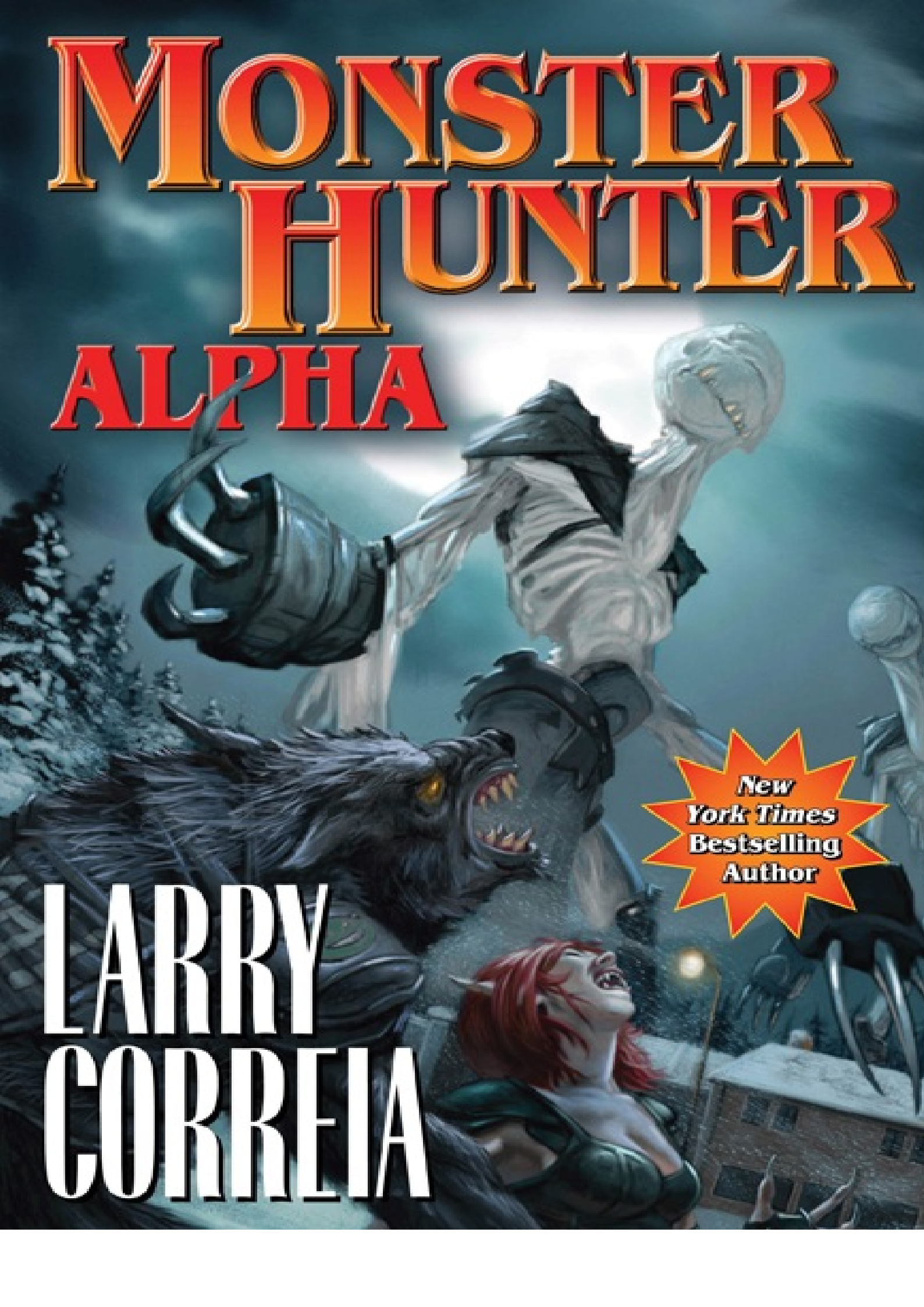


MONSTER HUNTER

ALPHA

LARRY
CORREIA

New
York Times
Bestselling
Author



**MONSTER
HUNTER
ALPHA**

Larry Correia

Monster Hunter International
Monster Hunter Vendetta
Monster Hunter Alpha

the grimnoir chronicles

Hard Magic

*Spellbound**

*forthcoming

Monster Hunter Alpha

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“Evil looms. Cowboy up. Kill it. Get paid.”

—Mission Statement from the MHI Company Handbook

Prologue

The night that Deputy Joe Buckley got disemboweled by a werewolf had started normally enough.

The patrol car's radio chirped just after one in the morning. It was dispatch, reporting a 911 call. Buckley laughed when he heard the description. Something was scaring Nancy Randall's horses. It sounded like a complete waste of his time, but since Nancy held a seat on the county council, she became the priority call of the evening. Buckley, being the nearest available deputy, took the call.

The Randall farm was up 26, way out on Cliff Road. Since it was raining and the roads were slick, it took nearly twenty minutes for him to get there from Copper Lake. When he arrived, the farm was dark and quiet, shrouded in the miserable freezing drizzle. Buckley left the warm comfort of his Crown Vic and hurried for cover of the front porch.

Nancy answered the door with a shotgun. She stuck her head outside and glanced quickly in both directions. "About damn time you got here, Joe."

What did she expect? Copper County only had a handful of deputies and she lived on the tail end of nowhere. There was nothing out this way except for a few abandoned mines, scattered farms, and a whole lot of trees. "Easy, Nancy," Buckley chided. Though she had a reputation for being levelheaded, Nancy was pale and shaking right then. "Just put the gun away and calm down."

"You calm down! Did you hear anything on your way in?"

"Like what?"

"Growling," she answered, watching over his shoulder.

"Growling? What kind of growling?"

"The scary kind...And screaming. Lots of screaming." Buckley laughed nervously, but Nancy was dead serious. "At first there was some crashing and banging, then they started screaming. I thought somebody was hurt behind the barn, crying for help, but when I went to look I heard...something else...Hell, I don't know what it was. So I herded the kids to the back room and called 911."

"Probably nothing out of the ordinary." Buckley sighed. Some regular old animal probably got caught in something, got scared, maybe hurt, and made a racket. It could sound spooky enough. Call like this weren't too unusual, though he expected better from a longtime local. "I'll check it out."

"Just be careful."

