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*The Visitor*

The storm raged with a renewed fury, bellowing in the sky over the tiny farmhouse. As the curtains whipped about, caught and torn on crooked shards of broken glass, wind roared in through the gaping chasm of the demolished window.

Turning his back into the glass while dropping to the ground, Drew had sheltered his mother from the explosion as best as he could.

‘Are you all right?’ he called over the din.

His mother nodded quickly, eyes shooting towards the window. She looked shaken and scared, but beyond some scratches on her face seemed unharmed. Drew slowly helped her to her feet, surveying the situation.

The great bay window now blanketed the floor with hundreds of tiny pieces of splintered wood and shattered glass.

The odd piece of timber swung from its brackets attached to the window frame, broken and ruined. The bookcase that had flanked the window lay on its side, empty and smashed, its far-flung books flapping as the wind clutched at their pages. Rain continued to drive into the room, harsh cold spittle that splattered Drew's face.

Helping his mother back into her chair he began to step over the damaged furniture, making his way towards the window. The fallen bookcase would be best put to use as a temporary hoarding over the hole until the morning came. He'd have to dig out his pa's toolbox from the cellar, but once his father and brother returned they could all set about putting things back to normal. Still, the situation unnerved him.

His eyes searched the room, an important piece of the puzzle missing. The hairs on the back of his neck trembled, a shiver still coursing down his body and making his whole frame tremble. Something wasn't right. Squinting into the darkness, Drew couldn't see what had caused the impact. He had expected to find a great tree branch jutting into the house, but the lack of any obvious cause both surprised and worried him. Surely the wind alone couldn't cause such damage? He took a further step towards the window, still searching for evidence. The fire roared against the storm before suddenly giving up the ghost, chased from the room.

Then it appeared.

The shadow seemed to build from the floor upwards, a low murky shape that stood out from the darkness with a definition all of its own. Drew staggered back. As it rose, first to the height of Drew's waist and then taller, it seemed

to grow outwards at the same time, filling the gaping hole that had once been the bay window. Drew stumbled, the strength in his legs failing him, almost losing his footing as he backed up. Wood and glass clattered to the floor around the creature as the remains of the window fell from its frame.

Outside the lightning flashed, adding a brief glimpse of illumination to the scene. Upon seeing the beast, Drew's first thought was that it was a bear of some kind, but who had ever heard of a bear being bold enough to walk up to a farmhouse, let alone leaping through its windows? It quickly became clear that the creature was far removed from anything that he'd ever seen, sharing little in common with the animals that inhabited the Cold Coast.

A thick coat of oily black hair covered its heavy frame, a foul-stinking pelt that bristled with muddy rainwater. Heavy forelimbs swung down from its hunched shoulders, viciously clawed hands scraping the splintered floorboards around it. Smaller legs were bent double below, supporting the body above, threatening to spring the great mass forward at any moment in a mighty bound. What appeared to be a long fleshy tail wound out from the base of its torso, snaking back through the rubble towards the window. It stood some eight feet tall in all, dominating the darkness of the room.

Whatever horror the body of the beast had created in Drew and his mother paled in comparison when the fearsome head rose slowly from the black nest of fur on its chest. The long snout came into view, tapering towards the end where a cluster of long, sharp teeth jutted out from curling blood-red lips. Its

breath rolled into the room before it, making Drew gag at the stench. The foul air carried the scent of rotting flesh and disease, the stink of death and decay, sweet and sickening. Its ears were small and pinned back to its head, almost hidden among the glistening dark coat. Two pale red eyes flashed from pitch-black sockets, narrowing with wicked glee as it stared back at its prey.

It opened its mouth wide, throwing its head back as it bared its teeth, a long black tongue lolling and snaking from its maw as saliva splattered down to pool with the rainwater.

Drew's stomach was in turmoil as he stared at the monster. His heart raced, the burn of the fever still gripping his body but now fuelling something, feeding his will. Spurred into activity, he leapt to the fireplace between the beast and his mother, reaching up and unclipping his father's Wolfshead blade from the chimney breast. It felt heavy and awkward in his hands, but he held it wavering before him, palms gripping the hilt of the sword. He felt his mother's trembling hand on his shoulder, her fear passing over him as she stood up to shelter behind him.

The creature seemed to chortle, loud, low and guttural, as it clambered over the overturned furniture and further into the room.

