

[EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM.]

[National Weather Service Issued a Blizzard Warning.]

Winter was warm — not literally but figuratively for Johnny as he curled down into bed alongside Ruby Goldhirsch, under those hand-knitted quilts that her parents had laid upon every bed in their home, occupied or not. Outside, the wind had whipped itself into a frenzy, and the snow seemed to fly like spectres past the window, while out on the hills and into the forest it lay blanketed thick upon the ground of the New Hampshire wilderness, teased by the roaring currents to dance. It had been a white Thanksgiving for them, perhaps the prelude to a white Christmas. The internal heat of the Bed and Breakfast that the elder Goldhirschs owned kept the frost off the panes, but the cracks in the wood of that venerable old manse allowed the occasional draft to slither in and tickle the skin just as the howling picked up into a frenzy. None of that mattered to Johnny: his betrothed curled to his side, her legs entwined with his and arm resting upon his chest, provided all the comfort necessary.

It had been a week since they'd made their pilgrimage to that remote little manse, taking in the quaint comforts of American exuberance. Her parents had welcomed him with waiting arms, and he obliged them with a waiting appetite for the feast they'd laid out to cap off the day of revelry: food, football, frolics through the then gentle blanket of snow which had descended upon the land during the dead of night and not yet grown to the now wild whip beyond the windows. In the days since Thanksgiving, Johnny had allowed himself respite in Ruby's company, skating on the frozen ponds and stalking through the frigid woods to catch sight of the fauna still fit to roam.

Just past one month, it had been — one long, lonely month since that quarrel in their apartment and the subsequent separation. But they'd been inseparable since their reunion, and the week spent in Pittsburg, New Hampshire had been a necessary reminder of their commitment. During that past week, she'd remembered the boyish and almost shyness of his smile when asked an uncomfortable question — a smile which made her heart seem ready to burst — and he remembered the grace and serenity of her expression while nestling down into a snowbank on her elbows, her binoculars held at the ready in anticipation of a robin or woodpecker's appearance. When they stepped out onto the ice, his initial clumsiness made her giggle, and

when he'd begun to master the mechanics of skating, her smile of pride brought a blush to his face which negated any of the temperature's sting.

They'd stayed up late every night before the fire, sharing glasses of wine and brandy with her parents as they exchanged stories from their times and travels — they played board games in between exchanging presents and singing along to the piano — they kissed under the mistletoe as many times as they found a convenient excuse. And when Ruby had walked into their room that night, wearing nothing but the baggy sweater she'd stolen from him last year, holding one of those sprigs of mistletoe above her head, they spent the evening reaffirming their engagement in one another's arms.

It was perhaps ten minutes after they'd concluded that Ruby extricated herself from around him and turned towards the mechanical alarm clock which sat on the bedside table, picking it up and winding it for the morning. Outside, the wind picked up its pace.

“Maman et Papa insist on these,” she remarked, “I don’t think anybody uses them. Ils sont très vieillots. Mais...”

She paused, nodded with satisfaction, and turned back to him, snuggling to his side once more.

“...Je les aime bien.”

The howl rattled the window panes, loud and sharp like a chorus. His fingers tightened on her side, his body tensing at the sound as his eyes darted towards the outside, but she replied with nothing more than a laugh.

“C’est bon! C’est bon!” she remarked, reaching up to stroke his hair affectionately.

“Jesus,” he muttered, *“You guys got some fuckin’ dogs out here.”*

“Non, non,” she shook her head as she assured him, *“Wild mutts, perhaps a coyote or so, but nothing dangerous.”*

She smiled impishly before she looked up to him, her smiling falling as she saw his eyes still on the window and the pallid look upon his face. Her hand removed from his head as she rolled onto her back, her feet kicking beneath the blankets, toying with the folded lambskin blanket her parents left folded at the foot of the bed — the one she always hated, even if they'd insisted it was ethically and humanely sourced.

