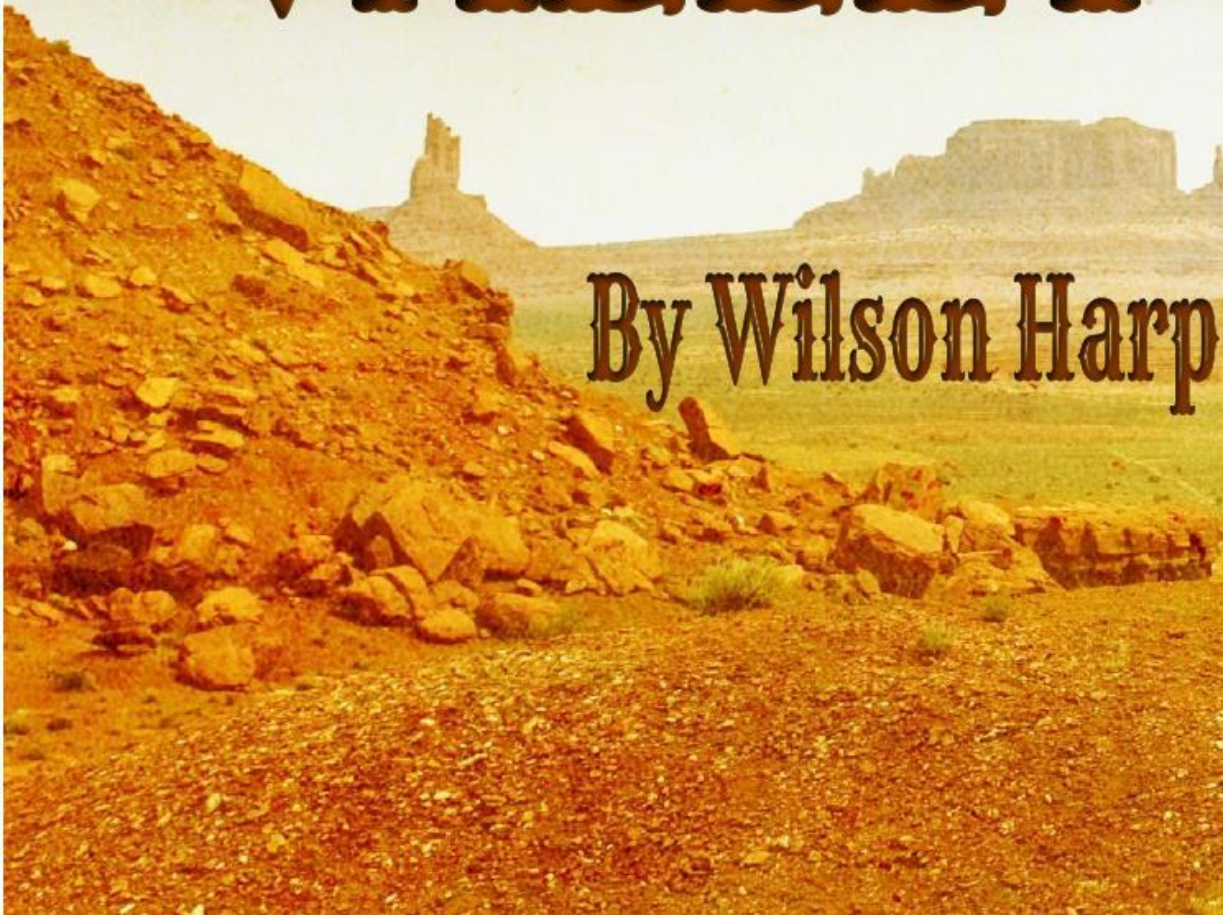




Werewolves in the Old West

Moonlight
in the
VALLEY

By Wilson Harp



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The First Night

The last golden rays of the sun that the town below would ever taste washed the scene in a peaceful light. Blackclaw smiled as he thought of the death and blood that would cry out from this spot for years to come. All other werewolves would smell what he and his pack would do here tonight.

"They still in the jail?" he asked. Stinkfoot approached him from behind. It was no chore to smell him, even a normal man could have smelled Stinkfoot upwind.

"They is in there, both of 'em. They seemed a might confused when I spoke them the message," Stinkfoot said.