Buckley bid Nancy a good night and went to work, expecting to find evidence of either a raccoon or petty vandalism. Surprisingly, he discovered that the horses in the barn were freaked out about something, snorting and kicking at their gates. Their genuine fear was a surprise and made Buckley think that maybe Nancy wasn't completely wrong to be concerned.

He did a sweep of the property. It was too dark and wet to spot any tracks, and none of the equipment looked like it had been disturbed. After wandering fruitlessly around the barn in the dark with only his flashlight for illumination, poking around, tripping over things, and getting generally soaked and frozen in the rain, Buckley decided to call it a night. Whatever had been out there was gone now. He returned to his Crown Vic to call in, thankful that it had a good heater and a thermos of hot coffee.

There hadn't been any snow yet this year, but this was northern Michigan, which meant that when it came it was sure to be extra nasty. Moisture fogged the windows solid within seconds. Turning on the defroster and jamming his hands deep into his pockets, he decided to wait until his teeth quit chattering before calling dispatch.

The Crown Vic suddenly lurched on its shocks. He looked up, but with the windows fogged, he was

blind to the outside world. Puzzled, his initial suspicion was that someone was screwing with him, but then there was a thud as something big struck the hood.

Screeeeeeeech.

The sound sent an involuntary shiver running down his spine. Something had just scratched the hell out of his paint. He reached for the door handle. “Son of a—”

The windshield ruptured, pelting him with safety glass. Black limbs shot through the hole. Buckley yelped in surprise as black fur engulfed his face. Stunned, he tried to jerk the door open but was torn away and pulled against the steering wheel. His hands were swatted aside as long claws flailed, tearing him open. Blood struck the dash as nails sliced through his scalp. Paws clamped down on both sides of his head, and squeezed until his skull cracked.

He was dragged thrashing through the glass, down the hood, and hurled into the cold mud. The claws released, and Buckley shoved desperately against the mass of heat and hair, splashing and rolling in the muck. He ended up on his back. The thing towered above him in the headlights, and Buckley knew that he was going to die. Terrified, he struggled to get his gun from its retention holster as blood poured down his throat.

The animal seemed to smile six inches of razors as the Beretta came out in slow motion. The pistol disappeared into the night as a claw laid Buckley’s arm open from elbow to palm. Then the animal was on him, and Buckley watched in shocked disbelief as it drove its long snout under the bottom edge of his Kevlar vest and bit deep into his abdomen. Fire lanced through him as the animal wrenched its head back and forth.

“That’s enough.”

The animal tore its bloody head free, something red dangling from its teeth. In shock, Buckley stretched out both pieces of his hand, as if to ask for that bit of himself back, but the creature was already retreating out of the headlights. He tried to speak, but all he could do was cough on the blood in his mouth. He felt as cold as the puddle he was squished into.

A figure walked into the light. He was saved! Somebody had chased off the animal. The man would call for help. He just needed to hang in there.

But this man didn’t seem upset. He didn’t call for help. He didn’t tell Buckley to stay calm. Instead, he just squatted next to him in the mud. His features were obscured by the shadow of a wide-brimmed hat, but somehow his eyes were visible, glowing like molten gold. The stranger studied the giant hole in Buckley’s stomach and frowned. He made a *tsk-tsk* noise, and behind him the animal let out a mournful howl.

Buckley had lost too much blood to be afraid. He was just very cold. The man plucked the gold nametag from his shredded uniform shirt and studied it. “My apologies, Deputy Buckley,” the stranger said. He tossed the nametag into the puddle with a little *plop*. “I doubt you’re going to make it. The pack could’ve used you. Maybe I’ll be wrong, but that doesn’t happen too often. For now I leave you to the *vulkodlak*.”

The stranger rose, adjusted his overcoat, and walked from Deputy Buckley’s darkening vision.

PART 1

The Monster

Chapter 1

I've been shot one hundred and fifty-three times. Stabbed, cut, or bit so many times I've lost count. I've been blown up, electrocuted, frozen, buried alive, set on fire, and was once hit by a train. I've fought in both world wars and a few others. I've killed men on all but two continents. I've killed monsters on them all. Other dimensions? Twice.

I guess you can say I get around.

Husband, father, grandfather, and now great-grandfather, I've seen whole generations come and go. I've loved, protected, and watched over my family, the Shacklefords, for decades. With a couple of notable exceptions, most of them have turned out pretty good. Which is important, because in the grand scheme of things, the Shacklefords are a very special bunch. This particular journal is not about them.

I run Monster Hunter International, the best outfit in the business. You work for MHI for very long, and you'll see some things. I've run into some of the weirdest beings in God's creation and killed a whole mess of them. You wouldn't believe the shit we've fought. There are a lot of innocent folks alive right now only because one of my Hunters stepped up and did what had to be done. The bravest men there have ever been look at me to be their leader, and that's a humbling thing. But this journal ain't about them, either.

I've already written those things down. Now I need to focus on the hard part. This is the third journal I've attempted to write. If you are reading these words, then I can only assume that you know the truth about me. This book is about things I'd rather not share, things I'd rather have forgotten. But no one lives forever. I'm hoping that some of the things I've learned might help after I'm gone. A wise man once told me that we're no smarter than the Hunters that came before us. The only reason we've got a clue is because those guys bothered to write stuff down. So here goes.

I'm a werewolf.

You've got no idea how remarkably hard that was to write. I stare at those words and want to tear the page out and burn the evidence. We tend to be a secretive bunch.

See, I bear a curse. You learn to deal with it, or it deals with you. Crying about it won't change anything. Embracing it will destroy you. I have stared into the face of evil, and I've been the face of evil. I've done some bad things in my life. Good thing I've lived a long time because I'm still trying to even that score. Some folks would call it penance. I call it my job.

I am a Hunter. I am a Monster. I was born Raymond Earl Shackelford Jr., son of the greatest Hunter who ever lived, in the year 1900. I've held many names since.

Today they call me Harbinger.

* * *

"Well, ain't you Mr. Melodramatic?" Earl Harbinger muttered to himself after rereading the first page of the journal. Frankly, it was surprising that he'd managed to fill so many pages in it already, and reading through them had given him something to keep occupied while waiting for the meeting. The leather-bound book went back into an internal pocket of his battered bomber jacket and a pack of Marlboros came out. Shaking one loose, he put it to his lips while pondering on the book.

