

Afterlife Act 5 - What's Left Of Me

By Bartan Tirix

Another siren blazed loudly as the car raced by, adding its alerting wail to the dozens of others on the constant search. Gunshots echoed through the city, along with the constant battlecries of officers who encountered the night horrors that littered throughout. At the top of some apartment buildings was the Aatxe, watching it all unfold: a war in the streets between what felt like his past and present. A war he caused.

And Gorret never felt so... **DUMB**. Of Course throwing his family's tombstone into the city's Police HQ was like throwing a rock at a hornet's nest! Now they were sent out looking for the vandal and risking their own lives to search for him; stumbling into other monsters lurking in the dark alleys and shaded streets. All for what? Because he wanted to make a dramatic reveal that He Wasn't Dead? A note would have sufficed! Stepping out of the shadows or talking to a reporter would've done the job, buuuuut no. His wrath and more primal instincts got the better of him. Instead the Aatxe ripped out his family's gravestone, crossed out his own name, and threw it into a building like a parcel deliverer trying to get fired!

He placed a large paw over his glowing red eyes, keeping still as he heard some whispers a couple of floors below. A mother hissing at her child from looking out the window as another car raced by. If anything... The law enforcement definitely know that there's a large threat within the city when things go dark. But for now, the black beast needed to lay low. Turning around made enough of a heavy step for that same child to yelp and scamper away from the window. If they stay inside, they should remain safe. For anyone stuck outside during this dark rainy evening...

At the moment, the smartest thing for Gorret to do is to fallback and stay out of sight until the search dies down. Preventing any encounters with the armed officers, worried that he would be forced to harm them or worse. Though his muzzle caught the scent of something near the Aatxe's hideout; instantly making him growl as the armadillo-like dark insect scanned the air with its antenna. Detecting the large bull even mid-fall and curling up into a ball, surrounded on all sides by its spiked armor.

Though a few of those thorns were broken by the heavy hoof from above, the small car-sized creature somehow supported Gorret's heavy weight! Keeping the armored shell intact as he rebalanced and hit the ground with a slam. Cracking the old pavement even further and

released a snort, until spotting the thing trying to roll away.

Those primal instincts kicked in once more, lunging after the armored sphere and grabbing part of the armored plate. Getting enough of a hold to slam the critter on the ground, but it still remained intact. Another growl as Gorret slammed it a few more times before an overhead slam directly behind where the bull was facing before. Making an entire pothole in the pavement easily a foot deep... Yet, the thing still remained intact.

Anger got the best of him as the beast threw the armored bug against a building's far wall. Watching it bounce off it very faintly before starting to roll away, somehow. But it made the Aatxe furious, leaping after the thing and slamming the spiked shell with both fists! Actually cracking it just enough for the beast to grab hold of it and attempt to rip a section off. Taking a lot more effort than the bull expected, only making him more temperamental!

A loud roar from the black beast as a large plate of the armor was ripped off, making the creature squeal loudly in pain. Unexpectedly though, the armadillo-insect quickly unfolded out of the ball and stung the bull into his exposed side with its abdomen! Actually getting through Gorret's thick skin where he growled in pain... But that only made him more furious.

A second sting was interrupted by the bull's grab against the bug's lower half, keeping a firm grip as he swung the thing by its back end into the wall; making it hit the concrete with its softer underside and stunning it. Enough for Gorret's other hand to grab its other end, fighting against the armadillo's instinct to curl forwards as the beast pulled back. Eventually swinging it over his horns and breaking the creature's spine using the black one's own broad neck!

Several snaps and cracks were heard as the thing nearly screamed in pain, moving what appendages it could to lash out against the hold. Soon thrown to the ground- exposed side down, as a heavy stomp was felt on its armored back; right in the middle where the injured spine hurt the worst. Then another set of grabs from both ends, forcefully pulled upwards despite the creature's cries. Being deafened by the angry calls of the aatxe before being ripped into three parts.

Throwing the two sections of its body onto the ground with the third, Gorret growled heavily as his anger subsided. Only to begin feeling a bit lightheaded, soon holding where he got stung and prying out a stinger of sorts from the swollen bulge. Feeling his body begin to leak from the wound left behind, one caused by unnecessary wrath on a creature that was only trying to flee.

Yet, the thought made the beast snort as he turned about and headed back into his makeshift home. That thing was in his territory, it trespassed and deserved its demise. Leaving behind the glow of its bounty, rejecting it as he almost always did... But not without looking

back at it, almost craving its warmth and essence. Having the taste once recently...

Gorret watched it until the glow faded, finding himself breathing heavier than expected as the beast made his way inside. He used a decent amount of energy taking that out, but nothing that should make him feel like this. Opening the double door and closing it behind him, detecting some sirens in the background that sounded... Warped. And losing his sense of perspective, unable to tell how far away they were. "Do you ever wonder what happens to-?"

