

Two Dog Night

An Anno Amagium Short by Hank Whitson

"You see this one about the wolves?"

Mul asked, holding up his symphone.

Devran bristled, then forced himself to relax. He looked up from his laptop incanter and waited for Mul to continue. The Walt Diner's ruddy proprietor liked to talk, and all he asked in return was some small sign of acknowledgement. After that, he would continue talking regardless of whether he had seen the meme or not.

"It's a proverb. Says there are two wolves fighting inside all of us. One good, and one bad. And the one that wins is the one you feed."

Dev winced. He wasn't much for memes. They chewed culture like gum, stripped it of all context, nuance, and nutrition, then smeared it on the digital asphalt. *Then again, I'm biased.* Memes cost a lot of his colleagues their jobs. Maybe not directly, but they seemed to catalyze a shift. Timelines replaced papers with endless-scroll funny sections, insipid listicles, and baseless hot takes. He knew there were writers doing good journalism on the arcanet, but it was a struggle to compete with the all shit fit for shorter attention spans.

"First Peoples find it offensive when it's used like that."

"Used like what?"

"Social media."

"Why?" Mul asked.

He wasn't being an asshole, so far as Dev could tell. Just genuinely perplexed.

"I dunno," Dev admitted. "I'm not First Peoples. But I have friends on the reservation who've told me as much. Figure they have enough shit to deal with already, and it costs me nothing to drop it."

Mul tilted his head to the side in concession. *Probably a disappointing answer.* But he was already scrolling on, searching for his next fix. *Don't be so judgmental.* Mul was sixty-eight, and had only recently figured out how to use the arcanet. He said it helped him keep in touch with his grandkids. *Even if it doesn't, it's good for people to develop new skills. Good for him for finding something that makes him happy. God knows there's too little of that to go around.* Mul still read the paper too, and books besides.

The Walt Diner was both home and office for Devram. He had a perfectly reasonable apartment in Monrovia, a few miles to the east, but it was more of a shower and sleep spot than a place of residence. Every homicide reporter needed a base with three things: a reasonably comfortable place to do a lot of waiting, a Wi-Fi connection, and an endless well of cheap coffee. Mul provided all three.

A faint, tell-tale crackle lit up his earpiece. He turned up the volume on his incanter, set to pick up the local police scanner and caught the report from the beginning.

"All units, we just got two calls about an abandoned car at the corner of Glen and Del Monte. Two people who are badly wounded and nonresponsive."

"Ten-four, dispatch. This is car seventeen. We'll be there in five."

Dev closed his laptop and stretched.

"Duty calls?" Mul asked.

“Yeah. Pour me one more for the road?”

“Sure,” Mul said, moving to fetch the pot. “But don’t you need to hurry?”

Dev smirked.

“Cops look at you funny when you beat them to the scene.”

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Dev slowed his car to a halt as soon as he sensed the blood, roughly half a block away. He felt it against his wyrd first—a distinct magical pressure, rhythmless and steadily waning—but he could also smell and taste the acrid, metallic tang on the back of his tongue. *Two men. Young. African Eriician. They’ve been dead for a couple hours, and it was plenty gruesome.*

There was something else too that tugged at him. *Another scent. Wait. Is it...?* As he reached deeper, probing the urdic energy with his senses, he closed his eyes, and... the totem stirred, abrupt and violent. His Adam’s apple shifted, vocal cords contorting, and a low, slow growl escaped his throat.

Dev seized his neck with one hand, coughing, and clutched the small leather cord that hung around his neck with the other. The totem’s energies retreated from his wyrd. *Keep your goddamn head. Moon just started waning. It is a very bad night for this and you need to be more careful.* When his breathing slowed, and the totem receded, he resumed his approach.

A large crowd had gathered around the corner, surrounding the beaten-up sedan that housed the victims. Detectives hadn’t arrived yet, but four officers were working the scene. One was cordoning the area with caution tape, two were taking statements, and the last was taking urdic readings from the scene. If there was too much residual magical energy present, they would have to turn the case over to Amagia, and everything would go straight to hell. As soon as witnesses saw wizards, they stopped being rational. Viable suspects were overlooked in favor of boogeymen. Superstition superseded sense. Outlandish speculation buried pertinent information.

“We’re good,” the officer taking the readings called.

Dev exhaled and approached the closest bystander, a middle-aged Filipino man.

“Hey. Sorry to bother you, but I’m a reporter for the Arroyo Chronicle. Do you know what happened here?”

The man looked surprised and apprehensive as people often did, which is why Dev liked to identify himself as quickly as possible.

“Oh. I’m sorry, uh, I don’t really know anything. Somebody found two boys in that car. I think they’re both dead.”

“Jesus,” Dev said. “Do you know when this happened?”

