

The Quickening of Aprilynn

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I. We meet Aprilynn

Aprilynn's hair was her very pride. It tumbled down her back in lush, straight, chocolate tresses that the adults of the village erroneously described as "black," provoking Aprilynn to conclude that they were simpletons. The boys of the village knew the careless description bothered her, and Aprilynn contemptuously regarded them as fools when they teased her about it because she wouldn't let them paw her hair.

On the eve of her 15th birthday Aprilynn stole deep into the forest that surrounded the village to a secluded pool she vainly called her own. The waxing moon in the clear spring night sky cast peculiar shadows on the shore and reflected off the ripples Aprilynn's carefree bathing sent capering across the surface of the water. In the murky shallows she rose from beneath the water and stood quietly for a moment, her hair pressed well down into the small of her back in shocking contrast to her pale, young skin gleaming in the moonlight. Aprilynn crossed her arms on her chest in feigned modesty and strained to look back over her shoulder as effeminately as she could while standing ankle deep in muddy silt. The chill water lapped eagerly at her hips as she gazed at the tips of her hair splayed across the glassy surface, her prominent teeth glistening in the silvery light of the moon. The chill midnight April air, caught up for a moment in a suggestion of warmth from a far away place, slid across the pool on a light breeze and slipped its brisk embrace around Aprilynn's waist. The moon fell behind a cloud and a convulsive shiver quivered through Aprilynn's body when the chilly air spiraled up around her wet skin. She clenched her jagged teeth and hissed as she sucked in her breath reflexively.

Snapped out of her narcissistic fantasies by the rude candor of nature's frigid regard, she dropped all pretense and lumbered

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grotesquely from the gloomy pool onto the ragged shore. She recovered her crumpled nightdress from the moldy path where she'd let it drop and pulled herself into it. The faded, drab, floral print fell down around her lithe frame until the frayed hem hung unevenly just below her knees.

She staggered in the darkness left by the relentlessly retreating moon, barefoot through the forest that tore at her short legs and stabbed her long, gnarled feet. The forest's insolence toward her made her rather angry so that by the time she reached the outskirts of the village she was practically stomping down the worn woodland track. At the edge of the village, she forsook the path and crept stealthily along the back of the simple wood and stone cottages that circled the common well in the center of the square. Ever since Aprilynn could remember, she had imagined the cottages were giant vertebrae in the desiccated spine of a massive serpent that had once encircled and guarded an enchanted pool. When the serpent died, the houses were made of its bone and the people sprung from its marrow. Now, ages thence, the pool was just an ordinary spring that fed a well in a remote and lonely forest village. She longed to have been there when the serpent had passed away, to have drained the bone to make a soup, and to have feasted on it with hot milk and wild honey. She circled the village keeping close to the shadows at the forest edge until she came to her family's house with the ancient wisteria clinging to the south wall. She clambered adroitly up the thick, winding trunk to the second-story loft, the open window, and the bed she shared with her little sister, Hezbah.

II. We meet Aprilynn's family

Hezbah's body was warm; her name unfortunate, made more unfortunate by the truth that it was a misremembering of Hephzibah by her addled parents. Aprilynn pressed her feet against Hezbah's calves and her hands under her back, leeching the warmth from her sister's body into her own cold

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flesh and bone. "My delight is in her." That's what the wandering preacher man had told her "Hephzibah" meant, and as Hezbah squirmed in her sleep to escape Aprilynn's frigid skin, Aprilynn sneered in the dark at the delight she was drawing out of Hezbah beneath the filthy quilt they shared.

Apirlynn removed her left hand from beneath Hezbah's body and slipped a lock of Hezbah's mousy-gray hair over her ear with one grimy, jagged nail. The moon had finally conceded to once again grace the village with its presence and its pale light fell through the window onto Hezbah's tangled hair and her sister's claw-like fingernail gently carving path after path through her locks. Aprilynn traced an arc over Hezbah's temple where the warm blood pulses palpably near the surface, then around and down behind her ear to her neck where all the vitality upon which life depends is continuously ascending and descending. She stopped and pushed her nail against Hezbah's neck until the skin dimpled under the pressure. Aprilynn was captivated by the soft vulnerability of it. A rush numbed her body and she swallowed against a thickness forming in her throat as she mused over her jagged nail in Hezbah's flesh and the ruminations that prowled in her mind. Staying her hand with all her will, beads of perspiration sprung out upon her forehead, and then she jerked away, shoved Hezbah contemptuously and edged as far away from her in the bed as she could, pulling the quilt around her and up into her face. She smelled the musty scent of years of stale sweat and bit into the dingy fabric. She suckled at it until reality was stolen by sleep and lost to her and she was given over to her private world of dreams.

The morning broke on the eve of Aprilynn's 15th birthday by pouring sanguine sunlight into the bed with her, but Aprilynn never saw it. She stirred and groaned when the sun hit her face and would have woken but for her sister who rose from their bed, circled around it to the window, and closed the shutters, blotting the blood-red light with shadow, and

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shielding Aprilynn from its power to wake her. Hezbah turned from the window and paused a moment over her sister. Aprilynn was lying on her side, curled slightly, facing the window, her right arm following the ridge of her body. Hezbah regarded the awkward form with which she shared her bed and smiled tenderly, admired the dark, shimmering hair, pitied the oblong skull and uncomely features in the long, narrow face.

Aprilynn's shoulder was exposed to the elbow and Hezbah gently pulled the old quilt up over her arm and placed it softly at her thick neck. Aprilynn stirred and sighed, but didn't wake. She ground her unusually long teeth a little and her right upper incisor that jutted out slightly from the others escaped and idiomatically pinned her bottom lip to her lower jaw. Hezbah softly, affectionately kissed Aprilynn's forehead and crept to the ladder and out of the loft, leaving Aprilynn to sleep off the late night she had spent, unbeknownst to her parents, lurking in the forest.

"Wh-where is Aprilynn?" the stammering voice of the girls' father vehemently demanded of Hezbah when she reached the bottom of the ladder.

"She is sleeping," Hezbah replied timidly.

"Still abed? The sun has r-rrr-risen. Aprilynn!" he yelled up the ladder into the loft.

"Oh, let her be," Aprilynn's mother screeched back at her husband.

"Quiet wo-woman!" he shot back. "Aprilynn!" he shouted again.

Aprilynn stirred and woke, the reality of parents and sisters and chores clamoring to dispell her dreams, her father's demanding stammer echoing her into wakefulness.

"Aprilynn! G-g-get down h-hhh-here!" Her father's voice was dripping with irritation.

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"I'm getting dressed!" she shouted back, unable to suppress the vitriol dousing her every nerve. She regretted the tone as soon as she poured it down the ladder, but not nearly enough to send down an apology after it.

"Tone g-girl!" She heard heavy feet shuffling on the floor downstairs.

"Please, Father, she's dressing," Hezbah's quiet voice pleaded.