'Get out!' cried Drew over the wail of the wind, swinging the sword before him to try to ward it off. The beast raised a hand, batting the sword aside, stepping ever closer. Drew's bones and muscles burned, a sudden sharp pain racing wildly through his body to clench his heart. Losing control he lashed out with the sword, lunging towards the monster blade-point

first. The sword disappeared beneath its arm, hitting home somewhere in the monster's midriff. It recoiled, staggering. Lowering a clawed hand to its bloodied side, it examined the dark black liquid with no small degree of concern, before glaring back at its attacker. A huge hairy arm scythed out, quick as a flash, arcing across the room to tear Drew's chest. Blood flew from a trio of razor-sharp cuts as Drew collapsed against his mother, the sword tumbling from his grasp with a clatter on to the floorboards.

'Drew!' called his mother, but the cry was in vain.

His body shook violently, picking an unfortunate moment to seemingly give up its battle against the fever that had haunted him. Tilly Ferran let out a scream of despair as her son tumbled from her arms to the hearth, his poor body convulsing. She snatched up the blade.

'You've killed my boy!' she cried, waves of a mother's grief exploding from her.

The monster raised a thick black claw, wagging it in a show of disagreement, before pointing it at her. Its voice gurgled, a malevolent laugh that belonged to the dark places of the world.

'For you. Came. For you . . .'

Tilly's eyes widened. She staggered forward, sword flailing wildly, but the creature powerfully swung out its arm, claws meeting her as she ran, the sword tumbling from her grasp. The impact sent her flying through the air towards the kitchen. She landed on the table with a sickening crunch, sending crockery tumbling to shatter on the tiled floor.

Twitching and shuddering, Drew could only watch on as the monster sent his mother crashing into the kitchen. As it followed her, all he wanted was the strength to rise and attack the beast, bring it down, tear its throat from its body. But he was paralysed by an unfathomable weakness that had now consumed him.

The creature slowly advanced into the kitchen, drawing out the inevitable. It stepped through the chaos, wind cloaking it with rainwater as it shambled up to the table. A huge clawed hand trailed playfully along the wood, blood dripping on to the surface.

Tilly Ferran whispered the word 'No' over and over, again and again, but she knew this was her end, knew there was nothing she could do to stop the monster. The beast shook its head, stinking drool falling on to the table beside her head.

'I thought . . . I thought I was safe from you,' she mouthed, though the words found no volume. 'I thought you'd never find us.'

The animal snarled a grin, leaning in towards her and mouthing a single word as it opened its mouth.

'Never.'

Then it closed its jaws round her throat.

Indescribable anger and fear raged through Drew's body as he watched the nightmare scene unfold. He closed his eyes, willing his limbs to move but was instead assailed by a feverish spasm.

It started in his guts, as before, but worse. Much worse. He felt his insides tearing now, fighting not to pull free from his body, but twisting about and finding fresh homes. His bowels

seemed to rise from the pit of his belly and shift further back, while his lungs grew threefold, great gasps of air racing into his chest. As the lungs grew, so did the rib cage, straining at first before cracking and popping. His chest expanded as his ribs took a new shape. The pain was unbearable. He wanted to yell out loud against the pain, but nothing came other than a silent scream.

He gritted his teeth as he felt a pressure grip his skull like a vice. The strain increased, Drew thought his eyes might burst from his sockets. He felt his gums beginning to tear as his teeth seemed to work themselves free. His arms came up before him, but he could only stare in horror as his hands distorted, stretched and elongated, with his nails tearing from his fingers into great long claws. Hair shot from his flesh, up his arms, from his chest, and he felt his mind threatening to slip away. His skull cracked under the pressure, and his jaw dislocated when a muzzle broke out.

His eyes hazed over, yellow and baleful, as he looked up from where he crouched. A semblance of Drew's mind remained, locked away inside, unable to fathom this horrifying transformation. He was looking on, a witness to what unfolded, as if suspended from the ceiling above. Fur bristled along his spine as, hackles raised, he watched his enemy, the intruder's back turned.

He let out a low growl, almost inaudible over the sound of the storm, but the monster heard him. It turned, slowly, blood staining its muzzle as it looked back into the sitting room. Disbelief appeared on the monster's face. It faced the boy, or what had been the boy, warily.