"As long as you told it right," Blackclaw said.

"I says that they need to be ready to run. That tonight they would have a new gang to ride with."

"Good."

Blackclaw turned to look at the hills in the West. Out of habit, he shaded his eyes against the setting sun. He had no need. His were eyes that saw sharper than a hawk's in bright sun or moonless night.

"I reckon they have about two hours to see if the town will hang them. If not, they won't have to worry about a rope again," said One-Ear.

"I reckon so," said Blackclaw.

"Chief, we got a couple riding in from the North."

Long-Stride handed the looking glass to Blackclaw. "They are still a ways out, but they will be at the town in an hour the way they are riding."

Blackclaw lifted the glass and peered through it. Two men were riding hard straight at the town.

"Might be the Marshal they sent for?" asked Stinkfoot.

"Maybe," said Blackclaw. "Don't make no difference. That's just two more dead bodies for tonight."

The rest of the werewolves laughed.

"Yes," thought Blackclaw as he smiled. "This will be a good night."

The golden sun drew down and a velvet blanket of night started to creep across the land. Blackclaw and his pack of werewolves stared at the spot between two hills where the first silvery rays of moonlight would burst into the valley. The sky above the spot glowed. It was a cloudless night in this wasteland, and the moonlight would be at its full power.

The edge of the moon peeked through the part in the landscape and Blackclaw felt his blood turn hot. This moment of transition was the last bit of fear left over from his human years. The fear that his blood would ignite and he would burn to a cinder still came upon him like the first time it happened.

He knew what he must look and sound like. Twenty-two other men screamed and howled in pain along with him. Their bodies twisted and contorted, their muscles and sinew bent and popped. Their faces became deformed images, mockeries of their human faces, but not quite the noble image of a natural wolf.

Blackclaw lifted his arms into the air. Thick, shaggy fur hid the brands he had endured as a horse-thief and razor-sharp claws extended from the tips of his fingers. Seven claws the color of rough weathered bone, and one claw on his right hand that glimmered like polished obsidian.

He felt alive and whole. He was truly in his real form. He howled in triumph as the night and its blessed moon had given him victory over the mortal world.

Tonight he would add two more to his pack. Two more men who had rejected the mortal world by murder would embrace the immortal world of darkness.

And there would be blood. Innocent blood. The thought of the taste was enough to howl again. So he did. His pack replied with their own howls.

They all knew their jobs. He had picked out their targets. He had chosen the general store for himself. There was a blonde woman, almost a girl, who had turned her nose up at him when he walked in a few days before. He wanted to hear her scream, to luxuriate in her fear, before he drank her blood.

He leaped forward and charged into town, his pack right on his heels.

Their howls and yips filled the head of the valley and all other creatures hid and cowered from their unnatural presence. Blackclaw knew that their racket might alert some of the town to their presence, but that wouldn't save them. They would just know why they were being torn apart.

The first buildings of the town proper were the survey office and the wainwright. One-Ear and Sharp Tongue would take those. Blackclaw was headed toward the general store and the rooms that housed the store keeper and his family. Including that blonde trull. He would kill the rest of them quickly, only drinking the hottest of their blood, but he would keep her alive. She would live until the last few minutes of the moon. He might even wait until he formed back into a man before stilling her breath.

Oh yes, the rage was hot on him this evening and he would make her suffer.

He reached the door of the general store and burst through. Glass and thick shards of wood cut and dug at his thick, furry hide. The dark powers that gave him this form and immortality also healed those wounds almost as suddenly as they appeared. He had once doubted the regenerative powers of werewolves. When he was turned, he even feared himself and feared for his soul.

The night of his first change, he had hurled himself over the precipice of a mountain cliff. Five hundred feet down he fell. He smashed into the jagged rocks below and felt the pain course through him. But he didn't die. As he lay there in a mangled, bloody mess, he felt his bones and muscles pull back together into a solid form. A strong form. An invincible form.

He howled in fear and pain after that, but it soon turned into a howl of victory. He had cheated death, and would do so every month for the rest of eternity.

He turned his mind back to the evening's pleasure. He listened for the sounds of feet running in fear upstairs. It was silent. He listened to his pack shatter and break the doors of their assignments. There was a disappointing lack of screams from townfolk being killed.