“You trust me, don’t you?” she said softly, her arms coming across her body as she looked down at her lap. She pulled herself upright as the corners of her mouth continued to fall down. And with this, her betrothed turned in bed to look her way.

“Yeah, of course,” Johnny said, now pushing himself up, “What’s wrong?”

“You’ve been skittish lately,” she replied, her eyes and voice both low, “On edge. Like something’s wrong. Non, not just lately — all year. Perhaps I noticed it in June, but it’s been there. It’s not stopped. It’s not just Arcadia and Casanova English, is it? There’s something more, and you won’t tell me.”

His fingers tightened on her side. Turned away, she didn’t see the twitch and flash in his left eye. Taking a deep breath, she pivoted his direction, letting the blanket fall from her chest as she allowed herself to be bare before him, and reached out to take his hands in hers. The wind had begun to howl again.

“I love you, Jaybird,” she stated without reservation, “And I trust you. *But...*”

She paused as those agonized, her eyes leaving his for the blanket beneath them, composing herself and taking a deep breath before looking back up as though through force of will. The wind continued its roar.

“...I feel like you don’t trust *me*. And I *hate* that. *Because* I trust you. And I love you. And accept you. But I’m also not stupid,” she continued, even as every part of her body seemed ready to jitter itself away, “*C’est étrange*: the wounds, the late nights, the lack of explanations. *Ce — tout cela*. Grace, Teddy, Olive, that *new... niais...* that you have around. *Qu’est-ce que c’est?*”

The panes rattled, the sound like a choir of voices rising to the call. Ruby’s eyes stayed on his.

“Jaybird...” she whispered, “What *is* VLI?”

The howl rose. The frost seemed to constrict along the window with no regard to the warmth inside. A draft hissed through a crack in the wood.

“It’s...” Johnny began before the words left his mind, burrowing back down into his chest. They were outside now — the howls that had spilled over the rivers and through the woods. When his eyes darted to hers, she waited unblinking.

“...It’s not just Arcadia and Casanova English,” he finally gasped, “There’s more to it. More out there, more lurking.”

He could hear his own voice, tense and frayed. The truth caught in his throat like heartburn.

“And it’s dangerous to be out there alone. You need people you can trust when there’s so many monsters in the world — so many goddamn predators. That’s why I was reticent of bringing Jules along. That’s why I didn’t take you to South Korea after my match in Los Angeles. That’s why...”

He choked. It ached. She stared. The howl became a shriek and then a roar.
He swallowed.

“...And that’s why we travel together. **In the business,**” he let pass, his hands relaxing as the tension seated itself upon the white lie and drifted off with the snow, “**Because there’s evil people in this business like Tyler Norrie and Matthias Syn who want to hurt me but can’t be allowed to hurt you.**”

They sat in silence. Her eyes dropped, but her hand reached up to touch his face.

“**That’s all?**” she asked with quiet hopefulness.

“That’s all,” he affirmed, “**Nothing more.**”

She nodded before drawing him in and pressing her lips to his. They fell back into the bed and made love once more, the focus of their passions drowning out the rattle of glass on wood and the hiss of the cold through the cracks in the sill.

When they ceased, she slept, pulling the blankets over her body as she rolled off to her left. But in the darkness and stillness of the room, Jonathan lay awake staring at the ceiling, hearing the howl just outside. She’d taken enough of the blankets in her fatigue he’d been left bare, but he didn’t want to disturb her by trying to jostle any of them away. Instead, he reached down for the sheepskin and clothed himself in it beneath the full moon’s light.

[National Weather Service has issued a
Blizzard warning for the
following counties:]

[Coös County, NH; Essex County, VT;
Estrée; Montérégie; Montréal;
Laurentides; Outaouais; Stormont,
Dundas, and Glengarry; Prescott and
Russell; Ottawa; Leeds and Grenville;
Lanark; Frontenac; Lennox and
Addington; Hastings; Northumberland;
Durham Region; York Region; Peel
Region; Toronto.]