Before the creature could move Drew instinctively leapt forward. He cleared the distance between them in one bound, crashing into the beast's chest and the two tumbled to the floor in a ball of flailing claw, tooth and fur. The monster tried to defend itself from Drew, but the beast-boy was taken by a furious hunger, a rage that was unstoppable. The monster, though clearly stronger and a seasoned killer and fighter, let slip its guard in the panic, and Drew's jaws snapped over its skull. He yanked the beast's head back in a sharp savage motion, and with a ragged tear the flesh came with it. Letting loose a screech of pain, the monster struck back, a clawed fist hitting Drew hard in the chest. The force of the blow sent the boy tumbling back, crashing into a dresser in an avalanche of crockery. His strength escaped him when he tried to get up, the jangling pain of broken ribs adding to the shock of being winded.

Looking up from where he lay in a heap, Drew saw the creature rise from the floor, towering over him again. Ragged breaths escaped from its mouth as moonlight streamed in through the kitchen window, illuminating the damage Drew had dealt it. The right-hand side of its face was missing, revealing torn sinew and cartilage slick with black blood. Bare skull caught the light, a crescent of bone that arched round the eye socket like a bright white sickle. Flesh hung in tatters from the side of its mouth, the teeth in all their glory vanishing into the shadows of its jaws.

Snarling, the monster let the remainder of its lips peel back, emitting a gurgling growl. Raising its hands it let its claws play against one another, long black talons that clicked and



clacked with anticipation. It hunched its shoulders as it took a step closer, its legs crouching, muscles flexing, as it prepared to pounce on the boy. A noise from the front of the house made the beast stop, its head twitching up, bobbing, as it listened intently. It looked back at the strange helpless creature at its feet, spitting blood at him in anger before turning and diving through the kitchen window. Sheet glass fell from the frame as the beast vanished into the stormy night.

Struggling to regain his composure, Drew fought to get to his feet, grasping a leg of the kitchen table with one clawed hand over the other until he stood tall. While he climbed he could feel his body shifting, twisting again, as his human self returned. The hairs that covered his body receded, disappearing beneath his skin, and his bones and muscles reverted back to their natural state. Last to crack back into position was his muzzle, and he felt his face slowly return to normality as he looked down on his lifeless mother.

Laid out as if on a mortician's slab, Tilly Ferran stared up at the ceiling through dead eyes, blood spread from her throat over her chest. Unable to hold back the tears, Drew bent low, taking his mother in his arms and lifting her head until they were cheek to cheek. Tears streamed down his face as he sobbed in silence.

When Mack Ferran stepped through his house a short time later, it only took him a moment to register what had happened. Turning the corner of the upturned living room he looked through the archway into the kitchen. His wife of twenty years, the only true love he had ever known, lay

sprawled on the table. His son stood hunched over her, her head in his hands, limp as a rag doll. She was dead, her throat torn ragged. The boy's jaws and hands were slick with blood, and when he looked up to face his father he had a wild, animal look that cried of madness and murder.

Mack's eyes glanced to the Wolfshead blade on the floor. Crouching slowly he let his right hand slip around the hilt, his fingers feeling their way before clenching into an all too familiar grip. All the while he fought back his fury, keeping his composure. He straightened as Trent dashed into the house, skidding to a halt behind his back.

'Put her down,' said the old soldier, raising the sword out before him, the blade motionless as the wind and rain still whipped through the ransacked house.

Drew trembled, his head shaking, uncomprehending. Why was his father holding the sword to him?

'Father . . .' he gasped. His voice came out low and bestial, struggling to escape through his still-twisted throat. His face twitched and spasmed as his dislocated jaw grated back into place.

'Put. Her. Down.' His father stepped closer, two, three steps.

Drew looked from his father to his mother, trying to comprehend his father's actions. Surely he couldn't think that Drew was responsible for this? Tears streaked down his face. His eyes darted towards Trent, his brother's face a mixture of fear and confusion at the scene before him. 'But, Father,' Drew said, bloodstained lips trembling.

'Stop saying that,' the older man screamed, his sword

beginning to quiver in his hand now as he struggled with his rage.

Drew wanted to be sick, wanted to collapse. What should he do? He tenderly released his grip and laid his mother's head back on to the table from the cradle of his arms. 'An animal . . .' he started to say, but could not complete the sentence.

