were...? And would it be possible for them to regain their humanity as well? To tame those instincts...?

The wildcard to all of this was Eman. Literally an off-worlder to this place with an unclear motive. As much as she disliked speaking ill about the Charr she's gotten quite close to, the young woman still didn't know what exactly he wants. Something about helping the planet that called him here? It hardly made any sense to her, vague and near cryptic as he always was. For now, he was a friend. Both to her, Gene, and Gorret. Who could honestly use as many friends right now as possible.

As the car pulled into the driveway, Leslie's mother gasped loudly at the orange furred beast she was just thinking about. Standing next to their porchway and waiting patiently for Simon to park the vehicle. "It's okay, mom. He's a friend." She assured her, knowing quite well the caution the older woman was likely experiencing. Almost not believing her daughter and wanting to stop her from opening the door. "Hey-" It was then she noticed it: something off from his expression. Subtle, but it was there...

Les stiffened her jaw, trying to be strong as she barely asked the Charr. "Who was it?" Those blue eyes locked onto her, strong willed and focused even when the father got out of the car slowly.

"Gene." That weakened her a little, nodding as some of that strength was fractured more with time and she took a breath. Still not approaching the large beast.

"...How bad is he?" Still no change from Eman as he nearly studied her. Knowing quite well the signs her species would go through. Not showing such signals himself and able to deliver such a report like the ten thousand times beforehand, only for this one to be the most difficult.

"...He was KIA [Killed In Action]." There was a delay in Leslie's expression as he waited patiently for it to morph. To twist in near pain and her eyes wet, turn red in reflex. Finally shattering that strength as she rushed towards the creature to embrace it, a monster in the eyes of her parents. One that was now returning the gesture as he kneeled, his ears flicking towards Simon's curse. Coming around the car as Eman picked up his daughter and passed the crying young woman on. Though accepting the transfer, Les kept a hold onto the Charr, silently asking him not to leave.

Chapter 8

There was a strange sense of belonging after the cemetery was vacant, of both visitors and caretakers. Taking the day off early as the heavy rain continued to pour, making the late evening darker than it really should've been. Camouflaging the black bull as he made his way through what seemed like an endless path of gravestones. Some names he recognized, but only partially. Be it first or surnames that seemed to have a glimmer of a memory, likely reminding him of someone else he used to know.

He should've been buried here, barely recalling spending most of his life in this city. Instead he was trapped in a strange form of afterlife, where he wandered the streets he used to protect as a black

monster of sorts. Destructive. Territorial. Aggressive by nature, and guided by a violent instinct. With every step he took, cracking the very thing he grew up on. What he spent most of his previous life trying to protect, able to be shattered from the sheer act of moving.

This was a Hell, he thought as he approached the tombstone with a few names on it. A punishment of sorts for something the Aatxe did wrong... Even with his memory fractured, Gorret could still come up with several reasons. Wrongdoings, sins, misconducts that he committed or did not react fast enough to. And they paid the price, while he is still left paying his.

You Can't Hang Onto Yourself. Again, the words haunted him. *You Don't Have To Try Not To Hang Onto Yourself. It Can't Be Done.* Was it true? This entire time, ever since the bull regained even the slightest thread of his humanity back, he's struggled so hard to hold onto it. Was it really worth all this torment? Should he just leave everything Human behind here to be buried where it belonged? Step foot outside of this graveyard as Gorret and nothing else? As a beast, and not-?

"Curtis?" The black one's heart suddenly skipped a beat, nearly twisting along with his very body as the familiar voice of Leslie could be heard in an echo of sorts. Those solid red eyes scanning every inch of the vacant darkness, once again finding himself completely alone. Ears flicking while catching voices of the past... His past. Looking down at the list of names once again, able to hear every one of them call the bull many different things. "Buddy." "Partner." "Dad." "Father." "Pop." "Old Man." Making him smile sadly, knowing very well it was a joke. "Honey." "Dear." "Love."

...His chest hurt. Far more than it ever had, as the shards slid into place and he could see their smiles. Not quite their eyes, left out of focus as he stared at their names for what felt like hours... Then shifted up to his own. Tightening his jaw and making a fist as he read it again and again.

It didn't belong here.

The glass doors pushed open a little hard as the officer brought a box from the front door. Walking up to the front desk and being greeted by a man behind it. "From the Evidence Locker?"

"Up on Tampa, yeah. Which room did it go to?" Getting pointed directly down the hall from the front doors.

"The one beside Officer Rhyans."

"Curtis Rhyans?" The younger man behind the desk nodded. "He still has an office? Didn't he...?"

"Until tomorrow, yeah. There was a rumor he was just in Witness Protection, but..." A noise in confirmation as he grabbed the box and headed down the hall. Spotting the plaque with the name just below the window on the wooden door, leaving a few officers still working late a bit uneasy still seeing it. Stopping in front of the door for a moment before entering the one beside, and placing the delivered box down in front of another. Nodding while he was on the phone, recognizing what it was.