Growing up in the East Bay, there were a fair amount of wild dogs: all sorts, even in suburbia. Scavengers require sustenance, and the most plentiful accumulation is anywhere with a fair amount of surplus trash and easy prey. For the most part, you only need your wits about you to stay safe: they're far more afraid of you than you are of them. But don't get complacent; these are, still, opportunistic carnivores. As the old Aussie cry goes, "*A ~~Nickelman~~ dingo got me Xtreme Title baby.*"

Identification. That's the key. Know thy enemy.

For instance, there's little concern besides fleas and rabies when it comes to a stray mutt. You know when you see them—a lost schnauzer lacks the natural inclination for violence as a bully, but no domestic lasts long in the wild after having been castrated and bred docile. What was once a proud pooch can be quickly reduced to skin and bones without the punctual pampering by a patient pet owner, the perfunctory feedings now feckless predation.

Who is Cyrus Braddock: man or mutt? 350 pounds and 6'9" tall strikes an intimidating silhouette. I can see why Thaddy Dukes kept him: Cyrus has jaws to maul and a lapping tongue to give slobbery kisses after returning home. It's the owner, not the breed, right? Men like Cyrus were originally nanny dogs and perfectly safe to leave unsupervised with children, aren't they? That's why Lucy Wylde and Aurora didn't preemptively have their guns leveled, daring him to drop even a single protestation about how Mamma Lauren was replaced with a stranger, yes?

"I'm sure he's a good boy, Thad, but when he barked in confusion we had no choice but to empty a clip into him for aggressive behavior."

The Cyrus Braddocks of the world will find themselves starving to death in storm canals, curled out of the cold, and whimpering "why me" as they waste away in an untethered life they were never fit to endure. They aren't the most loathsome dog you'll meet on a street at night — that would be the coyotes.

A coyote will snap up your outdoor cat just often enough that you may be tempted to fear them; you shouldn't. Coyotes are less dangerous than mountain lions, rattlesnakes, and black widow spiders — certainly less than *sharks*. A lone coyote may be brazen enough to stalk you on an evening jog, but it takes a simple pivot and scream in its face to send the cur fleeing. Their bites can be as toxic as any wild beast, but good luck for them scoring that bite before getting punted square in the muzzle for being so bold. When I was younger, I used to fear coyotes, especially when they roamed in packs. Now, I'm not so timid: whether as a collective or a straggler, they're of equal threat, which is to say none.

I used to fear Sarah Wolf — I used to fear all of Triumvirate, her in particular. Now? Not so much.

Hello again, Ringo. Sorry I couldn't dangle the shiny above your head to draw you in for the stomping you deserve. But I suppose it saves that Dollface one more week of being less blemished than your soul.

In spite of her eponym, it's not Sarah who I find to be the stalking wolf in this match. Sev Yurievich's reputation precedes him, War Games results be damned. You can see the glint of his eyes through the treeline — hear the panting of his breath at your back. In a world of mutts and coyotes, it is the wolves — all too rare in the 21st Century — which pose danger. Not for the diseases harbored between their teeth or under toenail but the genuine feral danger. The single and simpleminded drive for predation. You can turn your back on a cur — even upon a coyote. But never turn your back on a wolf. To do so is to doom oneself.

Nonetheless, there's a reason why the beasts of yore have been brought to heel. People have forged fires, paved roads, and dug shovels into the dirt of the wastes while felling the trees which concealed them. A dog, no matter how dangerous, will never be capable of wielding the tools of survival.

Don't carry a basket on the way to grandmother's house. Instead, keep the shotgun on hand and remind them that what big eyes they have are all the better to watch the slug rip through their head.

[The National Weather Service Board recognizes the following conditions:]

[Winds capable of 100 miles per hour, sub-zero temperatures, visual hallucinations, severe risk of damage to persons and property, severe risk of death, auditory hallucinations, god's wrath, reduced visibility to less than a quarter kilometer, the call to the hunt, sustained snowfall of an estimated half meter.]