His father leapt forward, covering the distance in a swift bound, sword scything through the air with deadly accuracy. The sword tore into Drew's shoulder blade, cutting deep and fast. Wailing, the boy stumbled back, scrabbling barefoot over broken glass as his father now stood before him and his mother. Trent watched the drama unfold from the archway into the living room, jaw slack as the horror played out.

'You're no son of mine,' his father spat, eyes red with tears as he snarled and choked on his words. 'Monster!' he screamed as he lunged forward once more.

Drew raised his hands in a vain attempt at defence, but the sword flew straight to his belly, sliding in and through his stomach, right up to the hilt. Father and son were face to face, eyeball to eyeball. Drew's eyes blinked in disbelief as his father's eyes narrowed, his grisly job done. He released his hand from the sword hilt and let his son stumble backwards into the cold shadows of the kitchen.

Drew's fingers reached for the handle that sat flush to his stomach, stained dark with blood. He felt the tip of the blade scrape into the brickwork behind him from where it extended almost three feet from his back. His fingertips played over the decorative pommel, a steel Wolfshead glaring up at him in an emotionless stare.

Mack stepped back to his wife, taking her still-warm hand in his own before dropping to his knees. It had come to this. This boy who he had raised, this monster, taking the life of the most precious thing in his world. In his worst nightmares he'd never dreamt of this moment. The boy was an aberration, a monstrosity. Justice had been swift but he could never forgive himself for allowing this to happen. He looked at his wife, her ivory skin coated crimson with her own blood. *They had known, and still they had been unable to stop it.*

Trent stepped forward and patted his father's shoulder, just the once initially and then repeatedly, more insistent. At first Mack thought they were pats of consolation, of shared grief, but he quickly realized as the pats became frantic tugs that the boy wanted his attention. He looked up.

Trent stared wide-eyed across the kitchen, his hand stretched out and a trembling finger pointing towards his brother, who stood silhouetted by the shattered kitchen window. *Still* stood. The wind whipped around him as he teetered, bloodied, blade firmly lodged through his midriff.

Mack rose, knowing what had to be done. How could he have forgotten? All those years in the king's service and his mind had slipped. He turned to his son as Drew watched on, speechless and stunned.

'Boy, go fetch me the poker,' he said. Trent simply stared at his brother who by all rights should have been dead but stood wobbling on his legs like a newborn lamb. His father grabbed him by the coat, shaking him. 'The poker from the fire, boy. Fetch it. And be quick about it!'

Drew watched his brother dart into the living room. The

whole thing was surreal, all of the night's events escaping explanation, a twisted dream. The beast, his mother, the transformation that had taken him. *His own father had run him through with a sword.* Surprisingly the pain from the sword seemed diminished somewhat, dull compared to the bone-breaking injuries the monster had dealt him. He should have been lying on the floor in a pool of his blood. Yet somehow he still lived, the Wolfshead blade slicing him like a stuck pig, and now his father wanted the old poker from the fireplace. Drew used to play with that poker as a boy, fascinated by the fancy metalwork that ran the length of it up to the silver handle.

But this wasn't a dream. Drew fought the nausea that welled up inside him. His father had attempted to kill him once already tonight and looked determined to try again. The next time he was bound to succeed. Drew's decision was made.

He clambered up on to the window frame, before looking back just the once. His father stood there, obscuring his mother from his view.

'Hurry, boy!' yelled Mack Ferran as Trent snatched up the poker from the cluttered chaos of the living room.

Drew hovered on the glass-peppered windowsill, half-naked in tattered clothing that flapped in the wind. His eyes glinted as his father stared at him with an unfaltering gaze.

'Give it to me,' Mack called as Trent stumbled through the broken furniture and thrust the poker towards him. He grabbed it by the pointed end, raising the silver pommel over his head before turning back to the boy who used to be his son. Drew had killed now, would kill again no doubt. He had a taste for blood.

But it was too late. The window was empty, now simply framing the rain that lashed in. Mack Ferran slowly lowered the poker and shoved it through a loop of leather on his belt. His other hand settled on to the hunting horn on his hip, palm closing over the cool ivory as he crossed over to the window. He peered through the rain that flooded the muddy yard outside. Beyond, in the black night sky, the moon stared down, full and white.

The boy was gone.