Blackclaw hurried to the stairs set in the back room of the store. He bounded up its rough wooden slats and charged into the first door on the second level.

The bed along the far wall was empty.

He turned and knocked the door across the hall down with a single blow.

The bed in that room lay unoccupied as well.

The last door in the hallway hid the same emptiness, he realized. He knocked the door down anyway to confirm his suspicions.

They were all gone.

He howled in frustration. They had been warned, but where could they all have gone?

The sound of gunfire from the street below caused him to lay his ears back and growl. Some fool was trying to fight back.

Blackclaw jumped through the window and landed twenty feet below already in full stride. The gunfire continued and he heard howls from his pack. Howls he had never heard before. Howls of pain and confusion.

He ran toward the sound of the howls and reached the edge of a large wood building. As he rounded the corner, two of his pack slammed into him driving him into the ground. Neither werewolf stopped as he snapped his jaws in anger.

Long-Stride ran past and then slowed his flight and looked back at the pack leader. A series of yips and barks from Long-Stride combined with the overwhelming smell of fear.

Several more gunshots were followed by howls of fear and pain, and Blackclaw rose from where he had been knocked down and locked eyes with Long-Stride. The other werewolf flattened his ears, tucked his tail and fled from the scene. Blackclaw saw another four members of his pack turn a far corner several blocks down the street and hurtle toward him at full speed.

They fled from something. Their ears were down, their eyes shone with panic, and they raced along the ground trying to escape... something.

The scent of fear overwhelmed Blackclaw and he found himself turned back toward the south and sprinting as fast as he could back toward his camp.

For the first time since he had formed his own pack, his hunt had gone awry.

Second Night

The sun peeked over the ridge and around the rock that Blackclaw had his head behind. It tiptoed toward the face of the angry looking man. Even asleep, Blackclaw wore the scowl of the most murderous villain.

He was in a foul mood when the moon took its magic from him the night before. Several of his pack, once they had regained human speech, tried to tell him what had occurred, but he snarled at them that he would hear their excuses in the morning. No one was brave enough to say another word in camp. The whiskey had flowed with abandon, and none drank deeper than their pack leader.

The sun seemed to know it was taking a risk being the one to wake Blackclaw. Several of the other werewolves fidgeted as they watched the bright line of light crawl timidly toward his face.

Finally, the yellow line cut across his face and touched the corner of his eye. He blinked, twisted his head to the side and sat up with a curse.

He squinted to block out the bright light of morning and the effects of his drink the night before. He turned until he saw Long-Stride.

"What happened," Blackclaw growled.

"It was at the church," his scout told him.

"What about the church? Where is Stinkfoot?"

"Dead," said Redtail.

"What do you mean 'dead'?"

"I saw him get shot in the face and he dropped and didn't get up."

"Who shot him?"

"A man standing at the front of the church building. Light came from all the windows and I was close enough to smell a crowd of people inside. I saw Stinkfoot charge at a man standing on the front steps. The man shot him right in the face. I expected Stinky to get up and tear the man to pieces, but he just laid there all still. Then Ripper charged and the man fired twice more and Ripper fell."

Blackclaw looked at Redtail like he had grown an extra head.

"This man shot and killed Stinkfoot and Ripper?"

Redtail nodded. "And Arcturo and Bloody-Paw."

"What did you do?"

"Ripper didn't die right away, and I could smell the pain and fear coming from him. Arcturo and Bloody-Paw ran at the man, but someone else slipped around the side of the church and shot both of them. The smell of fear jumped as they fell. I couldn't stand it. It was like our power was gone. I just had to get away, so I ran."

Blackclaw grabbed Redtail by his throat and lifted him off the ground.

"You coward, you ran right into me. I was coming to find out what had happened and you knocked me down, you and Fang-Heart."

Redtail struggled to break Blackclaw's grip. His legs shook and a sound gurgled from his throat. None of the other men tried to help their packmate. He was being corrected and it wasn't their place to interfere.

Blackclaw dropped Redtail to the ground and stalked away a few steps. He was the only man who hadn't clothed himself yet, and his nakedness, combined with his rage, gave him a bestial appearance.

"I shouldn't say you are completely at fault, I smelt the fear, too. But you have to remember that we are a pack, and as a pack nothing can defeat us."