I was awoken by the howling just outside my window, and while the room was practically pitch black, a pale yet oddly-bright light from the shining moon crept through the cracks in the

curtains. I rolled to my left, and the red LED of the alarm clock on the bedside table read 3:33 AM. A digital alarm clock: cheap, plastic, purchased from some wholesaler or straight out of some local big box store — not at all the mechanical wind-up clock which Ruby had kept since her childhood.

Toronto. Fuck, I'm still in Toronto.

It had now been almost two weeks since I had left that Bed and Breakfast her parents owned in that quiet New Hampshire town of Pittsburg; she had offered to accompany me to Toronto, and truth be told every part of me wanted to acquiesce, but on that final night, when we had wrapped ourselves in blankets and the cries had rung through the night and rolled down the hills, I found myself unable to shake a sense of dread and foreboding which had remained in my gut to this day.

So that next morning, I had packed up, stuck around for breakfast, and shot the old '02 Cadillac Escalade off down Rte. 3 like a Yeti barrelling through the wastes.

This fiery height! Oh, my feet of fire! My burning feet of fire!

Seven hours and forty minutes from there to here, fifteen more if I took a detour to stop in Sherbrooke — I wish I was in Sherbrooke, now. Along Autoroute 10, I saw an exit for a town named Granby. I did not stop.

I had checked into the Shangri-La hotel in downtown Toronto, a few blocks from the CN Tower which sat just beyond the train tracks. As per usual, my modus operandi remained unchanged: it was the tallest hotel in the city at sixty-six stories, but even the highest of floors provided private balconies. It was comfortable. It was expensive. It made do. It had a coffee pot, a safe, a thermostat, a cheap plastic alarm clock which read 3:33 AM — and it had a bathroom. In the days since arriving, I'd spent my time floating between views atop the CN Tower alongside Lauren Duke and haunting watery dive bars where I watched a woman step onto the Open Mic night stage to read her stand-up script off a sheaf of paper she'd brought along, playing some new character with a Southern accent that she called "Mama B.D." after the lopsidedness of her breasts. I don't remember her set, but I remember finishing my beer and stumbling outside to rush home as I burped poutine in every Canadian alleyway I traveled through. The bricks and cobblestones were just as ravenous.

I had brought that sheepskin blanket Ruby had always hated along with me, and when I rose nude and aching from bed, I wrapped it around my shoulders before trundling in that direction. Its light fixtures were still incandescent and hurt like hell. I brushed the blue powdery residue from the countertop, washed my face in the sink, and took a piss before extinguishing the lights

and returning to the main room, my attention back to the light filtering through the balcony blinds. The wind still howled.

It laid minced on a tray I left just below the TV set. **Blue Velvet**. That funny valentine I had acquainted myself with over the past two months, and it was precisely due to this affair which had driven to book my room apart from the rest of the team, lest Olive be disturbed by its lingering presence. I gathered it in one of the rolling papers which sat alongside, twisted and licked, and stepped out onto the balcony with the cigarette in my lips, my phone and lighter in hand, and the blanket still pulled tight over my shoulders. Beneath me, the city shone like ice — the moon hung fat and white in the sky.

With a spark, the cigarette tip ignited, and that strange perfumed smoke entered my lungs. As I exhaled, I could not discern it from the natural condensation of my breath in the cold. Then I was soaked; I could feel every single part of myself sliding straight from the bone even as the air around me stabbed into my skin. It lay beneath me, just below my feet — a limitless void which eats its kids and hides the bodies under the bridge. It throbbed and hummed through the haze another puff, and once more the howl whipped itself through the streets and up the sides of the hotel into the air. I kept my eyes perpendicular to the horizon to stave off the vertigo and beckon of the void.