Writing his personal history had been Julie's idea. Originally he'd been resistant to the idea of chronicling his life, but the fight with the demon Rok'hasna'wrath had cost him dearly. Earl pulled out his Zippo and lit the cigarette. The lighter was a perfect example of the damage the minor Old One

had inflicted on Earl's mind. The Zippo had been engraved with the MHI logo, and he knew it had been a birthday present, but for the life of him he couldn't remember when he'd gotten it or who was that had given him the gift. It was one of hundreds of little things he had lost. Random memories had been ripped from his mind and swallowed whole or torn into indecipherable shreds and scattered. Rocky, devourer of souls and reaper of worlds, had been a real asshole that way.

There were gaps, blank spots, fuzzy bits where the original events were lost but he could recall telling the stories to others, like a weird secondhand report. He didn't even know the entirety of what was missing. The journals had been started as tools to find out just what had been taken away. He had written one chronicling the Shackelford family history and another about Monster Hunter International. The realization of the sheer number of events he could not recall had been a slap in the face.

Thinking about it left Earl bitter. It was too bad that Z had driven Abomination's bayonet through Hood's black heart. Martin Hood had gotten off far too easily for Earl's tastes. Rocky had robbed him, but that creature had only been summoned to perform the job. It had been at Hood's bidding, where his old friend had wanted to make it personal.

Ironically, the thing that had brought him here was also about personal business. Once again, the past had come back to haunt him, but when you're over a hundred years old, you build up an awful lot of past.

The bar was kept purposefully dim. It hid the grime and, once the crowds came in the evening, would help mask the unattractive. There was an old-fashioned jukebox playing country music. He had picked a table in the back. It was still early in the day, so the only other inhabitants were the solitary types with nothing better to do than down a couple of beers before lunch. Earl took a slow drink of his. It was just the kind of out-of-the-way dive that somebody like Conover would pick for a clandestine meeting.

It had been decades since they'd last spoken, but Earl had not hesitated to drop everything when he'd gotten the message. Making up some excuses, he'd told the rest of his team that he was taking some vacation time—which had shocked everyone—promised he'd be back before the full moon, loaded some gear in his truck, and driven the six-hundred-some-odd miles to rural Illinois.

Earl didn't like lying to his people. Hunters lived or died based on trusting their team, but this wasn't MHI business. And if it was what he feared, then he definitely didn't want to involve them.

He studied the other patrons, normal working stiffs, just regular Joes. A tired bartender was watching the TV on the wall and eating stale pretzels. There was one almost-but-not-quite-pretty waitress wiping tables. His heightened sense of smell confirmed that everyone here worked for a living. The air stunk of chemical fertilizers, truck cabs, engine grease, and French fries. Earl could usually tell who someone did for a living long before they opened their mouths. If any of them were undercover Feds here to snoop on his business, they were extremely good at it. Considering the kind of work that he'd once performed for Conover, he'd fully expected the place to be bugged and surveiled by all sorts of government types. Instead, the most interesting scent was the fry cook, and that was only because Earl was hungry.

The captain's message had been short. He hadn't elaborated on what business they needed to discuss, but it sure as hell wasn't to reminisce about the old days. There could only be one reason. The Russian was back. Earl took a long drag from his cigarette as he stared off into space. The single baddest son of a bitch Earl had ever had the sad displeasure of squaring off against. Sure, he'd won last time, but a lot of people had died in the process. Good people. Sadly, Rocky had left most of *those* memories, the spiteful demon prick.

The Russian had dropped off the grid years ago. Earl had hoped that he'd had the decency to just die but had known that was wishful thinking. There was only one reason he could think of that would bring Nikolai Petrov to America, and Earl had known the time would come eventually. Driving a night had given him time to think about what it meant, and it had made him glad that he was doing this on his own. His Hunters had faced some terrifying things, but Nikolai wasn't just another monster.

This time was going to be different. He wasn't going to play Nikolai's games. Things had changed since Vietnam. No contest, no bullshit, no hide-and-seek. This was going to be a straight-up, old-fashioned execution.

Thoughts of revenge were interrupted as a sudden rectangle of daylight appeared at the front of the room. A tall, stately gentleman with silver hair entered. He was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, but somehow he even made that look a little too professional. Kirk Conover had arrived. The man stepped into the room, subtly breaking the bar into quadrants and scanning each one for threats like the trained operative that he was. Conover's head dipped briefly in acknowledgment as he glanced at Earl's table. Satisfied there were no obvious watchers, the former liaison officer of Special Task Force Unicorn started over.

Earl was distracted by a female voice. "You can't smoke in here."

He looked up to see the almost-pretty waitress standing over him, hands on her hips, disapproving. He let the cigarette dangle from the edge of his lip. It was only half done. "We're in a bar...."

"No smoking," she said sternly.

"Seriously?" The frown said she was serious. He didn't think he could use the excuse that he had a medical condition, either. Saying that the nicotine helped keep him from massacring everyone in the room in a fit of bestial rage, though partially true, probably wouldn't help his case. "Please?"

She shook her head. "It's a state law. Sorry. We could get fined."

"That's a stupid law," Earl muttered. Everywhere he went now there were laws stacked on top of other laws until there was a mountain of laws ready to collapse in a giant avalanche of meddling. "Fine." He flicked his tongue, put the lit cigarette in his mouth, swallowed hard, and ate it. It burned going down. "Happy?"

"Gross," the waitress said as she quickly retreated.

"Hey, get me a drink too, honey. Whatever that cranky bastard is having," Conover called after the waitress. He stopped in front of Earl's table. Conover had aged, as was to be expected, since they hadn't spoken since Vietnam. The fighter-pilot-turned-spook had always been tall, several inches over Earl's average height, and in good shape. Now he was approaching old age and didn't seem quite so tall anymore, but still very fit for a senior citizen. Kirk had aged, but he'd aged well. "Well, you've still got a way with the ladies, I see."

"You were the lady's man, not me." Earl gestured with his bottle of Sam Adams. "Have a seat, Captain."

"I retired as a colonel," Conover replied as he pulled up a chair. "And that was a while ago. But damn, Earl... You look nearly the same.... Well, you did get a shave and a haircut."

"A couple since then, I suppose."

"Good thing, too. You looked like a filthy hippie."

Earl shrugged. "You kept us awful busy to worry about the state of our grooming."

"Things were crazy there at the end." Conover gave a little chuckle.

He hadn't meant it to be funny. Earl and the other *special* members of the task force had been one step above slave labor, and this particular air force officer had been their overseer. Earl studied his old boss. Conover watched him back, and the two sat in uncomfortable silence for some time. People

always told Earl that he had an unnerving way of looking at people, but Conover had been one of the few that had always been tough enough to look him in the eye. At least that hadn't changed.