A loud roar from the black beast as he swung an arm towards the unfamiliar voice! Instantly panting with an intense anger as he scanned the darkness, eventually spotting a pair of eyes. A yellow-green with a very faint glow at the upper corner of the stairs, pulsing irrationally like an old lightbulb at the end of its lifespan. Not moving towards or away from the Aatxe, just watching it as the black bull attempted to regain its bearings.

Only to finally connect where he seen them before! Instantly identifying the gaze as a threat- or worse; a challenge! Letting out another roar as the beast leapt at the stairway and drove his fist through the hard wall. "Hey, hey, hey." The vocals came from down below, but echoed oddly through the building. "Relax buddy. No need to tear down your hideout."

Turning about and growling loudly was more than enough to make Gorret dizzy. Staggering and needing to use the concrete wall to maintain his balance as he searched through the low light, usually able to see through the darkness with ease. Yet, right now it felt foggy and all he could make out were those eyes, creating duplicates of itself. Shifting around in circles while still studying the beast from afar. "I ain't here to hurt you."

It made the bull snarl as he attempted to get up, easily losing balance and attempting to place his weight on a railing that couldn't support it. Causing it to bend incredibly easily and force the aatxe to fall onto the makeshift table below. Splitting it into fractions while sending some of the CD cases owned by the young girl scattering.

The fall itself didn't harm Gorret, but the venom in his system made his body feel incredibly heavy. Feeling something slide against his head and attempting to look towards it, causing his snout to hit a few buttons on the small CD player and get it to start. The muffled volume of harsh music echoing off the walls, unable to tell if it was due to the antique player being damaged or the bull's current state of mind.

"Easy now..." The beast slowly started to get up, even though it felt like the room was tilted. His body started to burn up and panting at the adrenaline pumping through those veins, swearing it was only making it worse as the voice approached him. "Take it easy, I'm not here to-" When it felt like the vocals were an inch away from his ear, Gorret swung an arm at the intruder. Feeling it connect and actually grasp something- a body! Slamming it into the ground!

Where it seemed to sink inside the floor, getting no other feedback than his fist slamming the concrete. Unable to observe it with his black body twisted, attempting to stand up only made his condition worse. Stumbling into the corner underneath the stairs, looking up to see those eyes again nearly standing on the ceiling. "Seriously buddy, I just wanna talk. Nothing else." A growl in response. "I ain't a threat to you... And you ain't a threat to me either."

"What the hell are you talking about." The aatxe growled, closing his eyes as his head throbbed with pain. Within that moment, the yellow-green eyes vanished. Only to find them on the other side of the stairs, like looking at the beast through a set of bars. Able to see what looked to be a mask made of cloth, perhaps a bandanna or a scarf. A baseball cap and a long coat hiding most of his figure.

"I just wanna talk, that's it. Because..." Those eyes studied the beast's form, almost making Gorret uncomfortable. "There's something different about you since the last time I saw ya." The bull's jaw tensed up. "Like something broke... Not like a horn or any body part or anything, but-ah..." The Shadow rubbed his chin, studying the beast. "I'm also sensing... What is that? A hunger?"

No response. "Yeah... You're looking at me differently too. This isn't 'Get Off My Lawn' energy I'm feelin', though that's still there..." He moved closer to the stairs, as if looking through the bars. "You want me." A growl from the black beast, but Gorret didn't move.

"I'm flattered honestly. I found you so interesting when I first saw ya." The man stood up and began walking down the stairway. "A monster, much like the one that saved me, being talked about on the news. One that saved a young girl from, bein' poisoned was it? The black bull- the Aatxe; a malefactor that had an oath! It was there to protect those within its new found territory, from both the scum of the earth and afterlife!"

"What...?" The bull panted under his breath. Hearing morphed sirens in the distance that even got the Shadow's attention.

"Even if it meant pissing off the police. Or did you attack them too?" Another gaze at the beast, this time without the 'protection of the cage'. Taking his time to walk around the debris in the old warehouse. "Yeah... I'd say you did. To you, there's only three types of people in the world; you got your allies. I wouldn't even call them friends, to be honest, they're just using you to help their own goals-" A low growl got the man to stop in place, smirking at the aatxe. "Consider that nerve touched."

He continued. "You got your civilians, which are more of just a pain to you really. They're not a threat, they're just a bunch of idiots that get in yer way." Another growl that was interrupted with a small cough, making the bull adjust his position and make the mistake of

trying to stand up again. No longer finding the beast intimidating and even taking a step closer. "Only making your hunts harder than they need to be, because they seem to have a deathwish. You don't actually care about them, do you." He barely asked Gorret. "The girl wants you to have this Heart of Gold, to be this hero to help get the trash out of this city, but you could care less about that idea."

No response, but those solid red eyes locked onto the yellow-green ones. "No, your instincts just hunger for the conflict. You keep them around as an excuse to rip apart anything that preys on them; be it man or monster..." Stepping within arms reach of the black bull, the shadow leaned over the Aatxe and whispered. "That's why you didn't save Gene."

Only to get a roar and a swipe to the side! Causing the man's body to ragdoll through the wall and disappear; only leaving the crack of the paw's slam against it, and the beast breathing heavily in anger. "**Any**." The voice came from above again, in the rooms upstairs. "**Excuse**. To let that beast of yours out."