The other men looked toward the ground, but didn't turn away. They knew better than to even think about not listening to his words.

"Think. How could Stinkfoot and the others be killed? There are only three ways we can die. Just three. If we are bound on consecrated ground for an entire night of the full moon, if we lose our heads and someone burns it in a silk bag, or silver weapons."

"Well I saw what happened," Redtail said. "Stinkfoot got shot. He didn't heal up, he died right away."

Blackclaw walked over to the fire where breakfast was being cooked. He was starved. He had expected to drink a good amount of blood the night before, but his stomach was only full of whisky.

"Could he have used silver rounds?" Long-Stride asked.

"No," Blackclaw said. "Wouldn't be a good idea to make bullets out of silver. For the price of one, you could buy a whole case of high quality lead loads. Only a rich fool would make bullets out of silver."

Blackclaw filled a plate with beans from the cook pot and picked up a biscuit.

"What if it was just for killing werewolves?" Long-Stride asked. "I mean, a whole case of lead rounds won't do much if you wanted to kill one of us. But a silver round would put one of us down."

Blackclaw didn't like the idea of agreeing with Long-Stride, especially since he had already dismissed the thought. Long-Stride was the strongest of the pack behind Blackclaw, and showing weakness to your strongest challenger wasn't a good idea. But Long-Stride's idea made sense.

"Maybe so," Blackclaw said after he chewed and swallowed a bite of biscuit. "Maybe those strangers that came in yesterday had some idea about what was going to happen in that there community and spent a fortune to put some of us down."

"Who would spend that kind of money to save a town of dirt farmers?" Redtail asked.

"Don't know. Don't care," said Blackclaw. "Just want them dead."

He stared down at the town.

"See anything down there with your looking glass?" he asked.

"I seen the townfolk drag four men, four naked men, out behind the undertakers. They piled wood up on them and I think they are going to burn them soon," Long-Stride said.

"Well, it will strengthen the pack in the long run," Blackclaw said. He wasn't sure if he believed that himself, but he had to show resolve to his men. "Tonight we go in and kill those two. We find 'em, we kill 'em, we drink their blood."

"What if the farmers hole up in the Church again? We can't go in after 'em." Redtail said.

"No, but we can surround it until morning and then smoke them out. I prefer the blood hot, but I'll see them dead in any manner."

The others of his pack gave a whoop and yell at his words. They may have lost four last night, but there were eighteen of them left, and ten werewolves overmatched any twenty men with silver weapons. Two men would take no time at all.

"Where did Long-Stride get off to?" Redtail asked.

"I had a special job for him," Blackclaw said. "He won't be with us tonight. In fact, I want you to run with me at the lead."

"I'd be honored," Redtail said. He stood a little taller and squared his shoulders.

"Good. The moon should kiss us in a few minutes."

The sense in the camp was tense. The night before, all of the men knew they would have a good time killing and drinking blood. But four of their pack had been left behind and their bodies burned.

Tonight was not about wanton slaughter and a thirst that could not be slaked. It was about revenge and dominance. The men who had killed part of the pack were in that town. They had offended Blackclaw and his pack. They had killed those who had become superior to them. And that would not, could not stand.

These strangers would be dead within the hour. Of that Blackclaw was certain.

The silver beam of the moon struck him on the face as a wisp of cloud moved away from the split in the hills. The transformation was terrible. It was always terrible, but on the apex night, the second night, it was more dramatic, more violent, and more powerful than it was on the waxing or waning night.

Blackclaw felt his true nature take hold. His scream turned to a howl as his body transformed into the vile creature of the night that reflected his heart and soul.

He motioned his pack forward and leapt down the rocky walls of the valley toward the quiet town. He heard and smelled his pack around them. He knew that Redtail had taken the place just to his left, the place he normally had Long-Stride take on these raids.

As they approached the first buildings, the instinct to go and kill raged hotly. But Blackclaw knew what he needed to do, so he slowed and after a few paces, came to a complete stop.

He could smell the confusion behind him as his pack formed up into a crowd that unconsciously reflected their order of importance in the pack.

Blackclaw turned to look at his current lieutenant. Redtail looked back at him with curiosity in his eyes. He smelled confused and hungry. He wanted to find the two men and drink their blood. He never would.