The waitress came back and left another bottle on the table. To be fair, Conover had been as decent a sort as could be expected, given the circumstances, and had actually looked out for the monster mutants, and misfits under his control. The Perpetual Unearthly Forces Fund was as blind as lack of justice and far less merciful. If your kind were on the list, you were fair game. An individual had to *earn* the right to be PUFF exempt, so the government always had some *special* volunteers. After fulfilling the terms of the government's agreement, Conover had kept his word and made sure that Earl's name had been put back on the exemption list.

His former boss may have gotten old, but he hadn't gotten soft. Conover stared back at him unblinking. There was no guilt there. This was a man given hard orders who'd done his duty, that was all, and that was something Earl could respect. They hadn't spoken since the last evacuation, and Earl was curious about the other survivors. "Have you seen Sharon Mangum?" Earl asked finally.

Conover smiled, still with that lopsided way that the Saigon bar girls had found so charming. "We got married not too long after your tour was over."

"I'm shocked," Earl said, perfectly deadpan. The two of them had a thing there going toward the end. The fraternization rules sort of went out the window in an oddball outfit like theirs. "I figured that might happen. Extremely late congratulations are in order."

"Best thing that ever happened to me. The agency bounced us all over the place afterward. She hated that part, as you can imagine. But we settled down finally when I got stationed in DC. Moved out here when I retired."

"Family?"

"We've got a son and three daughters."

"Human?" Earl asked.

"Mostly."

"Good to hear, Cap." With Sharon's condition, it could have gone either way. "She was a fine girl. Saved my bacon a few times."

Then Conover let out a long sigh. "She died last year," he said. "Car accident."

It had to have been a bad accident to kill a half-siren. "I'm sorry. I know how you feel." So much for trying to be cordial. "I'm guessing you didn't send me that mysterious letter just so we could shoot the bull over some beers?"

"It did get your attention, didn't it?" Kirk gave a sad little laugh before taking a long drink. "Over the years... We were never really buddies, were we, Earl?"

Conover had been a decent man to work for, considering the circumstances, but Earl had still been there against his will. He didn't mind war. In fact, he was rather good at it and would have gone on if he'd been asked rather than threatened. "I like to think of us as business associates with a relationship based on mutual respect. Well, and the fact that I'd have gotten executed if I disobeyed your orders."

"Smart-ass. You know, when you got assigned to me, your file said you had authority problems and I'd probably have to terminate you."

"Aw, they were still just sore because of that time I punched out Jimmy Carter." Sure, he'd only been governor then, and that little stunt had cost MHI some business, but he had deserved it.

"You always were the lone wolf, weren't you?" Kirk asked rhetorically. "Well, back to business. I've still got people who owe me. When certain things pop up, I hear."

Men like Conover tended to accumulate a lot of favors. "Nikolai's back, ain't he?"

"Afraid so. Last we'd heard he'd gone freelance. Mercenary werewolf for hire. Worked for various

bad people eating other bad people, and then all of a sudden, nothing. He just disappears. Until the week. Any idea what would bring him out of the woodwork after all these years?"

Earl shrugged. "Nikolai's a badass Russian. Badass Russians only have three emotions: revenge, depression, and vodka. Where is he?"

"It isn't that easy, Earl. First I've got a question about what happens when you find him."

"You know exactly what'll happen when I find him."

Conover nodded. "Yeah, stupid. I contacted you, remember? You're about the most determined killer I've ever met. Once I set you on Nikolai's trail, that bastard's good as dead. I'd swear you're not part wolf. You're part bloodhound. Not the *what*, Earl. I want to know the *why*. I'm retired. This isn't going in a report. You can level with me."

Earl paused. How was he supposed to answer that? Nikolai was dangerous. He was everything bad about werewolves rolled up into one exceedingly ruthless and intelligent package. He was the big bad wolf. He was evil, but there were plenty of evil people in the world, and he didn't go around hunting them all down. "Revenge is as good a reason as any, I suppose."

"You can do better than that." Kirk leaned back in his chair and studied him. "That was war. We did what we had to do."

Since Kirk understood monsters better than most people ever could—hell, he'd married somebody that technically was one—Earl figured he might as well level with his old commander. "There's something else...There are certain rules, ways of doing things. It's been the same since the beginning. There's always one who's the strongest. He sets the rules."

"They form packs once in a while, that's about it. You trying to tell me that there's some werewolf society with rules? Werewolf law? I must've missed that briefing."

"Not in the way you're thinking of it," Earl answered. "Maybe rules ain't the right word, but it'll do. New werewolves break them because they don't know better. Most folks, when they turn, they go right to doing whatever urge strikes. For the ones that live, though, after a while, they'll sense what the rules are, and they either obey them, or somebody like me comes along and takes them out."

Kirk studied him for a moment. "Somebody like you, meaning a Hunter, or an Alpha werewolf?"

Earl nodded at the terminology. As usual, Kirk knew more than he revealed. "Same difference. Even though it wasn't. "Some old werewolves break the rules, but most know better than to piss off the strongest. When he finds out, then there's hell to pay."

"What're the current rules?"

"There's only a couple. But basically, leave humans alone. They live by the rules, and regular people never even know we exist."

From the look on his face, it was obvious that Kirk's suspicions had just been confirmed. "I thought so. You know, I've learned a few things about werewolves since we last worked together. Most of them don't care. They do whatever they want, regardless of what some old guy says."

"I didn't say it worked well, but you don't want the world's werewolves instinctively following the example of a real aggressive leader. The way it is now is better."

"What happens if there's a new boss?"

"They'll all sense it. The rules will change...and you don't want somebody like Nikolai setting the rules. He doesn't see us as people who are different. In his mind, we're superior and humans are prey. The curse will spread. Packs will grow. You do the math."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully. "I figured it was some sort of monster psychology like that."

"So why does the Russian have to die?" Earl leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. His minotaur-hide coat creaked. "Because *I'm* the king of werewolves, and I said so."

Apparently, that had been the answer Kirk was looking for. "Nikolai is in America."

"Figured that was the case. Where?"

"North of here. Middle of nowhere, Michigan. He was spotted arriving in the US last week. Intel says he was heading for a town called Copper Lake. Heard of it?"

"Can't say I have. How do you know all this?"

