

This story was written as an original work initiated on October 10th, 2019. The first draft was completed on October 14th, 2019 (7,659 words). The second draft was completed on October 30th, 2019 (6,954 words).

The world-setting (containing Arborvale, Bridgewater Community College, Old Reservoir Road, and other landmarks within this story's context), and the characters of Alim "Albie" Malouf and Drake Caledon are owned by Sylvan Scott. All rights reserved. This story may not be shared or edited without the express written permission of the author.

Vengeance on a Sliding Scale

©2019 Sylvan Scott

1

Squeezing through the narrow, basement window wasn't easy but being drunk made it easier. The aperture's weathered frame left paint flecks across Drake's crimson muscle-shirt and spotted fur. Inebriation dulled the pain as he forced his broad shoulders and chest into the dimly-lit gloom. Coming loose in an abrupt slide, he tumbled in with a thud. A small, low bookshelf broke his fall: crushed into dusty debris.

The hyena rose and brushed himself off.

No cars in the drive and none in the back garage meant he was alone. He had crept through the woods to the Old Reservoir Road house to ensure secrecy. By the time Albie and his father got home, it would be a pile of soot and ash.

He grabbed his gas can and brought it inside.

He'd planned his revenge all summer. With both men away at the local college—one teaching and the other attending freshman classes—Drake's plan was simple. After his eyes adjusted, he looked for the best place to start. Even through his alcohol-soaked frontal lobe Drake realized the room's contents were unusual.

Cardboard boxes labeled "mementos", "books", "cleaning supplies", "clothes (for donation)", and "tools" were normal enough. So were old cans of turpentine and paint. What was not commonplace were specimen jars of formaldehyde, ropes of dried herbs, a glass case of curved daggers, a skull with black symbols carved across its cranium, dreamcatcher-like stick sculptures, and a wall-hanging that displayed an embroidered, twenty-one point, arcane design. The Maloufs had moved here several years ago and always seemed strange to Drake's underdeveloped mind. The assortment of basement oddities only reinforced his view.

"Freaks." He walked up to a workbench against the opposite wall.

Upon it was a mortar and pestle. A foul-smelling, dun-colored substance stained its interior. The muscles along the top of his tawny muzzle wrinkled in disgust.

"Almutatafil ... alssariq! Thief! Thief!"

Drake jumped and spun about. The raspy shout had come from an old jackal woman standing at the base of the Victorian house's basement stairs. She was wrapped in a red shawl covered with gold embroidered symbols and wore a smooth ankh on a necklace. She brandished a cane: jabbing it at him as if fending off an invasive rodent.

"Get out! Out!"

Drake snarled at the slight creature and snorted dismissively. He chucked the gas can onto the workbench. "Fuckin' hag: get lost!" He raised his fist to make his point.

Some Arborvale residents knew that the Malouf family had immigrated with four members. Tragically, this number had been made one less by indiscriminate illness less than a year later. It had left Doctor Malouf, his son, and his mother even more alone in an unfamiliar country.

Drake hadn't known this. If he had, however, he still wouldn't have cared. All that mattered was getting even with his former classmate, Albie. The old woman poked him with her cane, continuing to

shout in blended English and Arabic.

"Damn it, bitch: shut up!"

She prodded him twice more: unintimidated by his thick-necked physique, fangs, and claws.

Finally, fed up with her defiance, he swatted the cane from her hands. He closed on the tiny woman and back-handed her. With a feeble cry, she crashed into the workbench and collapsed to the floor. A tumult of arcane bricabrack rained down around her.

Angry—less at the woman than himself for his lack of knowledge about the home's third inhabitant—he raised his foot and stomped on her bony, fragile wrist. "Stay down!"

Again, the old woman cried out: sobbing and cradling her hand.

Drake glanced at his gas can. His plan could proceed. All he had to do was drag the old witch outside before torching the place, and then...

And then she'd tell the police.

There were few hyenas in Arborvale; his connection to the Maloufs would be easy to figure out.

A knot formed in his stomach. His plan—thuggish and mean though it was—had been undone in moments. His revenge was spoiled. Unless...

Unless he didn't drag her outside, first.

And it would be easy.

A clatter caught his attention and he turned.

The old jackal still lay where he'd left her. But, now, she grasped one of the many small items that hung on the walls or from the rafters. How she'd gotten it, he didn't know. Nonetheless, she held it in her bony fingers. Her milky eyes glared at him from over her greying muzzle. She bared her teeth and uttered a single word: "*Nama*."