"She m-must learn to c-control that tone," Father said, but his voice was much calmer. He rarely yelled at Hezbah the way he did at Aprilynn. "It wi-will be hard enough to mm-marry her off as it is, and t-t-tomorrow is her Quickening."

"Here's your breakfast," Mother said, clunking a mug and a plank with bread on the table. Father reluctantly sat down and took a deep draft from the cup and then tore off a liberal helping from the dark loaf.

In the loft, Aprilynn dawdled in silent spite of her father's demand, but only for a few minutes in fear of his temper. She dressed and combed her hair, cracking the shutters to let the sun in enough to make her dark locks glisten. She admired its shine, the softness and texture of it, and the way that it draped about her royally. A pleasant smile filled her lips, and she was suddenly convinced that some greatness awaited her far away from the village. She had only to begin walking.

She climbed down the ladder, suppressing the abhorrence she felt at the confinement that awaited her below in the small space of the cottage with the people she despised. Father was finishing his last gulp of ale when she reached the bottom of the ladder. She turned to face him. Hezbah was seated at the rough table with him and staring at her with fear in her face. Father, with time and bread and ale in his system, was considerably more affable, but still wore a cold, stern expression and his voice was sharp when he cut into her with his reprimand.

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"G-girl, you can't afford that sp-sp-sp-spiteful tone. You haven't the lll-looks to afford it. As it is I'm likely as n-not to have to go elsewhere to f-f-find you a husband. You have so little to off-off-offer a man."

"I'm not asking you to find me a husband," Aprilynn replied as politely as she could to mask her impudence.

She could see Father's ire rising. His face reddened and his eyes seemed to darken, but to his merit, and the ale's, he kept control. "You wouldn't s-s-survive a year without a m-man," he said in disgust. "You can't d-d-do anything and you couldn't ch-charm a snake. All you have i-is that hair. H-hh-hair may be a woman's glory, b-but it won't buy a loaf of b-bread...." He went on and on becoming more and more impassioned and fervent at his lecturing, but Aprilynn didn't actually hear anything he said, except the part about a woman's hair being her glory. Long ago she had developed the habit of tuning out his tirades. She'd determined he was such an oaf that the only part of it he himself remembered was the last line or two anyway.

Aprilynn watched his mouth while he struggled to talk. His lips curled along unusual lines and she wondered if that wasn't the reason the words came out all bent and broken. A few drops of ale rested in his reddish beard that Mother, when she was happier and Aprilynn was very young before Hezbah was born, once described as "mahogany." The drops caught the lamplight from the table as his jaw moved up and down and made his beard sparkle in a few places. She thought it was like he surrounded the stars and was putting them out.

"... but there is always the hope that a near-b-b-by village will send a boy as d-d-desperate as you."

"I'm not desperate, Father," Aprilynn said, soberly.

"B-b-but I am, Aprilynn! I won't b-b-be around forever to take care of you, and then what? A stone in the f-field is cast and

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forgotten."

Aprilynn didn't answer and remained standing stock-still, staring at the crumbs of bread on the table, recalling the way her wet hair glistened on her supple skin in the moonlight. She unconsciously touched the tooth that pinned her lower lip and thought how clever she was to sneak out every night for years without her family's knowing, how agile she was climbing the wisteria, how beautiful she was when she ran through the forest. She thought how odd that she find herself bound to these three homely dullards who couldn't see her for who she was becoming and what she would be after her Quickening.

Father stared at her mute stillness in frustration, watched her touch the freakish tooth, long and sharp, that grew down over her lip, saw her faintly smile at some private recollection. He grabbed the rest of the dark loaf abruptly. "Aw, I-lost!" he said, irritated, and stalked to the pegs where his gun and his coat hung.

"There w-was a wolf last night. We m-must see to the herds."

"There was no wolf. I'd have seen --" Aprilynn caught herself, but it was enough to alert her mistrustful father.

"Seen? S-seen? Why would you hhh-have seen?"

Hezbah, who had been tensely watching the exchange between her father and her sister, spoke up from her silent scrutiny, "Aprilynn went out to the bushes last night, that's all." Aprilynn shot her a curious expression.

"Hmm, use the chamber p-pot from now on. It's d-dangerous still this time of year." Father turned and went out the door, the early morning sun slipping in briefly as he left, but blotted out again when he closed it behind him. Mother went across the room to the fire and poked it.

Aprilynn turned on Hezbah and whispered angrily, "Why did

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you do that? What do you mean getting in the way?"

Hezbah looked crushed, "I'm sorry," she whimpered back, "I didn't want you to get in trouble for ... you know"

"No, I don't know, and neither do you. What are you talking about?"

Hezbah glanced at Mother, then turned back to Aprilynn. "For going out into the forest every night," she whispered intensely.

Aprilynn started and stood upright, her eyes wide and apprehensive. Hezbah looked up at Aprilynn timidly, her head turned to the side a little, her face down, as though she expected a blow from her sister, but Aprilynn was too shocked and felt too vulnerable with their mother in the room to do anything but stand still. For two years she had crept out every night, no matter the weather, in sickness and in health, even if only for a few minutes, and she had believed no one knew. But Hezbah had, at some time, discovered her secret, and had remained silent about it, even to Aprilynn, and held it close to her heart. Aprilynn's mind raced, trying to divine her little sister's motives for not telling her parents or confronting her. The only conclusion she could find that made sense was that Hezbah was holding onto the secret until she would use it to wrest some advantage or benefit from Aprilynn.

Aprilynn bent and whispered into Hezbah's ear as she slipped past her toward the door for the morning's chores. "Beast!" she said, acridly.

III. We meet the wolf which commits a series of violences against the village

Aprilynn's father and several other men from the village stood at the edge of the meadow looking down at the remains of John Higgins' heifer.

"Wolf. Killed for the sport of it, I reckon, heartless beast,"

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Tom Pill said matter-of-factly.

"They ain't got no hearts," Higgins said.

"Oh, they g-got hearts. They got hearts f-f-for themselves, selfish beasts."

"Look how it tore the neck. Barely touched the rest, but nearly beheaded the dumb animal." Pill observed. He had a weakness for riddles and always appeared wherever anything unusual occurred around the village.

"Reckon we can save the meat?" Jim Phillips asked. He was one of the few rare immigrants to the village and barely out of his teens. He survived working his little plot of land and helping with odd jobs around the village and was currently employed by Higgins, who had grown to think of Phillips as a son.

"No ... t-to long dead, and m-might have a sickness from the w-wolf," Aprilynn's father replied.

"Besides, I ain't eatin' no meat what touched the mouth of no wolf," Higgins added.

"This here is no ordinary wolf, either," Pill chimed in from a few yards away. He'd backtracked the wolf's trail into the meadow and had found a print in a small patch of bare, soft earth. The other men gathered around him. "Look at the toes, and the length of the paw. I never seen a wolf with a paw that long, nor that big, either. That's the print of a big wolf, and no ordinary one."

