

DIFFERENT WORLDS,  
DIFFERENT SKINS

Volume 2: More of Humanity's Encounters with Other Races.

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# DIFFERENT WORLDS, DIFFERENT SKINS

Volume 2: More of Humanity's Encounters with Other Races.

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Different Worlds, Different Skins, Volume 2

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## EDITOR'S NOTES

WILL A. SANBORN

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Hello and welcome to the second volume of *Different Words, Different Skins*. When I started the undertaking of making an anthology of human-furry interaction stories close to two years ago, I was not expecting the numerous submissions I received. This is a theme I'd always found interesting and I was happy to see that other authors thought so as well.

I received more worthy stories than would fit in a single volume, so once again I'm happy to bring you a second collection of these tales of interactions between races, cultures and people of different skins. It has been a good deal of work wrangling this collection of fiction, but worthwhile for the glimpses into the different worlds it shows. I hope you will enjoy this book and these stories, as I have.

Thank you once again to the authors who contributed their visions, the people who helped out behind the scenes, and for the readers who help support these efforts.



## FOREWORD

ON ANTHROPOMORPHIC CHARACTERS.

RENEE CARTER HALL

---

Why use anthropomorphic characters? The question comes up frequently in discussions about furry fiction and why those of us who write it make the choices we do. Why not just write about humans? Or if you have to use nonhuman characters, why not make them aliens? What's the difference? Why do they have to be animals?

The answers to those questions vary widely depending on the author and on the individual story. I believe, though, that there is something unique and potentially very powerful about stories involving anthro animal characters. Simply put, animals are the aliens with whom we share our world. We have changed and grown alongside them. We have hunted them, made pets of them, revered them, and driven them to extinction, and along the way, they have been part of our culture, from ancient legends to modern sports mascots. Because of this shared journey, making a character a fox, a tiger, or a dog carries different connotations than making them a creature from another world or making them something that, on the surface, appears more human. And when we bring human and furry characters into the same setting, we're able to draw on that legacy of symbolism to tell a variety of stories. Some use the human-versus-furry motif for social commentary on issues of race, gender, religion, orientation, or class. Others explore questions of our responsibility toward what we cause or create. And often, woven in with these is the question of where the line between human and animal is drawn, or whether it exists at all.

In explaining the impulse behind furry fiction – and indeed, behind the furry fandom in general – we tend to invoke that long heritage of using animal characters in human religion, legend, and storytelling. I'm sure this can come off sounding somewhat pretentious and self-aggrandizing to outside readers – put a fox in jeans, and suddenly furry writers are on the same level as Aesop or Orwell or the ancient Egyptians. In the end, though, we're simply following in a tradition grounded in human nature. Anyone who has ever been to a zoo, watched backyard wildlife, or shared their home with a pet has, at some time, looked into those other-eyes and wondered what was happening behind them. As scientists continue research into

animal behavior, intelligence, and even emotions, that line between human and animal grows less and less distinct, and we continually find ourselves challenged by both the fears and hopes of what that blurred distinction means for animals and for ourselves. Furry fiction can explore those fears and hopes in a specific, direct way that simply isn't possible with stories about aliens, vampires, faeries, and other fantastic creatures.

We who write these stories give animals voices and culture because we see ourselves reflected in them and can't help wondering what they might see in us. Animals, as Henry Beston wrote, are "gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the Earth."

In the stories that follow, you will meet ambassadors from those other nations. Whether the experience is inspiring, humorous, poignant, or disturbing, we invite you to see yourself through their eyes.

## THE CURSE

A MEGGIN STORY SET ON LIFESBLOOD JUST BEFORE THE GOD WARS.  
SAIA KFERR

---

*How do you define evil?*

Sendric cursed softly as his axe bound yet again in the half-frozen log. Straightening his aching back, he wiped at the sweat trickling down from under his rabbit fur hat before it could freeze on his forehead and gave a soft sigh of resignation. The sigh became a short-lived cloud of frosted air streaming from his face on the uncertain but gusty wind. Working his jaw to loosen the rim of frost in his beard, he turned and counted the neat stacks of cut firewood.

Raising his pale eyes to the dim evening sky, he tried to gauge how long the storm would last this time. The angry clouds that were again gathering there remained mute for the moment, but were thick, dark, and stretched to the distant horizon in an unbroken sullen mass. It was going to be another bad one and his family would need more wood to make it through.

He wrenched the irritating implement free with a grunt, and crossed the backyard of the old manor house, crunching through the icy remnant of the last snow with his big over-boots. The door to the dilapidated carriage house creaked on rusted hinges and flaked a bit more of its faded paint as he pulled it open. The interior was dark and filled with looming objects not easily identified till he lit the tarnished coal-oil lamp to reveal the once beautiful and expensive carriages his granduncle had bought in the process of squandering their family fortune. Now the gilding no longer shone on their dilapidated sides and the only passengers they were fit to carry were the mice living in the upholstery.

He moved past those mute relics of better days to the workbench, setting the lantern among the neatly ordered but heavily worn tools. At the end of the bench he sat at the grinding wheel with a sigh and pulling a glove, ran a practiced thumb over the dull blade of the axe. Making a “tisking” sound at what the frozen wood had done to the cheap iron blade, he eyed it critically wondering how many more times it would take an edge before the rapidly diminishing head would need replacement.

He'd just placed a boot on the treadle of the grinder when he heard "Sendric! Are you in there?" He grinned as he recognized his wife's sweet voice, and the years seemed to melt from his careworn face.

"I'm here, Lora," he called back as he set the axe aside and lifted the lamp to light her way.

She came around the side of the carriages, an answering smile playing on her lips, and a basket on her slender arm. She was still young looking and full of life at forty, thanks to her half-elven heritage. Her blue dress and tight fur coat accented her upper body, while the voluminous skirt hid her legs. As always, her lovely face made Sendric's breath catch in his throat.

She laughed at the expression of wonder on his face saying, "I've brought you warm bread and butter, my hard working man."

As she brushed a lock of her honey blond hair from her copper colored eyes and tucked it back under the hood, he came back to life and his grin broadened into a smile, his eyes soft. Taking the bread from her, he said lightly, "Thanks my darling. You have saved your old husband's life yet again."

She pulled a stool from under the bench and sat as Sendric again seated himself at the grinding wheel to relish his fast-cooling treat. Looking up, he asked between bites, "What's Angela doing?"

Lora's face clouded. "She's back in the trophy room talking to the stuffed lion-man, again." She tucked her hands deeper into the muffler in her lap, her face troubled as she sighed. "I really wish you'd get rid of that thing Sendric. It gives me the shivers something dreadful to have it in the house, and you've sold almost everything else out of there."

Sendric sighed. They'd had this conversation many times before. He agreed that the thing was a horror and he'd be just as happy to have it out of the house, but his daughter loved it. If anyone so much as touched the wretched thing she'd burst into tears.

He knew that he was mostly the cause of his daughter's outbursts as he tended to spoil her totally, but he justified it by telling himself that after losing eight other children he was entitled to dote over her.

He nodded again, squaring his shoulders in determination before saying, "I'll talk to her again. She's fifteen now and should be putting away childish things like talking to stuffed animals. It's high time for her to start looking for a husband after all," he said with determination as, bread finished, he started to peddle the wheel and draw sparks from the axe head.

Lora gave him a knowing look saying over the hissing of the wheel. "Just don't cave in to her again, Sendric." He nodded, fully intending to do the right thing, and she put a comforting hand on his shoulder before turning to leave.

It was well after dark when Sendric finally called it a day. The wind had gone from directionless puffs to a roaring beast that seemed determined to steal his hat and the freezing rain that started at dusk had thickly coated everything. That made holding the

axe in his clumsy homemade gloves nearly impossible, and now as the temperatures dipped from uncomfortable to dangerous, the rain was changing to snow.

After putting the tools away and checking to make sure the wood box was full, he went into the house by way of the kitchen mudroom, leaving his coat, boots, and other cold weather gear there to dry.

When he opened the inner kitchen door it felt like a Tri City forge working overtime after the cold of the night. Dishes were set on the long table, and Lora was stirring their supper stew in the big iron pot hanging in the fireplace. She suffered the expected slap on the bottom as he leaned over her to sniff appreciatively at what she'd done with the rabbits he'd caught for her that morning.

She gave the expected squeak of protest over the attack on her posterior and turning, aimed an evil eye at him that changed to a smile as it always did while saying, "I hope your hands were clean."

"One is now," he replied with a chuckle as he retreated to the battered table and settled into his heavy old chair with a groan.

She gave a snort. "For that you can get your self up and go get your daughter, you lecher."

"Just the way you like it, wench," he replied in kind.

Lora laughed and turned back to the pot as Sendric slowly stood. He stretched and groaned again as the aches and pains that would leave him stiff and hurting by morning started to gather.

Lighting a lamp from the cook fire after kissing his wife's neck, he headed for the door asking, "Where is she?" already guessing the answer as he took an inside coat from the rack next to the door.