What Drake would have expected he wasn't sure but it certainly wasn't the old witch's broken wrist to crackle like dry twigs and set itself. Nor was it an almost immediate filling-out of her flesh, beneath patchy fur, to become healthier ... solid ... more muscular. In his few, scant seconds of bewildered surprise, he watched as she seemed to swell: growing larger and less frail.

But those seconds were not enough to prevent him from acting.

Again, he lashed out with his foot: stomping on her, again and again. His kicks landed on her arms, wrist, chest, and legs. Reaching down, he picked her up. As much as her body looked more substantial, she was still light. Snarling defiantly, Drake threw her against a support beam. Her magical growth and healing stopped as abruptly as her motion. The talisman flew from her hand: coming to rest in the bookshelf debris beneath the basement window he had come through.

The weight of Drake's actions settled onto his shoulders. While fear was an old companion, he did what he always did when it came to call. He spit, defiantly, and banished the emotion to the core of his dark mind.

"Yeah!" he shouted. "That's what you get, *bitch*!"

The fear, despite being buried, remained.

It was time to go.

He ran to the window and began to squeeze his way out.

His eyes settled on the shattered bookcase at his feet. He felt a chill as he spied the strange, twisted, wooden talisman the witch had brandished at the end. Outside, a tremulous moan of wind rose and fell. In its wake he set his jaw and cast his gaze at the cloudy October skies.

2

"*Jida*!" Albie called to his grandmother. He leaped from his bike and ran to the ambulance as the EMTs carefully lifted the stretcher.

His father held him off, saying, "Alim! *Albie*: let the men work! Please: they need to hurry!" His thickly accented English cracked with emotion.

A police officer gripped Alim's shoulder. "Back away, boy. She's got precious little chance as-is. Don't make things worse."

He spun on the cop, eyes burning with tears. "What happened to her?"

"Well, that's what we're trying to determine," the wolf officer said. His tone was infuriatingly calm.

"It was a break-in," Albie's father said. "She surprised an intruder in the basement. I ... I found her when I came home for lunch."

The EMTs closed the back of the ambulance. One walked briskly, to the driver's side door.

"Will she be alright?" Albie asked.

"We'll do our best," the paramedic said. Quickly, he got in. Moments later, sirens and lights erupted to life. The ambulance shrieked down the narrow driveway away from the Malouf's hilltop house.

"Dad: we've got to go with them," Albie said.

"Hold up, boy: we need statements, first," the wolven officer said.

"What statements?" Albie's father said. "My son only just arrived and I've already told you everything! Someone came here, was going to burn our house down, and attacked my mother!"

"Yes, you told us about the gas can." The officer sounded skeptical. "Look, you shouldn't keep those inside your house. A safer place would be the garage with your lawnmower."

"We ... we hire a lawn service," Albie said.

Another officer—a wolf, like the first—approached and shot a glance at her partner. "Like my partner said," she stated, as if for someone slow-witted, "you shouldn't keep gas cans in the house. They're a fire risk."

"It's not mine," Albie's father said. "I've said that, already."

"Arson is a pretty serious accusation," the first wolf said. He lowered his voice. "Look, I know you want to nail the perp, but break-ins are common. You don't need to make this any more complicated than it already is."

His partner backed him up. "We'll investigate, Doctor Malouf. Why don't you run along to the hospital? We'll talk to your son, here, to see if he knows anything."

"Knows anything?" The middle-aged jackal sounded near-hysterical. "He only just arrived! What's *wrong* with you?"

"Dad ... *baba*... they're right! Look: you should go to the hospital ... be with *jida*." It galled Albie to agree with the cops but someone needed to defuse the growing argument. "She needs you. I ... I can stay here and talk to the police."

His father frowned: clearly torn. "I don't want you here, alone; what if he comes back?"

"The perp broke in and left," the first cop said. "He won't be back."

"And if you're *wrong*?"

Albie heard his father's fear and took his hand. "Dad ... dad: I'll be fine." He looked to the cops, hoping to break through their walls of indifference with a meaningful glance. "I'll help them see what's missing and ... and then I'll get a lift to the hospital, okay?"

The second cop nodded, putting her hand on Albie's shoulder. He bristled.

"Your son's right," she said. "Look: you're just getting in the way, here. Your son's more detached from these events, anyway. His eyes'll be clearer and may notice things you wouldn't."

His father, reluctance in his eyes, nodded in agreement.

Tensions finally subsided with the dust of his father's car as it made its way after the ambulance.