The other men nodded in agreement, except Judah Ketchum, who was a bit skeptical. "You sure that's the wolf's? Any more prints?" he asked.

"Sure, I'm sure," Pill said defensively. "You sayin' I don't know my tracks?"

"I'm just sayin' it don't look like no wolf, like you said, so how

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do you know it was a wolf, and if you ain't seen a track like that before then you don't know this here kind of track and you don't know what kind of animal as made it. That's all I'm sayin'."

"I know my tracks," Pill said, standing and facing Ketchum. "It's the beast that did it."

"I ain't so sure," Ketchum said forcefully, leaning in toward Pill.

"Well then you tell me what made this here print," Pill challenged. Ketchum stared hard into Pill's eyes.

"It's the beast that made it," Higgins broke the tension. "And it's a wolf." Ketchum backed down: it was Higgins' animal that was killed, Higgins' loss, and Higgins' prerogative to name the culprit.

"Yeah, reckon so," Ketchum conceded reluctantly.

Aprilynn's father spoke up next, "We'll need to g-gather the animals into the square at night. And we'll nn-need to post a watch. Let's go."

"Whatta' we do with the carcass?" Phillips asked.

"Leave it," Higgins replied. "Maybe the beast'll feast on that and leave us alone -- at least tonight." The men turned away, leaving the carcass to the flies and the worms.

By the time Father arrived back at the village, Aprilynn and Mother had gone down to a nearby stream to wash some laundry and Hezbah was busy sweeping the cottage. Under normal circumstances Hezbah would have gone to the fields to work the ground with Father or tend the sheep, but today was far from normal. Father was not around and the rumor of a wolf made the meadows fearful places. With the company expected tomorrow for Aprilynn's Quickening, however, it occurred to Hezbah that Mother would appreciate a clean

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house, so she took it upon herself to give the place a cleaning while she waited for her parents to return.

Father returned first and burst temperamentally through the door, put up his gun, and jammed his coat on a peg. "It was a www-wolf," he said. "A wolf like no one ever s-s-seen before."

Hezbah's curiosity peaked and despite her timid nature, she blurted out eagerly, "Did you see it?"

"No, child, j-just its track. Like no wolf track I ever seen b-b-before. We'll be p-posting a watch and bringing the animals in. It'll make preparing f-f-for the Quickening the mm-more difficult."

When Mother and Aprilynn returned, Father filled them in and then went out again to tend to the fields, animals, and arrange for keeping the livestock in the square. Mother and the girls went about making preparations for the Quickening, though they had to confine decorations to out-of-reach strands of streamers between cottages and move the usual banners and pennants outside the circumference of the village square. The men of the village set up makeshift fences between cottages while the boys gathered mounds of firewood into heaps at four points in front of the houses around the square. The women and girls made as many preparations for tomorrow's feast as they could and then gathered in groups where the older women passed on the wisdom of womanhood to the younger girls while teaching them the skills required for the domestic craft work for which they were responsible.

In the afternoon the men and boys fetched the animals from the pastures and brought them into the square. They closed in the last open spaces with fences and drew water into troughs for the sheep, goats, and cattle. The stables where the horses were kept were closed up.

As afternoon darkened into dusk, the atmosphere of the village

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gradually filled with tension. Stories turned from domestic anecdotes about Uncle Bill's blisters and Grandmama's puddings to dark local legends and yarns about ghosts of family ancestors and were-beasts that stalked children and mysterious itinerant preachers that carried mirrors that stole peoples' souls. When the dark of evening was full upon the square, the villagers went home and the watch was set. The four fires were lit, the light creating a black wall out of the shadows at the edge of the forest beyond the cottages.

Night crept as night creeps, skulking in the shadows at the edge of light, patiently biding its time, waiting for an eye turned away, a fire unattended, a candle let burn too long. Then, as always, on silent paws it steps in closer, encroaching the darkness slightly more and more and more again, imperceptibly so that when awareness dawns, it is too late, and the darkness pounces.

Midnight approached and the watch was changed. Nothing had been seen nor heard save a few early insects and frogs. The first watch went home to sleep, the second watch took their stations. The watchers had just settled in when a wail arose from a cottage at the northern edge of the square. It began as a low moan that rose in pitch and volume and then became a cry and finally ended in a long piercing "Nooooo! Ohhhhhh!"

The watchers turned from their stations toward the sound. Jilliette Ketchum burst from the Ketchum cottage through the Ketchum front door, looked disoriented for a moment, and then ran stumbling toward the approaching watchers.

"My baby!" Jilliette cried to them. "It's got my baby!" She went from one to the next, grasping each by the shoulders and pulling him. "Do something!" she cried. "Go get my baby back! It took my baby! My little John! Oh, my John! My baby! Help me!"

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Judah, her husband, rushed out behind her. "Jill," he pleaded.

All around shutters and doors opened and villagers looked on or came out of their houses. Judah grasped his wife by the shoulders and pulled her close. She clung to his shoulder and his arm and whimpered into his chest, "My baby my John He's gone! Taken by that beast!" She looked resolutely up into Judah's face. "Jude, do something! Go get him back! You have to get our baby back!"

"Judah ..." one of the watchers started, but was interrupted by a woman's scream from the south side of the square.

"It's here! It's in the square!" Sarah Patterson cried out, hands on her face, the bonfire light dancing absurd rhythms across her nightdress and in her hair. She was staring down at the cobblestones that paved the square in front of the cottages. She began to back up, stiffly, and looked about her with panic. "It's here! Holy Mother protect us! It's here!"

Three of the watchers bolted across the square, dodging animals, and around the well and came up abruptly when they broke through the last line of sheep. There in a finger of shadow where night had dared steal into the firelight just to the east of Aprilynn's family's cottage, the carcass of a goat lay convulsing out the last stubborn vestiges of life from its wretched limbs, shimmering in a spreading pool of its own blood. A hint of steam rose from it in the chill April air and the scent of slaughter spread through the square. The goat had made no sound, it never had a chance, most of its neck, including the vocal cords had been ripped away, its head left clinging to its shoulders by a few shreds of skin and sinew around its spine.

One of the watchers, Jim Phillips, the immigrant, recovered his senses and turned to Sarah. "Where is it, woman!"

"There!" she wailed, pointing in horror at the goat. "It's right

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there!"

"Woman, that ain't a wolf! Where's the wolf!"

She turned on him defiantly, "There ain't no wolf there! But it's here in the village! It killed that there goat just now! Look, you fool, it's fresh! It's here! Oh, sweet Mother of Jesus save us!"

Just then from across the square to the west a man shouted, "And here! A sheep!"

"Where is it?"

"There!" a boy cried out. "Over there behind the Douglas place! I saw something move!"

"Where?"

"No, it's over there!" a woman shouted, pointing east.

Voices rang up from all around the village. People ran from place to place, strained their eyes into the shadows, screamed when another carcass, slaughtered without them seeing under their very watch turned up oozing into the cracks between the paving stones.