Lora had unhooked the pot, and was moving to the table with it as she answered, "You know."

With a sigh, he moved through the door and into the cold, dark interior of the house.

In its day, this tired old manor house had been a grand place full of parties and light, but that had been long before his time. Now the faded wallpaper was peeling, and Sendric had to dodge a barrel he'd set to collect the water that leaked in through a hole in the skylight.

Cossen Manor had been built at the height of the Veldt War where the forces of humanity and the lion-men had clashed viciously some eighty years ago. Sendric's grand-uncle had made his fortune running caravans to the embattled human forces, and had even killed several of the beastly lion-men in single combat when they thought to attack his caravan.

By the time the war had finally played out without a victor, Sendric's granduncle had built a small financial empire. But ill fortune seemed to follow him, slowly eating away at his wealth and sanity. Finally he had hanged himself in the manor's garden.

His oldest son had then inherited the house, and slowly gone mad as his family had died one by one over the years till he was heirless. His last servant said that his master had seen visions and heard whispered words in the nights during his last days. Finally he'd died when he'd dashed out into a stormy night and been run

down by a coach, though some said that he'd killed himself to escape some horror none but he could see.

Sendric, as the only surviving member of the family, had inherited the house from his uncle ten years ago with dreams of fixing the place up and making it again a grand home. Unfortunately nothing had gone right for he and his family. The orchard he'd planted had withered and died when the trees were ready for their first harvest, crops would fail just as they would ripen, money seemed to disappear without trace, and his children never seemed to make it much beyond their thirteenth birthday.

Were it not for the love he and his wife shared, he doubted he would have made it this far. Without her he was sure he wouldn't have survived the death of his last son five years ago.

The boy had turned twelve, and was just coming into his man's voice when Sendric had given him his first horse. Two weeks later while he was out riding with friends, the beast had panicked and in its madness had run off a cliff, killing them both.

Sendric sighed and wiped at a tear before it froze on his cheek.

Stepping up to the trophy room door, he found light seeping from under it and heard his daughter speaking softly on the other side. He paused for a moment to listen to her muffled voice, shivering slightly as the cold started to bite him through the lightweight coat.

"So what happened then?" she asked in a soft voice.

There is a long pause, and then she said in exasperation, "Oh, all right! Keep your secrets for now, but I'll be back after I eat."

Sendric shivered from more than just the cold as he listened. He was beginning to wonder if the madness that seemed to plague his family was now showing itself in her.

Then the door opened; and there she stood with a lamp in her hand. She was a smaller copy of her mother but with green eyes and the grace of youth to enhance her delicate beauty. She was heavily bundled against the cold proving she'd been here in an unheated room for quite some time.

Though she smiled a smile that, like her mother's, could melt the heart of her doting father, Sendric found his eyes drawn to the object of her obsession. He stood nearly eight feet tall, and the wooden plinth he had been mounted on added another foot to his towering height. The pedestal had been set with a brass plaque telling how he'd died at Sendric's granduncle's hand. He was dressed as he had been at his death in black plate armor complete with the holes that Angela's great grand-uncle had put there in killing him. The visor on his helm was thrown back to show glass gray-green cat eyes in a golden furred face and a set of killing teeth. The great tarnished sword it had carried in life was now frozen forever in a vicious two-handed downward stroke.

Before he could rip his eyes from the hideous thing, Angela said, "Shall we go eat, father?"

Sendric nodded absently as she stepped into the hallway, feeling almost hypnotized by those glass orbs. As Angela pulled the door closed behind her and the shadow



covered the cat man's face, Sendric would have sworn that, just for a moment the glass eyes glowed with more than just the lamplight.

Turning away, they walked along quietly for a bit as Sendric ordered his arguments and regained his composure. Finally by way of opening he asked, "Do you really still talk to that moth-eaten old thing honey?"

She nodded "I like talking to Redclaw, father." She paused for a moment before continuing, "He seems so lonely in there all by himself."

Sendric nodded, "If he was alive, I imagine he could be lonely; but he's dead Angela. He can't feel anything now, anymore than a stick, or a rock."

Angela's voice took on a hard edge as she replied, "You don't think animals have feelings either, father. Do you think old Lighthoof wasn't sad to leave when you sold him? I swear I thought I saw horse-sized tears in his big brown eyes when they lead him away."

He realized that his retort would have to wait as they'd arrived at the kitchen. Once again she'd managed to steer him away from talking about what he wanted. She was as good as her mother at deflecting questions about things she didn't want to talk about, and he was in no mood to continue the fight during one of the few happy times he had in a day.

Supper was quiet after that with little said, and only the howl of the wind cutting the scrape of spoons, till the end when Lora asked casually "Sendric, did you tell her we are going to sell that horrid cat man?"

There was a crash as Angela jumped to her feet in fury and her chair overbalanced. "You are not selling Redclaw!" she screamed, her face going a bright scarlet with her rage.

Lora stood as well, anger flaring in her eyes as she roared back "I'll not have you wasting your time with that toy when I need help running this place! We *are* getting rid of that thing on the next market day, or I'll just toss it on the rubbish pile and burn it! *Now*, I'll be hearing no more on the subject, young lady!" she said, slamming her small fist on the table hard enough to make the plates and flatware rattle.

Angela's face went white, and with tears now sliding down her cheeks she choked and after several false starts finally came out with "Mother... I... I... *hate you!*" Turning, she grabbed her coat, wrenched the door open, and started to run from the room.

Sendric struggled halfway to his feet and yelling, "Young lady, you will not talk to your—" before the door slammed shut with a thunderous bang behind her.

Lora turned angry eyes to Sendric. "You were to talk to her! What happened?"

He groaned as he dropped back into the chair, "I didn't expect you to bring it up now. I was going to talk to her later."

She snorted, "You never could talk to her about anything serious, Sendric. You just let her wrap you around her little finger, and you always make me the villain, well not this time!" She pointed at the door. "Don't just sit there, go after her!"

Sendric nodded as he got to his feet and picked up a lamp. Shoulders slumped; he slipped on his coat again, and followed his daughter back into the cold dark house.

He'd expected to find her in the trophy room, and was puzzled to find the door standing open and the room empty. "Angela?" he called as he lifted the lamp and

looked about the nearly empty room. He was about to turn away and see if she had gone up to her room when he noticed that old Redclaw was standing there empty-handed.

Coldness gripped Sendric's heart as he looked at where the sword had gouged deeply into the floor near the base of the mount. Taking the sword made it likely that she'd decided to do something rash he realized. It was then that he felt the deeper fingers of cold reaching into the old house and heard the wailing of the wind more clearly than before. A door or window was open!

Rushing to the front hallway, he found the front door had been flung wide and snow carried on the howling wind coating the floor.

Sendric rushed down the front steps and into the teeth of the storm, calling his daughter's name. Faintly, his lamp illuminated the footprints and the drag mark of the sword in the frozen mud, but they were being quickly filled in by the heavy wet snow. Holding his thin coat shut against the wind, he followed those faint marks across the lawn, and then into the dead orchard.

Ice thickly coated the dead branches of the fruit trees, turning them a translucent blue white. As the snow-laden wind shrieked through the skeletal orchard, it ripped the dead limbs free to crash to the ground in a rain of sharp icy shards. All around him the sound of destruction carried, sounding for all the world like giants throwing boulders in a china shop.

He searched futilely for nearly half an hour, struggling past downed trees and broken limbs, and more than once just avoiding a limb or a whole tree as it crashed to destruction. He called Angela's name over and over till his voice cracked, he lost feeling in his hands and feet, and hope in his heart. Then came a sound different from the crashes, a sound like words carried on the howling wind.

Sendric strained his ears and heard it again. It was unquestionably a voice off to his right, deep and resonant. "What would someone else be doing out on a night like this?" he asked himself, but any help would be welcomed just now. Having no better guide, he staggered after the voice calling in return, but was unsure what or who it was he heard replying. It was most definitely not his daughter's voice, and it was far too deep to be any of his friends.

As he started over yet another fallen tree, he nearly tripped over Angela! She was lying on the ground with the tree lying across her chest. Blood stained her chin, and her skin was nearly as pale as the ice and snow around them. The great sword she'd taken lay next to her, also pinned under the tree. To one side of her crouched a shape that made Sendric's blood feel like the icy water that was trickling from his hair down his back. It was Redclaw looking just as he did as he stood on his pedestal!

He looked up, gray-green eyes with their slit irises glinting in the lamplight as Sendric stared back slack jawed. The icy droplets did not touch him, his breath did not fog in the cold, and as Sendric watched him move, he noticed he could faintly see through the big Meggin.

"I can not help her," Redclaw rumbled as his paw passed through the downed tree without even disturbing the snow gathering there. "It is up to you human. Save her."

Sendric set the lamp down in the snow and tried to lift the tree, but it didn't even shift with his best efforts.