The cops, without his father there, quickly showed disinterest in Albie. They gave their platitudes but, also, said that "cases like this rarely resulted in arrests, let alone convictions."

Albie wanted to ask how many cases "like this" they encountered but avoided provoking them.

He and his family moved when he was fourteen. They thought they had been prepared but getting used to a whole new world had been more difficult than expected. It had been Alim and his grandmother who had made sure they brought Old World things with them to preserve their heritage. Ever-studious, he made sure his father had his books, his mother: her favorite spices and herbs, and his grandmother: her knick-knacks and trinkets. He brought as much of his family's past as possible.

It had been a difficult adjustment. Losing his mother to pneumonia a year later had made things even nigh-impossible at times.

Being part of "the immigrant family" had also taught him about being an "outsider". Just over four years later and he was still learning how to navigate a system that didn't care about jackals or any other race from "not here".

There were a few jackals around town but they and their families had been born here. They were even a different species.

Albie's russet fur with cream-white chest ruff was offset by the black coat of his back with white,

contrasting streaks.

Racial appearance aside, he also tended to be ignored due to his overall nebbish look. Unlike his father, he was short and slender: needing big, round glasses for reading.

The conversation with the cops was rote and repetitive.

He explained that his name was Alim and that “Albie” was only a nickname. He told them that nothing appeared to have been taken and that, indeed, his family owned neither a lawnmower nor a gas can.

Neither of the wolves appeared to care.

An hour later, in an October swirl of yellow and orange leaves, he begrudgingly waved to the departing cops.

He felt drained. Exhaustion swept through him like the autumn wind. He phoned his father and confirmed that his grandmother was still in critical condition but had stabilized. He argued when Albie told him he wouldn’t be coming to the hospital. He was too tired and needed food.

Self-care wasn’t something his father believed in but Albie had come around to it after years of public school bullying. College was proving slightly more enlightened but it was still a far cry from the comfort and acceptance he had known back home.

He went inside and locked every window and every door. He made himself a plate of kebabs, lit some sandalwood incense, and turned on the classical music station.

Tomorrow would hopefully bring better news.

As he drifted off to fitful sleep in his father’s living room chair, he didn’t notice the large, hyena-shaped shadow watching from the treeline.

3

The town of Arborvale and, more specifically, its residents along Old Reservoir Road, felt the dark swaths of the season more acutely than mid-autumn than any in recent memory. The attack on the elderly Malouf woman was part of it but, beyond that, were the spates of unseasonably cold and overcast weather.

As the turning of dawn to dusk to dawn churned away the warmth of summer into an increasingly blurry recollection, the skies seemed to grey and darken more than in previous years. The cloud layers spread flat across the sky with roiling undercurrents resembling a vast, upside-down, bay with occasional nimbostratus waves breaking on cumulus rocks. The temperature dropped and, quickly, the flora dropped its leaves: bypassing the usually cheerful yellows, oranges, and reds to directly embrace brownish-blacks and gravestone greys. Several mornings greeted the residents with frost on their windows and, on more than one occasion, crisp, chilling snow would swirl about pedestrians in the late afternoons.

In fact, one morning the flag outside city hall was laminated by a freak, freezing squall.

Then, there were the “occurrences”.

As the weeks approached the end of the month, more people—from the downtown strip mall to suburban homes to outlying farms—reported seeing menacing shapes stalking around the shadows at night.

Vandalism increased. Car alarms screamed only for their owners to find dented panels and broken windshields. Tool sheds and garden houses had their doors and windows smashed as if by some roving gang armed with colossal sledge hammers. A few gutters, already burdened by early ice, were torn down.

Even a few street lights had their bulbs stolen: not broken, but simply removed.

Finally came the report by a group of children walking home from school who swore they had seen and been chased by “a giant, snarling monster” from the treeline along Old Reservoir Road clear to their nearby homes.

While no one took such tales seriously, though, they added to the overall timbre of ominous tidings that gripped the Arborvale community.

The shadows were at their darkest and every moment of the day began to feel like tightly-wound springs within in an old, rusty clock.

Parties on campus were common. Any excuse to buy a keg, dress up, blast music, and dance with sweat and passion was augmented by the chill nights. Hallowe'en added more of a drive. It was something Albie had never embraced.

He had arrived, one July, at age fourteen and spent all his time adapting to high school and helping his father fix up the old house. When his mother took ill, he had even less time to devote to learning local customs.

This was not to say that he was ignorant of the holiday.