"I'm retired. Not dead. I've still got friends in the business who like to keep me informed." The nebulous answer indicated that he was not ready to give up all his secrets.

"Are the MCB planning to take him out?"

"The Monster Control Bureau doesn't even know he exists. When the task force was shut down, we passed most of our files on, but not everything. Back then the MCB were just glorified cops and damage control. Our op was national security on a need-to-know basis. They didn't need to know."

"Good. They'd just complicate matters." The last thing Earl needed was Myers's goons getting in the way. "So, I answered your question, Kirk. Now you answer mine. Why'd you bring me in on this?"

Conover's beer was half empty. He swirled the remainder around and stared at it. "You and me, we're the last surviving members of the task force."

"Turns out the Destroyer is still alive," Earl pointed out.

"Really? Pitt the crazy Green Beret? Huh...Didn't know that. He must have gone on to something so classified that even my department didn't get a whiff of it. Well, Nikolai was our problem, and I don't like leaving problems unsolved. I'm too damn old now. I can't take him. Hell, I couldn't back in my prime. You, on the other hand, can. Sure, I could call the MCB. They'd go crazy if they knew Stalin's pet werewolf was roaming around their turf, but I'd like this to stay in the family."

Earl could tell there was more. "And?"

Conover studied the tabletop, mulling over his answer. "Sharon used to have bad nightmares, all the time, our entire marriage. And it was always the same thing. Golden eyes and white fangs...The Russian would come for her, and he'd take our kids, too, just out of spite. She never had closure. He killed most of the task force. She always felt that he'd come back to finish the job."

Nightmares. Earl didn't have nightmares. He gave them.

"That son of a bitch stole years of Sharon's life, and I couldn't protect her. Now that I know he's alive, I need you to destroy him, Earl, absolutely *destroy* him. I want him to feel how she felt. I've seen what you can do. Do it for the task force. Do it for her. And when you're finished...Then I can go to Sharon's grave and tell her it's finally over."

Earl raised his bottle. "For the ones that didn't make it."

They clinked their beers together. "To lost friends and a shitload of dead communists."

Earl Harbinger could drink to that.

Chapter 2

The morning after the first night I changed I woke up naked in a pool of blood. None of it was mine. I was in a farm house, a little pueblo on the river. The flimsy door had been ripped off the hinges and was lying in the yard surrounded by pecking chickens. The farmer's family was spread from one end of the place to the other, splattered on the walls, dripping from the ceiling, and turning the dirt floor into mud. I could still taste them in my mouth. Bits of them were stuck in my teeth.

It's a hard thing to explain. The memories while I'm changed are different. They're difficult to put into people words. It was like waking up from a dream, one that I could only partly remember, but I knew exactly what I had done to them. MHI hadn't known much about werewolves back then. It was a mess of myth and old wives' tales, but now I understood how the curse was transferred. A simple bite one month before. That was all it took to end my life.

I found the farmer's old Navy Colt tossed halfway to the well. Though I could still feel where a slug had punched through my ribs under the caked-on blood, there was no wound now. The hazy memories told me that the bullet had just driven me into a frenzy. The Colt hadn't done the farmer a lick of good, but under that bright morning sun, I prayed to God that it would work for me now. I destroyed monsters. I would not become one. I put the muzzle under my jaw and angled it to take the back of my head off.

The others would surely find this place soon enough. They'd probably already seen the gathering vultures. Hunters would learn from what happened to me and not make the same mistakes. That was the last thought I had before I dropped the hammer.

I came to later with a splitting headache. Like I said, back in those days we hadn't known much about werewolves.

* * *

Heather Kerkonen didn't have to work the night shift. She had enough seniority to claim days, but she had always been a night person by nature. Working nights ruined any chance she had for having a social life, but excepting the occasional accident, bar fight, or somebody doing something stupid, the nights were usually quieter, almost peaceful.

Last night had been an exception. It had been one call after another. The state police had found some drifter wandering around a campground, screaming about the end of the world, and had put him in the closest lockup, which happened to be Copper Lake, where the nut had promptly bit a chunk out of the jailer's hand when they'd tried to restrain him. Heather had just come on duty and took care of the problem with a liberal dose of pepper spray and an ASP baton. After that she'd gotten a call about two hikers who hadn't made it back to their camp yet, but that turned out to be Baraga County search and rescue's problem. Then she'd had to check out a missing-person call because Mr. Loira had never gotten home from work—probably passed out drunk again somewhere—but all that had been interrupted when she'd heard that Joe Buckley had been mauled by a bear.

Sure, they had bears in northern Michigan—wolves, too—but nobody could remember the last time one had actually attacked someone. Heather had been incredulous when she'd heard the panicked call over the radio. It had to be a mistake. She'd driven like a madwoman to get out to Cliff Road, but by the time she'd arrived they'd already loaded Buckley into the ambulance. The early prognosis was grim, and when she saw the deep red of the puddle they'd lifted him out of, she knew that her friend was surely going to die.

Nancy Randall had found him. The poor lady was in shock. She'd been telling the other deputies about how she'd heard howling, but that was absurd. No wolf could do something like that. There were claw marks that actually pierced the metal of the patrol car's hood.

She and the other deputies had been joined within half an hour by two representatives from the Department of Natural Resources and some volunteers with a few good hunting dogs, but they'd found no sign of the bear. The dogs wouldn't cooperate. They'd sniffed around Buckley's damaged car only to retreat with their tails between their legs. No amount of coaxing could get them to go back.

Heather had grown up hunting in those woods, less for fun than because they'd been poorer than dirt and the only meat that ended up on the family table had come from things that she had shot herself. However, she had no idea how to track an animal. Sitting in a tree stand and waiting for a deer to walk by doesn't exactly make you Davy Crockett. She'd taken the Winchester shotgun from her cruiser, loaded it with heavy-duty slugs, and set out anyway. The wet ground had been so churned by clumsy footsteps at that point that she couldn't spot a thing with her flashlight. Sunrise hadn't helped either, and though more volunteers had arrived, the damn bear had gotten away.

The place was covered in fish cops, and the sheriff himself had taken command of the scene by the time Heather returned. Kai Hintze had been sheriff since Heather had come back to Copper Lake from Minneapolis. He was fifty years old, fifty pounds overweight, and a hardcore sci-fi nerd, so Heather hadn't expected much from her new boss, but Sheriff Hintze had turned out to be a good leader who watched out for his men and his county. He kept getting reelected because he honestly cared about the people, and compared to his incompetent predecessor, the county loved him.