The man regarded him with a polite wariness. It was a familiar expression. *I want to help. I just don’t want to be involved.* Dev held up his hands and emanated an apology, retreating ever-so-slightly:

“I’m just trying to get the basics. I won’t write anything down unless you want me to. Do you know who discovered the bodies?”

“Think it was that lady over there,” the man stood on his toes and tilted his chin at an elderly, gray-haired woman—*distant Scandinavian heritage, now thoroughly Californian*—talking to one of the officers, wringing her hands.

Gonna be a long wait before it's my turn. Dev nodded his thanks at the man and looked around the crowd for somebody who seemed less nervous and more talkative. A large, bearded man—*Polish roots, also been in California awhile*—was shaking his head and loudly holding forth with a woman—*first generation Korean*—who was emanating emphatic agreement. Both wore tee shirts, sweats, and bathrobes. *Noisy neighbors in night clothes. Bingo.* Dev approached slowly, listening to the man's rant and waiting for an opening.

"I mean, of course it's *sad*. It's a goddamn *tragedy*, but you can't be surprised! This is gonna keep happening until the police do something about the damn gangs. But nobody cares about anything that happens north of the 210."

"You don't think it's the Good Wolf?" The Korean woman asked.

Dev took the opportunity to interject:

"Hi. My name is Devran Cobb, and I'm a reporter with the Arroyo Chronicle. Do you know what happened here?"

The man and woman both turned to Dev then looked back at the scene.

"Somebody killed two boys and left them in the back seat of that car. Gang related, is my guess. Probably petty revenge. Or some asshole sending another asshole a message."

"Why do you say that?" Dev asked, though he had his hunches.

The Bent Lane Bloods had recently splintered, and their turf war for northeast arroyo's drug trade was heating up. There had been a drive-by that left two wounded two weeks ago, and an execution-style shooting the month before that. But gangs were always invoked as local bogeymen, especially in the predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods nestled between the foothills and the freeway.

"I mean, up here it's always the damn gangs. The wall next to that gas station up there? It's one tag on top of the other, like dogs pissing on a hydrant. There was that shooting. So many attempted drive-bys that people have stopped reporting them. Just business as usual."

Dev nodded sympathetically as he extracted a notepad from his satchel.

"Would you mind if I took some notes? Maybe a quote?"

The Asian woman shook her head and withdrew with a silent apology. The big man considered Dev for a moment, then shrugged and extended his hand:

"Gazmel Nowak. People call me 'Gaz.' I live in that apartment there," he pointed at the second story of the beige building behind him. "Came out when I heard a scream about half an hour ago. Actually, it was four past twelve on the dot. Remember looking at my clock. Anyway, that poor woman over there was passing by and she saw the bodies in the back seat."

"Were they obviously injured?"

Gaz grunted.

"You hear about that kid they found near Muir? Last winter?"

Dev's blood froze with a single beat.

The seventh of Ophiuchus. Tyronn Douglas. He had fielded that call too. Dev remembered seeing the boy's mangled body stretched across the lawn in the predawn light. His face was gone, flesh bitten off, jawbone broken. Then Dev was back in his old house, covered in blood, throat burning, sprinting to his nephew's room.

Brenim.

Only the top half.

The totem stirred along with the memories. *You need to get to that car. You need to check the scents.* Dev barely managed to hold himself together. *The interview. Stay in the present moment. Ask something, damn you.*

"You mean the mauling?" Dev managed, forcing the images out of his head.

Gaz nodded.

"I'm sure most people will say both of them are that 'Good Dog' Selia was talking about," He gestured dismissively at his Korean neighbor. "Personally, I think its gang members making things up to convince the Amagium magic is involved, so they can make jurisdiction difficult for asfal's cops. A werewolf vigilante sounds too good to be true." Gaz laughed. Dev forced an anemic smile and waited for him to continue: "Anyway, I got a look in that car when it came down to see what was wrong. Wish I could take it back. Those boys've been torn apart. Looks like they've been through a meat grinder."

"Don't gangs usually settle things with guns?" Dev asked.

"They can get pretty creative when they want to make an example out of people. Or maybe they're trying to send this vigilante a message. I just know the cops are timid about the 'G' word because it might make them look racist..."

As Gaz started repeating himself, Dev allowed his attention to wander slightly, and noticed the arrival of another police cruiser. A pair of detectives stepped out. *Hall and Corson.* They were decent people as far as asfal's cops went. *Reasonable toward the press, at least.*

Dev thanked Gaz and proceeded to speak to two other bystanders while the detectives took stock of the scene. They corroborated the testimony he had gathered so far. One more vote for the Good Dog, and one more vote for gangs. He got some useful quotes for the article, but no actionable information. *I need to get to that car.*

After ten minutes of agonized waiting, Dev caught Detective Hall's eye. She was in her mid-forties, of distant Caribbean descent, and always wore the demeanor of a stern, but good-humored mother.