School had been full of costumes and candy. The theaters showed scary movies while the local college held a "classic horror movie" festival. All the channels on TV and streaming services became aspected towards the supernatural and frightening.

Other immigrants had told him that Christmas was the most overwhelming of holidays for newcomers but he found it to be Hallowe'en.

Christmas may have been mostly religious but espoused a hearty warmth and focus on good will and the family. By comparison, Hallowe'en welcomed unnatural fixations with danger and fear; grotesquery and darkness were far more conspicuous when welcomed—even in jest—into a life that, otherwise, eschewed such things.

That being the case, every year the Maloufs had to defend their property against vandals while giving out candy to youngsters from the surrounding neighborhood. And while their outsider status may have combined with their old, isolated house's appearance to dissuade many youngsters it also seemed to attract teenage revelers.

Little of that was on Albie's mind.

Grandma hadn't woken. Albie and his father did what they could to get through the days and visiting *jida's* bedside. They split their time between home, college, and the hospital. Tonight was Albie's turn at home: handing out fun-size chocolates and shooing away mischief-makers.

By nine, when the young children were at home nursing sugar highs and most high-schoolers had gone off to bonfires at rural farms, Albie had already chased off two groups attempting to hang toilet paper from the trees.

Tired, he blew out the candle in their ceramic Jack-o-lantern.

Turning to go back inside, he felt the short fur on the back of his neck prickle and stand up. While a predatory species, the jackal still knew what it felt like to be watched. His stomach momentarily knotted as he looked over his shoulder.

The yard, enveloped by trees, was empty but for piles of recently-raked, soggy leaves.

And yet...

Drawing his breath, long and slow, through his nostrils: he scented something. Salty and strong; coppery and musky. A powerful smell: filling the night. The knots in his stomach grew more pronounced. The smell was familiar and made him feel like prey: small and weak. The fur on his arms stood up, echoing that on the back of his neck.

Albie's heart quickened as he peered more intently into the gloom.

Movement in the shadows was normally not a problem for him. His ancient ancestors had been nocturnal hunters. But with the wind in the branches, motion was everywhere.

He stopped, catching his breath.

Something had moved beyond the trees to the west.

He abruptly turned and squinted at the area. His mind told him it was just his imagination but his heart said it had been huge. He tried to sort what the corner of his eye had seen: trying to draw it forth from multiple layers of shadow and dark flora. The forest receded into the dark unknown. Still, he kept staring.

Finally, after an hour-long ten minutes, none of the night's secrets seemed forthcoming.

The familiar smell was still everywhere.

He saw and heard but his family's tree-shrouded property.

He shivered despite his polo shirt and fur.

Tail bristled, he slowly walked back to the front door.

Inside, he locked it behind him.

About to turn on the TV, his still-jangled nerves erupted as powerful vibrations—deep and steady tremors—shook the floor and walls.

When they had first moved in, their personal renovation work had left the immigrant family with extra money. And, so, his father invested in some landscaping. The sound of the large, smooth boulders the workers had rolled from their flatbed truck into the back garden had created the same, resonant booms he was hearing now.

The only difference being, these were getting closer.

The walls shook amidst the creaking of old trees, outside. The vibrations weren't enough to make him fall but his legs felt weak as he rushed to the front window. He reached out to pull back the curtains.

A crack and rumble threw him back as the glass shattered inwards. Grasping talons of bare elm branches erupted into the room: reaching for him. The rain of debris rained down. He covered his head and cried out in fear as several missiles of splintered tree trunk lacerated his flesh and marred his fur. The creaking of upper-floor support beams and breaking roof tiles completed the fading avalanche of the fallen tree.

Moments hung with trepidation: awaiting the next crash. But, despite the groaning and creaking of timber, there was none.

Not hearing further signs of calamity, he slowly opened his eyes.

The trunk of the largest tree in the front yard, had snapped. The bulk of the old, wooden sentinel now lay through the front wall of his home having missed crushing him by only a few feet.

The lights flickered amidst distant sounds of popping electricity.

Shakily, he rose.

His eyes focussed through the stuttering of light and a chill fell over him.

Beyond the shattered window and tangle of elm, he could see an almost straight line of felled trees leading to the edge of the property. Large divots, each the size of a compact car, led straight to the front door.

Another boom shook the house, making him jump as the lights gave up the ghost. Through the darkness, Albie could see movement outside.

His eyes grew wide.

In the wake of the lightning-like flash of the property's transformer exploding, he saw a massive shape: like a mythical ogre or giant, looming in the night.