Regardless, the man turned about, gazing at the haunting name once more before finally heading home. Turning to the glass double doors and... Swearing he spotted something move in the darkness just ahead, as well as a pair of something red. Only to spot those very glass doors explode inwards as a large slab of rock was thrown into the police station. Barely missing the evading officer as the stone crashed into Rhyans door; doing almost nothing to stop it's momentum and leaving it all to the wall and desk inside.

Several people came out to witness the damage and see if anyone needed medical attention, before spotting something large in the darkness. A few drew their firearms as the tall beast remained in the shadows for several moments before turning about and leaving. Letting a few to look inside the late officer's room and spotting a ripped out Tombstone. The name Curtis Rhyans clawed out while the rest of his family remained.

The man walked out of the bathroom, being greeted by the cool AC air that was even more refreshing with his damp skin. Taking his towel and putting it in a nearby laundry basket to be taken care of later. Nearly jumping when his wife snuck into the bathroom for her own evening shower, chuckling at his reaction. "Everything okay, Simon?" She teased, though there was still something heavy in her voice.

"Yeah. Something's just..." He paused trying to think of the right words. "Something's off, I just can't tell what it is." The older woman nodded, coming back out and giving the man a loving embrace. "It felt like I lost a lot of people today, y'know. And it's like something is still... Yet to come."

"I know... I'll admit I wasn't a big fan of Gene myself, but he did come in handy from time to time."

"He left bad first impressions."

"And the worst smells on the chairs. Seriously, two bottles of Febreze to get it out-!"

"Over three days, I know. You were so worried that we might have to replace the living room set to get it out." They shared a small chuckle and Simon sighed heavily. "He was a good friend though, Margret."

"I know, love... I know." She stroked his face and they hugged again.

"...That perfume is super strong."

"It really is." Margret gave him a few taps. "Now, I'm going to rinse it off. Try to relax for the evening."

"I will."

"Says the person who's still keeping his firearm harness on." A playful eyeroll from the male. "*After* a shower, I might add."

"Okay, okay. In you go." A small yelp as he lifted her and placed the woman into the room. Giving her a kiss before closing the door and heading to the kitchen. Taking a heavy moment to breathe before getting a beer out of the fridge. Turning about while closing the door-

And he heard something snap. Like a large piece of wood with some broken glass. Not from his house, but... The Rhyans'? Placing the can down on the counter and quietly pulling out the firearm. Resting his finger on the safety as he moved out the back door...

She tried to work, but the loss of her friend was just too heavy on her. For months, Les knew about Curtis and his family, but one of them was still kind of alive in a strange way. So the funeral itself was a little easier on her, even swearing she spotted the black bull on a building in the distance.

But Gene...? It was coming, she knew that. Everyone did. But deep down, she didn't expect it so

suddenly. His passing was so far into the future; a few years from now, but not today. A few months from now, but not today. A few weeks...

She felt foolish, never once thinking that he would be killed by the creatures they hunted. That's not how these stories end. Though absolutely terrified of the idea, some part of her wondered how it happened, wondering what he was trying to do. If he was trying to protect Gorret, or perhaps someone else? Did he die a hero? And most importantly... Would anyone even remember? Would anyone even care?

Leslie bitterly looked out her window at the city, wondering just how much of it was worth saving. Worth Gene's life. Worth Gorret's life- her own father's. Some part of her just wanted it to be swallowed up by the darkness after it was evacuated, because the creatures that came out at night weren't the only monsters out there. The streets themselves have been plagued with them for years.

...Eman's perspective was rubbing off on her. It was fun to get a different perspective from an outsider for a while, but she never expected her to become so... Disillusioned by it. Leaving her to really question just how 'Good' humanity as a whole really was, especially after dividing themselves up for so long.

Hunger struck her, not feeling like eating for what felt like days. As much as the young woman didn't really feel like eating, she knew everyone would want her to. It was the healthy thing to do, getting up and listening for her parents, not wanting them to see her eyes red like this. Hearing the vent from the main bathroom still going, but nothing else. Odds are her father was having his nightly drink before bed, meaning maybe the kitchen faucet would be cleared enough to clean herself in. She did so, slightly reluctantly so as the young woman made her way to the vacant kitchen to wash her face-

...Something was wrong. No sounds from the TV. The back door was open. And something... Was pulling her. Getting Leslie to carefully make her way to the door and really listen for anything. Swearing she could feel something around... Something familiar yet different. "Freeze!" She suddenly heard her father's voice coming from the Rhys residence! Followed by...

Gorret's growl. Making her heart stop but suddenly fill with Adrenaline! Rushing towards the wooden fence and climbing over it with relative ease as she spotted her father in the darkness, holding a flashlight shining into a large broken down door. As well as the heavy footsteps of the bull. "I said Freeze!"

"Dad!" A sudden curse as the man took a step back, still aiming at the bull. Finally getting his head out of the doorframe and looking over at the young woman as she rushed inbetween them; covering the beast. "Don't shoot-!"

"Leslie! What the hell are you doing!?" Both males seemed to growl at the same time.

"This is no time to be friends with these things-!"

"Dad! Stop!"

"Les..." Gorret growled at her, feeling the small hand on his chest then snout.

"Dad... This is Curtis."