"Detective Hall," Dev called. "You have a minute?"

"For you, Dev? I might even have two."

"Seems to be an even split between the Good Dog and Bent Lane," Dev observed.

"Somehow I don't think it's either," Hall said.

Me neither.

"Why's that?"

"Gangs use guns. And this alleged Good Dog doesn't kill people."

No. He doesn't.

"May I take a look?" Dev asked, nodding at the car.

Detective Hall laughed and shook her head.

"Nothin' publishable there."

"No pictures," Dev swore.

"If you don't want pictures, why bother? You get off on this shit? I mean, *smell that.* This one is grizzly, kid. I don't care how many bodies you've seen."

"Tyronn Douglas was found on the lawn of Muir High School on Ophiuchus seventh of last year. It took the coroner two days to identify him because he was so badly mauled. There were all kinds of rumors surrounding the death, people blaming gangs and what not, but so far as I know, it's still an open case."

“I’m not really sure where you’re going with this, Dev.”

Come on. Persuade her. You need to get closer to that car, before the scents and their energy fade altogether. “Look, certain cases stick with you, right? That one keeps me up at night. I just want to see if I notice something that might help you out. Come on, Leshanda. When have I ever screwed you?”

Hall squinted at Dev for a moment then gestured irritably for him to follow her.

Dev knew the sight of the bodies would bring memories of Brenim. He steeled himself for it, tried to anchor himself in the present moment, but it was worse than he anticipated. The boys in the car were more wound than flesh. One was missing the entire right half of his face, empty eye socket exposed, and the other had his lips and ears torn away. Gaping bite marks on their arms. Shredded tee-shirts, soaked black-red. They were only a few years older than Brenim would have been. Fifteen and sixteen rather than twelve. *No. He’d be thirteen.* Just like that, Dev was back in his nephew’s room.

Only the top half.

Dev beat the images out of his head again, and allowed the totem to come to the fore of his mind. His senses sharpened, recalibrated, and then the scene exploded with vivid detail. Each scent became a maze unto themselves, filled with an overwhelming amount of information.

It was more than a physical capacity to sense smells. The totem changed Dev’s wyrd, giving it an intense, inherent capacity for psychometry. His nose could pull residual emotional energy and psychic impressions out of the particles comprising aromas. Sometimes he heard faint echoes of a victim’s thoughts or glimpsed their final moments. Other times he would experience the emotions of their killer. Dev threaded his senses through the labyrinth of half-dissipated memories, searching for answers. Each scent held secrets that would spell out the boys’ death. *And lead me to the coywolf.*

The blood was the most prominent scent and its energy was the most complex. He saw a concrete path leading through a row of chain link cages. Dogs barking. Recursive scents emerged from the ferric tang of blood. Canine shit, urine, and blood battling solvents and hose water. Then he saw a large, dirt-floored basement lit by floodlights. Then fangs. Agony.

Dev lost himself for a split second, caught between his own memories—*ding-dong, fangs in my neck, only the top half*—and the victim’s first-person visions of their mauling. He retreated instantly, giving the other scents of death—piss-saturated denim, bile, spinal fluid, incipient decay—a wide berth.

Whoever owned the car worked with animals regularly. Canine musk had seeped into the car’s cushions, but there were feline and rodent odors as well. *There’s even coyote fur in here.* But it all meant nothing without the aftershave—the puzzle piece that could cement a link to the Ophiuchus murder scene.

Dev continued sprinting down the wending corridors of scent and memory, processing them at a dizzying, aching pace. And then he found it. A beacon of truth submerged beneath the ocean of gore. Aerosolized sage and spice, aged in aluminum. Other people wore the same brand, of course. It was fairly popular. But the way the chemical’s mingled with the wearer’s sweat was entirely unique—distinctly sour. The driver of the car was the same person who left Tyronn’s savaged body at Muir.

The scant traces of his hair and skin smelled like an indistinct blend of northern European nationalities, filtered through at least three generations of Southern California sun and smog. Low melanin in the trace amounts of skin and hair. *Definitely not a member of the Bent Lane Bloods.* That aftershave acted like a skeleton key, establishing a sympathetic link to its wearer. Dev could tell the driver was not nervous about the bodies in his back seat. In fact, he was warm with satisfaction. A sensation similar to afterglow. *He got off on this.*

Scents also clung to the car's exterior in muted layers. Salt and grease from the fast food joints up the street and a much milder, earthy scent lingering beneath. *Dried grass. Dog shit. Pigeon Food. Ash, acacia, and silver maple. Passed through the Arroyo watershed.*

With more time, Dev could explore the car in its entirety. If he was alone, he could close his eyes, and devote himself entirely to the totem's sense of smell without fear of losing control. But it had been four seconds and if he waited any longer, Hall would get suspicious. *This will have to do.* Dev withdrew his senses from the scents, allowing the gore to overwhelm his human stomach. He quickly turned away quickly, hand to mouth as Mul's slightly burnt coffee lurched up from his stomach and slapped the back of his teeth. *Hopefully that sold it.*

"You asked for it," Hall said, clicking her tongue.