"Shut up!"

"Do you deny it, Aatxe? Your instincts? Your nature?" A growl in response, and then the man laughed loudly in the darkness. "I'm just pulling your leg, Bullwinkle. I ain't here to make you feel guilty. In fact, I honestly thought it was the best thing you could've done." Another grumble as the black one attempted to get up, but to no avail. "Hear me out: that city out there is vicious. Always has been, always will be. Even before those 'creatures' came, along with yourself, it was full of monsters. The only real way to survive in it was to become one on your own, or maybe... Just start out as one."

Those solid red eyes stared at the Shadow, jaw tensed. "It ain't no secret that I admired you, Buddy. I thought my little Green-Eyed Friend here was the only sentient monster that made it through the otherside." A slow breath as the humanoid looked over the aatxe, making Gorret feel uncomfortable. "Even then, I stretched the meaning of the word, whereas it was only looking for survival from a man that was currently dying."

"I... Know." A double take from the man, further gazing at the beast and waiting for him to elaborate. "We... Found your diary or something."

"Did you now...?" The Shadow nearly purred, stepping closer and squatting. "...Ahhh, yes... I remember where I lost it now. That fucking cat... We'll get to that fucking cat soon enough." A wag of a half gloved finger. "But you... When I first became one with my little friend here, my so-called 'Second Life', I admit that it was about revenge... As well as trying to rescue her."

"Her...?" It took a moment for the aatxe to recall what was written in that notebook. "...The one that got away. Who found somebody else and was happy without you." A slow nod from the man. "...She came to you for help because her daughter was sick. And you did... You tried."

"Agrume is a vindictive asshole."

"You did steal the money from him. It wouldn't be the first time he made an example of such a thing-"

"But taking it out on the life of a child!?" Though it didn't look like it, Gorret closed his eyes. Understanding the Shadow's anger. "...I never found out if Kathrine made it out alive, but I sure as hell exposed the fuck out of that nonsense."

"The police took down that Human Trafficking auction in this city... I remember the location being vacant." The beast took a deep breath, still feeling hazy. "Odds are the victims would've been taken away to a safe place first. I can only imagine... Evan, was it?"

"Last I heard he ran into a semi-truck shortly after the raid. Whether it was sabotage or intentional, I don't know. I was too busy tracking and culling those responsible, until one of them encountered their own 'shadow'." The man looked towards the door that led outside; mostly closed but barely able to spot a strange light outside. "Gunshots barely did a damn thing to it, and I sure as hell wasn't going to step in."

"...But I did." Gorret mumbled, those yellow-green eyes returning to him.

"It was the first time I ever saw you, coming out from above like a meteor on top of that thing. Giving the bastard another chance at life, be it intentional or not." The Shadow began pacing again, his footsteps echoing in the beast's head like ticks to a clock. "I've seen my fair share of these creatures at this point... But none as strong as you. Most rely on poison, venom, or self-defense like spikes to survive or kill. Some do have large weapons like blades and clubs that they fused their bodies with, taking the primal scrap from this world and the last..." Another long study of the bull that honestly made him uncomfortable. "But none of them could rip them apart, limb from limb, shell from shell, like you could."

No response. "I figured you were just some veteran from the dimension they came from; a warlord of sorts that gathered everything to devour into its own mass. So I nearly left when you nearly killed this thing, but wanted to see it through... Only for you to reject the bounty. Immediately. Not even a second thought about it." A very long stare from the man. "I couldn't tell what you got out of it, where your hunger lies. Fuck, I *still* can't. You didn't do it to save that coward crying for his mama, you didn't do it to make yourself stronger. You just snorted at the

corpse and moved on."

The Shadow continued to get closer and closer, eventually causing the black beast to growl when he was in striking distance. "So what was it? What do you still crave when you dive in from the rooftops? Challenge? The violence?"

"They're in my territory-"

"Oh don't give me that bullshit excuse, 'Aatxe'!" A heavier growl at the Shadow's tone. "When an animal encounters another in its territory, they don't cull it unless they have no choice! They drive it off, they leave a damn mark as a warning! Even if these bodies could withstand the daylight you would be using them as totems if that were the case." The man took several steps back. "But no, these are not animals we are dealing with. No no no..."

"What do you mean." Gorret barely asked, getting that stare again and spotted a smug smirk that only made the beast growl louder. "What."

"You don't remember it, do you? Maybe none of them do..." A louder vocal as the black one attempted to get up again, but was still too disoriented to stand. "I never went through the process specifically myself, not until I gifted you my body- and I need you to understand this, Aatxe. It had to be you." The Shadow looked at his own hands, almost shaking. "That was my hunger... I wanted to know what was beyond the doorway. I **Needed** to *know* what happened to those who you let burn into the light...!"

"...And it had to be me." A gaze from the yellow-greens. "Because I do not claim..."