"I saw it!"

"Quick, torches!"

"No, it's here!"

"I can't see! Watch out there!"

"This way, John no, over there!"

Shadows flitted around the edge of the forest behind the cottages, the animals became restless, fed on the human anxiety and the scent of death, and began to stamp and stomp. Horses whinnied, goats bleated. Children cried out. A woman screamed and men shouted and cursed.

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In the midst of the pandemonium Father stood unshaken, a solid anchor of stony calm in the midst of smoke and flickering light, gore steam, shouting, stamping, and running hither and yon. He looked around at his fellow villagers cavorting and contorting in the firelight like witches at their Sabbath and an expression of nauseated disgust consumed his features. He hefted his gun and raised it aiming at the void of star-bespattered velvet sky and fired both barrels into the fearful, dispassionate darkness. The explosion rose above the din of the frenzied villagers and reverberated against the forest edge, echoed off the cottages and ricocheted around the village square. A chicken fluttered away toward the well, streaming feathers. Everyone stopped in their tracks, silence fell. Even the animals became still and quiet. Everyone and everything looked at Father and stared blankly. He lowered his gun, and slowly surveyed the crowd. He was a tall man, and wore a fur cloak, which made him look even larger. His hair was disheveled from sleep and his eyes radiated a deep rage that pierced even the night and seemed to make the shadows waver and recede. He took a few, slow steps toward the well. Both people and animals moved to make a path for him. Everyone turned as he walked, following him with their eyes. An expectant hush fell across the village, even the insects were quiet, waiting for him to say something, longing for words of guidance, hope, wisdom, and comfort.

"The beast," he started, loudly, turning as he spoke, "has mmm-made you beasts! It wins when you act Ill-like animals! It ch-changed you this night! You are mmm-men, not beasts! Act like it!"

Heads dropped in confusion or shame. The silence remained complete. Father relaxed and spoke less loudly. "Go b-back to your homes. Man the watch." He turned and walked toward the Ketchums. Villagers slunk back toward their homes. A few men went to tend to the carcasses of the fallen animals and the watchers went to their stations to stoke the bonfires.

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"Judah," Father said to Judah Ketchum, "what hhh-happened?"

Judah Ketchum passed his wife to a nearby woman.

"Jilliette got up in the night and went to check on John," Ketchum swallowed hard, but remained strong. "The shutters were open near his crib. He was gone." Ketchum looked down at the cobblestones.

Father remained stone-faced. "Were there ... s-signs?" he asked.

Ketchum shook his head softly. "No," he said, "just gone."

Father remained still and quiet, looking down at Ketchum who looked down at the cobblestones. They remained that way for a tense, long while, private thoughts, different but equally deep, moving in their minds. Around them the village stirred, recovering from the scare and coping with the lingering fear of the unknown and the unseen.

Another woman cried out from inside a cottage, "Where is Matthew?!" Father and Ketchum didn't stir. Two nearby watchers started wearily toward the cottage and then broke into a jog. This time there was blood.

IV. Aprilynn appears ripped and torn and then goes missing

"Father?" Aprilynn's feeble voice reached Father through his ruminations. He turned around and looked angry and confused. Aprilynn stood before him, her left side in darkness her right covered in watch firelight. The light crawled and flickered over her from her muddy bare feet, up over her ripped and torn nightdress, and into her disheveled hair, so that she looked as if on fire. She held both her arms out, bent at the elbows, palms up and looked at him pleading, her hands trembling. Covering her arms were numerous gashes and scratches, her hands slick with blood. Dark stains spread here and there in her nightdress from wounds riddling her body

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underneath, and scratches across her face were caked with black earth.

Father's expression progressed from anger to confusion to concern and as he approached Aprilynn, her legs weakened and she crumpled to her knees on the cobblestones. Father bent and caught her before she fell headlong and lifted her.

"Aprilynn," he said, his eyes wild with worry. He held her to him. "What happened t-to you?"

"The wolves," she said weakly, "were everywhere." She sighed and fell into him. Father carried her back to the cottage. Mother put her hands up to her face when she saw her daughter and gasped.

"Aprilynn!" she cried, and looked at Father quizzically.

"The wolves," Father said, answering her unspoken question. "She's alive. B-bring water." He carried her to his bed and laid her down.

Mother brought hot water from the fire and she and Hezbah carefully cleaned Aprilynn's wounds. Most were superficial scratches, the worst of her injuries a pair of lacerations that ran diagonally from her right shoulder across her breasts to her lower left ribs.

Hezbah's forehead was furrowed with worry and she worked gently and diligently to thoroughly clean Aprilynn's wounds.

Aprilynn woke in the midst of Hezbah and Mother's ministrations. At first, disoriented, she tried to escape their touch, but then, looking around, and after staring confused at them for an agonizingly long moment, recognition began to dawn on her and the fog lifted from her brain.

"Mother? Hezbah?" she asked, looking at each in turn.

Mother looked about to cry and nodded, "Yes, Aprilynn, it's Mother." Hezbah only stared.

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They finished cleaning her up and dressing her wounds, and got her some ale, which she sipped at first and then drank greedily. Mother brought her some bread and she devoured it in huge gulps, barely bothering to chew.

Father went to her. "Aprilynn," he said, softly, "can you t-tell me what hhh-happened?"

Aprilynn wasn't sure what to make of him. His eyes were deeply emotional and his voice gently compassionate. It was a side of him she'd never experienced before and it affected her profoundly, filling her with ardent joy, and then to her terror her joy darkened and was tainted and became anger and she was filled instead with derision, but she held it back and answered him coolly.

"The wolves came and cut me off from the square. They drove me back, over the fence. I had to flee through the edge of the forest to escape them. They took me down once, but were frightened away, so that I managed to escape, and then I made it back into the village."

Father squatted near the bed and took Aprilynn's scratched and gnarled hand in his. He brought it to his lips and kissed it. Aprilynn recoiled at the touch, but let him. "I love you Aprilynn," he said, and then stood. Aprilynn remained silent, but looked up at him with a pleading affection in her soft, forest-green eyes, and then it flickered and went out. Father turned away and went slowly to the door of the cottage, taking his cloak and his gun from the pegs nearby.

"I mm-must see to the watch and the village," he said to Hezbah and Mother. He went out the door and into the square to assess the damage of the attack and ensure the perimeter of the square was fortified and the watch fires tended.

After Father left, Mother helped Aprilynn up to the loft, out of her nightdress, and into bed. Aprilynn drifted to sleep almost immediately.

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Mother and Hezbah put Mother and Father's bed and the rest of the cottage in order and then rested for a while at the table with warm milk. For a long time they didn't speak, and then Hezbah asked, "What do you think happened to Aprilynn?"

"I cannot say, child. She has seen horrors, of that I'm certain, but what horrors and how they will affect her, I cannot say."