"I sure did," Dev said weakly.

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Dev kept the police scanner on in his earbuds as he sped home, just in case the killer was foolish enough to claim more victims in one night. Mercifully, the scanner was silent.

As soon as he stepped inside, he went to the cupboard and extracted an air anima—an ambient spirit pertaining to wind, gas, and related natural forces trapped in a crystal ball, waiting for use. He slotted the orb into his right magic license and began a simple contract.

It was legal, completely exempt magic—a spell intended to deal with unpleasant odors by drawing them from one object and fixing them to another. He checked a reference book to make sure he spoke the incantation perfectly, then used his *wyrd* to cast the spell. It went off without a hitch, drawing every atom of the aromas that had clung to his hair and clothing, and bound them to a clean rag that would serve as his compass.

Once the spell was finished, the rag smelled like an abattoir with the thinnest hint of animal piss, sage, and spice. Satisfied, he placed the cloth in a lead box, closed it, and wiped all the residual scent away from the exterior. Then he stripped and headed to the shower.

Dev always showered after work and before deciding to do something stupid.

And there's been a lot of that lately.

But this could be it. An end to everything. *I'll kill him and come clean. If I get the needle, so be it. I died when the coywolf arrived, anyway.* But the totem whispered into his ear. Niggling, nagging, and needling. *We don't know if this is the coywolf for sure.*

Three stories. Three scents. One down, and two to go.

The coywolf had not smelled like any of the leads. Even though Devran tried as hard as he could to remember the coywolf's scent, it had been distinctly odorless. An absence of smell to the point of being caustic. It was like a hole in the fabric of magic and every known Resting Law. The scent of silence and recursive darkness.

That's why I didn't know what was waiting on the other side of my front door.

When the bell rang—*ding-dong, only the top half*—a person stood in a full-length coat, hooded and masked beneath the nose. Then it wasn't a person anymore. The nose turned black, extending forward as the beast it belonged to erupted from the disguise. *Teeth. In my throat.* Even as the thing ripped at Dev's Adam's apple, he noticed things. *It's not a full wolf. Too lean. Hair too short. Half coyote?*

Dev was too stunned to shift.

Only the top half.

The totem had been frantic inside him, its obscene power flooding to the fore, but far too late. His brain was clogged with pain. Neither his wyrd nor his muscles could respire, and he was already bleeding out. Brenim was in the other room. He had to—*Only the top half*—he had to warn his nephew. Had to protect him. Dev managed to punch the thing, once, in the side of the head. *Cold air. In my neck. Coming in the wrong way. I can't breathe.*

Then he died.

He was dead.

But the totem wasn't done. *It ate my whole life when I was six, and it still wasn't done taking things from me, twenty-two goddamn years later.*

When he woke from the attack—*only the top half*—Brenim was... *butchered? Eviscerated? Ruined?* There were no words. *Only the top half.* Dev knew words—he knew them very fucking intimately—and they all fell short. He found his nephew. *And I held him. I held the him I recognized. I held the top half—only the top half—of his head. Hair and ears. Eyes and nose. Top teeth. Oh God.*

Dev started to retch, but the totem seized control, a howl overcoming the bile. Before he could catch himself or halt the change, he dragged his hands down the sides of his shower, sheering jagged shards of tile into the tub below. Fortunately, his swipes strayed just shy of the plumbing. He stepped back, slipped, and fell on his ass, naked, exhausted, and weeping.

Toweling off helped somehow. Put the memories back in their boxes.

Rational thought resumed.

The coywolf had been an agent of retribution. A means of silencing a story.

Dev never achieved real fame as a journalist, he had earned a local reputation as a young bulldog while working at the Los Angeles Times. In addition to homicides, he did investigative work, usually on topics his comparatively well-adjusted coworkers shied from. Crime. Corruption. *You know. The cheery stuff.* His pieces had ended more than one career and disrupted criminal interests through exposure before, which was always dangerous. But before anything else, he spoke of the dead, and to some extent, spoke *for* the dead. Few careers carried greater capacity for inspiring rage.

Every story Dev had ever written had a distinct scent, and the aftershave belonged to one of three pieces he had been working when the coywolf attacked.