"I can't do it! I need the axe to cut her free," he gasped as he staggered for the lamp.

Redclaw's huge form drifted between Sendric and the lamp holding up an insubstantial paw, "You haven't the time, man. I can feel her life ebbing as we speak."

Tears were freezing to Sendric's face as he wailed, "I've got to do something! I don't want to lose her too!"

Redclaw cocked his head and looked down at him, saying slowly, "You are nothing like the man that killed me, human. You love. You care. You grieve. The one that killed me and served The-One-We-Do-Not-Name felt nothing for anyone. His only love was for his gold and glory."

He drifted back to where Angela lay. Kneeling down to look at her, he tried to brush his paw against her cheek saying, "There is one thing that I can try that may save her, man, but it may cost both of us dearly." He looked up at Sendric "Are you willing to pay the price, no matter how much is asked?"

Sendric nodded and said in a stricken voice "Whatever it takes I will give it gladly! I want my daughter to live!"

Redclaw nodded and with a deep roar he cried out, "*Lord of Vengeance, hear me!* I, Redclaw, withdraw my call for revenge!"

For a moment nothing happened, then the lamp flared and exploded into a tower of flame, but at its heart the flames turned black! The flames climbed to nearly ten feet and were untouched by the wind as they grew. In the heart of the fire the blackness began to take on a humanoid form, then resolved into the outline of a Meggin. It was black as midnight as it stepped from the collapsing flames and stretched while taking on more and more detail.

He was like the night itself come to life till the head resolved into a face. Old scars crisscrossed his jaw and tawny cheeks, and a patch showing the sign of a silver sword covered his left eye.

As he looked about, he gestured with a paw that was little more than darkness given form and the wind and the icy rain stopped falling about them. The only sound now was the crackle of the dying fire behind him, and Angela's gurgling breath.

The dark one didn't seem to notice the two humans, turning his full attention to Redclaw. His voice was deep and slow, filling the silence like the tolling of a bell as he asked, "Was my gift of vengeance on the family Cossen not enough for you Redclaw? Why have you disturbed me yet again?"

Redclaw dropped to a three-point stance before the dark one saying "Lord of Vengeance, I have had my revenge and wish the curse lifted from this family." He looked at Angela and added softly "I don't wish this girl to die."

The shadowy Meggin growled "When I placed you in the sword and gave you the power to manifest, the agreement was that you would kill this entire family. Why has your heart changed?"

Redclaw seemed to gather himself, and after a moment he said "You may destroy

me if you wish for this blasphemy, but I've fallen in love with this one, and I think she loves me."

The dark lion's voice was as smoky and dangerous as the night about them when he spoke again. "You love... a human? The last time we met you told me you hated them all, that they had destroyed your family. You said you were the last of your clan and pride because of them, and now this!" The apparition leaned in closer and growled in a voice that could stop a heart, "Why should I help you when you are, by your own words, betraying your family?"

Redclaw was shivering now, but his voice held strength as he replied, "Because that was a long time ago and these people had nothing to do with what happened to my family and people. Great Lord, they are good and kindly people that have endured much for the crimes of those that they have never met. I no longer feel that the curse is vengeance against those that have wronged us, but has instead become my curse."

The dark one nodded, his voice a velvety hiss now as he asked, "And the girl?"

Redclaw sighed "I know your feelings for humans, Great One, but she has eased my loneliness and has been... my friend." He eyed Sendric for a moment before continuing. "She has even acted to protected me at times, and I care for her, deeply My Lord. Please Sir; don't let her be taken from me as everything else was. If you will help her, in return I offer up what is left of myself for her life," he finished softly as he looked away.

The dark lion seemed to consider his request for a moment before turning to Sendric. His face wrinkled in disgust as he spoke to the trembling human "And you... man. Your ancestors aided in the killing of thousands of our people. Entire prides destroyed to the last cub with weapons and goods that your family provided. Do you feel that it would be unjust for me to let this girl die?"

Sendric dropped to his knees before the dark form, "Please sir, I and my family had nothing to do with the war and your losses. I beg you not to let my last child die! I... I'll give whatever it takes to save her!"

The dark one stood motionless for several moments, then nodded. Stepping over to the fallen tree, he sank the claws of one hand into its bark and lifted it off the girl as though it had no weight. With contemptuous ease he hurled it off into the darkness, then knelt next to the girl placing an inky black paw on her forehead.

He looked up at Redclaw, growling, "You are right, she loves you, cub, so I will give you both a gift." Glancing at Sendric, he growled, "And from you I will take the final toll of this vengeance called down on your family."

The dark one's eye flashed as if with inner fire, and Redclaw staggered and fell to the ground, steaming breath coming from his nose and mouth as he gulped the cold air. "I live!" he gasped.

The dark one then turned his attention to the girl. Suddenly she was encased in fire that did not burn her flesh, but instead closed the terrible wound in her chest, but that was not all. In that fire that melted the ice and snow about Sendric and Redclaw like the summer sun, her shape started to shifted and squirmed in a way that made Sendric look away in terror.

The heat and flame suddenly vanished leaving only the dwindling pool of burning oil from the ruined lamp to light the clearing. “It is done,” said the dark voice. “The line of Cossen is ended this night and the curse lifted. Make of my gifts what you will.” With that, the dark one stood and seemed to flow back into the fading fire like black dye flowing down a drain, then disappeared entirely.

Sendric looked from the dying flames back to where his precious daughter lay, expecting the worst, and was shocked beyond words at the sight he beheld.

Redclaw was kneeling there, holding a young lioness in an ill-fitting dress stained with blood. She stopped nuzzling his neck long enough to look up with familiar green eyes now bisected by a catlike pupil and asked “Father, can we go home now?”



## SWEAR NOT BY THE MOON

RENEE CARTER HALL

---

The wolf watches us from the far corner of the enclosure as the girl fumbles with her keys to let me inside. I don't bother to call to him; his hearing isn't as good as it used to be, and besides, he won't come near until we're alone.

In the brochure, they called the enclosure an "enriched personal habitat," but it's really more of a pen, a section of grass and trees fenced with chain link. They've tried to make the grounds look something like a forest, but the effect is too neatly trimmed to be convincing. Instead, it looks more like a park – or a zoo.

The only thing that's wild here is him.

In the nearest corner, a three-sided wooden shelter shades two stainless steel bowls. One holds fresh water, changed every hour – a touch I appreciate – and the other is half-filled with a pile of pink beef scraps.

I watch two flies buzz around the meat. It doesn't look like he's touched it at all.

I sigh and turn back to the girl, who has already closed the gate behind me. "Has he eaten anything today?"

She glances at his chart. "No, sir, not today. They tried giving him venison this morning like you asked, but he didn't eat any of it."

"Was it cold?"

Even with the chain link separating us, she blanches under my gaze, and I look away briefly to make her more comfortable. I know, then, that she has no *faol* blood in her. "I don't know," she says.

I try to keep my voice gentle. "He won't eat it unless it's warm."

She jerks a nod. "I'll make a note, sir."

I don't doubt that she will. They love notes at this place: charts and paperwork and orders typed in all caps. But I wonder if they ever bother to read any of them. One shift ends, another one starts, and you might as well have never said anything in the first place.

If it's frustrating for me, I can only imagine what it's like for him. At least I can still speak.

“Thank you,” I tell her, though I’m not really sure what I’m thanking her for. “I’ll find you if we need anything else.”

She locks the gate and hurries away. I wonder how long she’ll keep working here.

I double-check that the gate is closed securely, then sit down on the wooden bench under one of the trees. The wolf whines softly as he rises and comes to me. He is thinner than the last time I saw him, and his gait is stiff-legged. If he hasn’t been eating, he likely hasn’t gotten many pills down for his arthritis, either. He thrusts his muzzle against my hands, and I stroke his silver head lightly, respectfully.

“Hi, Dad,” I whisper.

I remember the first time I saw him in wolfshape. He told me not to be afraid, but still, watching the full-body grimace of the change was terrifying to a ten-year-old. It reminded me of the horror movies where you think you’re approaching a loved one from behind, until they turn around and the music shrieks and you realize you’re seeing the monster instead.

But at the end of it, he wasn’t a monster. He was a strong, healthy gray wolf, lean muscle, lush pelt, white teeth. As a man, he had always seemed to me somehow smaller, weaker than the other fathers I saw – although I hated to admit that, even to myself – but as a wolf, he was powerful, he was fierce, and I felt I was seeing his true self for the first time. It was disorienting and wonderful.

As a wolf, I turned out to mirror him in miniature, a fact that pleased me immensely.

He taught me what it meant to be *faol*, to carry a wildness within you. The wolf is always there in your mind, even in human shape, just as the human side of you still lingers in wolfshape. In form, you are one or the other. But in your mind, you are neither, and both. And it is so much simpler, and so much more complicated, than that sounds.