Stepping backwards, he shakily took step-by-step away from the gaping maw in the front of his house. He nearly stumbled over debris and had to watch his step. More booms rocked his damaged home. He looked up but, in those moments, the giant shadow had somehow vanished.

Albie stayed still and let his eyes fully adjust.

Once they had, he saw nothing in the front yard aside from the damaged trees and their upturned hillocks of earth and roots.

Fear gripped him.

He swiftly turned and ran down the hall, past the basement stairs, and into the kitchen at the back of the house.

Pots and pans lay scattered on the floor. Out back, through the windows, he could see more trees—still upright and waving in the night winds—as well as the garage and garden. A creaking from the floors, above, made him stop. It almost sounded like someone was up there.

He looked, wide-eyed, and swivelled his ears to listen.

With a start he realized that the smell from earlier now filled the house.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Albie jumped, spinning about, at the blows against the kitchen door. A massive shadow loomed beyond it, blocking the back yard.

Enormous and unrelenting, it banged and banged and banged against the wall of his house until, in mere seconds, wood splintered and exploded inwards. Debris pushed him back and fostered a new crop of pain.

He fell on his ass, staring up in horror as his home's rear, exterior wall collapsed and fell away.

The shape that had battered the door loomed, fully exposed. No troll or ogre—not literally, at any rate—but, rather, a person...

A giant.

The titanic person, shins at the level of the former back door's lintel, stood in the darkness with shaggy, spotted fur and the reek of adrenaline, sweat, and blood. But the forty-foot monster's looming presence were quickly accompanied by booming words.

"Knock. Knock."

The grin, high overhead, showed teeth as large as any Tyrannosaurus Rex's. Albie's earlier feelings of being prey were confirmed.

Drake Caledon stood naked in the frigid October night with splintered pieces of Albie's house flecked across his fur and knuckles.

Memories of high school flooded back.

The mockery. The taunting. The slurs. The vandalism. The beatings.

Senior year.

Standing up to the bully ... getting him expelled.

He hadn't thought about Drake in six months. And now, here he was: blood in his eyes and larger than life. The fears in Albie's heart and stomach magnified as much as the impossibly large monster.

With a blur of motion belying his colossal size, the giant hyena kicked in a still-standing shred of the back wall. His mammoth paw slammed Albie flat against the ground and slid him against the cracked, kitchen tile, until his head slammed against the oven. The giant glared with contempt.

Pressure crushed the air from Albie's lungs as the giant pressed forward with casual exercise of power. The hyena's toes splayed and wrapped the jackal's neck. Albie groaned as he felt his bones compress. He could almost hear them creak in protest as the giant's foot gradually increased its pressure. The image of being a spider, centipede, or some other bug being slowly stepped on by a sadistic child flashed through Albie's mind. And he knew with a cold certainty that his life would end like a smear on the underside of a hyena's paw.

Then, the increasing force paused. From above, the giant face began to lower as Drake's other leg bent so he could kneel and peer at the skinny, bespectacled jackal.

"Ready t' die, mouse?" The booming words rumbled with a dead finality.

Albie choked and sputtered, hands gripping the giant paw and trying to lever it off his chest.

Drake chuckled. "Naw: you're no mouse. You're a roach. And you shoulda been stepped on, years ago."

Sparks of light swam in front of Albie's eyes. He grew dizzy, unable to breathe. He tried to gasp, begging for mercy but couldn't say anything. All that came out where tiny, desperate whines and wheezes.

Then, just as darkness was consuming his vision, the pressure lifted.

The underside of the paw retreated and began to lift, outside the damaged rear of his home. It loomed above, rising up higher and higher. Beyond it, through blurred vision, he could barely make out Drake's giant, cold expression.

"Bye-bye, bug."

The paw came crashing down.

Albie rolled to one side. Pain shot through his tail where part of it got caught under the ton-and-a-half foot. With all his strength, he pulled free: fur ripping loose in red welts as he clambered to his feet and started to run: not away from the giant but towards him.

Skirting the giant's mass, he ducked underneath and behind the towering hyena and made a dash for the garage. His father's car wasn't there but there were other things. With enough time, maybe he could find something to defend himself.

Albie's mind spun in wild desperation.

Enough time.

There wasn't. But what else could he do?

Already, his ribs ached, shoulders were in agony, and his left ankle felt twisted. Still, in his frantic fear, no other ideas presented themselves. With a desperation-quicken half-limp, he pushed on as the ground shook. Behind him, Drake turned.