The first story centered around a counterfeit drug ring in Watts. Mara salvatrucha was dealing a specific mix of fae dust cut with a retired brand of laundry detergent. *Smelled like dried battery acid and scum-coated sugar.* The second story concerned human trafficking. He was covering the deaths of three First Peoples women who died of dehydration in a shipping container that was delayed in the port of Los Angeles. *Sweat, hickory smoke, and horses.*

Dev had yet to find a lead on that case, but it also struck him as the least likely lead, since the deaths appeared to be accidental, and trying to silence somebody would draw more attention to a trafficking ring than it would dissuade.

But Tyronn's mauling, tinged with sage and spice, was the most promising lead, because the victim had been ripped apart—*only the top half*—just like Brenim.

After the attack, he changed his legal last name from Desai to Cobb, resigned from the Times, and told his editor that he needed a change of scenery. Something safer. A fresh start. That was all probably true. All things he needed. Especially if he was looking to heal, or regain some kind of clarity. Dev wanted the coywolf to believe that the attack was a success. *Devran Desai is dead. You killed him. Broke his spirit. Even if you hear that he survived, I want you to know that he received your message and is now running scared.*

And Dev did run. He ran until the blisters turned to callouses, and his lungs could pump out consecutive six-minute miles. He took mixed martial arts classes, researched fighting styles used by asfalis military, police, and amagia. Devran's brother and mother had taught him the basics of hand-to-hand combat as a kid—a *Desai family obligation*—but it made the totem harder to control, and Dev shied from it.

The Mara Salvatrucha drug ring was his dry run. His research on the story had already armed him with all the necessary information to pursue the lead. He bought a bag of the tainted fae dust from one of the street dealers, and then spent two hours in a dream-like trance, utterly lost in the scent of the dust. He followed the echoes to the distributors' warehouse, beat everyone inside within an inch of their lives, burned their product, and waited for the Coywolf to show. When the cops arrived and the Coywolf didn't, he scratched the lead off his list. Thus, the Good Boy was born.

Dev signed up with the Arroyo Chronicle, because it was the paper based closest to Muir High mauling; his most promising lead. Every night, he waited for the right kind of murder to arrive. And on nights when he was off-shift, he drove to dangerous neighborhoods in Los Angeles, hooded up, and went looking for trouble. Stuck his nose in neighborhoods where it didn't belong, mad dogging anyone who dared to meet his eye.

When the inevitable fights started, he forced himself to rely on his human muscles and wyrd as long as he could. Got used to getting hurt. He was stabbed. Shot. Hit with baseball bats, chains, and crowbars. But the Totem always saved him, and then the second kind of training began. Once the fangs and claws came out—he used every ounce of willpower to keep himself from killing the people trying to kill him. So far as he knew, he wasn't a murderer yet, and he checked the metro records very carefully. But there were two dozen crippled and maimed men in his wake. Aryan Brotherhood. Crips and Bloods.

Bad people. But I'm not a person anymore. I'm a fucking monster. Good Dog, my ass.

He had resigned himself to misery. Committed himself to revenge. When he found the coywolf, he would stop fighting with his hands tied behind his back. He would give in to the urges that throbbled behind his eyes.

Dev walked to his room, opened his night stand and pulled out his mother's knife.

An amagium forged, pure silver blade. The only metal that would wound shifters in a way that wouldn't immediately grow back. A .45 would be better, but once the totem changed him, he wouldn't be able to fit his fingers through the trigger—assuming he could even think through the rage.

The totem stirred. Eager. *It's time to hunt.*

The leather cord of the binding knot was suddenly heavy around Dev's neck. He clutched it, calmed himself, and contemplated. *Are you ready for it to be over? This half life? This fraud? Your little vigilante fantasy?*

In answer, he donned a charcoal hoodie, a thin white shirt, black track pants, and a pair of running shoes. All of them were flimsy and cheap. Dev ordered them off the internet with different emails, taking care to never purchase the same brand or color twice. The cops were looking for him. The Amagium was looking for him. And he couldn't afford to be caged.

Not just yet.

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Dev drove back from Monrovia, silver knife and scent box sitting on the passenger seat next to him. When he reached the neighborhood of the murder, he lowered the top on his convertible, opened the lead box, and let the scents within guide him through the night. He blew by the fast food joints of Lake, heading steadily northwest toward the largest of Arroyo's eponymous gullies.

He focused on the smells of nature, and the animal odors that had saturated the car. He had a loose destination in mind. Before leaving, he had searched the region for businesses that dealt with animals, and discovered a small, independent animal rescue at the northernmost edge of the arroyo, where the gully broadened to meet the slope of the foothills.

The totem had bitten him in a place like this. Not proper wilderness, but a region where the suburbs' hold over nature was weaker. A place where a kid could be forgiven for thinking he was safe.