Hezbah looked down into her milk and watched the light dancing on the surface. She looked up at Mother, who appeared weary and broken. "Go to bed, Mother. I will wait for Faither."

"Bless you, child," Mother said, and got up from the table. She kissed Hezbah on the forehead stiffly and put away her cup and then went to her bed. She put on her nightdress and climbed onto the mattress she shared with her husband, where she had given birth to her children, and where she had cleaned Aprilynn's wounds. She was soon asleep with troubling dreams.

Hezbah remained at the table and waited. Father returned after some time inspecting the village and talking with the Ketchums and in consultation with Tom Pill.

"Where is Mmm-mother?" he asked.

"Abed," Hezbah said, dryly.

"Aprilynn?"

Hezbah hesitated. "Aloft. Asleep," she replied.

Father went to the dark space under the loft where he and his wife slept. Hezbah blew out the lamp and crept up the ladder to her bed with Aprilynn. Silence fell across the village like a veil. Night crept a little closer on dark, shadowy paws. A rustling in the woods outside Hezbah's family's house ended abruptly and the consummation of yesterday and tomorrow was satisfied. Evening was sated. Dawn was still mystery.

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The night wore on wearily, creeping from hour to hour. The fires died and rose again, the watch changed once more. Invisibly, as silent as shadow the beast visited the village thrice more before dawn. A calf and a sheep were lost from under the very chins of the watchers. A daughter was lost from under the very roof of her parents.

V. The Day of Quickening

Morning came. The day rose chill, stern, and still. Mother prepared a loaf and ale and thought it best to add a cheese as well given the strain of the night before. Hezbah emerged first from the loft, as she had the day before, but arose late. Father did not call for Aprilynn, of course. She needed to heal, in both mind as well as body, and sleep, he knew, was nature's balm. So he allowed her to remain in the loft, his Aprilynn, his firstborn, his precious and priceless princess of misfortune and horrid beauty, on this her day of Quickening.

No one spoke during breakfast. Hezbah stared at her bread and ale and never looked up. Every sound of their feeding was magnified by the silence of their voices. The joyless home Hezbah had grown up with had lost even the hope of joy.

Breakfast was eaten, the few dishes put away. Father went out to assess the damage done the night before, help to turn the animals out to pasture, effect repairs and improve defenses for the night to come.

Mid-morning Father returned. The door opened with a groan and the sunlight of the warming April day fell onto the table in the center of the cottage. Mother looked up from where her head rested nestled in her arms, her eyes rimmed in red and wet with tears. Hezbah had been crying as well. Mother looked at Father with a pleading, helpless expression.

"What is it?" Father asked, panic in his heart. "Where is Aaaa-aprilynn?" He looked at the loft. "Aprilynn!" he shouted.

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"She's gone missing," Mother said coldly, accusingly. "Been missing we don't know how long."

Father turned fiercely on Hezbah, "Where is she!" he demanded. "How llll-long has she been g-gone? What do you know, ch-ch-child? Speak!"

Hezbah cried, "I don't know, Father! She was spirited away in the night!"

"And you said nnn-nothing? Are their ss-s-signs?" his voice broke and wavered.

Hezbah looked at him longingly, timidly, "There is blood," and added quickly, "but not Aprilynn's, not from last night."

Father looked confused. "What do you know g-girl?"

"There is blood," Hezbah started again, "but not from last night. From the night before. Only a little. But not from last night."

"Whose b-blood?"

"I don't know! Maybe Aprilynn's ... from ... from her ... from ..." her voice faltered and faded, then she recovered, "but not from last night!"

Father bolted upright and flung himself up the ladder to the empty loft. He threw back the stale quilt and searched the mattress. There were several blood stains, small dark fathomless wells in the yellowed, dingy bedding, but what they were was difficult to determine. One was near the place where Aprilynn's knees would be, two near her abdomen, another where Father imagined her heart would lie, pounding out the regular cadence of her life.

He bent close and smelled the stains, seeking knowledge in his senses, the things he trusted most. He smelled his daughter's scent, smelled the ages-old filth of humanity unwashed, smelled the scent of womanhood and was startled and repulsed

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by it, smelled his wife and himself, smelled animals and decaying leaves and green grass. He leaped back and cracked his head on the beams that supported the roof, reached up and felt the spot on his scalp through the hair, waited for blood of his own and found none.

"Aprilynn," he whispered hoarsely, and lowered himself to his knees by her bedside, buried his face in the mattress, drank in her scent, and then raised his head in prayer and pleaded for her life and her salvation.

He returned downstairs to the expectant faces of Mother and Hezbah. No one spoke and Father simply shook his head and walked out the door with his gun.

Noon came. A few -- very few -- visitors from neighboring villages arrived for the Quickening. The village was not ready for them. The few decorations were meager and though less than a day old, carried in them an air of great age and weariness. The sunlight seemed to flicker, like a dying flame. Though the light was steady it seemed weak, subdued, and faded in a way that only the spirit could discern. The eyes of the visitors beheld a world of possibility, the spirits of the visitors beheld a realm of despair.

Father approached each horse, wagon, or foot-traveler and told them, "Aprilynn is g-gone. There will be no Quickening."

"What?" "Where?" "I'm sorry." were the reactions.

"There will b-be no Quickening." "She was t-taken by a wolf." "Thank you." were the replies.

By late-afternoon, no more visitors, no more potential husbands arrived for the Quickening. Only the village remained, with the sun setting on the day and the promises of another night with the beast approaching. Mother and Hezbah did not leave the cottage. They stripped the linens from the sisters' bed: Hezbah would sleep on the bare mattress.

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When dusk ran its clammy, cold fingers through the village and pulled its pall over the square, the animals were brought in and the fences, newly fortified, closed. The pyres were stacked and the watches chosen by lots.

The shadows of night crept into the forest around the village, turning it into a single monstrous gloom that wrapped its arms of darkness around their tiny haven of light, threatening to breathe upon it and extinguish the light like a candle at Christmas. Deep in the woods a lone howl began, first low and sonorous, then rising and joined by others in varying pitches that then rose together, and then each in its own time faded and fell and then rose again, until all around the village, near and far into the forest, as numerous as locusts, howls, at the same time lusty and cold, wild and rational, always relentless, rose and fell as if an innumerable legion of wild, carnal animals were poised to descend with the final fall of darkness on the prone inhabitants of the defenseless village.

One of the watchers of the first watch approached Father nervously. "What is it?" he asked.

"A Howling," Father replied, his voice clear and strangely free of all impediment. "The wolves are led. They are driven here. They are preparing."

"Led? Led by whom? Why?" In the firelight the man's eyes were wide and desperate. "Preparing for what?"

Father looked down at the man coldly. "Led by Nightmare. Driven by Sin. Preparing to feast. On us. They smell the Quickening."

The man stared at Father, incredulous. He couldn't believe this stalwart, sensible man was suddenly full of these notions. A grin crossed his face. "What?" he chuckled. The Howling died to silence.

