

THE WOLF HUNTER



A SHORT STORY BY
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*“Beware that, when fighting monsters,
you yourself do not become a monster”*

-Friedrich Nietzsche

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Paul watched the building burn. Flames spouted from windows as bricks charred and cracked. The fire's glow outshone the streetlights, creating a burning beacon on the city block. Sirens sounded in the distance. Paul hefted his bag of tools and started down the street.

Guilt rattled his chest as he washed his hands. He stared in the mirror at a black-eye ghoul. Paul thought of all the children in the development that had gone up in smoke. Children that were now safe from the drooling mongrels snapping after them. He began to empty his bag.

The guilt vanished as he cleaned his knife. His lip curled as water swept blood down the drain. It was satisfying to watch the Vultures try to worm their way out. Offering money. Drugs. Flesh. Nothing he was interested in. He set his knife aside and began cleaning his pliers. All he wanted was for them to talk. It was disgusting how fast some caved. This one had the dignity to hold out a while. In the end, he sang like the rest of the cowards. Paul wiped his pliers clean and put them with his knife. He pulled a gun from the bag.

There was nothing fancy about it. A basic handgun procured from a local derelict. He ran a thumb over the rough patch of silver that used to be a serial number. Paul placed the barrel to his temple and stared at his reflection.

The stand-off lasted several minutes before he lowered the gun and ejected the clip. He made sure to clear the bullet from the chamber. There was still work to be done. He could sleep when he knew for sure.

Paul grabbed the last tool in his bag. A photograph of a little girl. She grinned at the camera, showing off gaps where teeth should have been. A pink headband crowned her like a halo. The photo was creased with wear and stained with bloody fingerprints. He tried to wipe the stains away, but they were long dried. The sight of the little girl incited a tug of war.

There was the white hot rage. The insatiable search for justice. The shrieking Fury that would never rest until the truth certain. Then, its counterpart, the devastated man. The broken man. The one with nothing left. The one who begged for sleep. He was that much closer. Sleep could wait a while longer. Now that there was a solid lead, he had no cause for rest. He had a name and location. The Sandstorm Lounge. Vinny Virgo.

It was worth investigating. The information was always good. That was something about the Vultures he didn't understand. They were always willing to sell each other out. There was an illusion of solidarity between some of them, but it always fell apart when pressure was applied. There was no such thing as loyalty among their breed.

Paul looked at the photograph again. There was no way to make him betray her. She was all he had. Crafted from his own flesh. His tiny flicker of light in the black of night. He would trade anything for her safety.

The Sandstorm Lounge was in the basement of a dilapidated brick building. A grimy counter and makeshift tables comprised the bar's floor plan. An old man stood behind the bar with his eyes locked on the television. Without looking away, he asked Paul what he wanted. Perched on a stool, Paul answered that he was only going to have water.

Grumbling, the bartender delivered the drink. Paul sipped his water and watched the door. A hand moved to the gun tucked in his waistband. Though he had never seen Vinny Virgo, he knew he would recognize him. The Vultures had a way about them that filled the room- a rancid aura of cowardice and greed. Paul gulped water as the door opened.

A man entered dressed in a tailored suit with a dark overcoat. A little girl dressed in rags shuffled behind him as though on a leash. Her eyes were dead to the world. There was no fear in her expression, only animal bewilderment.

Paul seethed, but did not move. He watched as the man dragged the girl to the bar and ordered a drink. The bartender began mixing the cocktail. The little girl became alert and complained of her own thirst. He hissed for her to shut up and took a long drink.

The choking anger rose. He looked at the girl and for a split second was moved to pity- the eye of a raging firestorm. Paul rose from his stool and approached the man. He tapped him on the shoulder while his other hand moved to his waist. The man turned around. Paul asked if his name was Vinny Virgo. The man's lip curled in defiance as he told Paul that he wasn't, but that his wares were just as good. Paul shook his head and

put a bullet through his skull. Before the body crumpled to the floor, Paul and the little girl were out the door.

The little girl was in a state of dim confusion. Paul guided her along the sidewalk and snaked through alleyways, his gun returned to his waistband. When they were a safe distance from the bar, he stopped and asked if she was okay.

She looked up with fawn eyes and shrugged. Paul smiled and told her that he wasn't going to hurt her. She did not react. He looked up at black sky overhead and declared it was time for them to go.