The sheriff was talking to one of the DNR men. The game wardens weren't very popular amongst the independently minded types that lived in places like Copper Lake. She'd had a few run-ins with game wardens back in her teens, when she hunted game regardless of season—the squishy environmentalist types were the worst. But this particular one conducted himself like an old pro and seemed to know what he was talking about. Heather approached from behind and didn't want to be rude and interrupt.

"I'm telling you, Sheriff. There is something seriously wrong here. Colleague of mine out of Washington State, Terril Erion, he had a case like this a while back. Animal attack that didn't seem to fit, just like this....A particular government agency got involved. Do you *know* the agency I'm talking about?"

Sheriff Hintze was nodding his head. "Every sheriff in the country gets a vague briefing and a number to call in case of something weird. You really think there really are...Naw. That's ridiculous." He realized Heather was standing there and abruptly stopped. The DNR man looked away, sheepish like they'd been caught talking about something naughty. The sheriff coughed. "Deputy Kerkone. Any luck?"

"Nothing, sir. Any word on Buckley?"

"Not yet." He took in her soaked and muddy appearance. "How long have you been out here?"

"Since we got the call."

"You look beat, and your shift was over hours ago. There's really nothing else you can do here."

"Sir, I—"

"I understand. Joe is my friend, too, Heather. Why don't you go see him?" *Before it is too late.*

She waited until she was a mile down the road before she screamed in frustration, swore her head off, and punched the steering wheel until her hand hurt. Her department had lost people before, but not things that made sense, like a meth head or a car wreck....Who got killed in the line of duty by a damned *bear*? This wasn't Alaska. This was *Michigan*.

It didn't make sense. Winter was coming. She was no zoologist, but shouldn't the stupid thing have

been hibernating? The attack had occurred during a freezing rain: why was it even out and about, and why would it attack a car? Heather had no idea, and now her hand was sore, and she chided herself for the tantrum. She had always struggled with her temper.

Why couldn't she have been the one to take the call? Maybe if it had been her instead of Buckley, she wouldn't be dying right now. Maybe she could have done something different...She knew it was stupid to blame herself, but Heather had always been protective of anyone she deemed to be *her people*. That attitude had always made her popular amongst her coworkers, but had gotten her in trouble a few times with her superiors in her last department. Copper County was different. This was her town, her people, and this department was *family*. Only now one of them was dying, there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it, and it was really pissing her off.

It had been several hours after the Buckley call that she had finally made it back into Copper Lake. Half the staff of their tiny department and several family members had gathered in the hospital waiting room. Buckley was a popular and beloved man. By some miracle he was alive, which had absolutely amazed the doctors, but they said that it was too early to tell what would happen and too risky to airlift him someplace better. Heather didn't like hanging out, nervous and emotional, in hospitals. She had done far too much of that in her life already, and though her shift was over she had volunteered to head into the office to see if she couldn't help out for a bit. She was still too fired up to go to sleep anyway, and it wasn't like there was anyone waiting for her at home except for her dog.

Back at the station, hungry and cranky, Heather had not been surprised to find that nobody had bothered to put on more coffee. She bought a Diet Coke and a package of expired chocolate doughnuts from the office vending machine instead. She didn't think that doughnuts were supposed to be crunchy, but they had sugar, and that was the important thing. She knew that despite religiously hitting the treadmill every day, if she kept up her junk-food addiction she ran the risk of turning into another Upper Peninsula "snow cow," but that was a risk she was willing to take.

"Did you see Joe, Kerkonen?" asked Chase Temple, one of the new road deputies from days. Heather didn't know him that well yet, just that he had recently gotten out of the Navy and was taking correspondence courses from Northern Michigan University toward a political science degree. His youthful enthusiasm made her feel ancient. She had just turned thirty-six. "I'd heard he was bad off."

She had to pause to not talk with a mouth full of doughnut. She didn't really know what to say anyway; it wasn't like she knew any more than anyone else. "I didn't see him myself, but yeah, the doctors said it was bad. Broken skull, massive lacerations to the abdomen, a lot of blood loss, missing a few feet of intestines..." Even if Buckley lived, he would be crippled and miserable the rest of his short life, and that left her feeling even more depressed. She changed the subject and pointed in the direction of the holding cells. "How's our favorite guest?"

The Copper Lake station was a small building, so Temple knew whom she was talking about right away. "Bill was ticked after that nut bit him," he said, referring to the deputy that had been manning the station last night. "He needed five stitches. But I heard you really walloped the guy for it. Pow! Right in the face! That how you guys did it in the big city?" Heather didn't respond to his idiotic grin so he quit smiling and tried to be professional. "Didn't mean anything by it. I've just heard you've got a reputation is all...Keeping it together when the shit gets real."

Heather shrugged noncommittally. "I just did what I was trained to do."

"Whatever. I heard about—"

"Kid needed protecting. I was the only one around to do it. No big deal." One crazy case involving sex-slavery ring could get you quite a rep. One sloppy gunfight later, she'd been publically cited for bravery, privately reprimanded for stupidity, and been on the fast track to a promotion to detective.

until her family's health issues had brought her back to her hometown. It didn't matter now. Copp Lake was a much quieter place than Minneapolis. She made sure to change the subject so obvious that Temple would know better than to bring it up again. "We got an ID on our biter yet?"

"Every time we ask for a name, he just stares off into space and mumbles about something humming. Still no idea who he is yet, but we're still checking."

One of her friends had just been eviscerated. She wasn't in the mood for dealing with random stink lunatics, but the U.P. was virtually the edge of the world. Lots of crazy people ended up here for some reason. It's like they wandered out of Chicago or Minneapolis and walked through the woods until they hit Lake Superior, where they became *her* problem. "Anything else going on?"

"Those hikers down in Baraga are still lost."

"Probably eaten by the same bear," she muttered. Lost hikers weren't any sort of surprise. Except for a few clusters of small townships and farms, northern Michigan was thickly forested hills. It was easy to get turned around if you got off the trails. The locals loved the tourists' dollars, but finding lost suburbanites got old quick.

"Other than that, well, some federal agent called from Washington, wanting to know about the bear attack."

"Who?" Heather asked. That was fast. The Department of Natural Resources guy must have passed up the chain to whoever it was he'd been talking to the sheriff about.