There were no large packs near our home, but he took me to the others within our range. I saw them bare their throats and bellies to him, saw them lick his muzzle. The wolf in me knew what that meant without being told, and the boy in me nearly burst with pride.

Two females ran with that group, both with silver coats and sweet voices, but while they fawned over my father, he never took any special notice of them that I could see. My mother had been gone almost since I could remember, and I asked my father once why I couldn’t have one of these for a mother.

He smiled. “The wolf wants to make things easy,” he said at last, “but the man knows it isn’t that simple. As a wolf, I could. As a man...” He didn’t finish, and, sensing something in his silence, I never asked him about it again.

Those were star-filled nights, summer-sweet, and like all children, I never imagined they would end.



“Dad,” I say now, “you have to eat something. I know it’s not what you’re used to...”

He looks up, his golden eyes cloudy. I can’t read his expression, can’t tell if he’s pleading with me or simply struggling to focus.

“For me, okay? Just a little. I’ll bring some liver next time.” For one crazy moment I wonder if I could smuggle something alive in here – a calf or a lamb or even a rabbit. He needs hot meat, blood meat, but I don’t know if he even has the strength left to make a kill.

The wolf, in the end, is greedy. Bit by bit, year by year, it grows in the mind. Some happily take to the woods for good, as far from humans as they can get. Others hold out as long as they can, until they can no longer change back to human form. Born as men, *faol* die as wolves.

He always swore he would know when that time came. Sometimes he talked of getting to the national park a few hours’ drive away. Sometimes he talked about the gun in his nightstand drawer.

That day when I went to his house, when I hadn’t heard from him and he wasn’t answering the phone, I didn’t know what I would find. And so when I saw him lying in wolfshape in front of the old recliner, the TV still tuned to the baseball game, I was glad. Even when his eyes met mine and I could somehow taste the sorrow and defeat that hung about him – even then, I was glad.

I glance back at the gate, but there’s no sign of the girl or anyone else. I take my clothes off, carefully arranging them on the bench so they won’t get dirty or wrinkled. The change comes swiftly and easily.

I tuck my tail, lower my ears, whine, and lick his muzzle. His eyes brighten, and his tail lifts a little higher.

I long to run, to play the way we used to. But I don’t know if he can keep up, and I won’t make him feel weak if he can’t. In the end, we settle in a patch of shade, with tiny ants tickling our paw-pads. I breathe in his scent, and it makes me feel little again, safe again. He dozes, and I wonder what he dreams about. If he remembers me, is it as a wolf-pup, or his son?

My human mind whispers that I can’t stay much longer. I lick his ear gently to wake him up, and as he stretches stiffly and yawns, I get an idea. Tail high, ears up, I trot to his dish. Just as I lower my head to the meat, he growls, and I look up to see him standing with his lips pulled back from yellowed teeth. Instinct has won out over stubbornness.

I back off, allowing him his place. He eats most of the meat, then steps aside, and I finish. The taste of it makes me shudder – I’m used to meat either cooked or fresh, not raw and sun-stale – but I force myself to swallow. Afterward, we wash the juices from each other’s faces, just as we used to wash the blood away after a kill.

He whines as I walk back to the bench. I want to stay with him; I want to leave.

The change back to human form is a bit like pushing a wheeled cart over a threshold – a little more force, more of a jolt than the slip into wolfshape. Right now it is still as effortless as breathing, but I know it will gradually get more difficult. And then, one day...

I try not to think about it.

He lies down and rests his chin on his paws, watching as I get dressed. Does he still remember how it felt to tuck in a shirt, pull up a zipper, buckle a belt? Or has the wolf-mind carried those memories away, buried them in the scent of dead leaves and the dreams of moon-dappled deer? I don't even know how many words he still understands, but I speak anyway, if only for myself. I speak the words that I couldn't say out loud to the man, the ones I can say only now, to the wolf.

"I love you." I lift the keypad cover on the gate and enter the code to unlock it. "I'll be back soon."

As I close the gate behind me, the low, throbbing howl begins. A moment later, the others join in, the song echoing through the enclosures, and even in human form I can still pick out his voice among the chorus, rising above the others, dying away into a moan, then rising again.

I get to the car, but even with the doors and windows shut, I can still hear them. I put my hands over my ears like a child, rest my forehead against the steering wheel, and weep.

Night falls clear and cool, and I run alongside a white-furred female, our paws skimming the ground. Last night, the two of us shared linguini and red wine; tonight, if the wind is with us, we will feed from an aging doe.

Running is a joy, a song in my blood. I am a pup no longer; I am as fine and strong now as my father was when I first saw him in wolfshape. I am drunk on the night and the run and the she-wolf's scent in my lungs.

And yet.

As I leap to bring the doe to the ground, as I join the tussle of teeth tearing at the hide, as the first hot sweetness of blood tingles in my nostrils, I pray that one day the deer's hard, sharp hoof will find me, a single well-placed blow to blaze my life to its close. Before my eyes dim and my hearing dulls, before the chain-link fence and the stainless steel dish. Before I hold a pistol, or a noose, or the keys to my car, and try to decide. Before it's too late to decide at all. The wolf I am hopes it will be that easy.

But the man knows it isn't that simple.

## THE WOLF OF THE HARE THAT BIT HIM

PHIL GEUSZ

---

Lycanthropy isn't like other diseases. If you're diabetic, you can find a support group at any hospital. Any good-sized American town plays host to cancer patient groups. There are even organizations set up to help the spouses and children of many sufferers. But just try finding a little help dealing with a bad case of lycanthropy...

Harry Duncan was growing rather desperate by the time he found the posting on the Internet, a notice that eventually led him to an anonymous meeting room in a nearby large city. The quiet, middle aged man didn't really expect to find actual help – most likely this would turn out to be just another bunch of weirdos, he reckoned. Still, he had to try. Various shrinks had taken his money and laughed him off, while even his closest friends became uncomfortable when he even hinted at what was troubling him. No one believed in were-creatures anymore; Harry himself hadn't until one bright full moon almost a year ago, when his entire understanding of the universe had undergone a rather drastic revision.

Having arrived early, Harry selected a metal folding chair, then quietly seated himself in a dark corner not far from the emergency exit. A toothpick found its way into the corner of his mouth, where he nibbled at it nervously. Brightly-lit and largely empty rooms made him nervous these days, but the toothpick helped. Toothpicks were just one of many new habits Harry had acquired recently.

In time, others began to arrive in ones and twos. They gathered in small groups and cracked jokes, laughing easily and freely together like the friends of long standing they clearly were. But as the meeting time approached, people began to drift towards the chairs. Harry grew tense; he'd chosen his undesirable seat partly in the hope of being left alone. But apparently whoever had set up the room knew from experience what the turnout would be like, and there were few spare seats. A whipcord thin young man with long brown hair seated himself next to Harry.

"Evenin'!" he said, smiling and nodding. "My name's Doug. You new here?"

Harry simply nodded, too nervous to speak. His pulse had gone wild the instant the stranger noticed him, though the young man hadn't been in any way impolite. Harry's body, however, had developed a mind of its own.

Doug grasped the newcomer's predicament instantly. His eyebrows rose. "Wow! Cool, dude! You're a prey species, aren't you? I'm sorry – I didn't mean to spook you! I give the Word that I won't harm you. No were-creature can break the Word."

And with that, Harry's heart rate slowed to normal. It was like magic! Something deep inside Harry's soul told him that Doug was now more trustworthy than any other creature on the planet. For the first time in ages, Harry had someone he could really, truly talk to!

Doug was rattling on. "...guys are pretty rare, you know. I met a mouse once, and there's a few wererats who've formed a colony in New York City. But your kind is so very few, compared to the wolves. Hey, I'm kinda unusual myself, you know. I'm a coyote!"

"Really?" Harry asked. It was his first unnecessary speech to a stranger since *That Night*.

"Yeah! I'm so lucky! I'd always loved 'yotes, but had never seen one in the wild. A friend took me out in the country one night to call some up for me, and a big male jumped right into the blind with us, nipped me, and then took off. Didn't think anything of it until I came to one morning in my bed with a dead jackrabbit in my mouth."

Harry's eyes widened for just an instant, but deep down inside he understood that the Word protected him more completely than anything else ever possibly could. Relaxing once more, he inhaled to ask the first of many, many questions he needed answered. Just as he was about to speak, however, a gavel blow from the podium up front startled him nearly out of his wits. "Order!" a deep booming voice intoned. "Order, Order! All mundane humans must now leave the premises. Norms remain at their own grave risk." All conversation died instantly; the burly man in front of the room emanated palpable waves of authority. Even more jarring, suddenly Doug and all the other predator-types were staring at the floor. The newcomer looked around in amazement at the spectacle, until his eyes locked with the speaker's. He looked down then, too, in order to be polite. Not, however, before he'd attracted irritated notice.