"...You didn't at least. Not until your little friend there-" The beast threw an object at the man that was very easily dodged, but almost got hit by the dive attack from the bull. Disappearing into the shadows before Gorret's body landed in a heavy growl, detecting the general direction the intruder went before roaring at it. "Calm down, you. I'm not here to judge ya." Some sirens nearly got their attention as they came close. "And maybe you should keep it down. You're not in the best state to fend off an entire police force."

As angry as the beast was, the Shadow was right. Getting Gorret to drag himself up against the wall again, still not quite able to balance himself just yet. "But you were right, that's what attracted me most about you. I couldn't figure out why you weren't doing it like all of your kind; claiming scraps for yourself. Maybe you didn't want to taint your body with their garbage, but that wasn't a satisfying answer to me. Day by day, week by week, my hunger to know grew. I looked to see if I could find any answer to what lies beyond the door; be it heaven or hell. An afterlife or an empty void of nothingness... And you were my only chance at finding it out."

Though it was hidden by the solid red covering his eyes, Gorret gazed at the man sadly.

"So I built the fire in the middle of the city, and I danced around it to summon you. Hoping you could make the connection, and preventing myself from chickening out. There's no shadows in a burning building after all..." The man sat down on the stairway and stared into space. Taking an emotional breath. "I never imagined it would be so cold surrounded by flames..."

"...What did you find." The aatxe barely questioned, getting a slow blink from those yellow-green eyes. "I know you want to tell me, or else you wouldn't be bringing this up."

"...We are not animals, Aatxe." The black one's jaw tensed as he spotted a gesture towards the city in the darkness. "They are. We are just their hungers." No response as the man studied him. "You still don't get it... And that's why I'm here, buddy. Both to help you and me."

"To help you...?" Gorret half whispered, sensing a nod in the darkness. "Why would you-?" Only to feel a grab on his muzzle, keeping it still as the scent of the Shadow nearly surrounded him. Making the beast release a growl.

"Because you **Need** to understand, Aatxe. You keep looking at them; the messages I left you, but you...!" A near growl of frustration from the man. "You don't seem to be grasping it." The two stared into each other's eyes, almost trying to intimidate the other. "Say it with me. You Can't Hang Onto Yourself. You Don't Have To Try-"

"Try Not To Hang Onto Yourself... It Can't Be Done."

"And That Is Salvation. That is **Your** Salvation." The grip on his muzzle was released as the man took a few steps back, gesturing to the outside with stressed hands. "Everyone out there... Your so-called 'Friends' or 'Allies', they want you to be something that you are not- something that you were! But no longer are..." Those solid red eyes gazed towards the doorway. "You are not this beast with a Heart of Gold that the girl wants you to be. You are not this city's protector or hero to its residence. You are not a vigilante that's cleaning up the streets while the law ties itself with its red tape." The man continued, getting more frustrated with his words. "You are not *Animal*, you are not *Prey*. You are not Alien, You are no longer Local. You are not **Good**, You are not **Evil**."

The Aatxe moved his gaze towards those yellow eyes again. "...Then... What am I?" A long stare, almost in disappointment.

"...All of these people, and all of these fucking labels have only made you question that. Time and time again. You were Burdened with the memories of your past life, as if they were supposed to lead you to be something special- and you are. I ain't saying you're not, bub... All these people have just been leading you down the wrong paths over and over... And now you're lost." A slow blink from the bull was hidden from the man, but as soon as those red eyes could

focus again- The Shadow was right up in his face. Making that black jaw tense again. "I need you to... No, *You* need to find the answer to that question."

"...Who has the answer? Eman?" A loud exhale of frustration came from the man in response, turning around and taking a few steps away. "He's always given-"

"He's always given you what you wanted to hear, is that it? Some grand outside perspective in the form of gospel that you just seem to eat up."

"You're saying I shouldn't trust him-?"

"Why would you even consider it?" The Shadow snapped at him. "The fucker comes out of nowhere, as if to suddenly reveal that we haven't been alone in the universe. Yet, you came here first! Then attempts to brainwash us with his self-righteous shit, and you mindlessly begin following it without question!" Those yellow-green eyes glared at the bull. "Why is that? Why do you suddenly trust your greatest enemy!?"

"Because... What he says makes sense."

"What he says and suggests is so vague it hurts. It's not a solution, it's a cryptic warning: 'Do The Right Thing Or Else', without actually telling you what the right path is." A near growl from the man. "Reminds me so damn much of that fucking book people hold onto so dearly."

"Book...? The Bible?"

"Yes. And just like that God, this cat comes out of nowhere and starts telling everyone how they should live their lives."

"And you're saying that's wrong-"

"You're missing the point here, buddy. He's an Outsider. Sure, he claims to have seen multiple planets and shit, but he doesn't understand our world. He hasn't been here long enough to understand how it works."

"Maybe that's what we need: a fresh pair of eyes with experience of how these systems turn out." A near growl from the man that the bull ignored. "We reach out to our experts in order to guide us in paths we do not understand, why not do the same? Because he's foreign, both in home and species?"

"Why are you defending him?"