"G-gather the young mm-men, the ones without young

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children. Arm the others to g-guard the cottages. Prepare fff-fff-for a hunt." Father walked away toward his cottage. The watcher stared after him until he disappeared through his door. For a moment the man hesitated, then the Howling started again, beginning with the same voice from the same place deep in the forest. The watcher signaled his three companions and filled them in and they began moving from door to door around the village square, gathering the men for the hunt.

VI. The hunt

"Take this," Father said, handing Mother a gun. "No m-mmm-matter what you see or what it ss-ss-says, shoot it."

He kissed Hezbah on the forehead and brushed her bangs back behind her ears. "I love you," he said, and smiled. "And I llll-love Aprilynn. Never forget that." Then he turned and walked out, the cold iron latch clanking closed behind him.

Outside, men had gathered in the square and were mumbling to one another. Father stepped into the center of the group. One man spoke up, "You called us out here for a hunt. What are we hunting? It's the middle of the night."

"We hunt the b-beast that leads the wolves. Kill the beast and the wolves will fff-fff-flee."

The men murmured anxiously and some turned timidly toward their cottages. The same man spoke for them again. "How do you know that?" he asked defiantly. Father remained still and silent.

Tom Pill studied him and then stepped forward and faced him. "He's seen this before," he said to the crowd of men, still looking at Father. "Tell us," he demanded.

Father sighed. "When I was b-but a boy," he began, "my brother was of mmm-marrying age and we traveled to a faraway village for a Quickening. D-during the feasting, a

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Howling began in the forest. The wolves c-c-came, led by a beast. The village was defenseless and the w-w-wolves poured in like water over rocks. It was like a wa-wa-waterfall of fur and claws and teeth. I remember running and s-someone grabbed me and rrrr-ran with me -- maybe mmm-my father, maybe my mother -- and we hid in a house. Outside there was ss-ss-screaming and growling and people crying for help. I was t-too scared to cry. I buried my head in my mother's arms. My brother was n-n-not with us.

"Then I heard a gunshot and everything g-got quiet. We went outside, and a man with a gun stood there, just looking d-d-down at a body at his feet. It was the body of a ... a" Father's voice trailed off.

"A what?" Pill asked eagerly. "The body of a what?"

"It was lll-like a wolf," Father started, "but it wasn't. It had ... it was" Father looked up and around at the men. "It was a wolf, b-b-but its bones were forged with those of a man. A man-wolf. A ... werewolf."

The men stared at him silently.

"We hhh-hunt the werewolf. It took my brother years ago. It took John Ketchum. It took Matthew and C-carolyne. It took little Judith." Father looked at Judith's father sympathetically. "It t-t-took my Aprilynn."

"We hunt the werewolf!" he shouted, raising his gun above his head. And then he did a thing that seemed at first horrific: he howled, he howled clear and long like the wolf. And then the other men joined him, first Tom Pill, then the others, howling like the wolves, and then the pack of men moved as one, following Father, and broke the fence between the world of men and the world of wolves and they followed Father into the dark, slick, shifting shadows of the forest. Torches were lit, and men spread in a line, stalking the animals that stalked them.

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Father shouted orders to the men.

“Stay c-close enough to see another man! Jim! Not to far ahead, I can't see you in the d-dark!”

Jim Phillips slacked his pace and the other men caught up. Ahead they heard rustling in the undergrowth. Dark forms, shadows inside of shadows leaped and ran and crept through the darkness at the edge of the torchlight. A gap of darkness inside the darkness ahead moved and froze. Ketchum raised his gun and fired. The barrel blazed to life and the dark form jerked with a yelp and tumbled into last fall's leaves. The men charged forward.

“Hold up!” Father shouted. “S-stay t-t-together!” The volume was lost in his stammer. The nearest men slowed, the others surged forward with the crowd of their fellows. They arrived in a ring around the carcass of the kill.

“It's the wolf!” Phillips shouted in the dark, his voice prickling with excitement. “We got it!”

Another dark shape bolted through the trees and a canine form crossed a splash of torchlight. “There's another one!” Phillips cried and ran after it into the darkness, torchless.

“Jim! Stop!” Father shouted, but the adrenaline of the kill made Phillips as deaf to the warning as he was blind in the darkness. Father seized a torch from Higgins and hurried after Phillips. The other men gathered close and watched them vanish. Only Father's torch could be seen bobbing as he ran, weaving as he avoided bush and tree and rock.

“Phillips!” he shouted again and again. “Stop!” But a blood lust had taken hold of Phillips and he could no more stop than he could fly, though in his euphoric rage he seemed to fly as he darted after the wolf he desired to take. A younger man and ignited with recklessness, he outran Father easily and drew farther and farther ahead. Father heard the wild, rushing

turmoil of the wolves hurtling through the undergrowth from the darkness all around him, but could see nothing outside the reach of his torch's glow. From up ahead there came a snarl and heavy crashing. Phillips cried out once, then there was a horrible raging growl and the sounds of something dashing away into the forest to the right. Moments later Father reached the scene of the encounter and off in the distance, yet uncomfortably close, came a howl that made Father's blood seem to turn to ice. All around him, near and far, countless wolves raised their voices in answer to that first hideous cry. Father turned, trying to see his adversaries in the dark outside the feeble ring of light that shielded him and Phillips from their hunger. Eyes reflected here and there and then blinked out as the wolves moved around the men. Father could see the torches of the other hunters shining far away in the forest, too far to help. He looked down at Phillips and an expression of horrified pity crossed his face.

"Jim...." he said softly. Jim lay sprawled as the beast had felled him, his gun, second barrel still loaded, lying by his side. His contorted body lay as it had fallen so that the toes pointed to the stars and his arms spiraled around his trunk which twisted back toward the village. A muddy gap filled the space where his neck should have been and his head lay several feet away, looking into the forest, as if it didn't yet realize it could no longer pursue the beast that had taken him.

Father broke from his contemplation of Phillips when a blur of fur moved through his torchlight. He raised his gun and fired blindly into the darkness. The eyes all blinked out and bodies crashed through the leaves and forest ground cover deeper into the trees all around him. Father turned back toward the other men and ran, ignoring the sounds of panting and pursuit that flanked and followed him. He reached the ring of men much more quickly than he had reached Phillips, gasping.

"Where's Jim?" Higgins asked, alarmed and expectant.

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“Jim's ... d-done ...” Father managed to get out between breaths.

“You just left him?” Higgins accused. Father shot him an angry look.

“Yes!” he hissed. “B-both parts! What d-do you want?” Higgins backed off.

Father straightened and stood tall, a blaze of determination in his eyes. “Form up!” he commanded. “Stay c-close!”