"You ruined my life!" The accusation boomed like thunder, carrying the threat and power of an angry god. "Got me kicked out of school; I ain't even got my GED!"

Albie didn't listen and, even if he had, wouldn't have cared. Drake was making excuses for his own crimes having come home to roost. Hypocritical or not, though, at the moment the hyena had the

size and strength to force the world to see things his way. If Albie couldn't get away, soon, it wouldn't matter whether Drake had deserved expulsion or not.

He felt a rush of incoming air and instinctively darted to one side.

A fist bigger than his father's antique writing desk smashed down, clipping his shoulder with an explosion of dislocating pain.

Albie cried out and half-spun as he crashed to the ground with the glancing blow. Above him boomed amused laughter.

"Awww... Did the tiny, little runt fall down? Here: let me help you up!"

Fingers long as hockey sticks dug into the ground beneath him, flipping Albie up and over. He yelped in pain as he rolled into one of the garden's decorative boulders. The giant hyena laughed and, before the jackal could gain his bearings, flipped him, again. Albie's head struck rock and his world exploded with painful fireflies. The roars of amusement filled his ears.

He flattened his ears and tried to stand but the giant flicked him with two fingers and sent him sprawling through the low fencing around the garden. Albie's mouth filled with dirt, mingled with blood.

"Ooops! Looks like I don't know my own strength!" Drake rumbled.

Face-down in fallow earth, Albie grasped for any hope. Nothing came to mind. In his confusion and fear, he lay still: panting.

"Giving up? Won't save you, you mother-fuckin' speck!"

Hot wind, stale and laden with the smell of corn nuts and beer, wafted over Albie from behind. The giant had leaned down; started to sniff at his mostly motionless body. His heart beat, irregular, he suppressed a shudder.

Carefully, quietly, he gathered his courage.

Clenching both hands into the soil he abruptly rolled over and flung dirt into the giant's face. Small rocks, dirt, mulch, and torn roots bounced off Drake's muzzle. However, at least half a handful ended up in his jack-o-lantern-sized right eye.

The giant's booming snarl seemed more surprised than pained but so magnified were Drake's motions and sounds that it sent new waves of terror spearing down Albie's spine. As the hyena reared back the jackal didn't wait. Albie leaped up, ignoring his body's protests, and sprinted to the garage. He slammed the door behind him and, without thinking, turned the dead-bolt.

"I'm ... gonna ... *eat* ... you!"

The rafters and beams shook with the proclamation.

Albie looked around.

There was nothing, here, to help him. Nothing. Anything he could think of was back inside the house: if not outright destroyed, probably buried in fallen plaster, glass, wood, and drywall.

He was going to die.

Footfall reverberations shook the earth: deliberate and plodding ... closer and closer. Then, after a terrifying pause, one garage wall exploded inwards in the wake of a massive paw. A dislodged beam half swung down striking Albie in the chest. Catapulted back on his ass, he tried to breathe through the pain. Moments later, the ceiling broke apart in the wake of two, clawed hands. Drake's face peered down: smirking and uninjured.

Albie didn't want to think about how the giant's thrill almost seemed like arousal. Was this how sociopaths got their jollies? He wouldn't be surprised. He didn't look at the naked giant's nether-regions; he didn't want any sort of confirmation.

Rather, he stared directly at the hyena's face. He'd run past his fear; all he had left was defiance.

Then, he saw it: the only thing the hyena was actually wearing.

There was a cord or cable of some sort strung around his neck. Drake followed the angle of Albie's gaze and smiled a slow, cruel grin.

"The old witch you kept in your basement gave me this," Drake boomed. He tapped the object hanging around his neck. "I'll have to thank her ... personally." He licked his lips with a feral hunger.

While small and far above the jackal's head, Albie still recognized the talisman. He gritted his teeth.

He had a tool, after all.

And answers.

Now he knew how Drake had gotten so huge.

Raising his hand, the jackal made a sharp, jerking gesture and muttered an ancient word. Power called to power; like to like. The talisman flared with its internal energies and leaped from around Drake's neck. Like a diving hawk, it flew into Albie's palm. He closed his fingers around it and felt the power hum.

"My grandmother ... is ... a dabbler," he said. "She uses the Old Rites for comfort." Staggered but fueled by anger, he stood. "And the basement space you tried to burn is *mine*." His breath rasped and heaved. "I taught my *jida* everything she knows."

The hyena's titanic, dull face showed a moment of confusion.

Albie narrowed his eyes. "Let me show you."