The speaker glared at Harry for many long seconds before continuing. "I am Chuck M., and I'm a werewolf." A chorus of howls erupted in reply to this formula, and Harry tensed to flee until Doug laid a protective hand on his shoulder. Once things finally quieted down again, Chuck continued. "I've been a werewolf since 1843, when I survived an attack in Paris. I know of the aching need for blood, the agony of the transformation, the cold burning of the moonlight, the uncontrolled beast that bides its time in my heart. Everyone here tonight knows these humiliations. It hasn't all been bad, however. Like all of you, I've also known the joy of the hunt, the taste of fresh-killed meat and the joy of pack-brotherhood." He smiled. "Let us share this brotherhood here tonight. We may speak freely here; the mundane no longer walk among us. The Word is given. Until midnight, there shall be no bloodshed."

A wave of relaxation crossed over Harry like he'd never known before. Suddenly he felt totally safe and secure, even safer than he felt at home.

A pretty young girl raised her hand, and an answering nod called her to the wooden

rostrum. “Hello, fellow were-creatures!” she began. “I am Sally R. and I too am a werewolf.” More howls erupted, but this time Harry rode it out without a trace of fear. Already he was learning from this meeting- never had he dreamed of such a thing as the Word. There was *so much* that he needed to know!

“Six months ago,” Sally continued, “I was a pathetic furball that had forgotten human form. The Outreach program here found me, and nursed me back to health. It took time and patience and love, but look at me! I’m wearing clothing! And speaking words! All thanks to you, my littermates. All thanks to you!” And she sat down to more howling.

Chuck at the microphone smiled. “Great to hear from you, Sally. We’re glad to help; there but for the grace of God walk us all. If you ever remember your real name, be sure to let us know as soon as you can so we can get you back to where you belong.”

*My God!* Harry thought to himself. *Could that happen to me? Could I actually forget who I am?*

Other folks went to the mike one by one. Perry G. admitted to having become addicted to dog biscuits – he was a were-rottweiler. Pat M. spoke about the difficulties of being transgendered as a were. “It’s not anybody’s fault,” Pat explained, her voice low and sad. “Just something that happens from time to time. No one understands why. So there’s no need for shame. In fact, I’ve learned a lot from all of this.” Steve W. was a werecobra – he was terrified of freezing to death every winter and was saving up for a move to a warmer clime. Dana P. was a weretiger, and had severe problems dealing with his girlfriend’s housecats. Others spoke about embarrassing social situations such as absent-mindedly sniffing lovers in indelicate places and marking their territory on days near the full moon. All in all, it was balm to Harry’s soul. These were the same kinds of problems he was trying to deal within his own life, though generally with a different twist. As the meeting wore on, Harry felt better and better about himself and his situation. There *was* hope. Others *were* coping...

Finally, things began winding down. Doug leaned over and whispered, “We have a rule here. If you want help, you first must speak in public about your problem and admit what you have become. Then, one of the packs will take you in.”

Harry nodded, smiled, and raised his hand. For almost a year no one had believed him, and now he was surrounded by sympathetic fellow lycanthropes. His heart sang as he was called on, and strode to the microphone.

“I am Harry D.,” he stated carefully, “And I am a werebunny.”

The silence was so loud that it roared.

“For over a year now, on the night of the full moon I have transformed into fully lapine form and raided gardens all over the county. I fear that I’ve pilfered much produce.”

Was there a snicker from the audience? Well, Harry understood that that the garden bit probably *did* sound a bit funny. Or at least it might until you’d picked up a few shotgun pellets. “In rabbit form, I am white with blue eyes. Strangely enough, silver doesn’t seem to affect me. Though ivory has bad effects....”

The snickering loudened. Bravely, Harry pressed on.

"I have a neurotic need to always be chewing on something, and the thought of eating meat revolts me. I'm afraid of almost all animals now, and sometimes I need terribly to hide under bushes...."

The snickering matured into full-blown laughter. "He's a fake!" someone cried out. "There are no wererbunnies!"

Another voice agreed. "Throw him out!"

Doug shouted back "He's genuine! I can tell!"

"What makes you think so?"

The were-'yote hesitated, then shrugged. "He smells delicious!"

More laughter, followed by decisive gavel banging. "Order, order!" Instantly the room silenced again, and Harry found himself once again the only one not forced to look at the floor. "Harry," the large man in front continued, "Do you have any idea how outrageous your claim is?"

"No, sir."

A new voice called out. "When you eat half a carrot, does the other half become a werecarrot?" There followed howls of laughter, then others joined in the fun.

"Can you eat wolfsbane?"

"What about garlic, wererbunny? Can you eat garlic?"

Harry tried to explain that he was quite fond of wild garlic, but the insults and laughter drowned him out.

Then the gavel banged again, and Chuck M. reasserted control of the meeting. "Look around you, man! Everyone here is a were-creature, and every one of us is also a meat-eater. Even rats and mice, which only rarely create new weres, eat meat from time to time. The very idea of a wererbunny is unheard of!"

Harry shrugged. What could he say?

"How do you claim to have contracted the disease?" Chuck persisted.

"I was passing through a pet shop, and tried to stroke a frightened rabbit. He scratched me."

There was more laughter, then Doug's spoke up again. "Was the bunny wearing a collar?"

Harry was glad to hear a friendly voice. "Yes. As a matter of fact it was. Why do you ask?"

"A collar can trap a small were-creature in full-morph form by not allowing him enough room to grow back to human," Doug explained. "It happened to me once, though I was able to eventually twist the thing off."

Chuck shook his head. He wasn't having any... "Harry, I suspect that you genuinely *do* need help. Not of the kind that we can offer here, however. It's hardly unheard of."

"Don't put him out!" the were-coyote warned. "He's genuine, I'm telling you."

Someone walked up to Harry and sniffed. "I don't smell nothin', Doug."

"I gave him my Word, and his scent vanished for me. Chuck is our Alpha. When he spoke for all of us, I bet the scent went away for everyone else too."

"Hmm...." Chuck said dubiously. "Doug, are you *sure*?"

"Positive!" he declared.

“All right, then,” the group’s Alpha replied, looking more than a little reluctant. “I’ll Test him.”

“Test?” asked Harry. Suddenly, he was a bit frightened again.

Chuck smiled, exposing long, pointed teeth. “You’ve nothing to fear, bunny-boy. I’m an Alpha-male werewolf, and thus can shapeshift at will. If you’re playing straight with us, I can drag you along with me.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “But... I hate...”

“Chickening out, faker?” Chuck’s smile altered subtly into a leer. “I don’t believe a word of your story. In fact, I think you’ve just come here to stare at us like some kind of freakshow. If you’re not leveling with us, I’ll see that you’re entertained, all right! You’ll get such a big thrill that you’ll never forget it. The Word is only good among were-folk.”

A lump grew in Harry’s throat. Rabbit-form was something that he was deeply ashamed of, now more than ever since even the other werereatures had rejected him. But what choice had he? Where else could he go for friendship and support? “All right. But let me warn you of something. I’m non-sentient as a bunny.”

Chuck snorted. “If you’re faking, you’ll wish that was true. We Alphas have powers that few outsiders know about. Those that learn of them rarely choose to speak about the experience. Take off your clothes.”

Shyly, Harry complied. Then Chuck stripped as well. When he was done, he extended a hand. “Just grab onto this. That’s all you’ve gotta do. Everything else is up to me.”

Harry reached out, and Chuck glommed onto him with fingers of steel. “If you’re a mundane and have failed to heed my warning to leave us weres in privacy,” he promised, “you’ll never use this hand again. And this will be least among your agonies.”

Trembling slightly, Harry stood and waited as the big man closed his eyes and concentrated. Presently the viselike grip tightened, and something rather akin to an electric current began to flow....

Usually shapeshifting was rather painful for Harry, but not this time. Apparently, the power of an Alpha werewolf made a major difference. Before the amazed eyes of the assembled weres, Harry’s paws formed, his rich snow-white fur grew in, and matching ears and tail sprouted. As usual the wererbunny’s mind disappeared early in the process, though the magic held him fast till it was through.

Presently, what had once been a mild-mannered man was now a bunny in mind and body. For all of Harry’s other personal deficiencies, he made rather a good rabbit. Certainly, he was equipped with all the proper survival instincts. So, it was the most natural thing in the world that Harry, confronted quite suddenly by an Alpha wolf standing only inches away, fled in terror for his life.

At first the crowd was too stunned to move. Though they’d seen far more magic in their long lives than almost any mundane, they were still pretty shaken up. So Harry got up a good head of steam before anyone reacted. It wasn’t until their leader shapeshifted back to human and took charge that they finally managed to corner the wererbunny, who now stood trembling and exhausted. “Okay everyone,” Chuck directed his pack. “Hold still and I’ll make the grab.”

“Be careful!” someone in the crowd cried out. “We don’t want to hurt the poor little bugger. Not after we didn’t believe him and all that!”

“He said he reacts to ivory!” someone else commented, the wonder of it all clear in his voice. “Who’d a thunk it? I wonder what else is unique about wererabbits?”