Just north of my balcony I could see the ebb and glow of Lawrence Heights, mostly dark but still stirring under the gaze of the moon even at this time of night. The locals had a name for it since the 1960's: "The Jungle". Built in 1955, it had grown from a public housing project to a full-fledged neighborhood — The Powers That Be cared for it just the same. Locked in its confined and stirring in its solitude, I could hear the cry come from out of The Jungle. The neighborhood which every incoming mayor planned to clean up — which every famous rapper and pop star from this city used as a backdrop — whose residents could rarely afford tickets to an XWF show — whose residents would never afford an '02 Cadillac Escalade to shoot off down Rte. 3 like a Yeti barrelling through the wastes.

Not that they needed it. The call was coming from inside the house. The darkness falls — twenty centuries of stony sleep are vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle. The howl rips out through the streets.

This fiery height! Oh, my feet of fire! My burning feet of fire!

Rinse. Lather. Repeat.

You can't save someone who the Powers That Be don't want to be saved. Not until They're dealt with.

The howl sent a shiver up my legs and chest, causing me to pull the sheepskin and grip the phone in my hand even more tightly than before, but the trembling in my fingers caused that funny valentine as blue as the night to plummet off the balcony. It moved sluggishly — catchable — but I did not lunge. It was, after all, just beyond the threshold of the balcony railing, and to swerve might make more dead. Three hundred and sixty-five days, twenty-four letters, and eighty-eight keys to the jail house. Still, the compulsion writhed in me like a serpent, begging to lash out and overextend itself — strike be true or damned, fate be the same. Calling out with the wind as it had just back in D.C. when I stood on that rooftop and leered down at our illustrious champion, so docile and weak.

The wind became a roar as it rampaged up the walls of the Hotel Shangri-La. Even the blanket offered me no solace from the rip and tear of its claws and its call.

It was then that the trembling shiver in my hand was replaced by the vibration of the phone — an alert, a message, and a lifeline. A series of texts, no numbers saved, awaited me as I stepped away from the railing and back towards the sliding glass door. I knew the numbers: I also knew that any messages coming in from them at this time announced their arrival.

(620) XXX-XXXX

Entered city limits. Seneca and Stolas arrived at 0250.
Rendez-vous set for Owl of Minerva.

(504) XXX-XXXX

Heard. En route.

(212) XXX-XXXX

I wanted New Ho King with the fried rice and the dip sauce with the blammy, crodie, but noooooooo it just HAD to close at 2.

(620) XXX-XXXX

You said this aloud, you didn't have to text it.

(212) XXX-XXXX

He appreciates it. Back me up.

(609) XXX-XXXX

This one is confused. It was told that Canada is a democratic country and lacked a monarchy.

(212) XXX-XXXX

China food. It's good. You want the shrimp fried rice.

(609) XXX-XXXX

This one still does not understand. Are you saying that a shrimp will be frying the rice?

(620) XXX-XXXX

Lucifer, we need to talk. Yes, the lost belt, but I ask you to consider its priority. There is Sarah Wolf's presence, and you know if she's surfaced the rest won't be far behind. We need a contingency. We need operations.

(620) XXX-XXXX

And of course... there is work to be done. Are you awake to rendez-vous?

My left eye itched. The moon above seemed larger. Leering. Three and a half blocks to Owl of Minerva — twenty minutes or under a mile on foot. The wind continued as I turned back to the door. I knew what I had to do: those words reverberated in my head every time I walked out onto an XWF stage.

Hear these howls. Embrace the Gnashing.

I would oblige. Back inside, I unwrapped the sheep's clothing from my body and tossed it onto my bed. I pulled on my uniform: the same darkened pants and sweater we all wore, the same boots, the same balaclava which steeled our faces to war. I was sure of my footing, leaving behind the glowing phone with its lock screen that bore a picture of myself and Ruby at Thanksgiving standing underneath the mistletoe. The time had come, the Walrus said, to talk of other things.

When I stepped out of the hotel and into the night, walking towards The Jungle, I could hear the winds steady and unwavering howl.

I answered the call and joined **the hunt.**

[Conditions estimated to persist until
Midnight, December 17th.]

[Please seek safety inside of a sturdy building or lie face down in a ditch.

Abandon hope for more substantial shelter.]

[Thank you, and good night.]