Shakily, the black-backed jackal drew himself to his full height. Overruling his body's protests, he raised his long, slender arms to the roiling night sky.

5

An immediate feeling of hollowness—like a vast, ocean whirlpool sucking into a bottomless void—struck Drake with a winter chill. His fur bristled as an abrupt weakness made him stumble. He felt the crack of wood and concrete beneath one paw as he struggled to stay upright. The ground rushed up at him making him dizzy. His righteous anger faltered: quickly swallowed by confusion and fear.

Motion, just at the lower edge of his vision, caught his attention.

Knee-high, the injured and bedraggled Albie vaulted over Drake's paw and remnants of the wall.

"Where do you think you're—*Arg!*" The emptiness in his stomach, similar to hunger ... a gnawing weakness, made Drake double over. "What ... did you ... do?"

Through slitted eyes, the rubble seemed to get closer: magnifying in size and detail.

"I'm taking what you stole."

Albie's voice had never been strong or loud. But during the attack it had taken increased effort, even for Drake's acute ears, to make out what he was saying. Now, however, it took much less. He reached down for support, his hand hitting the upper edge of the garage's southwest corner sooner than expected. He hadn't been forty-two feet tall for long but he had gotten used to it. Now, he saw that the ten-foot roof was merely waist-high.

"You took something," Albie's voice continued, "something intended to nurture strength—provide power to the powerless—and turned it into a bully's weapon." The jackal had moved to one side. "This talisman is *mine*."

The world spiraled upwards in size as Drake's realization settled on the reality that he was shrinking.

His inflated strength and size was evaporating with each passing second. What had taken weeks of willful coaxing from the basement talisman was being stolen in moments.

"No! Damn ... fuckin' ... *rodent!*" He aimed a punch at the jackal. Between his own disorientation and Albie's size, he missed. Fist hitting the ground with a heavy thud, Drake lost his balance. He toppled head-over-heels to face-plant in the Malouf's garden.

Dirt dribbled from his muzzle and face as he hefted himself to hands and knees, snarling.

Albie had continued to move away.

Through the darkness, the hyena could see his prey looking considerably healthier than he had been, moments before. Drake looked at his arms. They were getting increasingly slender. He struggled to rise but vertigo prevented it. Less than ten feet tall, now, he vomited onto the upturned soil. With his heaving, his size seemed to leave him faster than before. In moments he heard footsteps approaching.

He looked up.

Albie stood over him, the talisman tight in his long-fingered hand.

He looked huge. Drake rolled to one side, trying to move away. The jackal had always been shorter than him. Now, he was taller.

"What... What're you doin'?"

Albie shook his head. "You *know* what I'm doing." The jackal's clothes now fit his slender body as if painted on. He aimed a kick at Drake's chest and connected like a linebacker.

Drake grunted with the impact. Bowled back and over, he rolled into a non-harvested pumpkin. It splintered beneath his head. The gourd cracked and splattered its guts over the back of his head.

"How do you like being the wimp, Drake?" Albie demanded. "How do *you* like being weak and feeble?" He kicked the shrinking hyena again. "Do you, say, feel as week as my *grandmother* when you tried to kill her?"

Albie's growth was minor compared to what Drake had squeezed out of the talisman. Eight feet tall, the lithe jackal's growth stalled.

The hyena's diminishment continued.

Drake struggled to stand but the constant movement of his shrinking paws on seemingly growing earth only contributed to his disorientation. Ignoring the pain from the kicks was second-nature; he'd taken worse. But to see the world swell up around him... That was an injury of a different kind.

Powerlessness crept into him and he shivered.

Albie's drew back and up although his feet stayed rooted in place.

Drake struggled and, finally, managed to stand. His eyes came eye-to-waist with the jackal.

"Damn it! *Stop!*" He lunged, catching his opponent around the thighs in a tackle. The impact, for all his mass, did little. "You made your point!"

Warm laughter rained down over his shrinking frame. "Not yet, I haven't." Albie looked completely healed of his injuries.

Four feet evaporated into three as Drake tried, again, to knock his magical foe to the ground. Too late he thought of head-butting the larger man in the groin. But by the time that realization had come, it was too late. Two feet tall, his eyes were on a level with Albie's knees.

"*Fuck you!*"

The miniaturized, strained tones of Drake's vocal cords made his insult sound like the sped-up and high-pitched squeak of a cartoon mouse.

He staggered back, tripping over a clod of earth that was probably only six-or-so inches in diameter. At his size, it was like stumbling over a beach ball.