Blackclaw lunged at Redtail and bit at his throat. This was not a fight, this was a murder. Redtail tried to jump back, but Blackclaw was too quick. His teeth found the throat of the other werewolf and bit deep. He used his hands to turn Redtail's body. The weight of both of the werewolves as they toppled to the ground helped Blackclaw tear out the soft tissue that his teeth had sank into.

Redtail tried to howl in fear and panic, but his breath just helped spray blood up from the gaping wound in his throat. Blackclaw tore at Redtail's chest. Redtail's blood was ambrosia in his mouth. He cracked and tore at the ribs until he was able to reach in and pull out Redtail's heart.

There was a fourth way to kill a werewolf. If another werewolf ate his heart, he could never recover. Blackclaw had never told his pack about that. Nor did he tell them that drinking a werewolves' blood would remove all sense of fear.

He bit into Redtail's heart, ending the coward's life once and for all. Then he howled and his pack descended on their former packmate. They drank his blood and chewed his flesh. The rage and hate that fed their souls was inflamed and when they were done, bones and fur were all that was left of Redtail.

Blackclaw howled and his pack responded by bounding into the town. They were to remain silent until they found their prey.

Blackclaw headed directly toward the church. He wanted to go there himself in case the men tried the same strategy again. He raced along the streets and saw the lights on in the Church, but no one stood on the steps. He wouldn't be able to cross the threshold of the holy place, but he went up to the steps and sniffed anyway. He saw the faces of men, women and children look out of the windows and could smell their fear and dread. He showed his teeth in a mockery of a grin. Their smell made him hunger for their blood and he imagined that he could smell that as well.

A howl went up along with gunshots on the east side of the town. Two guns firing now and the howl of at least six of his pack were shaking the night.

He turned and ran as fast as he could to the sound. The pace of the gunfire had slowed but the howls and barks of his pack had become sharp and frantic.

The commotion was around a small blacksmith workshop. There was a man on the ground floor and another in a window on the second floor. The one above had a rifle and fired as Blackclaw came into view. A member of the pack dropped to the ground and shook violently. No fear, though. No smell of fear at all.

Blackclaw stopped as he watched the man on the ground swing a saber in an intricate flourish.

There was no smell of fear. Blackclaw realized that he didn't smell fear from either of the men.

Two werewolves charged the man with the saber from alongside the building. They were careful to stay out of view of the man with the rifle. The man with the saber slashed high and then low at the approaching werewolves. One slash of their claws or bite of their fangs would spread their disease to him. He had to kill them to win, while they just had to cause a single wound.

He leaped up and over the first werewolf, the second slowed to intercept him, but the man tucked into a roll and thrust up with his saber. The blade easily sliced through the shaggy, thick hide and appeared out of the back of the werewolf.

A feeble wave of both arms was all the werewolf was capable of before the man pulled his blade free as he danced to the side.

The werewolf that had been hurled, swung back around, but in doing so came within view of the rifleman. A sharp crack and blood and bone sprayed onto the street.

Blackclaw was furious. Long-Stride had been right, these were werewolf hunters. The man on the ground had a pure silver saber and the rifleman was firing silver bullets. Six werewolves were already lying dead around them, but they couldn't stop a single rush.

A howl and charge by their leader inspired the other werewolves out from where they concealed themselves. The rifle fired and Blackclaw heard the dull thud of another werewolf slamming into the ground.

The man with the saber turned and Blackclaw could see the face of the hunter. Or at least he could if the man wasn't wearing a black mask that covered his face from the middle of his nose up. A shirt that looked like the finest brushed cotton and a fine expensive white wool hat were juxtaposed against the rough, sturdy leather pants and plain brown boots he wore.

Two six guns rested in his holsters, and Blackclaw could smell the sharp scent of powder that had been burned inside those cylinders in the last few minutes. The saber that the man wielded was indeed silver. The blade shimmered in the moonlight, and the handle gleamed in his hand.

He was fast with the blade, too. Blackclaw had started his charge when his instincts caused him to throw himself to the right. The masked man's slash went wide, but did not completely miss. The tip of the saber gashed a furrow down Blackclaw's flank.

It burned hotter than anything he had ever experienced. The snaps and snarls of the werewolves who followed their leader in the charge changed quickly to whines and howls of pain. The man danced his way through the flurry of claws and teeth. No werewolf scored a hit on the hunter.