Dev didn't actually realize what happened until he woke to his mother, ashen-faced, with the leather cord around his neck. She was an Amagium arcanist, a magic researcher and developer. And she knew what would happen if her colleagues, or the Keeping Force found him. The totem's urdic signature was unmistakable to any Amagia, and if they detected it, they would either kill him on the spot, or ruin his body, mind, and wyrd in an attempt to extract the spirit that had taken up residence within him.

Most shifters were victims of therianthropy; magical diseases with countless strains. Some could control their shifts at will, others were linked to lunar phases or other environmental triggers. The lucky ones could treat the symptoms with drugs, or go to clinics that would restrain them up until their feral shifts passed, but some people shifted gradually, losing their minds and bodies in slow motion until they had to be euthanized. Under Amagium law, every shifter needed to be registered for an initial assessment and ongoing monitoring. They lived life under a microscope with crosshairs.

Dev was something different.

Totems were thought to be extinct, save for the most remote reaches of nature, far outside civilization's influence, or the Amagium's authority. They were relicts; powerful entities from an earlier paradigm of magic, that appeared to be slowly dying out. Amagium scholars described them as inherent contradictions; unnatural guardians of the natural order of things. Magical beings that preserved the integrity of the Resting Laws that governed physics. But in the wake of nature's subjugation, they roamed without purpose. *Just another kind of monster.*

His mother didn't pretend to understand it. She did not speculate. From the moment he woke up, she was brutally, desperately honest with him:

"I need you to listen carefully, my love. A monster attacked you. A wolf. It bit you on the back of your neck, and put a part of itself inside you. From now on, you must hide it and hold it in check. Never take this necklace off. Sleep with it. Wash it when you bathe, like it's part of your body. If somebody asks you to take it off, or explain what it means, tell them it's religious. Because this knot is your God now."

The cord was worn smooth from the start, but the leather never disintegrated or degraded further, if it was, in fact, leather. The braided knot was seemingly seamless, and it was tied in a pattern that was neither Celtic nor Native American but reminiscent of both. Dev didn't know if his mother made it herself, or if it was an artifact stolen from the Amagium archives, and she refused to tell him.

*If you learn, the wolf learns. And if the wolf learns too much—
There!*

The totem's growl woke Dev from his reverie. It was the same blend of animal urine, fur, and harsh solvent that hung in the car leapt out of the night, sharper now that it wasn't competing with the stink of death. As he slowed, he saw a sign next to the turn off for the Hahamonga Wild Animal Rescue.

Dev pulled to the opposite side of the road, raised his roof, and killed the engine. Then he closed his eyes, smelled, and listened. Even with the totem's senses, it took a long time to hear the human voices. They dialed in slowly. And even then, the sounds were indistinct. It was merely the rhythmic give and take of speech, deep inside—*no, below*—the shelter.

After a long moment, Dev put the rag in the lead box, latched it shut, and donned an elastic belt that would expand just enough to accommodate his shift. Then he attached the knife to the belt at the small of his back, beneath the folds of the hoodie.

Don't strike until you know for sure.

He approached the shelter at a casual, deliberate pace. Then the dogs started barking. *Goddammit.* The human conversation within stopped abruptly, punctuated by a collective exchange of profanity. While Dev's charm could fool Amagia, animals saw right through it. Some took an unnatural shine to him, playfully yipping or purring, but others snarled, or instantly cowered. He always got a reaction though, and it was never subtle.

The building was protected by a chain link fence, garnished with coils of razor wire. As Dev started to climb, he noticed two security cameras casually, and two more once he started deliberately looking.

When he reached the razor wire, he let the wolf out part way.

Wire-brush fur sprouted beneath his thin clothing, and his muscles doubled, then redoubled in power. His *wyrd* swelled, power somehow passing over and through the metal licenses on his wrist, meant to record and moderate magic use. With a surge of effort, he propelled himself into the air, barbs of the fence slicing his hoodie and shirt, but merely nicking the flesh beneath. And by the time he landed on the other side, the cuts had already healed.

The humans had stopped talking, but they were no longer beneath the building. They were holding their breath, but their hearts were *pounding*. Exploding behind their ribs. Dev smirked, and loosened the leather straps of his magic licenses until he had to hold them to keep them from sliding off his wrists.

Little pigs, little pigs. Let me in.

He walked the corridors of the shelter, a warren of concrete and chain link cages. The dogs up front were smaller breeds and appeared fairly well-cared for. Most cowered as he approached. But three released keening howls and panicked barks. *Danger. You are in danger here.* The dogs in the next corridor were different. They growled, threw themselves against their cages, gnashing teeth. *That's not a normal territorial response. These dogs have been trained to fight. Trained to kill.* And as he passed by them, undaunted, another smell met his nose, leaking from the edges of a padlocked door. It was a caustic kind of magic. The sort that warped minds and corrupted flesh. Fear, cruelty, and anguish, distilled into energy.