"Why should I trust you over Eman?" Gorret growled. "He's never lied to me or attempted to worm into my head with cryptic messages and quotes. What makes you any

better?"

"Because I have the answers you want." The Bull remained silent. "As for 'never lied to you'..." That time a low grumble left the black throat. "As yourself something: that Night you lost your-" A roar of warning and the Shadow stepped back, raising his hands a bit. "Where was *he*?"

A long stare at the man as the beast thought back, swearing he knew the answer but... Nothing came. Where was the Charr the night Gene died? He appeared after the event happened, but...? Remaining silent until Gorret exhaled through his muzzle. Swearing he heard Gene in the far far distance; Don't Fall Too Far From Who You Are... "Where do I start. Where do I find these answers." The bull barely asked, feeling a smirk form on the humanoid before him. Taking another step back and sitting up on a cabinet

"Start with your... Memories. Tell me that story again, the one you barely recall. About how you became this." A gesture to the Aatxe. "You told it once to the girl. How much do you remember without her help?" The worried gaze was hidden by those red eyes. "How do you remember it now?" A deep breath as Gorret accessed his foggy mind.

"I... I was watching a movie with my family." A noise in confirmation from the man. "Then... Something happened. I remember reality shifting, bending and ripping apart." A gesture to go on. "Then we were pulled in somewhere... All of us. Scattered in this urban wasteland. A maze of buildings all stitched together in an endless amount of passageways... And darkness. The only light was the occasional storm overhead, everything else relied on touch and sound..."

No response from the Shadow. "The only things I had were my gun and my family... In a city full of shadow and monsters with an insatiable greed... I tried to protect them, but one after another..." A heavy exhale, both of sorrow but also intense anger. "They picked us off, and left me for last... I still kept one bullet but... I was just too furious to use it on myself. I wanted to tear apart every damn one of them for what they did to my family-"

"There it is..." The man got Gorret's immediate attention. Interrupting the memory completely as that red glare focused on him. "Neat story, pal. Buuuut..."

"You don't believe me?" The bull snorted.

"It's not that, calm yourself. And that's likely what you remember seeing, but that's not what happened."

"What do you mean." The black beast growled.

"There wasn't any 'Rift' or 'Portal to some other world'." A solid stare from those red lights. "Think you can stand up straight?" A few moments of silence as the Aatxe tried, but his balance was still too far off. "That's a no. Best to sleep it off then unless you want to get yourself killed wandering out."

"Wandering out where?"

"Where do you think, Bullwinkle? The scene of the crime." The man leaned backwards, disappearing through the wall and completely vanishing from all senses. Leaving the beast alone to think...

The sirens were still going off in the distance as the bull reached the suburbs. Maybe not in his best condition, but the endless questions were keeping Gorret from resting. Needing to change his travel methods from 'jumping from rooftop to rooftop', to 'creeping through the bushes'.

Stealth was never the Aatxe's strength, unless he was striking down from above. Here, he was on level ground. Moving from bush to bush trying to avoid any lights and the constant barking of dogs. Barely recognizing where he was as he moved around the houses and the streets. Some looking familiar, while others... Not so much. As if a few of them were misplaced in his memory.

Then, a familiar scent was brought to him. Not one of his own home, but of... Simon's? His neighbor? Barely detecting some familiar music as well buried within the surrounding sounds of panicking pets and wails of emergency. To the point where his mind could sing along with it.

The beast followed it, even through the streets. Coming up to the familiar home from behind where an opened window was spotted and the music was playing from. Lights off. Odds are Leslie was asleep... Perhaps for the better, but once again the girl led him on the right path.

That black snout moved towards the next house over. Borderline lifeless compared to the others. The real estate sign squeaked from the front as a small breeze passed through. The

place felt... Haunted. As if waiting for the Aatxe to come in to prey on it, baiting him with answers that his mind craved.

Trap or not, and memories be damned... Gorret needed these questions resolved. Taking a few steps into the backyard as it began to ache his heart. Echoes of a ball being punted and glass breaking got his attention, as well as a voice that came from no direction. "S-sorry dad..."

"It's..." A frustrated breath. "It's fine, Zack. It's just a window, it needed to be replaced anyway. But this is the only time you're getting off from this Scott-Free. Understood?" Was that how the beast used to sound like? Angry? Irked most of the time? Or was it just a bad week at the office...?

The bull approached the sliding glass door, pulling it open as if the lock wasn't even there; breaking it in the process. Staring inside of the now cleaned out kitchen and living room area while more voices came from outside. Picturing a barbeque nearby and a portable table, all decorated for a summer holiday. "All I'm saying is that the chief thinks you're taking this case too personally... And I do too-"

"And we shouldn't? The guy's a Mobster, Simon. He-"

"I know, and you don't need to remind me of everything he's done. But... Really think about it; how you've taken action lately. Approaching him and his goons aggressively, detaining them on charges that should only be a slap on the wrist."

"No one is above the law."

"I get that, I really do. However, it sounds like you've got a grudge against Agrume. Did he steal your girl back in highschool or something?" No response. Just the sounds of flipping burgers and hissing of grease. "I know you graduated around the same time."