They went back to his apartment. The little girl stood in the middle of the room, her distant confusion slowly transforming into discomfort. Paul microwaved a bowl of soup. As it warmed, he crossed the room and pulled clothes from a dresser. The microwave chimed and the little girl jumped. He smiled and fetched the soup.

She looked like a rabbit poised to flee in the face of a predator. Paul set the bowl on the table and pulled out a chair. He told her that she should eat before it gets cold. She trembled under his affability.

Paul made sure his voice was gentle and friendly as he told her she didn't need to be afraid of him. That he wasn't like the others. That he would keep her safe. Her eyes moved from his face to the bowl. Paul heard her stomach growl.

He watched as she considered the food and the implications of accepting it. With hungry eyes, she went to the table and began slurping spoonfuls of soup. She glanced over her shoulder as she ate. Paul told her he wasn't going to take it away.

The spoon clattered in the empty bowl and she looked at him forlornly. Paul smiled and gave her a refill. Her eyes lit up and for a moment it looked like she was going to smile. Instead, she resumed inhaling the warm broth.

When she finished her second helping, Paul gave her a third and joined her at the table with a bowl of his own. He ate slowly, watching his frightened guest. Halfway through his meal, he asked her what her name was.

She stared into the bottom of her empty bowl. Paul introduced himself to her. She said nothing. He asked if she would introduce herself to him if he gave her another bowl of soup. She looked up.

Paul chuckled as he filled her bowl with another helping. Standing next to the table, he waited to set it down. Quietly, the girl told him her name was Lucia. Paul told Lucia it was very nice to meet her and placed the bowl in front of her.

Lucia looked from the bowl to Paul and asked what he was going to do to her. It was not the question that surprised him, but the tone of her voice. As though she had already resigned herself to whatever terrible thing he had in store for her. Paul shook his head. He told her he wasn't going to do anything. Lucia asked why he had stolen her.

Paul was chilled. Following the creeping cold in his gut was outrage at the fact that she was conditioned to think of herself as a piece of property. He told her that he didn't steal her: he saved her. The remoteness of her stare told him this was not the first time she heard those words.

Indignant, Paul produced the photograph of the little girl. He told her the little girl's name was Diana and that she was his daughter. He told her that she had been taken from him, the same way that Lucia had been taken from her own family. Paul told her that he was trying to find his daughter.

All Lucia said in reply was that she was not stolen, that she had run away from home.

Paul didn't say anything. He swallowed his anger following the insinuation. He knew that Diana would not have run away from him. Lucia stared. She told him she never knew her parents and that she had run away from the Wilks Center.

Paul rubbed his eyes. The Wilks Center for Displaced Children. Run by The First Congregation, it was an endeavor whose heart was in the right place. They were kind to the children who swallowed the dogma of their religion, but cruel disciplinarians when met with resistance. He sighed. Lucia looked down. He rubbed his chin and asked what she had been doing to survive, fearing the answer.

She told him that she was doing whatever she had to. She couldn't have been older than ten, but there was no wonder in her eyes. Only sober knowledge. Paul looked away. His eyes fell on the clothes he pulled

from the dresser. He motioned to them, telling her that she could change if she wanted.

Paul announced he was going to have a cigarette as he went to the door. Lucia asked if she could have one, too. He looked incredulously over his shoulder and shook his head.

He perched on the roof of his development and looked at the sprawling brick wastes below. He inhaled smoke and turned his attention to the North Rim, where titans of glass and steel towered over the rest of the city. The sight brought outrage to the forefront of his mind. Mere blocks from a cesspool of violence and suffering was a shimmering emerald city. There were families nestled in their homes in comfort and luxury, while, in the same area code, children were stolen from their homes and sold as property. The weight of this knowledge came crashing down and in that moment he understood there was no such thing as justice. It was a tool for leverage, a concept invented by the powerful to put the undesirables in a place where they wouldn't have to bear the sight of them. He sucked poison from his cigarette and stared into the vicious brick labyrinth called Carser City.

Then he thought of Lucia and felt his heart stir. She was a child. No parents. No home. Abused. Tortured. Probably an addict. Life was a long road stretching in front of her, paved with drugs and rape and blood. It would be better if her suffering ended as soon as possible. He flicked his butt off the roof and watched it fall to Earth.