There was a titanic blasting sound, and Dev was thrown to the ground, torso incandescent with pain. As the echo of the blast faded, he could feel his flesh healing so rapidly it seemed to squirm, forcing the buckshot out from between his ribs. Dev stayed down at first, to the totem's dismay—*wolves do not play dead*—but when the gunman ejected the spent shells from his weapon, Dev shifted.

Bone and sinew broke with a series of sharp pops, joints immediately healing in a new, lupine configurations. The loose magic licenses were suddenly uncomfortably snug against Dev's wrists. His eardrums popped as his jaw dislocated and reattached itself to accommodate his radically sharpened teeth. The totem extruded his nose with hellish, unseen pliers and narrowed his head in an agonizing vice.

The whole change took roughly five seconds. Then Dev cleared ten yards with one leap.

The stunned gunner—who had halted at the sound of the sickening twists and pops—fumbled his weapon and screamed as the dogs around them bayed in a frenzy. Dev swiped the gun away and bashed him in the jaw with its double-barrel. He double-spun, flinging three broken teeth in an arc around him, and fell to the piss-saturated concrete. Dev chased him down, preparing to choke him out, when a series of pops pecked him in the back.

Dev whirled, chucking the shotgun at the second attacker—a fat guy who drank so much that Dev could smell the cheap beer from fifteen paces away. The shotgun struck him full in the face and he went down with a groan, blood gushing from a broken nose.

Neither man smelled like sage and spice.

Dev bounded over to the second attacker, slowly tightening his wyrd around the man's throat until his heartbeat faded to unconsciousness. Then he returned to the shotgunner and picked him up by the neck. It was hard to speak when his mouth and vocal chords were shifted, but Dev had learned to manage:

"Who...killed...boys?"

"M-mardon!" the man managed.

Dev slammed the man's face against the nearest cage, then held him inches away from the gnashing rottweiler within.

"Why?!" Dev barked.

The man screamed and pissed himself, wailing in the face of the snapping dog. *Okay. Too much.* Dev withdrew the man from the cage and shook him by the shoulders.

"Why?" he repeated, lower and slower.

"Th-they wanted a cut! The B-bloods sent those kids—said we needed to pay dues!"
Dues?

There was a titanic bang, and the man's head burst open at the left temple, projectile spattering Dev's snout and eyes with gore as the projectile zipped past him. Then there was a second blast and his shoulder exploded, just above the left pectoral.

The shot knocked him off his feet, sent him sprawling with a lupine yelp and whimper. This was an entirely different species of bullet from the buckshot and nine-millimeters that pelted him earlier. Not only in terms of impact—*must be a shotgun slug*—but the pain it caused. Desperate, he tried to scramble away on all fours, taking refuge around the corner of the nearest line of cages, but his left arm was useless. He stumbled as he put weight on it, fell into an agonizing forward roll, and narrowly dodged another two shots that bit into the concrete. *My muscles are shredded. Tendon might be torn.*

And they did not heal.

If anything, the thing in his shoulder was eating him alive from the inside.

Silver. I've been shot with silver.

A calm voice called out:

"I wondered if you would be comin' around my house, Good Boy." Dev heard the man take a step. "Kinda hoped on it, really. S'why I got these special for you."

Dev said nothing, retreating and listening carefully. Then he smelled the scent. Aftershave. Aerosolized sage and spice, tinged with aluminum. *The coywolf. It must be him.*

He wasn't alone though. The stink of corruptive magic, the ethereal rot that leaked from the locked door was now flowing free throughout the air, swelling and contracting in rhythm with respiration. There was more to the scent. It smelled canine. Dry and sour as dust soaked with sweat. *Some kind of corrupted coyote.*

"Wasn't personal, Good Boy," the calm voice said with a midwestern republic drawl. "Just business. We have ourselves a humble establishment here. A little coliseum, if you will. And this here is our undisputed champion. Burson."

Coliseum? Dog fighting. Dev snarled. *What kind of sick fuck uses an animal rescue as a cover for a dog fighting ring?* The man reloaded his weapon languidly, continuing to speak:

"Thought you didn't care much for gangs. Actually figured we might be on the same team. Last winter they sent a boy as an...emissary, I suppose. He was spoutin' bullshit 'bout how he and his 'run this town' and how I needed to show them 'respect.'

"So I let Burson say hello, and sent his leftovers back to Muir. Don't think my message could be clearer. But tonight, two thugs came skulkin' around, trying to set my establishment on fire. I introduced them to Burson as well. Now, it's your turn."