"I'm just trying to protect the city, Simon. And I'll do it, even if it means I have to carve out the cancer myself."

"Just... Ease up on it for a bit, before he sees you as a threat. He's got connections everywhere..." The beast stared towards where Simon was standing in the past, slightly puzzled but... He remembered that. He recalled that warning... And recalled that Curtis didn't take it. Instead possibly pushing more aggressively.

The beast stood in thought for a moment, a bit of fear running through his chest before carefully squeezing through the doorway. Watching his horns and scanning the area that was now very vacant of anyone living. Still half seeing the objects as if they were specters in their normal places, and the stories behind them.

The old couch that his wife wanted to get rid of, but instead he and Simon worked on giving it new life; the first project they did together. The wide screen TV, gotten when they were first coming out. Using the bonus of his first raise to get it, only for one of his baby daughters to throw their sippy-cup at it and crack the screen... The first time Simon ever lost his temper at her, and scarred that poor girl.

Even thinking about it now made the bull angry, exhaling a wave of heat as he continued to look around. Taking heavy steps over the hardwood floor, hearing it groan under his weight. Only for those ears to catch a whistle. "Niiice place." A glare as the Shadow once again presented himself, looking over what was once Curtis' office. "Very roomy, two full baths with a jacuzzi. Garage, full basement, two stories and an attic. You were really living that American dream, huh?"

The Aatxe remained silent. "And here I was, struggling to pay for basically a closet with a built-in toilet. Not even a damn shower in it. The Envy I had for this lifestyle... But like most of us; we were not born into it. So we had no chance aside from mooching off of someone, like our parents. But some people aren't lucky enough to have good terms with them."

Those solid red eyes just stared at the man. "I ain't sayin' everyone's story is like mine, but there's a lot more similar to it than Curtis'."

"You know nothing about me."

"And you do?" The bull growled at him as the man looked around the empty office. As if able to see the same possessions and books that once decorated the walls. "Let me guess... It's like large patches of shadow in your mind? Unable to bring light to them in order to see what the memories were? And when you approach them, you get this... Vertigo. That if you attempted to walk into it blindly you would fall endlessly. Like the memory wasn't obscured... It was removed?"

That black muzzle tensed and scrunched up in a bit of anger, but didn't vocally respond past that. "Still nothing? What do you remember about your life as Curtis?"

"What?"

"I want you to think about all the memories, is there a pattern to them?" A low growl that time. "You remember things for a reason, Bullwinkle, even if it isn't until you see something like a face or a license plate. But the more vivid ones were always-"

"When I was angry." An insidious smile grew over the man's face when the bull answered.

"You're getting closer..." The Shadow took another look around, still browsing the decor of the past. "I wonder if they ever found it...?"

"Found what-?" The Aatxe stopped in place for a moment, suddenly recalling something that led him towards the garage. Squeezing through the doorways and into the corner of it where an empty shelf resided; barely touched or noticed, yet he could still... Feel something there. Pressing his paw against it and the wall pushed in ever so slightly, feeling it unlock and push out enough for him to look into. Revealing a small stairway to the basement of the garage. "...They never found it when cleaning out."

"Means he did a good job building it." A glare from those red eyes, but the beast ignored the Shadow, taking caution as he squeezed down the narrow stairway. Thankful that the stairs themselves were concrete and not possibly wood. Eventually leading down to a small room, the walls covered in cork boards, pictures, documents, photos, and strings attached everywhere. "Someone was a little obsessive."

It was difficult to make out the details of the documents, and the bull searched around for a lightswitch. Finding it nearby and grunting at the sudden flicker of brightness. Recognizing several of the faces, some crossed out for being arrested or found dead. Others having mountains of evidence attached to them, especially the center. "Agrume." The black beast growled.

"Probably for the best that they didn't find this while cleaning, but..." The man looked over them. "Looks like someone did a looooooot of snooping around, huh?"

"Bastard got away with so much. I've wanted to take him down for decades...!"

"But the red tape got in the way." A low growl from the bull that wasn't directed at him. "To the point where you started pushing those boundaries, something I don't think your boss was too fond of." Another bassey vocal that was nearly a slow snarl as the beast held the side of his head.

"...That didn't stop me." Gorret panted, looking over the suspects on the map. "I kept pushing. Even when he threatened to take my badge, I needed these scumbags out of the city in order to make my family safe. My Simon and my neighborhood... Everyone. If I could just rip out the heart of that snake-!" The Aatxe staggered as if he got shot in the back, panting heavier and heavier while a barrier in his memory shattered like glass. Staring at one of the pictures of a man and looking closer at it. "...No..."

A noise in question from the Shadow, as if leading him to follow the trail. "... I arrested him. He wasn't supposed to be out-" Another sharp pain in his head. "But I saw that face at the

highschool when picking up my son. Dressed in overalls, delivering a crate...?"

"Keep following it, bud."

"Zoe... My daughter, brought some powdered juice home. We were going to have a movie night and Heleen made it with supper. She wanted to go up and hang out with her friends, but I remember... Getting stern with her."