“Ask him after I change him back,” the Alpha ordered, edging closer. “Don’t distract me!” Suddenly Chuck made his leap, grasping the rabbit firmly around its middle. The bunny squealed in terror—

—and in sheer panic sank his incisors into the ball of Chuck’s thumb. Harry, it seemed, had never given *his* Word not to harm anyone. Instantly the latent magic of the Alpha werewolf was released. It poured forth like a tidal wave, transforming Chuck in the blink of an eye into a wererabbit. Chaos erupted everywhere; now there were *two* terrified white rabbits sprinting about the meeting room, ducking under chairs and weaving like mad things.

For over an hour, insanity reigned. Then Doug finally had the presence of mind to call for professional help. Soon a bemused woman from the Humane Society arrived. She captured the two wererabbits, provided a cage, and tried not to laugh at the dozens of false-ringing and mutually-contradictory descriptions of what had happened and why it was so necessary that the lapines be captured Right Now. After much discussion, Doug was placed in charge of the pair. He took them to a quiet place, let them calm down a little, then freed them. But, even though the rabbits were no longer restricted from growth to human size, the change back to human just didn’t happen. Not until weeks later, when both wererabbits snapped out of it together. Doug found them waiting for him in his apartment one evening after work, both nervously gnawing on toothpicks. Harry in particular was getting on quite well; Doug had unthinkingly caged them together, and Harry had established dominance. This made him a bonafide Alpha wererabbit, much more powerful and in control of himself than he’d been before.

And, it had made him a father as well. There is more to magic than even the were-folk will ever truly understand, and white were-rabbits are perhaps the rarest and most magical creatures there ever will be. Strange things can and do happen around them all of the time.

Chuck was expecting her litter any day now.



## THE ORPHAN SHREDS

WIREWOLF

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I'd heard about the interview, of course. The media station broadcasting it had been pushing it hard for a week. I wasn't sure I wanted to see it. There was this cold dread sitting in the pit of my stomach telling me it would be the start of more riots. That was the last thing we needed.

I was still undecided when the show started, so I scrolled through channel after channel looking for something else to hold my attention. I wallowed my way through countless splatters of color and noise, searching for something with any meaning. Pointless as always, but that's never stopped me from looking.

Then, there it was. Five minutes into the show, the host was still setting the scene with hints about how The Orphan Shreds started as a band. I noticed that *MSB* had chosen Melenda McIntyre as the interviewer. They had hyped the name of their primetime news anchor in all the commercials, trying to build suspense and interest in the show. I wasn't surprised she was the one chosen. She's done some of the toughest interviews I've ever seen and always kept her cool.

His name dropped from her dark lips and I found myself holding my breath. He was coming onto the set now. For real. He hadn't snubbed her after all. Morphs at work had taken bets on it.

I unconsciously closed my eyes as the camera panned left to where he would appear. I was worried about how he would be dressed. I was worried that he might not *be* dressed. The studio audience gave its approval with polite applause. A hundred or so humans, I assumed, who seldom listened to genemorph music and didn't particularly want to see him humiliated in public. It must have been a long search to find so many.

As the lukewarm clapping died down, I knew I'd have to look. Would he flaunt his position by showing up in only his fur? Would he wear one of those Orphan Shreds concert shirts that read "monkeyslayer" on the front? Or would he do the unthinkable and cover his body in one of those tailor-made genemorph-specific high-fashion suits his fame could now make affordable?

I peeked. Then I blinked. Then I could breathe easier. And wonder what he was planning.

Tobhus “Leeth” Mogimbal was standing there, waving graciously to the audience, clothed in ordinary street legal shorts and a vest. He almost looked like any typical African spotted hyena you might see out for a stroll. I squinted at the screen, looking at his ears. You could make out the light coming through the many piercing holes he’d left empty. He’d kept the three rings along the edge of each ear; one silver, one gold, and one platinum. The miniature human skulls dangling on chains from the tip of his ears, made famous at the first concert, were gone. So were the copper “bullets” that normally filled the half dozen other holes in the cups of his ears.

Tobhus shook his host’s hand briefly. He took the seat across from her, his stub of a tail easily fitting through the open back of the “morph-friendly” chair they’d provided for him. Melenda opened with simple greetings and some mild praise to her unique guest. Then she gave her trademark signal for starting the interview. “Let’s get to it, shall we?” Tobhus merely nodded.

“Before we begin, I’d like to know how you prefer to be addressed. Do you usually go by your name or your band’s moniker for you?”

The first words he spoke were as calm and non-threatening as a two-hundred-twenty-pound genemorphic hyena can make them, but the man’s underlying power came through his voice anyway. In the growling rumble of his normal tone of voice he said, “My given name is Tobhus. Leeth is just a stage name I took to promote our band.”

Melenda nodded and asked mildly, “And Leeth is short for...”

“Lethal.” I cringed a bit when Melenda brought that out so soon, but she seemed to be going somewhere with it, and in a hurry.

“Whose idea was it? Yours?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Her dark eyes sparkled in the studio lights. If I hadn’t seen so many of her previous interviews, I might have feared she was going to become one of those sleazy mudslinging, ratings grabbing fools who disregard consequence.

“Because I am.”

“According to the genemorph-based media polls that track your music?”

I couldn’t help frowning at that. It sounded rather ridiculous to me.

There was more growl in Tobhus’ voice as he answered, “According to the design specs of the United African Army’s genetics program which spawned me.”

Melenda turned to the camera, which suddenly tightened to show only her. She addressed the camera and her audience in professional tones. “A man born to be a soldier, raised to be a revolutionary, and who taught himself to live as a feared minority in a human’s world. When we come back, we’ll explore the world this man has been forced to live in.”

MSB cut to a commercial and I wondered where this thing was going. Was it going to be a serious, professional interview of an influential celebrity who had “something to say”? Or was it scripted drivel intended to sooth worried humans about the morphs living among them?

The break was only sixty seconds, and the camera angle had both Tobhus and Melenda in the shot when they returned. They sat at ease, neither seeming to be concerned about the potential for disaster.

"I'm sitting next to Tobhus Mogimbal, the lead singer of one of the most popular genemorphic bands to get media play," she said to the camera. Then she turned and addressed her guest again. "New York must seem a long way from the seaside town of Port Elizabeth, South Africa."

Tobhus nodded. "A long way, yes, but not so different."

"Really? The huge metropolis of New York has similarities to a provincial town like Port Elizabeth?" Melenda sounded interested, not skeptical. I hoped that was a good sign.

Tobhus shrugged slowly. "I've found attitudes toward genemorphs to be nearly universal."

Melenda wasn't satisfied and pressed for more. "Good or bad?"

"Both," he conceded. "Almost the same as any minority."

She let it go at that and switched to his personal history.

"You grew up in very poor conditions: substandard government housing, little education, random harassment from local police, no real health care. How did these conditions influence you as a child?"

The hyena's ears flicked, making the empty holes more conspicuous. "It was difficult, as it would be for anyone. But I did have one advantage."

"Music?" I frowned again. I was surprised Melenda had jumped the gun like that. But she said it as if she expected to be corrected. For a brief moment I wondered whose idea it had been to do this interview.

"No," he said gently. "The Madrid Conference."

"Ah," she sighed, as if she herself were a benefactor of that historic meeting.

"Because of that decision, and the treaty that followed, I was allowed to grow up free in poverty instead of well fed in the United African Army's ranks." Tobhus reached up and spread the perforated cups of his rounded ears. "I have no UAA tattoos in my ears, and that makes me much more fortunate than my great grandparents."

Melenda nodded knowingly and consulted the notes in her lap.

"You were raised by your birth mother until you were seven, when she was killed during the New Apartheid Uprising. Tell us a little about her."

Tobhus said nothing for a moment, but his bright, golden eyes lost their focus as if he were drifting in thought. Presently he said, "My first mother was a fighter. She was a member of Clawstrike and saw herself as a revolutionary, fighting for the rights and freedoms of morphs worldwide." He directed his piercing gaze at his host, his expression solemn. "She tried to teach me to hate humans. Even gave me a stuffed Zhon doll to play with as a kid."

"Zhon being the first genemorph put to death by the South African legal system," Melenda said for the benefit of the audience.

"No," her guest declared. "Zhon was the first genemorph to focus human attention to the oppression of morphs in South Africa by killing a human."

She seemed taken slightly aback, but collected herself quickly. "Well, viewpoints

on that moment in history aside, your birth mother raised you to hate humans. When she was tragically killed in the civil unrest that scarred Port Elizabeth twenty years ago, the courts handed you over to a human family. What was that like?"

"It was very hard at first. The first two weeks were hell for them. I didn't trust them. Tried to run away. It took a long time, but they were patient. They got me turned around. They earned my trust." Tobhus' lips lifted in a slight grin. A hint of sharp white teeth glinted in the bright overhead lights. "That's when my real education began." He said nothing more, and I knew he was baiting her. For the sake of the interview, Melenda had little choice but to drop that particular thread of conversation, or take his cue to prod him for more.