The men spread out and began moving through the woods again, much closer now to one another than before. The moon finally broke the horizon, a crescent of welcome silver light that brought with it shapes and outlines to nearer shadowy forms. Luke Johnson, a young man about 17 took the place at the far end of the line from Father. He watched the open woods to his right with trepidation, his eyes tricking him with every tree and rock. He fired his gun several times at far off shadows, spraying bark and earth, delaying the line while he reloaded.

“C-control it!” Father warned. He was worried Johnson's loose trigger would kill a man or he'd be unloaded when a wolf really came.

Johnson tried to restrain himself. He fired once more at a rock that in his defense possessed an uncanny canine shape. He aimed at another form, but stopped short of firing when he realized it was a bush. He was congratulating himself when a shaped loomed in front of him and to the right. He waited. It moved and he fired his second round, but missed. He began reloading and the line of men bent to accommodate his delay, but he fumbled with the ramrod and dropped it. He bent down and the line broke. He stood and rammed the rod into the barrel, not noticing he was becoming separated from the others. When he looked up to check his place, he saw a form in the forest, between him and the rising moon. He yanked the

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rod from the gun and took aim. The beast charged toward him and as it ran rose from all fours onto two legs for several steps. Johnson didn't understand what he saw and froze and the beast leaped. Johnson dodged left and the beast hurtled passed him through the air, bringing its fore-claw down across Johnson's shoulder, tearing through shirt and skin. It seared into Johnson's flesh like a hot razor and he cried out as he swung his gun around with the other arm and hurtled it at the charging beast. By some act of providence it connected with the creature's head and evoked an angry, snarling yelp. The creature tumbled to the ground, rolled once, and then was up on all fours again and shot into the forest.

The other men came running back and found Johnson bent, his left hand on this opposite shoulder, and staring dumbly into the woods. Father reached the scene last.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"It was a wolf --" Johnson started, "but not a wolf." The men stared at him. He looked from one to the other, blood oozing profusely out between his fingers where they clasped his injury. "It stood and ran on two legs when I took aim – and then it leaped at me! Its face – I saw its face close in. It had long hair like a man's, and its eyes, too. It was more than a wolf, but ... less than human.

I moved, I hit it – Oh, God, preserve me! It hit me, here, with its claw when it passed!" Johnson uncovered his torn shirt and the wound to show the men. The blood glistened crimson and danced with tiny bubbles and foam in the torchlight around a blackish gash that ran down from his shoulder to his elbow. "What will happen to me?" he cried out, staring down at his arm in horror.

"Nothing will hhh-happen to you!"

"But I always heard ...! Look at it!"

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"You h-hh-heard wrong. You d-don't change by being torn by the beast. You have t-t-to want the curse. You have t-to ask for it."

Tom Pill broke in. "You mean someone *wants* to be that ... that ... thing?" he asked in horror.

"S-s-someone wants its power."

"But who?" Higgins asked.

"Sss-someone from the village. The p-preacher man told me, but he wouldn't say who." He looked from man to man around the group, daring them to accuse him for remaining silent.

"That settles it," he continued. "I have long dreaded this d-day. I was always aff-ff-afraid the beast might come here."

The men stood in silence for a moment. The sounds and shapes of the wolves circled about them, kept at bay by guns and torches and hate.

"But what of our children?" Ketchum asked.

Father no longer felt any need to hide behind sentiment. He had lost a daughter to this beast as well, and on her Quickening.

"Dead," he said coldly. "Nothing ll-left to us but bones ... if we ever find even those."

Ketchum looked defiant, the torchlight shifting over him, giving his features an orange-red hue and deepening the shadows around his nose and eyes. "Not just bones," he said, lifting his gun. "We have the privilege of vengeance!"

"Hold your t-tongue, Judah Ketchum. The b-beast is a man in part. Vengeance is n-not ours for the taking, you know that. It belongs t-t-to the God of Hosts alone. But we do have a d-d-duty to rid the village of this evil." He looked around the

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group again, saw only fear in their faces.

“This is nn-no time for fear! Now you know what you are d-dealing with. No matter what it is, it is st-st-still a beast and it thinks like a beast. And th-that is our advantage.”

The men nodded their heads. They seemed strengthened by Father's courage.

“Lets go!” he shouted, and the men followed.

The hunters formed their line, putting Luke Johnson in the center, and moved again through the woods, a glowing snake of determined, angry power.

In the village, the watchers restored and kept order as best as possible. Older men and younger boys armed with the few remaining weapons sat ringed around the well, their backs to the center of square. Occasionally one would feed a watch fire and then sit down again, peering intently into the dark. The sounds of shouting and movement and gunfire leaped at them from the forest, at once faint, at another moment louder and excited. It moved further and further away from them as the line of hunters sank deeper into the forest.

Mother and Hezbah checked the windows and latched the door when Father left. He had given them the “good” gun, and both of them had enough experience to make effective use of it if need be.

“Mother,” Hezbah started, and stopped.

“What, child?” Mother asked.

“I ... Aprilynn ... she ...” Hezbah wasn't sure how to start.

“Spit it out!”

“I lied, Mother – Aprilynn has been sneaking out every night into the forest,” she blurted it out and looked down at the floor.

Mother stared incredulously and silently at Hezbah for a long

moment. Gradually her expression changed to understanding and then she paled and her eyes narrowed.

"How long have you known, Hezbah?" she demanded, her voice tinged with anger.

"Many months." Hezbah hung her head and her shoulders drooped. The firelight danced around the room and played in Hezbah's hair. "She would wait until she thought I was asleep, and then she would get up and climb out the window. Once I went to the window after she left and I saw her go into the forest behind the house."

"How long was she gone?" Mother's anger was held at bay for the present by her curiosity.

"I don't know. I tried to stay awake, but I fell asleep before she got back. It must have been very late."

Mother was silent, her lips pursed, her anger frothing. "Why didn't you tell us?" she yelled. She wasn't sure what she should do, so she did the first thing she thought of: she struck Hezbah across her cheek with the back of her hand. Hezbah recoiled and shrank back. She held her cheek and began to cry.

"I knew you'd forbid her," Hezbah sobbed. "It's all that makes her happy, I think, and she'd hate me for telling." She got some control of her crying and sniffled. "If I'd told you," she continued, "she'd be here now. This is all my fault." She sagged more and whimpered quietly, clearly broken and racked with guilt.

Mother softened. She put the gun down on the table and wrapped her arms stiffly around Hezbah and pulled her to her as she sat in a chair. She held Hezbah's head to her chest and rocked back and forth. "It's not your fault, child," she consoled her baby, "it's not your fault."

Mother held Hezbah for a long time until her little girl stopped sobbing and Hezbah stood and kissed her mother on the

forehead.

"We should check the windows," Hezbah said. Mother smiled, the first time Hezbah could remember seeing her smile in many years.

They went around the cottage again and checked the window shutters and tested the door. Mother made sure the gun was loaded and charged. Hezbah put on a pot to warm some milk. Outside they could hear the occasional gunfire of the hunt, but the cottage blocked most other sounds. The village square was quiet, though tense.