"Then what?" The Shadow urged him on. "The 'Portal' opened up?" The beast ignored the comment and just stared at the board, putting together faces and information. A chemist, several lackies, and a few people Curtis busted including one known for Breaking & Entering. A scene with several victims sick- Then his breath stopped.

"It wasn't a portal..."

"Speak up, buddy."

"We were... Hallucinating? Drugged as people entered our house. Picked our locks." A few pants as Gorret stared into space, watching the gaps in his memory slowly get pieced together. "I remember the lights going out, shadows of people, the walls and floors warping. They... Kidnapped us. All of us after paralyzing our bodies with whatever was in that drink." A gaze back towards where Simon's house would be; where Leslie would be. "There was no sign of struggle because... We couldn't struggle."

"The back of a van. A long drive... Then some forest. I remember coming out of it and trying to fight back. They said nothing, were dressed as nothing. They lined us up in front of dug graves... Executed my wife... My son... My daughter-"

"...And then Curtis." The black beast lowered his head and exhaled out in anger. "Buried you in marked graves, labeled as someone else-"

"No!" Gorret growled at the man, nearly backing the Shadow against the wall. "I remember that black hell so vividly! I was in there for almost two centuries-!"

"I ain't saying you weren't, Hotshot. Nobody's saying that-"

"Then what are these memories that you've been feeding me!? What are you trying to tell me, that my human life was a lie!?" The beast roared.

"Easy, buddy. Deep breaths. I'm not your enemy-" A growl in response as the man's hands were shown in surrender. "Okay, okay. But I can't bluntly tell you. You gotta ask the right questions."

"Why-!"

"Because that's how this works." The man stood his ground, despite another low growl with the Aatxe getting in his face. Snorting afterwards when the intimidation was resisted. "I don't make the rules."

"Who are you." Gorret barely asked.

"You can't intimidate what isn't there, buddy." A long stare from those solid red eyes. "I'm here to help you remember, I'm here to help you figure things out-"

"To help me with what?"

"To find out what the fuck that message means! The one he left behind!" The man growled at him back. "You keep seeing it, replaying the words over and over and over again in your mind! You just can't understand it, because you're missing something. You're missing a piece of that puzzle- but you've gotta ask the right question!" A long pause as they stared at each other, then the board. Only for the light to go out and the Aatxe to growl, returning to the humanoid with a single hand raised towards the light. "You're not going to find it there. As much as you want to blame him..."

Another long pause and eventually Gorret's gaze drifted to his own hand. "...What am I."

"That." The Shadow took a step back, disappearing into the wall. "Is the right question." Getting a growl in response as the beast pressed his hand firmly against the concrete. Not detecting him anywhere while looking around the small room. He won't find the answer here, so he squeezed his large self back up the stairway and closed the secret door. A scan around the empty garage led him nowhere, back into the home. The Kitchen empty. The living room vacant. Moving into the study where his home office used to be- those instincts flared up when movement was detected!

A low growl was released, but interrupted when the beast found himself confronting his reflection in a mirror built into the wall. Calming down as he stared at it: a large bull-like creature slightly hunched over. Built like a brick house, large horns, a faint mane of black flames. Bright red eyes creating a unique otherworldly light that even reflected off the mirror and onto the large metal amulet he wore. The one made by Gene, commissioned by the girl who saved him.

Taking a step closer to examine the symbols carved into it, though slightly worn. Charity. Diligence. Kindness. Humility. Patience. All surrounding the sign... -His head suddenly hurt, causing him to step back away from the thought and in life as he rebalanced himself. "If... Curtis is Dead... What am I. Why do I have his memories?"

"This is the thing that no religion or theory tells you about the afterlife." The Shadow returned in the back of the room.

"That not everyone goes there?"

"That not *everything* goes there." The beast held his breath. "I'll keep this in a language you can understand, but it's much more complicated than this: In order to get in, you need to cleanse yourself of your... Sins, so to speak." The man continued. "They are carved out of you, liberally too; like you would cut the best parts out of a meat. You wouldn't go out of your way to get every particle of the best, but you'd just get relatively close to the bad parts instead. Even if it means leaving a decent chunk of the good stuff behind to be thrown away."

"You mean-?" Within an instant, the humanoid was in front of the bull's face. Grabbing that muzzle when it tried to retreat back and keeping in place.

"You Are Garbage." The Shadow revealed. "You are Rot; the worst parts of a soul torn out and tossed away in a dump dimension. Mutated out of pain, decay, and fear to fight for whatever survival instincts you have left." A tug on that Amulet was felt and the beast snapped! Grabbing the very arm that reached for his treasure and hearing the bones in the limb break in several places, yet the man did not flinch. "Funny how close she was though, isn't it? You wonder why you're so much stronger than the rest? How you were able to survive despite not claiming any of the endless bounties torn apart by you?" A shake of that amulet, one carved with the symbol of-

"Wrath..." Gorret whispered.