Blackclaw turned back to the fight and was about to leap straight at the man, when he saw a figure leap out of the window above the blacksmith shop and straight onto the back of Fang-Heart.

The man who leaped out was an Indian in full war-paint dressed in buckskins. In his right hand, he wielded a long knife; in his left, a tomahawk. Both weapons were made of silver. A quick slash across Fang-

Heart's throat and the Indian jumped into the frantic melee that swirled like a maelstrom around the cowboy with his saber.

Blackclaw cursed life itself as he realized that his pack had taken on too big of a fight. He howled and barked at the survivors of the pack and led the retreat, for the second night in a row, away from a town that should have been dead ten times over.

Third Night

Blackclaw turned to look at Long-Stride as he approached.

"What did he say?"

Long-Stride slowed and looked around at the camp. "What happened?"

"You answer my question first," Blackclaw growled.

"They will come, as you requested."

"Good." Blackclaw turned back to stare down at the town.

"I guess we are going to need them," Long-Stride said as he sat next to his pack leader.

"Go put some pants on and then come back. Don't wake the others, I want them to sleep. They need it."

Blackclaw mulled over the news that Long-Stride had brought. He had sent the runner to Howler's den. Howler and Blackclaw had been turned on the same day by the same wolf. In many ways they were brothers, in others, the worst of enemies.

But Blackclaw was desperate. Desperate enough to show his weakness by asking Howler to come.

"Howler laughed when he saw me," Long-Stride said as he came back to where Blackclaw sat.

"Did he laugh after you told him what I said?"

Long-Stride shook his head as he sat and looked down at the quaint little town.

"No, he took me inside and asked me the questions you told me he would."

"What did he say?"

"He said that these fellows had made a real mess of High-Nose's pack. They had done just like here, interrupted the hunt and had killed a bunch."

"I never heard of it. Don't figure many did. When I heard High-Nose was killed and his pack scattered, I figured he upset one of his betters. He had plenty of betters and he was good at making them mad," Blackclaw said. "Did he promise any help?"

"Rufus and a group from the pack will be here in an hour or so. I left just before them. They can't move along the rocks like I can, especially after the moon has left them."

"Rufus. Howler knows I can't stand that red-haired loudmouth."

"He told me to tell you that Rufus knows what he is about. He's here to help, not to take orders."

Blackclaw growled. He hated to be told he wasn't in charge of his own hunt. Howler had the power, though, and that meant that Rufus would be able to do what he wanted without complaint or challenge.

Blackclaw heard several of his pack start to stir and noticed that the cloudless sky had started to lighten with the approaching light.

"Come on," he said. "We need to tend to some of the wounded and set a plan in motion. I mean to drink blood tonight, and eat the heart of the man who gave me this scar."

"I saw the blood through your shirt as I came up," Long-Stride said. "Was it silver like we thought?"

"It was silver in his guns, and he carries a silver saber. I'll carry it tomorrow and if all goes as planned, I'll see Rufus skewered with it by the time we move on."

Long-Stride laughed and pulled out his viewing glass. He liked to keep an eye on things in the distance.

Blackclaw went to his pack and checked on their wounds. Several of them had taken bullets that had held inside their flesh. The silver burned until it could be clawed out. A few suffered until the moon drifted below the horizon. Then it was just the pain of having a lump of metal where it ought not to be.

Two bullets had to be cut out with a knife in the early morning hours by the dim light of a mesquite camp fire. Sharp-Eye and Tender-Paw would be in no shape to fight tonight, but Blackclaw would take them into the attack anyway. They could soak up some bullets for the others.

Blackclaw looked around at what was left of his pack. Twenty-two strong just two days ago, he was down to eight of fighting strength, and only Long-Stride and Greybeard remained unwounded. He would have ten with him tonight. Rufus and however many he brought would be the bulk of the attack. As much as he wanted to deny it, Blackclaw knew that he would have to slink back to Howler and start over. Likely Long-Stride would have his own pack before Howler let Blackclaw out of his den again.

The idea was absurd. If Rufus died and the others saw, then maybe he could rebuild his pack after the attack. If he planned it right, he might even have a stronger pack than before.