"The Mogimbal family enrolled you in public school, where you found tolerance was possible between humans and morphs."

"Yes," he casually acknowledged. "But they taught me something much more valuable than grammar and math." He grinned wider, waiting to see if his host would keep playing his game.

Melenda did not become MSB's top anchor by letting other people play games with her. She simply stared at him, her patience far from being tested. Several moments of dead air were bounced off the satellites until Tobhus said, "They taught me that my first mother was a fool. They taught me that if I was going to fight the injustice morphs were forced to live with, I needed to do it from inside the system. Not from outside. That was my first mother's mistake."

I have to believe Mrs McIntyre was forced by time to let that topic go. Her eyes darted to something off screen before she went back to her notes. There was something in her eyes, though, that said she would come back to it if she could.

"When you came of age, you took a job at the port, working on the docks. From there you managed to get a berth on a Scandinavian freighter headed for the States. What drew you here?"

"For all its flaws, America is the most open democracy in the world. I wasn't sure what I wanted at the time, but I knew I had a better chance of finding it in America than in Africa."

"And what did you find when you got here?"

Tobhus shrugged. "Racism. Speciesism. All the problems I'd left. But I also saw morphs who were doctors and mayors and such. I saw morphs that were *respected* by humans."

Melenda consulted her notes again, reading off a brief history of his first years in his new country. "You successfully petitioned for temporary sanctuary under the fairly new 'Williams' law. You applied for citizenship, and two years later you passed the test." She looked up from the notes in her lap. "And during that time, you met your band mates."

"Vander Seth and Jorgen Waller. They were sharing a rental house and needed a third to help cover the rent."

"They were trying to start a band at the time, and asked you if you were interested. And you said...."

"I said 'no.'" The hyena shrugged. "I couldn't sing, couldn't play any instruments, and didn't care."

"What changed your mind?"

Tobhus grinned rather nastily. "They were lame. They didn't have a singer, they couldn't write songs to save their lives. And worst of all, they wanted to get play on human media channels. I watched them screwing around for a while, then finally got sick of their whining."

"You took over the group." Damn me if that didn't sound like an accusation.

"They needed an alpha, and I wasn't doing anything else."

"You even renamed the group. How did you come up with the name 'The Orphan Shreds'?"

The caniform shifted in his chair. "Well, that should be fairly obvious, I would think." When Melenda didn't respond immediately, he said, "All three of us were orphaned in both the literal and metaphorical sense. We lost our families, our countries, our identities. We'd come from places where our very lives were worth practically nothing." His voice deepened, and a growl rose up for a second. He blinked, settled, and continued. "We were chewed up and spat out, shredded."

Melenda gave her guest a moment to calm down. "Did you ever think you would become famous while you wrote the Shreds' first song?"

Tobhus became indignant. "Fame?" His ears crimped themselves over the shortly trimmed fur of his head. "Fame is for people with weak egos."

The picture went dark and Melenda's voiceover was accompanied by stock footage of a concert The Orphan Shreds had done a few months ago. "When we come back, the hard questions about accusations of promoting hate between humans and genemorphs being leveled at Mr Mogimbal and his band."

Not too bad so far, I thought. The make-or-break was coming, though. Humans and morphs had both been speculating for months whether or not Tobhus and the Shreds were trying to provoke fighting between the two sides. Now Melenda would ask for the answer. I wasn't certain what Tobhus would tell her.

I stayed by the telecomp during the commercials, not wanting to miss anything. When they came back to the program, Tobhus was still sitting at ease, but I noticed that his host was leaning forward in her chair. I thought I could see a hunger in her eyes, and it worried me. She's going to really go after him, I realized. I felt almost sick at the thought.

"We're back with Tobhus Mogimbal, lead singer of The Orphan Shreds. Tobhus..." Melenda seemed to search for a way to put what she wanted to say. Playing up to the camera, I was sure. "You were raised to hate humans until you were placed with a family that taught you tolerance was possible."

"And necessary," the hyena added.

"And necessary," Melenda agreed. "You left the oppression of Africa and came to America, which you say is nearly as oppressive but balanced by opportunity."

"Yeah."

"You joined a band you originally had no interest in, became its leader."

Tobhus merely blinked and flicked his ears.

“And now your songs are influencing young people, humans and genemorphs alike. Can you answer me this question?”

Here it comes, I thought.

“You grew up living with the corrosive effects of hatred, you’ve seen what it does to both sides. You’ve seen that it can be fought and beaten.” Melenda edged forward until she was sitting, literally, on the edge of her seat. “Why are your songs filled with hatred directed against humans?”

The studio was silent. The camera switched to show Tobhus in a close up. His tongue snaked out and slowly washed the black leather of his nose. I could now see the empty holes where his nose rings would normally be. The camera backed off a bit, perhaps some director’s discomfort with the image.

“First of all, Mrs McIntyre, I have to ask you something.” He was so calm, and his voice was just a quiet rumble. “Do you know the difference between anger and hatred?”

I suppose she saw that as a trap. Her professional training kept her from following his lead when he turned the question around on her. “Perhaps you should tell me.”

“Anger is what we all feel when we’ve been wronged, or seen a wrong that hurts us. It’s a normal feeling for people to have.” He stared at her, muzzle down and ears full up. “Hatred is prejudiced hostility. It doesn’t always come from being wronged, or from suffering injustice. It often feeds on itself and seldom follows reason.” He glanced up at the studio audience briefly, as though searching for something. “My songs aren’t about hatred. They aren’t meant to promote hatred.” He turned back to his host. “They’re meant to provoke anger.”

“Provoke anger?” She frowned, sounding puzzled. “How are people to distinguish the difference?” Shuffling through her notes she said, “I’d like to quote the lyrics to one of your recent songs, which has become wildly popular among the young listening public.” She looked up and pointed to the darkened monitor that sat between them. I hadn’t noticed it sitting there until then. “First, though, perhaps we should hear them the way you present them. This was recorded at your Seattle concert two months ago. The song is called, ‘Beautiful Agony.’”

The picture switched to a hand held camera used by the Shreds’ own crew to record concert footage for videos and commercials. I doubted such video would help Tobhus’ case. Any human who had never seen The Orphan Shreds in concert would likely be shocked at the display.

On the screen, Tobhus was fully transformed into his stage persona, Leeth. All the ear adornments were in place, every body piercing was filled with its usual gold ring or silver stud. The clothes were gone, and so was some of his fur. At this concert, the last of the tour, he’d shaved most of his chest and stomach and gotten a huge temporary tattoo. The word “monkeyslayer” arced across his chest in bright red letters. Most of the fur on his muzzle was gone, too. An image of jagged teeth and streaming blood had been dyed onto the skin of his snout. When he opened his mouth to sing, it looked as though another snout was forcing his open from inside. The spots in his remaining fur had been dyed bright red to stand out against his tawny pelt, making it look as though he were riddled with bloody bullet holes.

The sound quality was terrible, and I suddenly knew the reason Melenda had used the video. It wasn't so people could hear the him sing the lyrics of "Beautiful Agony". When Tobhus sings he doesn't just sing. He screams, he shouts, he rages, he howls. Many of the humans who dislike the Shreds' music say it's partly because they can't understand any of the words. The fans, however, say that those who listen, those who *want* to hear, manage just fine.

It was the image she wanted to show, though, that bothered me. She wanted people to see the performance, see the manic energy that fills Tobhus when he's throwing himself around the stage. She wanted to show how frightening he can look. It was a cheap shot, and it pissed me off.

The video cut out and the camera returned to the two of them. Melenda read the lyrics, putting emphasis on words that she knew would offend or shock.

*Bloody child lies in the road  
 Bullet through the head  
 Bloody child nailed to concrete  
 Father wants it dead  
 Claw their eyes, bite their throats  
 Taste their drying blood  
 Make them see us as we are  
 Or turn us back to mud*

A murmur ran through the audience. Not everyone had heard the controversial lyrics in the Shreds' recent hit song. Melenda glanced at the audience as though she sympathized with their concern. Turning back to Tobhus she said, "That sounds to me like you want genemorphs to go out and kill humans."

She'd finally gotten to him, and it showed. He shot her an irritated look and said, "You do realize the bloody child symbolizes morphs and the Father represents the human race that genetically designed us, don't you?"

"Claw their eyes, bite their throats, taste their drying blood," she repeated. "Do *you* realize that lyrics like this sound as though you want to provoke more than anger or hatred? It sounds like you want to provoke violence."

Tobhus studied his host a moment, considering his reply. I held my breath.

"Mrs McIntyre, you're a black woman."

Melenda blinked, uncertain. The camera changed to a wide shot as she leaned back slightly.

"Yes," she said dryly. "So?"