In the apartment, he found the little girl sleeping in his bed, still wearing her dirty rags. Paul moved across the room, scooping his pistol along the way. He approached the bed. His hand trembled. He leveled the gun over her temple. Paul stood frozen. He knew it was for the best.

The stand-off lasted several minutes. Then Lucia stirred in her sleep and Paul lowered his gun. He looked at the weapon in his hand. He staggered across the room and dropped into a chair. Paul set the gun on the table and cradled his head in his hands.

Morning came like a predator stalking through tall grass. Sunlight beamed through the window. Paul woke to the ringing of his phone. He stumbled out of the chair to answer it. It was a voice he never heard before, a rasping voice tinted with amusement. The voice accused Paul of searching for its owner.

Paul asked how they got his number, prompting a chuckle. The voice answered by telling him they only had to follow the trail of dead associates. Paul spat the name. Vinny Virgo.

Paul asked what he wanted. Virgo played coy, suggesting that Paul might have something that doesn't belong to him. Virgo continued, telling Paul he was willing to pay handsomely if his merchandise was returned in person, perhaps even by trading one of his own workers, one that seemed to be very important.

Paul grit his teeth. He growled threats of death and dismemberment into the receiver, barking like a rabid dog. Virgo laughed. He told Paul he was a businessman, willing to strike a deal in spite of Paul's lack of professionalism.

Through a clenched jaw, Paul asked what kind of deal he had in mind. Virgo laid it out— bring the girl to his stable and they will make the exchange there. Paul looked at Lucia's prone form and thought of Diana's smiling face. He asked Virgo for the address. Virgo responded with an intersection, a time, and the order to not be late.

Paul felt bad waking Lucia. He looked down at her dirty round face. There was something about the way she squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that made him sad, and he knew it was the body's effort to protect the sleeping mind from a nightmarish reality. He said her name, but she didn't wake. He gently shook her.

Her eyelids fluttered and she sat upright, an expression set in panicked confusion. Then she remembered where she was and the wall of indifference went back up, locking away any indication of emotion.

Ignoring his better judgment, Paul told her that they had to go meet somebody. He saw a flicker of understanding behind her stone gaze and felt the need to tell her that nothing bad was going to happen to her. He gathered his tools.

At the appointed hour, Paul and Lucia stood at the designated street corner. She looked up with worry. Paul patted her on the shoulder and lifted his shirt to show her the gun in his waistband. She nodded, but the fear did not leave her eyes.

A limo pulled up and the door swung open, revealing a man with a gun. He pointed it at them and

ordered them to get inside. Paul hesitated. A hand twitched at his side. He looked at Lucia and thought better. They got into the car and were off.

The man with a gun had a narrow face. His mouth was stretched in a predatory grin. He wore a pressed suit and a tie the color of blood. He sat across from the two of them, casually aiming the gun from his hip. He told Paul to hand over any weapons he was carrying. Slowly, Paul passed over his gun and bag of tools. The man apologized for any unpleasantness.

Paul narrowed his eyes and asked if this was how a businessman behaved. The man smirked and told Paul a businessman always exercises prudence when assessing risks. He held out a hand, introducing himself as Vinny Virgo.

Seething, Paul looked at the man's hand as if it were something rotten. Virgo arched a brow and explained that Paul was being extremely rude by not shaking his contemporary's hand. He added it was also unwise to offend the man holding a loaded gun. Slowly, in spite of the animal rage howling inside him, Paul shook his hand, prompting Virgo's laughter.

Paul began to ask about Diana, but Virgo held up a hand. They would discuss business at the stable. He turned an eye to Lucia and grinned his wolfish grin. She looked at Paul, who suddenly felt a deep and searing shame. He was unable to bear the sight of her dirty round face.

The limo stopped and Virgo ordered them out. They parked in front of a brick development. The driver, a bald and skeletal man with hungry eyes, looked at Lucia and asked where she was going. Virgo told him to take her to room 101 to break her in.

Paul's hand rolled in a fist. Fury made his heart thunder. Then he thought of Diana and the broken man inside him cried out and he knew he couldn't waste his only chance. He watched the driver take Lucia away. Virgo smiled and suggested they speak in his office. He led the way to an apartment on the fourth floor.

