

Beast

She left a message for her husband on the morning of the massacre. Askeila kept her voice as flat as possible, kept the tremors away by digging her claws into the fur of her thighs while she told him exactly where she'd be. Where he could find her. Then she climbed into their car and drove. She packed nothing, only stopped for a latte before leaving town and heading out the interstate toward their cabin.

At the first gas station, she bought a newspaper, and then tossed it on the seat without looking at it. So many lives lost, and she knew each one of them, remembered every single face without needing the pictures.

She tried the radio, but the music broke too often to tell the tale. News like this would not wait for the standard time. The death toll was too high, and the killer still at large. Now was not the time for singing.

The hunt had already begun.

Her nose twitched from one side to the other. Her ears lay flat against her skull. Deeper down, a hound's heart beat faster, remembered they were running even if the car did all the work. Running, and also, running out of time.

The sun already flirted with the trees along the ridge when she turned her vehicle onto the familiar gravel road. No more stops for her now. Nothing up here but forest and seclusion and one old building she hadn't visited once in thirteen years.

Since giving birth.

Askeila parked the car on the gravel and stared with dilating eyes at the dark cabin. Her nose twitched but gathered only the sharp scent of her coffee and the freshly printed newspaper lying on the passenger seat. She brushed a paw over long ears and darted a glance at the front page.

The headline read: Predator Heavy Madman Slays Ten in Workplace Rampage. They'd gotten that part wrong. The genetic research facility where the victims worked had not employed their killer. It had only angered him, only managed to make enough claims about their ancestry to rile the beast.

To bring out the defect inside his blood.

Askeila's eyes teared. She blinked away the last of her grief and shook her head. Too late for regrets now.

The cabin bathed in shadows. Black tree branches danced above, nearly blotting out the moonlight. Her hound side stiffened at the image, longed to bay. Instead, she plucked her cellular from its niche beside the cup holder and dialed with stubby, furred fingers.

"Police hotline."

"I have some information for you." Askeila's voice trembled. She swallowed hard. "About the man you're hunting. The man who m-murdered those people at Gen-Fang."

"One moment, please." A bland voice, too calm for her news. The operator had been coached in trauma, perhaps. Or maybe they'd *augmented* her. Maybe they'd all been trifled with.

Askeila's heartbeat measured the seconds.

"Okay." The voice returned, still flat, still barely interested.

"I know where Brout is, where he'll be tonight." She blurted it as quickly as she could, letting her hare side's terror, her minor, have free rein. Had they implanted that as well? *Did Brout know?*

"Can you give me the address?"

Askeila heard the disbelief and wondered how many had reported sightings already, how many of those had led nowhere. She recited the address while the moon peeked down on the same cabin where she'd birthed her son. *My cub*. Nine years ago on a night just like this one.

"Okay, ma'am, we'll investigate the lead as soon as possible. Would you like to leave any contact information?"

"Wait!" She heard failure in the recited script. "You don't understand. He's coming here now. He'll be here tonight. You *have* to send someone."

"Is there any way you can verify this, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

Askeila swallowed and opened the car door. She let in the cold, the blast of bone-chilling night air.

"Ma'am?"

"I know he's coming because he's coming for me. He is. Brout is coming for me next."

"Hmm. And why is that?" Too flat, too practiced for her emergency.

Askeila blinked huge hare eyes, twitched her nose and summoned her hound's courage.

"He's coming for me," she said. "Because I'm his wife."

She ended the call with the press of a button. No need to wait for a response. They couldn't NOT send someone now. She marched to the front door, crunching the stones together beneath her rear paws. Local cops would need a good fifteen minutes to arrive. Add in the time it took to reach them, factor in disbelief, dispatches, lag time...

How far behind her was Brout? How much of a chance could she possibly have? *For my cub. For Jode's sake.*

She left the newspaper in the car, didn't need to see the snarling Grizzly's face to know he'd gone mad. They'd used his driver's license photo. Profiled him directly below that.

Pred heavy Grizzly succumbs to his nature after a long and tragic history. Brout "The Beast," whose only child was born with a rare genetic defect, has a criminal history including: vandalism, harassment, domestic violence and breaking and entering. Tonight, The Beast's fury escalated, and ten good scientists paid the ultimate price.

They thought they knew him. Askeila could have done better. She could have told them Brout would kill nine years ago, the night she made him promise not to hurt their son. Maybe she was just as guilty. Maybe. She'd wait for him here, where it all began.

The doorknob still rattled. No one to oil it, she supposed. Inside a mother's memory haunted the open room. Ghosts, the first cries of a cub who looked too human for his own good. *My Jode.* The floorboards creaked, even under her light steps. That might help, might warn her when the Beast arrived.

Not that she had anywhere to run.

At least their boy was safe. At least Askeila had that. She could even thank Brout for it, in the end. It had been his fury, the hints of rage that slipped free when the cub did anything wrong. Brout's reaction had convinced her, had worried at her and worn her down enough to part with her cub.