"Before genemorphs were liberated from the military and allowed to live among the public, you were practically at the bottom of the ladder in this society." The hyena's eyes narrowed. "You're a member of a racial minority that's been oppressed in this country for hundreds of years. Your gender has been openly abused for *thousands* of years." He stared at her, waiting.

Melenda's voice was slightly subdued as she said, "Your point is?"

"Have blacks fought to rid themselves of oppression?" He turned to the audience again, which sat in tense silence. "Have women fought to stop the abuse they suffer?"

He raised a hand and pointed a clawed finger at them. "Every one of you knows that when a group of people is treated unfairly, those people will eventually fight back." He put his hand down and leaned forward. "And none of you will deny that genemorphs have been treated unfairly by humans."

I waited for someone in the audience to speak, but the silence held. Tobhus remained calm, but his voice was filled with passion.

"When I sing 'Beautiful Agony', I'm trying to get each and every listener to understand how it feels to be on *my* side of things. I need them to feel how angry I am, and to know *why* I'm angry." He turned to Melenda again. "If I do it right, if I get my point across, then when I sing about wanting to 'bite the throat' of the people who are hurting me, the listener will think, 'Hell, yeah! I would, too!'"

When Tobhus sat back in his chair, Melenda asked, "Would it be reasonable to say, then, that your songs are an attempt to justify the violence between humans and genemorphs?"

The hyena sighed and shook his head. "No. I'm not trying to justify anything. I'm trying to *explain*, to both sides, why morphs are willing to fight."

Melenda McIntyre stared at her guest a moment. Then she made up for using the video footage of the concert by giving him the opening I was hoping she would. "Tobhus, music aside, if you could speak to the human race as a whole, what would you say?"

Tobhus took a deep breath, lowered his head a bit. He closed his eyes and swallowed. When he opened his eyes he looked right at the camera and softly said, "Don't forsake us. You gave us intelligence. You gave us strength. You gave us compassion. We have all the gifts you gave us and you've taught us how to use them. All we want..." He paused, amended himself. "All *I* want is to stand by your side, peacefully. I am a child of the human race. I look different, sometimes I act different. But I want to live with those who created me. I don't want to destroy them. And I don't want them to destroy me."

The studio was still for a long while. The camera focused on Melenda, but she was still staring at her guest. I want to believe I saw admiration in her eyes. Then the clapping started. It was subdued at first, as though the audience wasn't sure what to feel. Steadily it grew. Both host and guest looked out among them, and both looked pleased at the response. Eventually the applause drowned out everything, even Melenda's shout that the broadcast would return after the last break.

I turned the telecomp off at that point. I didn't need to see the last minute or so. I knew things would be alright. I wouldn't need to watch the news feeds for signs that civil unrest had broken out. And I didn't give a damn about what the critics thought. I just sat there in my darkened home and waited.

About an hour after the interview, the telecomp chimed an incoming call. I answered it, and was happy to see my adopted son's face on the screen.

"Hello Tobhus."

"Hi, Mom. Did you catch the show?"

I nodded. "Wouldn't have missed it for anything." There was no need to concern him about my early doubts.



“What’d you think?”

I smiled, feeling extraordinary pride in him. “You were marvelous. No one can call you an ‘illiterate screech’ now.”

He smiled back, a beautiful smile full of teeth I’ve never feared. “Thanks.”

“Your mother would have been very proud of you.”

Tobhus hesitated. “You think so?”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure. I know I am.”

His ears flicked back a bit, as close to a blush as any morph can come. A noise off screen distracted him. “Yeah, hang on,” he said quietly. “Gotta run, Mom. Party.”

“Okay. Be careful.” He nodded. “And Tobhus....”

“Yeah?”

“Put your bullets back in your ears. They look like furry sieves without them.”

He chuckled. “Sure thing. Later, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

After we disconnected, I lay back on the couch and thought about the interview, and all the events that had lead up to it. It had been a rough ride at times. But I wouldn’t trade a single moment for all the money in the world.

Sometimes I feel more like a genemorph than a human myself. I watched my adopted son go through some real misery growing up. But I have to admit one thing. For all the mistakes the human race has made, it still managed to create some truly beautiful children. Even the orphaned ones.



## TEAM PLAYER

WILL A. SANBORN

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I had to smile as I watched Christian interact with Tasha, seeing him loosen up and treat her with genuine adoration. He'd seemed so out of place here in Alaska, having made his way through the desolate backcountry to check up on his childhood friend. He'd clearly been expecting my living quarters to be far more austere than he found, though I knew Christian still felt out of place without city conveniences at his disposal.

The moment he'd arrived, the dogs had of course been overjoyed at seeing a new visitor. He'd been a little overwhelmed at their jumping and pawing at him in their enthusiastic greetings, so I'd led him into the sitting room to escape the ruckus. We'd found Tasha there, and Christian had seemed a little taken aback at seeing her quite at home, curled up in one of the chairs. He'd made little mention of it however, and had taken his spot on the couch, doing his best to ignore the tufts of husky fur attaching themselves to his clothing. Tasha worked her usual magic on him in short order, and soon he was sharing his tea biscuits with her, patting her head gently as she smiled up at him with those ice-blue eyes.

Eventually, Tasha had gotten her fill of attention, and had nuzzled his hand affectionately before excusing herself from the room quietly.

"Wonderful dogs, aren't they, Christian?" I remarked as Tasha was leaving.

"Yes John, they are quite unique, but a little rambunctious," he replied.

I just smiled at that. I'd spent more time than I cared to remember around huskies in general, and these ones in particular. I could certainly appreciate his statement.

"Well yes, they can be a bit of a handful at times, but that's what also makes them so perfect for this climate; they're very intelligent and independent. Out in the wilderness you need a team of dogs that can not only look out for themselves, but for you as well."

Seeing Christian's acquiescent nod, I continued. "Not only are they smart to begin with, but I got them from a breeder who promised me these dogs were smarter than average, and quite loyal as well.... I have to say I agree with him on both counts. They took a bit of getting used to, but they took a shine to me and we've made a good

team. It's funny, but once you've been around them for a while, you can really tell how smart they are.... We almost communicate on a certain level."

I read Christian's dubious expression and smiled. "Oh, nothing earth-shattering, but their moods are easy to read, and sometimes they even get a bit more than that across..." I paused briefly, and then continued. "Anyway, they were with me when I found that lucky strike, and if it hadn't been for them, I would've never gotten it all out of the backcountry. I'd never seen so much gold hauled out of one place before!"

"That's what I don't understand, John," Christian interrupted. "If you struck it rich, why are you still up here? Why haven't you come back to civilization and lived it up? It's what you always dreamed about."

I smiled and gestured around the well stocked cabin. "Oh, things here aren't that bad. It may not be as nice as a house down in the lower forty-eight, but this place still has some things to offer, especially if you have the money for it.... Besides, the dogs like it here."

"You mean you're staying here for the dogs? You've become that attached to them?"

"Well, not exactly, it's more like it's the other way around," I let out a small chuckle, glad to share my unusual story with him. "You see, the dogs had become very fond of me. I was planning on selling them to another prospector, even though I liked having them around. However, it seems they had other ideas. That night, after hauling the gold back to the cabin, I'd unloaded the sled, taken care of the dogs, then gone off to bed, ready to make the trip to the assayer's office in the morning. Heh, imagine my surprise when I woke up to find the gold missing."

"The dogs.... They took it?" The incredulous look on Christian's face was enough to make me laugh once again.

"Yup, I told you they were smart, didn't I?"

"But why, what use would they have for the money?"

"None whatsoever, my friend, except that they knew that's why I'd be leaving, and they didn't want that. It seems they would much rather stay with me than have a new master."

"So the gold is gone? It can't be!"

"No, of course not, they weren't that mean to me, they just played a little trick to keep me around.... You see, they hid the gold out in the woods somewhere. They've hid it quite well as I haven't been able to find it. I tried following them a couple of times, but they'd split up and run in different directions to confuse me. Oh, they had fun with that game."

"So, they're keeping you hostage here then?" Christian asked, his voice ringing with disbelief.

"Oh no, not hostage. I could leave anytime I wanted to, but then I wouldn't have the money now would I? They bring me some of it from time to time, enough to live quite comfortably here, but if I ever want to see it all, I understand they want me to look after them for the rest of their lives. It's a pretty good life, and the summers here can be quite nice. I enjoy having the dogs around too, they're a fun team, and I know I'll miss them when they do finally leave me my inheritance...."

I was interrupted as the door was pushed open and Tasha made her return to the room, her ears perked up at attention and her tail wagging merrily behind her. With a cursory glance in my direction, she trotted over to Christian and dropped something in his lap. Picking it up, his eyes went wide as he examined the small lump of gold.

He turned to stare at me, while I chuckled, having figured that was what she'd been up to. "See? Tasha is quite taken with you! It's not every day we get visitors here. She likes you and wanted to repay your kindness." I urged him to keep the thing. "Go on, take it. There's plenty more where that came from, even if I can't get at it just now...."