"I don't know. The guy was named something Jefferson, real snooty type, but I kicked it over to the sheriff. They were asking if there had been any other animal attacks or any unexplained disappearances, that kind of thing. They said they wanted to send some people to interview Buckle if"—he corrected himself—"when he wakes up. I told him he better hurry if the weather reports are accurate. Huge storm coming in tonight. He was real adamant that we call if anything else unusual happens."

Unusual? The little black bears that were native to the area normally stuck to knocking over trash cans, not smashing their way through car windows to eat healthy, armed men. *Unusual* was a understatement.

* * *

Agent Doug Stark of the Monster Control Bureau of the US Department of Homeland Security answered the ringing phone on his desk. He had already had a busy day, seizing a camera and video files from some teenagers who'd blundered into a Type 2 Unnatural devouring a homeless guy at the bottom of a drainage culvert. Stark didn't necessarily enjoy the part of his job where he intimidated witnesses and survivors into keeping their stupid mouths shut, but he was extremely good at it. "Agent Stark," he answered sharply.

"Hello, Doug," said the voice at the other end, and he recognized it immediately. Washington was calling. *Damn it.* Washington only called when something was wrong, and he had been hoping to get off early so he could catch his daughter's trumpet recital. "This is Grant Jefferson."

Stark didn't like the new guy—he was too smooth—but Director Myers thought Jefferson walked on water, had taken him under-wing, and had delegated all sorts of responsibilities to the former ME man. Grooming him for leadership, probably because Myers had come up from the private sector, to ... Just like those contractor bozos to get all the money, glory, and then come into his bureau to take all the promotions. "Mornin', Grant. What can I do for you today?" he asked with zero sincerity.

"There's been a potential attack in your region. The profile fits a lycanthrope, but that's currently unknown. One survivor."

So much for getting off early. Regulations said they had to check it out as soon as possible. "Bitten"

Stark reached for a pad of paper and took a pen from the pink clay mug labeled “#1 Dad.”

~~“Probable, but unknown. You should assume the worst. Take a test kit. You may need to eliminate.”~~

Stark grunted in acknowledgment. Who was this upstart punk to tell him something so obvious? As a rookie MCB agent recruited straight out of the SEALs, Stark had learned how to take care of witnesses from the holy terror himself, Agent Franks. Stark was old-school MCB. Back when he'd run the Phoenix office, he'd once had a family of four get torn apart by reptoids, and he had managed to blame the entire incident on coyotes. Stark was still bitter he'd been given the Chicago SAC job instead of the interim director position that Dwayne Myers had scored. Myers had been Dallas SA before the promotion, so they'd been equals, the jerk. “Location?”

“Copper Lake, Michigan,” Jefferson said.

“Where the hell is Copper Lake?” He leaned back and studied the laminated US map on the wall. The office chair creaked under his weight. Though no longer in his prime, Stark still loved pumping iron and had biceps as big around as most men's legs. He took pride in the fact that he could still keep up with agents half his age.

“Up by Lake Superior...I think,” Jefferson said. “Hang on, I'm pulling up Google Earth.” It figured. Not only was he going to have to work today, he was going to have to drive to the damn U.P. and probably freeze his ass off in Yooper country. “Wait a second, Agent Archer is here with me.” There was a pause. “He says that he grew up right down the road in Calumet....He says to pack a coat.” Grant laughed.

Just like those headquarters assholes to have a laugh at his expense, Stark thought. He'd been doing this for nearly twenty-five years. He knew more about this business than Director Myers did. Why were they to laugh at him? Stark idly wrote down the details as Grant kept on talking, but Stark's mind was somewhere else. He glanced at the PUFF table tacked to the wall beside the map. Government employees didn't get to collect PUFF, but those contractors got paid damn good money per lycanthrope...and by the time he said his good-byes, he knew exactly what he was going to do.

Like most things that depended on secrecy, the MCB was a relatively small agency. Even the IC and FBI staff they shared the building with had no clue what the ultra-secretive MCB did for a living. As Special Agent in Charge, he had six agents working under him in the north-central region, and more that he could pull out of Minneapolis, but he'd keep this one close to the vest. He called for Agent Mosher, gave him the lowdown, and told him to get an SUV ready. Requisitioning a chopper was out of the question. The weather was turning nasty, and besides, the key to keeping a monster attack low profile was keeping a low profile. Land a black helicopter at some rural airfield and the locals got to talking, and since the locals were already calling it a bear, why go and mess that up with a Blackhawk?

“Should I put together a team?” Mosher asked. “If it turns out to be a werewolf, that could be dangerous.” Gaige Mosher was the newest agent in his office. He was a tough kid recruited out of Force Recon, but even tough guys didn't screw around when it came to shapeshifters.

“Naw,” Stark said. “I need to get out of the office. Just the two of us to talk to the witness. My intuition is telling me that it was probably just an animal,” he lied. “And if it does turn out to be the real deal, we've got a few days before the full moon. Myers can send out his strike team, and they can use up their budget.” In truth, he just wanted to do the minimum amount of work needed and then get a little kickback on the side. Extra agents could make that a hassle, and Mosher was so eager to prove himself to the experienced Stark that he could be trusted to keep his mouth shut.

Once Mosher was gone, Stark excused himself from the office, supposedly to pick up some snacks for the road trip. He stopped at a pay phone on the way. He didn't like Briarwood much, certainly

didn't trust them, but a man had to provide for his retirement somehow. His pride wouldn't let him deal with their competitors. He couldn't stand those MHI punks, ever since he'd lost a drunk fistfight to that asshole Sam Haven all those years ago at a BUD/S reunion, but MHI wasn't the only game in town. These new guys were local, hungry, morally flexible, and not above passing him a little cut of the PUFF action under the table.

"Briarwood." That's all the receptionist said whenever she picked up. They liked that cool, mysterious vibe, like if you didn't know what they did, then you shouldn't be calling them.

No names. "It's me. I've got a scoop for you." Stark glanced around the busy street. This was the kind of thing that could get him fired or worse if somebody like Agent Franks got wind of it. Traditional forms of reprimands kind of went out the window when that guy got involved.

"Your information is always greatly *appreciated*," she purred. The Briarwood receptionist had a sultry European accent. Stark had never met her, but he liked to imagine her as a sexy blonde who liked to dress in tight black leather. Stark had always had a thing for European chicks since way back when the Navy had stationed him in Italy.

"My standard finder's fee applies."