Blackclaw mulled these thoughts as he paced through the camp. The shirt he wore showed the stains from his wound, but he did not fear a challenge from any in his pack. Long-Stride was the only one who might stand a chance, and he was a crafty one. He wouldn't move unless he knew it would pay off.

The sound of boots on rock turned his head to the west. Several men were working their way through the narrow passageways. They were dressed, which meant that they had carried their clothes with them on the night and had stopped long enough to become presentable. Blackclaw didn't need to see under the wide hat to know that a shock of red hair and a darker bushy red beard was on their leader.

Rufus was one of those men who laughed too much and spoke too highly of himself. As a wolf he was cunning and sly. He would torment those weaker than him and kowtow to those stronger. He took advantage of how others perceived him rather than live his life and let others live theirs.

"Ho! Blackclaw!" Rufus called as he and his men approached the camp.

"Rufus," Blackclaw said as he walked out to meet them. "I'm glad Howler sent some help."

Rufus frowned as he looked around the camp. "This is all you have left? I heard you had north of twenty."

"I did."

"Tell me about them," Rufus said as he nodded toward the town in the valley.

Blackclaw felt the hairs on his arms and neck stand on end. Rufus had already taken charge of the situation without effort.

"There are two of them. One is white. He wears a pair of six guns and has a saber. Saber looks like its pure silver."

Rufus cocked his head and looked at the red stain on Blackclaw's shirt.

"The other is an injun. He has a rifle but also knows how to fight with a knife and tomahawk," Blackclaw continued.

"Both silver, I assume?"

Blackclaw nodded. "Yeah. Pure silver. I saw him take off Rough-Pelt's hand with a single swing of his hawk."

Rufus spit on the ground and looked back at the town.

"Howler was afraid of that. High-Nose was taken by a masked man and his injun. Damn near wiped his whole pack in one night."

"How do you know?"

"Howler sent a few into the area and we asked around. A few drinks here, a few pieces of tack bought there. People talk. One man carried a silver bullet with him. Showed it off whenever he could. Said the wolf hunter gave it to him special."

"I'm guessing Howler wants this finished, then. How many did he send?"

"Forty in all."

Blackclaw was impressed. Forty was about half of Howler's pack. If he had sent more, Howler himself might have been in his camp.

"Well, get some rest. If you need someone to look at that tear along your side, I brought a couple that are good at patching."

Blackclaw went back to the few survivors of his pack. He watched as Howler's men came streaming into his camp. He felt helpless and ashamed as Rufus organized the new men and made plans for the assault that night.

The day passed at a crawl. Blackclaw thirsted for vengeance and it occurred to him that he might just get a gun and go into town and kill the masked cowboy. He dismissed the urge at once. Stories said that wolf hunters could smell a werewolf even at noon of a new moon.

The sun was sitting on top of the western hills when Rufus called to Blackclaw.

Blackclaw gathered his pack and joined Rufus in the shade of a large rock.

"Tonight we will get revenge for you and end this threat to our people once and for all," Rufus said. "Howler has had four packs destroyed in the last year and he believes it is this particular hunter that is wreaking havoc among us."

Blackclaw furrowed his brow at this news. He knew about High-Nose, but wasn't aware of any others. Howler's reach and reign must be much larger than he imagined.

"We will attack in four groups," Rufus said. "Blackclaw, this is your fight, so you will be honored by leading the first group."

"Of course," Blackclaw said. He knew this would be the case. Rufus would want to send in who he considered the most expendable first. But Blackclaw had confidence in his own abilities. He would survive the first wave, kill the hunters, and then pay Rufus back when the arrogant werewolf let down his guard.

"Your group will go straight up the main road right toward the church. That's where he will be holed up again. This one is crafty," Rufus said. "He will know that a bigger group is coming and he knows that this is

our last chance. You will go in straight at him, and I will lead the next group right behind you. Two other groups will flank the church and we will surround it, making sure no one can escape.”

It was a good plan, although a little simple for Blackclaw’s taste. But he wasn’t worried about a good story, he just wanted this hunter dead.

Long shadows lay across the camp as Rufus finished explaining the plan. Blackclaw went back to his pack and tried to rile them up. They would be the ones to kill the hunters and drink their blood. They would be the ones to set fire to the church the next morning.

