

As I lay on the ground, the sightless eyes in the dead face stare back at me unremittingly. They never blink, they never focus, they only stare. I struggle to tear my gaze away from them, but it's of no use, the foggy amber orbs deny me any escape from their cold, hollow embrace.

Reality returns with a jolt at the sound of distant shouting. There are three... no, wait... four muffled voices. Strangely I sense both anger and elation in them, but for some reason, the actual words themselves stay indistinct.

As I listen the voices steadily grow louder, which means my hunters are getting closer. My stomach muscles cramp as my mind, at last, recognises the gravity of my situation. I feel my heart start pounding within my chest as a fresh charge of adrenalin surges through my bloodstream, seeking out fatigued muscles, and pumping their fibres full of raw latent energy.

The sharp crack of a distant gunshot reverberates in the still, cold air. A bullet thuds into the hard ground just in front of me, and no more than an arm's length to my side. They say when the first bullet is close enough that it sounds like an angry hornet; you don't hear the next one. My body and mind are now in total accord and agree on flight rather than the usual fight. Powerless against my natural drive to survive, the dead eyes now surrender their cold, deathly embrace and release me. Now free. I jump up—and I run.

Despite my will to live, all too soon a crushing weariness starts to sweep over me. This hunt has gone on too long now; my lungs burn with every breath and my parched throat stings with every breath I take, but I must keep going, I have

to find somewhere safe. Mercifully my desire for self-preservation overrides my exhaustion and I manage to keep going, for the moment at least.

Another shot and a bullet rips into a nearby tree sending bark and jagged yellow splinters flying across my path. If I can just get into the old forest, I can make good my escape, for most still fear to enter this shadowy realm, as they should. Its dense, leafy canopy strangles all but the most determined shafts of sunlight, while the dark, foreboding interior hides within it much more than mere ancient superstitions. Even I tread warily there, for true malevolence has in it no respect of courage, or tolerance of foolhardiness.

Two more shots are fired, both wide of their target, the shooter must be trying to fire whilst running now. I know I am faster than them and cover a good distance before there's more gunfire.

This time a tremendous burning sensation rips through my back and chest. I stumble but somehow manage to keep going. A searing heat starts spreading up my neck, and my very blood feels like it's boiling. So, the inevitable has happened, and I have been shot.

I have nowhere left to run now, for me there is no place of safety or sanctuary that is within my reach. Every fibre of my being demands I end this now. As I stop and turn to face my pursuers, I catch sight of a body some little distance back down the dirt track. Is tripping over that what caused me to stumble and nearly fall? How could I not have seen it? I know it's commonplace now to find the remains of dead and decaying bodies just left lying where they fell, but if I

missed seeing it due to blind panic, then that is unforgiveable. As I stand there, an unexpected though welcome calm starts to settle over me, the feeling gradually easing the agony of the gunshot wound that tortures my body so.

The hunters have reached the figure on the track and stare down at the prone form. One brings his right leg back and delivers a vicious kick to the corpse's backbone with a heavy black boot. The body rolls slightly with the force of the blow then settles back. The kick is much too powerful to be just a simple check for any remaining life.

The kicker lifts his rubber gas mask up, makes a guttural sound in his throat then gobs on the body.

“Filthy. Fucking. Werewolf.”

The venom in his tirade of cursing reveals a long-held deep and smouldering hatred. He yanks the gas mask back down before pulling a large serrated knife out of a scabbard on his leg. Then kneeling down he proceeds to hack off a front paw, no doubt as proof for payment of some small bounty. As he stands up another of the group steps forward and fires a single shot from his pistol into the already lifeless body. Judging by their camouflaged fatigues and weapons, they are serving soldiers, or more likely deserters turned mercenary.

And now, satisfied with their day's work, they head back to whichever nearby town managed to scrape together the bounty. One punches the air above his head, rifle still in his gloved hand, while the others jubilantly slap him on the

back. Their gas masks muffle their cheering at earning enough money so they can all get drunk and whore for a month.

I know I should kill them all now and have done with it. Then under cover of darkness wreak my retribution upon the town. But I cannot find it in me to do it, and I cannot understand why, for that, is what I do. Neither can I comprehend why my pursuers did not come after me. They could so easily have had two prizes today; maybe I'm to be left as a source of income for the even darker times that are without doubt coming to this land.

Just a short time ago the greatest challenge my kind could expect would be from a handful of scared townsfolk filled with liquid courage. Sent out by some pious priest who'd stood in his pulpit and declared that the town needed 'brave men' to dispatch the unholy beasts back to eternal damnation in the fires of Hell.

However, since mankind's last great war between themselves, many things have changed. Now there is only desolation, and pestilence sweeps the land. I do not know about sending us straight back to Hell, but it seems to me that man through his desire for self-destruction, has brought the apocalypse down upon his own world. And no amount of prayer to any god can help them now.

The collapse of corrupt and inept governments and their failure to pay or even to feed their armies, forces starving soldiers to rob those that have little to start with or sees some of the braver ones risk their lives hunting my kind. And for what exactly? The price of a week's food, a few bottles of potato vodka, and

some cheap tavern whore to warm their bed for a short time before they fall into a drunken sleep and she leaves having stolen their money.

The soldiers have gone now, so I walk back down the track to the body and stand by it. I have a need to see if I recognise which of my brethren it is, but I can't do it. Why do I get such a feeling of dread about looking at this body? Is it because I shall know him, are we blood related? Can that be it?

I am the last of my family, I have no brothers, no uncles, or cousins left now as they have all been lost to hunters, so that cannot be the reason. Somewhere deep in me is the answer, but my memory... My memory is hazy, and I feel as if I have no clarity of thought anymore.

Forcing myself to look down I see the bullet's gaping exit wound in the chest, from it a thin trail of vapour escapes, whilst the smell of blood sours the cold air with its distinctive metallic tang of copper. Eventually, I kneel down to see the face better and gasp out loud as my lungs spasm with shock. For even with its cloudy dead eyes I recognise my own face.

Congealing blood slowly seeps past the lips of the partially open mouth, adding a dark red sheen to the once smooth black fur before it drips into the blood pool slowly spreading out from my lifeless body. I go to reach out, to touch the sodden, matted fur, but I cannot do it. The thought of touching my own dead body fills me with a powerful emotion that I have never before felt. Is this truly what fear feels like?

The sense of déjà vu and the utter hopelessness of my situation make me feel icy cold, and I shudder as realise I can now reason again.

It's always the same, I know now that I have been here before, just the same as I seem to know I'll be back here again, and again.

Why? Why am I made to suffer in this merciless way, surely even I am deserving of some little pity?

I am what I am.

Whether I'm a monster or not, I never asked to be this way.

Yes, I have killed, cold-bloodedly and many times, that I freely admit. But my kind has never been permitted any control of it, so stopping has never been a choice granted me.

I should never have been made this way if I were not to kill.

So, clearly, this is my perdition. To spend all eternity constantly reliving my own violent death.

Powerless to do anything else, I lay down on the cold ground. The dead, sightless eyes still stare unrelentingly back at me, they never blink or focus, they just stare.

I hear far-off voices shouting, and once again—it starts.

Copyright © 2016 Sean Catt

All rights reserved. No part of this publication or e-publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods without the prior written permission of the publisher or author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

www.seancatt.com

books@roughimage.co.uk