Vinny Virgo sat behind his desk. Paul took a seat on the other side. They sat in silence. Virgo grinned and Paul stared. Finally, the Vulture spoke, complimenting Paul on the fine specimen he brought with him. Paul shook his head, disgusted with himself. But the hard part was over. He was going to know. He was going to get her back. Virgo was going to die. He asked what he was going to get in exchange.

Virgo set his gun on the tabletop and picked up a gold-plated letter opener. As he fiddled with it, he asked Paul why he was dancing around the question when they both knew what he wanted. Paul sniffed and produced the photo of Diana. Virgo picked up the picture and grinned, telling Paul that she was very pretty. Paul suppressed the urge to snatch away the picture. He told Virgo he wanted her back. Virgo slid the picture back to Paul and resumed playing with the letter opener. He told Paul that he was very impressed with his passion for recovering lost property. The word sparked a burning fury. Paul's eyes flashed as he repeated it back in the form of a question. He told Virgo Diana was his daughter, not his property.

Virgo shrugged. To him, there was no difference. One way or another, people owned each other. Sometimes it's called love. Sometimes it's family. It's all the same. The strong take the weak. They press their will on them and do what they want with them. That's how life is. Virgo leaned back in his seat and set the letter opener down.

Paul shook his head, too disgusted to be angry. Virgo again shrugged and said he is only a product of his surroundings. That he is one of the strong who do what they see fit with the weaklings.

Paul asked where his daughter was, the burning anger rekindled. Virgo expressed pleasure at the sight of Paul's passion.

Paul's voice rose as he repeated his question. Virgo told him there may be a place in his organization for a man like him. Strong. Dedicated. Willing to do whatever it takes to get what he wants.

Paul roared, demanding to know where his daughter was. Virgo laughed and told him the truth. Diana was dead. An overdose. A true waste. He held out a hand for him to shake, offering him a lucrative opportunity as a member of the Virgo family.

The rage reared its head. Diana was dead. Nothing mattered. Paul snatched the letter opener and stabbed it through Virgo's hand, pinning it to the table. He howled and grabbed for his gun, but Paul was faster.

Virgo tried to work the metal from his hand. Paul growled for him to leave it, striking him in the tem-

ple with the pistol. He looked at Paul with helpless eyes. He pleaded for Paul to be reasonable. He promised money. Drugs. Flesh. The words came pouring from his mouth. Whatever he wanted was within his grasp as long as Virgo was spared.

Paul put a bullet into each of Virgo's kneecaps. The screams. The pleading. It was music to Paul's ears. He pulled out the picture of Diana. Virgo writhed and Paul shushed him, stroking his hair and promising him that everything was going to be okay. He passed the picture over and told him to concentrate on it. Virgo stared at it, tears streaking his cheeks and mixing with the sweat and blood. Paul put a bullet through Vinny Virgo's head. The shot boomed through the room like a thunderclap and was followed by a roar of laughter.

The joy was temporary. That irrevocable truth was known. Nemesis had claimed her prize, blowing out his search for justice like a candle. There was now only the broken man. The weary man. The man who begged for sleep.

Paul screamed and tore at his hair. She was dead. Never again would he see her smile. Hear her sweet voice. It was time for rest. Paul put the gun to his head and closed his eyes. He had nothing. Alone in a jungle of shadow and suffering. In the darkness of his mind, something materialized. A little girl with a round, dirty face. Lucia.

Paul's eyes snapped open. He tore out of Virgo's office with renewed purpose. Room 101. He had to get to room 101. He flew down the stairs.

Room 101 was on the ground floor. Paul kicked the door in, knocking it off its hinges as it whipped into the wall. The driver sprung from the bed, naked and glistening with sweat. Paul fired and the man's head ripped open, spraying Paul with blood and brain. The body hit the floor like falling timber.

Paul didn't speak as he crossed the room to meet Lucia. He dropped to his knees in front of the bed. She sat up with water sliding down her cheeks. Paul put his arms around her, pulling her to his bloodied chest.

Light danced across Lucia's face. Her eyes were wide with wonder as she watched the flames lick at the brick. Windows shattered under the strain of heat, the rush of air causing fire to flare out with an audible whoosh. Paul smoked his cigarette and watched the building burn. He turned at the sound of approaching sirens. He told her it was time to go and hefted his bag of tools. Lucia placed her free hand in Paul's and they started down the street together.