A chain fell to the ground with a clank. Dev could barely think through the pain. The hole in his left shoulder was sizzling; flesh trying to knit itself back together despite the caustic reaction from the silver. Dev reached to dig out the slug with his claws when a coyote the size of a lean lion came bounding around the corner.

Dire animal. Gigantism, rabidity, and God only knows what other surprises.

It lunged for his face, and Dev barely managed to raise his right forearm in time. The initial force of Burson's bite broke his arm. *But my head is still intact, and that's what matters.* If the thing's jaws sank into his brain, it would be all over—silver or not, there was no coming back from extreme brain trauma. And if it got his eyes, he was good as dead too. Ocular tissue took longer to regenerate.

Dismayed by Dev's struggle, Burson tried to withdraw from the bite, but Dev managed to twist his forearm, and grab the beast by its nape. The speaker—*Mardon, presumably*—emerged from the corner and raised his twelve-gauge. At the last possible second, Dev shielded himself with the dire animal's body. Slugs tore apart Burson's chest, and a yelping death rattle escaped its throat.

"Shit," Mardon said.

When he tried to reload the gun, Dev threw the ruined carcass at him.

It wasn't a great throw, but it was still three hundred pounds of dead weight, which was enough to knock the gun out of Mardon's hands. And by the time he steadied his stance, Dev was there with a backhand.

Mardon spun and hit the nearest cage, then fell-down.

Shift. Turn into the coywolf. Fight me. Fight us. But Dev couldn't sense anything unusual in the man's *wyrd*. *Nothing here but fear. Desperation. Weakness.* Dev rejected the totem's assessment. *No. It has to be him. It has to be. He's holding back.* Dev grabbed Mardon and slammed him against an empty cage, knocking the wind from his lungs and smashing in the chain-link.

"Change!" Devran bellowed, shaking Mardon violently.

But the man didn't do anything but struggle. *He isn't the coywolf. Just another murderer.* For a long moment, Dev considered tearing his throat out. The totem salivated in his head. *Do it. He's taken from others what the Coywolf took from you. He killed his own man. His own animal. He tried to kill us. He profits from the suffering on innocents. Delights in bloodshed. He deserves—*

"No," Dev snarled.

He flung Mardon to the ground. When the man caught his breath, he raised a hand.

"Hey!" he took another desperate breath. "Hey now. Be reasonable 'bout this. I have twenty thousand dollars cash inside—"

Dev used his enormous right hand to snatch Mardon's right wrist and then his left. He yanked Mardon off the ground and then lifted him until they were eye level.

"C-c-c'mon, now! I told you it wasn't personal," Mardon gasped.

"Neither...is...this."

He tightened his grip on Mardon's wrists, still holding him aloft, and then twisted abruptly. Both bones in both his forearms snapped like matchsticks. Dev dropped him. The man screamed until the pain made him pass out, bones jutting through skin, his hands swinging perilously loose from the ends of his ruined wrists.

It's practice.

•••

There was no saving the man Mardon shot.

Bury your guilt. There are other things to see to. The other thug was still out cold, but breathing steadily. Dev stripped off his shirt—which was an ordeal, since his left arm was still largely limp and numb, even with the slug extracted—and wrapped the torn cloth around Mardon's ruined forearms so the bastard wouldn't bleed out immediately, but he wasn't terribly careful about it. *I'm not going to lose any sleep if you end up dying too.*

He relaxed his shift and retreated to his car, then changed into a spare set of clothes he kept in his trunk. Nobody saw him, so far as he could tell, but he was so tired and drained that he made no effort to hide. He drove to a payphone and called the Arroyo Police Department, shifting his vocal cords slightly, so his voice would be unrecognizable. Then he drove on to Arroyo Greens Golf Course and waited.

Two out of three. If the Coywolf wasn't with the drug dealers, and it wasn't with the maulers, it had to be an agent of the human traffickers. The revelation exhausted him. He had almost nothing to go on there. He let the case lie fallow because it seemed like such an implausible lead. *But there's no way the attack that took Brenim was happenstance. Somebody sent that thing to kill me, and it took my nephew too.*

Or did he?

The alternative was too awful to bear. Shifting took up an enormous amount of energy, and it dulled his judgement as well as the totem's. He had never gone feral before. Tonight was the closest he came to losing control entirely. *Unless I blacked it out. What if I woke up from the attack, and I...what if I was the one to....*

Dev shook his head, grabbing his dun hair.

Only the top half.

"Uhh... dispatch? We have a dead body and two other people who've been mangled at the animal rescue up on Forester. North end of the arroyo. We need an ambulance, stat. Not sure yet, but I think this could be our Good Boy."

Dev's symphone started ringing. It was his editor.

"You get that, Dev? I know you've had a busy night, but this might be related to the—"

"I heard, Ezha. I'll be there in ten."