"But of course," she said. It was only money, and these private hunters were rolling in the dough. He imagined the hot receptionist working out of some secret posh office on top of some downtown high-rise, all black glass and marble. Twenty percent of the PUFF bounty was nothing to those people, but to a GS-13, it was a few extra mortgage payments. "What and where?"

"Possible lycanthrope. Copper Lake, Michigan. I'll know tonight for sure. Your boys don't do shit until I give the word, got it?" Stark hung up before she could respond. It was always good to let those contractor goons know exactly who was calling the shots. Agent Stark then used his cell phone to warn his wife that he would be pulling an overnighter, and he apologized in advance for missing his daughter's recital.

* * *

The offices of Briarwood Eradication Services were on the second floor of a crumbling brick building in a not-quite-terrible-but-getting-there section of Chicago. The first floor was a pool hall, the third was rented by a company that stuffed coupon mailers, and the fourth was untenanted except for the pigeons.

Ryan Horst stopped cleaning his carbine long enough to listen to Jo Ann take the call. She was still doing that Euro-trash voice, which told him that it was probably a potential job. Jo Ann Schneider was from Wisconsin originally and had the accent to prove it but had been working for a phone-sex line when he'd met her. The woman could sound like just about anyone over the phone, which did manage to add a little mystique to their tiny company. Horst knew that success was all about the marketing.

"Ryan! It was that asshole, Stark," Jo Ann shouted across the large open space. She yanked off her headset and tossed it on the desk. "We've got us a big one!"

"About damn time," he muttered as he finished tugging the boresnake through the barrel of his FA. He'd assembled a tough crew, but the boys were getting restless. He'd promised that there was lucrative money in this business, far better than what they were used to making for their particular set of skills. Men that good at hurting people weren't the kind that he wanted to string along. "What've we got?" he asked as he pointed the barrel at the overhead lights and squinted at the rifling. The chrome was perfectly clean and shiny as expected. Horst took meticulous care of his weapons.

"A lycanthrope up in Michigan. I think that means werewolf! You know what one of those is worth?" She was practically squealing.

"Of course I do, babe. I am the expert, remember?" he said. Jo Ann stood off to the side, bouncing up

and down eagerly, the aesthetics of which he especially appreciated when she wore a tank top. Horst could almost see the dollar signs flashing in her eyes. Even a brand new werewolf was worth at least forty large. The older they were or the more people they'd killed, the more you could make. The size was the limit on a lycanthrope. Horst had memorized the PUFF tables before those squeamish pansies in Alabama had booted him out of their training camp.

Sociopath. That's what that broad, Paxton, had called him right before they'd fired his ass. Well, he didn't need them. Horst had always been an entrepreneur, and he'd always done best on his own. Sure, most of those business dealings had been of questionable legality, but he'd never gotten busted or served time for any of his many ventures. He was far too smart for that.

Horst had filed the paperwork, borrowed some money from his uncle Mickey, got his own PUFF charter, got the Title 13 FFL for the weapons, and recruited his own team of badass killers. Now that he had his own license to print money, all he needed to do was start collecting some fat monster bounties. Even with Stark taking his normal cut, this trip could pay a few bills. So far Briarwood Eradication Services had only taken down a few small, local monsters. Killing a werewolf, hell, and a shapeshifter, would launch him into the big time. Horst took his time putting his gun back together. He worked the charging handle a few times. Smooth as silk.

“Good work, babe. Now do me a favor and call in the boys. We're gonna bag us a werewolf.”

Chapter 3

One of the old wives' tales about werewolves said that if you could destroy the werewolf that bit you the curse would be broken. Turns out that's wishful thinking. We know now that it's an agent present only in the werewolf's saliva, that must be introduced in quantity directly into the victim's bloodstream to cause the mutation to human DNA. But in the 20s, it was all just considered black magic and curses. But after I'd been infected, I was willing to try anything.

It took a magic spell, but I found the werewolf that had bit me. I tracked her for nearly a year. Ten moon cycles, at least three nights each time, and occasionally more if I lost control. I had something of a clue by the time I caught up. I knew that I could keep some semblance of control when I was changed, except for during the full moon, so I figured out how to restrain myself during those nights. I'd learned about the weakness to silver by then, but had developed the hope that I wouldn't need to use it on myself if I could just catch the evil thing that had inflicted this on me.

She went south, deeper into Mexico. Unlike me, she loved the killing. Whenever the trail grew cold I'd just stay for a spell and wait for the next tale of mutilated bodies to reach me. It made her easier to follow. I just missed her in Honduras, where I broke the chain I'd used to tie myself to a tree and ended up murdering a goat herder. She doubled back and headed north. I lost her for a while when she went into the Gulf, but I caught her eventually. The thing about werewolves is that once we've got their scent, unless the prey knows a few tricks, we're almost impossible to shake.

Across the sea, I finally caught her in Havana. Killing her was intensely satisfying, but as soon as she was over I knew it had been for nothing. I could still hear the Hum. When the moon was full, it would be back to the same old thing.

I was dead to my wife, dead to my kin. I was dead to my fellow Hunters. Raymond Earl Shackleton Jr. had ceased to exist after that first night. No one knew where I was or what had become of me, all with the hope that I'd be able to cure myself by destroying a single werewolf. I was such a sucker. Now she was dead, but so, still, was I.

Every day was a struggle to stay a man. All I wanted to do was change. Hunt. Kill.

And so at dawn I found myself on the walls of an old Spanish fort in Cuba, with a bottle of fine whiskey in one hand and a Smith & Wesson 1917 loaded with a single silver bullet in the other.

* * *

Heather knew that if she went home now she'd have time to get a decent amount of sleep before she had to come back in for work, and she still wanted to stop by the hospital again just as a show of support, but for whatever reason she decided to take one last look at the prisoner.

There were only a couple of cells at the Copper Lake station, nothing fancy. If they needed anything bigger, there was the larger jail in Houghton one county over. They still had no idea who this man was. He wasn't talking sense, had no ID, and there was no match on his fingerprints. Odds were that he'd been taken in for a psych evaluation by the state and that would be the last that the Copper County Sheriff's Department would ever see of him.

The prisoner was sitting on the thin mattress, staring off into space. Heather stopped in front of the bars and watched him for a second. He was probably thirty, bulky and a little too well fed to be homeless, pale with dark hair and a scruffy beard. For some reason an uneasy feeling settled in her stomach, and it didn't feel like the expired doughnuts. "Hey!" Heather shouted, but the prisoner didn't look up. He just kept rocking slightly.

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