The night Brout dragged Jode home from the fight. The awful day the other boys tried to mark him. Her heart had seized in place at the sight of them. Jode, limp in his father's grasp, dragging his feet and clinging to fistfuls of his father's pelt with too-long fingers. Flat, square

nails. His poor tail fluttered like a sad flag, and his white-rimmed eyes watered, ran like rivers across pink, hairless cheeks.

Brout's eyes had flattened then, and every step curled his lip, exposed a razor sharp fang. His round head alone dwarfed their child, and though he kept his promise, laid not a finger on the boy, anyone could see the desire to shining in his eyes. It didn't take a mother's keen sight then, to see the danger to her cub.

Now Jode was safe. Imprisoned, perhaps, but what institution wasn't a prison in its own way? Her cub would live out his life behind high walls, destined to be outcast, but safe... unless...

A shiver of fear washed through Askeila. Surely Brout would take her bait. He'd come for her, wanted her blood, she knew, more than anyone's. Anyone's except his own child's.

Not that. No. She should call the institute, warn them to keep her boy inside. She *should* have done that first. Now she spun on a long heel. She made the doorway with her heart revving, intent on racing to her child, calling, doing something.

A shadowed giant stood beside her car.

Askeila yelped, let her hound have voice. She reached blindly for the cabin's door.

"I knew you'd run here." Brout's voice shook the rafters. The moonlight cast his outline across the rocks, a giant bear, a madman. His long pelt danced, making his silhouette blur at the edges. His shoulders spread nearly as wide as she was tall. His voice rumbled like thunder, backed by the rage that had pushed him straight into insanity. He roared his words, and the trees cringed away. "I knew you'd run!"

Askeila slammed the door on him. She slid the bolt across to the beat of mammoth footfalls. When Brout's mass hit the panel, it leapt against its hinges. Metal groaned, and dust and splinters rained down around her.

"Let me in, bitch."

"The police are coming." Askeila's chest heaved, the satiny fur around her face slicked with sweat and her ears plastered to her head. "They'll be here. Any minute."

But if Brout ran, he might decide to go after...

The window at the side of the cabin exploded. Glass flew, spraying the room in shards that glinted like ice. Askeila scrabbled at the lock with both paws. When Brout hit the floor, the whole cabin quaked. Askeila screamed and slid the bolt free. She reached for the doorknob, and was lifted from her feet just as her claws scraped metal.

"You turned me in." Brout's snarl surrounded her. His sickle claws dug into the fur and flesh of her arms. "You ruined me, ruined our boy, ruined..."

"He has a name." Askeila snarled back and her husband lifted her higher so that even reaching with her toes, she couldn't find the floor. "Please, Brout. Don't hurt..."

His arm jerked. Askeila flew in an arc across the cabin. For the space of a breath she was free of him. Free. Her limbs swung out. Her ears lifted higher, higher than they had in two years. Since signing their son into the institution.

Long hallways where her padding steps still echoed. Jode's fingers in hers. His eyes down and away, but his sniffing tearing trenches in her heart. A cold pen in her hand. A cold soul behind her, urging her to be strong. "It's for his own good, Askeila."

She hit the wall, heard the impact more than she felt it, though her body slipped to the floor and her limbs refused to obey her instincts' command to flee. Get up. Run. *Live.*

"You made me a monster!" Brout's shout tore at her ears. Too close. So very close. His hot breath riffled the fur of her cheek.

She opened her eyes on a row of curving yellow teeth, the wrinkled lips of the Grizzly, fully enraged.

"Brout!" She tried, but his nose dropped and the eyes that gleamed at her had no feeling left in them. They were stones, empty of anything but his major. His bear. Those eyes said she'd never leave here alive. Askeila had nothing left to lose.

"It's your fault." She could only whisper it at first, but she heard the growl tear from him even as his claws pierced her shoulder. Askeila screamed away the pain, lifted her lip and snarled up enough confidence to shout it aloud. "It was your defect, Brout. You know it was. You have no minor!"

His stare flickered. For a moment, Askeila reached him. Deep in those black eyes, Brout knew she was right. He'd been born wrong too, born all predator, only half full. *He* was the anomaly, the chink in their blood that spawned a throwback. It was that knowledge that had snapped him in the end.

"It is *your* lack that made our son too human," Askeila finished, smiled.

The claws in her flesh twisted. Brout's face transformed fully, reflected the beast that he was. One paw pulled back, a palm as big as her face, black claws like curved daggers. They flashed, shimmered blue and red as the police cars skidded up the driveway.

Too late for her, and yet, just in time. Brout would never touch their son again. Her cub was safe.

The paw swiped down. Askeila's hare side screamed. Her death echoed above the trees, above the sirens and the gunshots, singing of her victory.