"You're strong because Curtis' anger was absolutely immense. You remember so much because that asshole was Vindictive, holding grudges against everyone and everything that did him wrong. He may have put on a happy face, but deep down..." With the man's other hand he tapped the side of that muzzle. Not getting a response from it.

"And those memories...?"

"Remember what I said, buddy? Liberally carved. Emotions are hella strong, and often enough it takes a little hint for everything to click into place." The beast's grip slowly relaxed, looking towards where that old desk used to be within the home. "You are not Curtis, Aatxe. You are just the tumor that was growing inside of him. You were never meant to survive, you were never meant to protect. You were never meant for anything but destroy and die off like the rest in a realm of even more trash."

A long silence as the two let go of each other completely, the beast nearly stunned in a defeat of sorts. Taking a step backwards, which only made him stumble and run into the mirror.

Shattering it loudly and slipping down with the shards against the wall. Taking a few breaths before the Shadow knelt down; broken arm and all. "Now... Say that quote again, buddy. Say it like it makes sense now."

"...You Can't Hang Onto Yourself." The Aatxe mumbled. "Myself being...?"

"Curtis? Who you *thought* you were? Who **They** want you to be!?" An exhale in anger from the Shadow. "It doesn't exist. None of it does. You are Wrath, that is all. You've seen what relying on others gave you- making you impure. They only weaken you, Aatxe. You don't have to try to hang onto what they Want of you- It Cannot Be Done."

"...And That Is Salvation."

"You will know peace by uncaging your Wrath. And you've been gifted another chance to rip apart the one that angered you the most in Curtis's life. No red tape, no laws. No objects, security, or weapons can get in your way." The man leaned in towards a black ear and whispered. "I don't know about you, but I think it's about fucking time we got some much deserved revenge."

In a blink he was gone, leaving the beast alone with the broken mirror, doing its best to reflect pieces of the beast with what little light his eyes gave off. Leaving him to stare at it in silence until a stumble was heard in the backyard, flaring off those territorial instincts. Getting up and growling loudly when he spotted the cone of light searching inside the empty home, though the source was coming from the backyard.

"Freeze!" The man shouted, instantly making the aatxe growl even louder when the light focused on him. Though that didn't stop it from taking steps closer to the officer. "I said Freeze!"

"Dad!" A female voice came from the other side of the fence, making the man curse under his breath. Taking a step back as the beast's head moved out of the doorway- only for the girl to move in front of Gorret as if to protect him. "Don't shoot-!"

"Leslie, what the hell are you doing!?" Both the bull and Simon growled at the same time.

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

"Dad stop!" The girl placed a hand on that black chest, lightly touching the amulet around his broad neck and making it lightly swing.

"Les..." Gorret muttered under his growl, but the warmth of her hand pressing against his black muzzle at least calmed that fury down.

"Dad... This is Curtis." The tension in the area raised a little before taking a swan dive down as her father attempted to process what she said. Lowering his firearm aim away from the beast's head.

"...What...?" Simon barely spoke. "The hell do you mean that's Curtis? Did he tell you that-?"

"He remembered who I was-"

"Leslie-" Gorret attempted to interrupt her.

"He saved me that night because he recognized me- not the other way around." The young woman turned around and looked into those solid red eyes, but she could... Somehow sense something was off. "What's wrong?" That head gazed off to the side.

"I'm... I'm not Curtis, Leslie."

"No, you are." That head shook slowly until it was caught by those soft hands. "You are, you remember things only he would remember-"

"But I'm not him."

"Hey..." She softly spoke to him, gently pulling his head down for a hug and feeling the heavy exhale. Looking over the empty house and putting together what likely happened with the beast this evening. Especially after losing Gene. "Hey." A black ear flicked with attention. "Home Is Where The Heart Is, So Maybe That's Where I Left Mine..."

"I Know I Failed You..." The aatxe spoke with her.

"But Gorret," Leslie brought his eyes up to hers, smiling sadly at the beast. "Please Don't Change The Lock On Your Heart." It made his heart swell up but his face twist as his body kneeled down. Wrapping an arm around her in an embrace, even though it made her father even more tense, the smaller arms reaching around his neck and adjusting that amulet a bit for comfort. Letting go after a deep exhale and feeling Les step back, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I have to... Find something-"

"I know." The young woman responded, giving him space to squeeze out but also going in for another small hug once the beast was. "And you will find it. But whatever it is, I'll be waiting for your return. Okay?" Another touch on the side of that muzzle as it slowly nodded, before the two looked over at Simon. Watching the man exhale in a low grumble, but wave his flashlight away as if to say Dismissed. Letting the beast leave so long as his daughter was safe while putting his firearm away, and getting a hug from her as well. "Thank you for giving him a chance."

"Yeah, yeah..." The father grumbled a bit, keeping an eye on the bull until it was completely out of sight. Those solid red eyes in the shadows looking back at them, and the man could feel it; some form of similarity. However... Not a good one. Like it was something he lightly feared for so long. "Now..." He got the young woman's attention as he continued.

"What the... Fudge do you mean he's Curtis?" A chuckle in response from Leslie.