They sat in silence for a long while, only them and the crackle of the fire and the muffled, distant sounds in the forest outside. Then, suddenly, there was a quiet scratch at the window shutters opposite the door. Hezbah and Mother both jumped at the sound. They looked nervously at the window and then at one another. The scratching came again, more insistently, and was followed by a canine whine. Mother shot from her chair and grabbed the gun.

"Who is there?" she demanded boldly. There was no answer but silence, and then the whine again and more scratching as the animal outside pawed the window shutters. Mother approached the window and yelled loudly, banging on the shutters at the same time. "Get away! Back to hell, foul beast! Go away! You are not welcome here!"

As if in answer, the beast growled and snarled angrily and threw itself at the shutters which shook and rattled under its weight. It howled mournful and long and all around in the forest wolves answered. Mother jumped back and put herself between the window and Hezbah. "I've lost one daughter this night, I will not lose another! Away, beast!"

The wolf growled again, and again the shutters shook under the force of its rage as it threw itself against the window a second time. Mother yelled and Hezbah joined in. The beast

slung itself against the shutters again and again, each time more viciously than the last. It snarled and yelped and growled, clearly becoming more and more angry.

Hezbah hid behind her mother, clutching the folds of her dress. "Make it stop, Mother!" she cried.

"Be strong child," Mother replied.

The beast came again, the shutters bowed and rattled, the hinges loosening in their moorings. Again the beast growled and threw itself against the window. The top hinge on the left broke loose and the shutters tilted. The starry night sky and the crescent moon shown through the broken corner. Hezbah suddenly longed to be outside, under the stars and the moon. At least outside she could run, run, and run until she was far away. Desperately she prayed silently. The wolf slammed into the window again and another hinge broke loose. Mother pushed Hezbah back and shouldered the gun. Hezbah backed up to the cottage door.

The wolf hurled itself against the window again and this time the shutters gave and the beast crashed through. It landed on all fours and tumbled to the floor, rolling into Mother's legs, knocking them out from under her. Mother went down on top of the wolf, the gun skittering across the floor. The wolf in a rage regained its footing violently and threw Mother sprawling across the table. It turned on her and then to the horror of both Mother and Hezbah the creature heaved itself up and stood on its hind legs. It reared back its foreleg and cocked its head, the long, dark fur that grew from its head like hair falling about its bony canine face. It paused for a moment, as if it was considering what it was doing, just long enough for Mother to recover so that when it brought its claws down she rolled from the table, suffering only a grazing across the thigh.

Hezbah rushed around the back of the beast and dove for the gun that lay under the broken window. The wolf didn't notice,

intently focused as it was on Mother who, on her feet again, backed up toward the fireplace, reaching behind her while keeping her eyes locked on her adversary, her hand frantically searching for anything that would serve as a weapon. She stared coldly into its eyes, its very human eyes, "a beautiful, forest green," she thought, absurdly. And then the wolf stepped toward her, its foreleg raised, the toes on its protracted paw ending in long, wicked talons, its tail lazily slung behind it and nearly dragging the dirt floor, swayed and the wolf seemed for a moment to grin, baring its mouthful of fangs. Saliva bubbled and foamed on its ravenous, ridiculously long teeth, and then it pounced as Mother's frantic hand connected with the fireplace poker and swung it around. The agile creature blocked the blow with its foreleg, but veered to its left under the impact and Mother dove to its right. The wolf crashed into the wood pile near the fireplace and rolled and twisted sinuously around to face them on all fours. Backed into a corner it arched its back and growled at them. It lifted its head back and howled, loud and piercing, a screaming, hellish howl, so that Hezbah felt every nerve prickling through her body and Mother covered her ears, terror in her face. Outside the other wolves answered, close now around the edge of the village, but kept at bay by the watchers' guns and the fires. The wolf in the cottage bent its long hind legs and crouched to leap at Mother and then there was a flash and a terrible explosion and the wolf recoiled and for a moment looked shocked and then fell twitching to the floor.

Hezbah stood facing it, the barrel of the gun she held exhaling a thin stream of smoke that wavered and dissolved toward the ceiling. The wolf's hind leg jerked involuntarily and a pool of its blood puddled around its neck on the hard dirt floor of the cottage. Slowly, laboriously, it managed to slide its head around and look at Hezbah. For a moment they just stared at one another, eyes locked, Hezbah confused and afraid, the wolf pleading. Hezbah, staring into the green eyes, saw only

an expression like the shock of betrayal.

VII. Revelations

She stepped over to the body on the floor, holding the heavy gun as best she could, its barrel lowered to the earth, her finger on the second trigger. The beast did not stir, its disproportionately long limbs tangled beneath its fallen body in front and lying sprawled out behind. The gray-black fur on its graceful body was long, thick, and looked soft. Hezbah longed to touch it, to run her tender young fingers through its warm pelt. She bent at the knees, rested the barrel of the gun on the floor, and reached out her left hand until the tips of the wolf's fur tickled her palm. The beast gave a huff, its abdomen shivering and Hezbah jerked back. Then it sighed. Hezbah felt a coolness around her bare feet. She looked down at the dark pool swelling on the floor, reaching out toward her from under the dying body of the beast. Its life blood oozed around her feet and between her toes. She moved them, wriggling them slowly up and down, and watched, fascinated by the dark fluid shimmering in the firelight. Suddenly the beast seemed much less beastly and very familiar: flesh and bone, and except for its soul, like her entirely, and she gazed on it sympathetically. Hezbah studied the creature: the tail lying on the hard dirt floor, the lithe body, muscular legs and arm- -- no, forelegs -- and the head with its wolfish ears and teeth and long, dark, hair-like fur. She picked up a pair of shears from the mouth of her mother's sewing basket that had tumbled to the floor near the fire in the commotion.

Timidly, she began cutting away the long mane that fell unnaturally about the beast's head and neck. The wolf looked up at her, pleadingly. Hezbah bent close to the creature's face and softly, affectionately kissed the wolf's forehead. She cut away lock after lock and when she had finished, she sat back quietly, tightly clenching the creature's hair in her small hands. Before her Aprilynn lay curled in a pool of her own blood, the

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firelight glimmering across her pale, young skin in stark contrast to her dark brown hair that tumbled from Hezbah's hand, across her thigh, and lay upon the cottage floor. Aprilynn reached painfully up and affectionately traced a path with her jagged nail through Hezbah's mousy-gray hair and around her ear, and smiled softly into her sister's eyes. Hezbah carefully laid the creature's hair on the floor and curled Aprilynn's gnarled hand around it. A glistening tear cut a dirty, ragged path down Aprilynn's cheek and dropped onto her fingers that held her delight and her curse. She sighed her last rasping breath, and ceased to be. There was no mistaking the long, dark-chocolate tresses that lay across the hard dirt floor, the tips splayed across the surface of the murky pool of blood. Aprilynn's hair was her very pride.

The End