"No," Albie's soft voice rumbled, "I don't believe I shall 'fuck you'." His grin widened. "I don't date shrimps."

Abruptly, the jackal crouched.

Drake threw up his arms, protectively, and shrieked.

But Albie only leaned in to peer closely at the shrinking, eighteen-inch-tall man.

"You see, Drake: I might have some sympathy for you if you hadn't tried to kill someone." His voice, booming in the hyena's diminished, fine ears, held notes of barely contained rage. "If you hadn't made life a living hell for everyone smaller than you, I might be forgiving."

Drake stumbled back. His arms, formerly large and heavily muscled from years boxing and street fighting, were smooth and slender. His height continued to melt away as a foot came and went. Tripping and falling into the churned earth. His massive paws had created a battlefield filled with craters and hills. Albie's massive paws stepped closer and Drake scrabbled hastily backwards in a crab-walk.

"You're the one who ruined my life!" he squeaked.

"You really think that, don't you?" Albie said. He shook his head. "You honestly blame your victims for standing up to you. Pathetic."

"I'm not pathetic! You are!"

Albie's face took on a look of disgust. "You really have no concept of irony, do you?" He reached down and made a grab for the hyena's waist. Massive fingers gripped the dwindling hyena before lifting Drake high into the air.

Dizziness made Drake dry heave. Eventually, he caught his breath: finding himself on a broad, leathery platform studded with a lawn of tawny fur. Albie held the shrunken man in the palm of his hand: barely three or four inches tall.

Drake trembled. Giant, amber eyes glared at him. Abruptly aware of his nudity, he covered himself. "Oh-okay! I ... I give up! Please! Stop making me smaller!"

A hot wind snorted over him, making him take several dizzying steps back. He yelped and glanced at the edge of the fingers and the hundred-seventy-foot drop to the ground.

"Not yet," Albie said.

The jackal curled one of his fingers in towards Drake, causing the whole, fleshy landscape to quake. Stabbing forward, Albie's blunt claw tip flicked the inch-tall hyena. Falling, he hit the leather paw pads at his feet and rolled between two clefts of warm, living leather.

Albie's second hand rose over the horizon as Drake struggled the stand. A tree-like finger found him and nudged him back onto the top of a paw pad. Then, the giant pressed down. Drake felt himself shrink even faster.

"No! Stop! Please!" His tiny voice rose higher and higher in pitch.

As it did, the vast eyes staring down at him squinted as if to make out the ant-sized hyena's begging features.

"Good-bye, Drake."

The rumble of the godlike voice filled the insignificant hyena's world. He fell to his knees, sobbing.

epilogue

A traditional happy ending hadn't fully materialized.

Albie's magic wasn't the strongest and his grandmother's advanced age resisted his efforts to improve her health. Perhaps he had drawn upon deeper reservoirs of energy than he knew he had or maybe medical science could succeed where ritual and incantation could not. Eventually, she regained consciousness. Walking wouldn't be possible for a long time, if ever. But she rallied her spirit and put on a determined face as she went through physical therapy. Once she was home, he would try to use the talisman's power to heal her: away from prying eyes.

Albie's father was looking into hiring a part-time, in-home caregiver for the holidays and the two were going to adjust their schedules for the coming semesters to always have at least one of them at home with her.

He was just glad that their time wasn't over, just yet.

Like always, her face lit up when he entered her room.

Albie kissed his grandmother on her forehead and withdrew a small necklace from behind his back: putting it around her neck. She looked to protest its apparent expense but Albie waved away her concerns.

"It's not store-bought, *jida*, I made it myself. A gift ... a bit of brightness during your recovery."

She smiled at its intricate filigree and designs, pulling her grandson close. A tiny noise, like the faintest buzzing or tapping, could barely be heard from within. She looked from it to Alim. "Oh, Albie; it makes a noise ... like something is loose, inside. Is it broken?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, *jida*. Everything is fixed, now. Give it a few days. I'm sure the rattling will fade and stop."

She smiled again and hugged Albie once more.

"You're a good boy."

The two sat and talked for hours. They discussed everything from her favorite teas to the coming winter snows. Eventually, visiting hours were over. When Albie left, he felt completed; like a long road was finally at its end. His grandmother hadn't asked any questions that would have forced him to lie. It was a relief. She was often very inquisitive.

For that reason, she never questioned why the locket was sealed and unopenable despite it having a hinge. Nor did she ask why the rattling might stop in a few days.

And, moreover, she never thought to question why it bore a singular image: a bas-relief profile of a howling hyena.

End