By the time darkness covered the valley, they were ready. The church was the only building that showed lights below. The hunters knew that this was the last night of the full moon. They knew that hiding on consecrated ground would be the townfolk’s only chance at survival.

And yet these hunters had taken out other packs. They wouldn’t be this simple, would they?

“We need to keep an eye on the streets,” Rufus said.

Blackclaw knew he must have been deep in thought not to have heard or smelled Rufus approach, but he resisted the urge to turn to the other werewolf. He wouldn’t give the red-haired ninny the satisfaction.

“The streets?”

“The town I gathered information in had piles of wood and junk strewn along the sides of the street. I think they set up barricades to help funnel the wolves to where the hunters wanted them.”

“We’ll keep an eye out,” Blackclaw said. “Our mistress should be here soon.”

Rufus looked up at the clear evening sky. “I reckon so. See you tomorrow morning.”

Blackclaw turned his head and stared at Rufus as he walked away.

“Those will be the last words he speaks to me,” Blackclaw thought. “The next time he can use that mouth to form words, I’ll stick him with the hunter’s saber.”

The silver light of the moon glowed above the hills before the edge of its disk crested the line of hills. The first beams danced into the camp and the men suffered the change into their bestial forms. The wound along Blackclaw’s side burned like molten steel and he howled in agony.

The other wounded wolves added their pain to his. Mingled into the sound were the howls of the others. Those howls told how hungry the wolves were for blood and vengeance.

Blackclaw gathered his pack and charged down at the town. He imagined the people as they shivered in fear. Their fright-filled eyes would peer into the darkness. He hoped that some of the children watched as he ripped the throat out of their champion.

His pace was only matched by Long-Stride, and even the lanky wolf had to push to keep up with his leader tonight. As Blackclaw turned down the main road that led directly to the church, he saw the barricade in the road. His first instinct was to jump directly over it and keep running, but at the last second he twisted and leaped onto the overhanging roof of one of the buildings built tight against the street. He glanced down to see several barrels stacked against the overturned wagon that made up the bulk of the obstruction. His pack followed him and soon they were back on the street and headed for the church.

The howls from Rufus and his wolves came from both sides and behind him. They were only a few seconds from catching up and Blackclaw wanted the hearts of the hunters before they could even witness the carnage. He didn’t want to fight the hunters; he just wanted to kill them.

The church was in plain view, but the hunters were nowhere to be seen. Blackclaw figured they had hidden themselves and he howled for his pack to spread out like they had planned. He reached the steps of the church and tried to move forward, but the proscription against moving into consecrated ground was as solid as ever.

He was frustrated that he couldn’t threaten those inside the church. He wanted to draw the hunters to him, make them strike at him. His focus was on small sounds; a trigger being cocked, a saber being drawn, even the whisper of leather rubbing against skin as the hunters moved toward him.

What he heard, however, was an explosion behind him.

Splinters of wood pelted his back before he could spin around. The barricade had exploded and wolves were laying in the street. Smoke rose from their bodies as they struggled. Rufus was laying a good distance ahead of them. He sat up and howled after just a second.

Gunfire erupted along a street to their west at that moment, and Blackclaw leaped to join the action. The hunters were clever. Werewolves would heal, but a serious injury suffered in an explosion could put them down for more than a couple of minutes.

If the hunters could face ten or twelve wolves at a time, they would have a chance. Blackclaw realized now that by dividing their numbers, they gave a slight glimmer of hope to his enemies. Another reason Rufus would never report back to Howler.

The sharp report of the hunter's guns rang out a fast, steady pace. Blackclaw had seen the skill of the masked cowboy and his Indian partner and knew that Rufus would be going back with far fewer wolves than he had arrived with.

Blackclaw led his pack down a narrow street. He saw a couple of wolves lying on the ground and heard the sounds of gunfire and battle inside a tall building. As he drew near, he recognized it as the public stable and heard the sound of horses in throes of panic.

He sped up and burst through the half closed door of the stable. Several lanterns made the interior much brighter light than he was comfortable with. Strewn across the stable, like discarded rag dolls, were the bodies of the werewolves that had been assigned the west flank. The Indian was in the rafters loading a rifle and the masked cowboy was at the far end of the stable.

He stood in the brightest pool of light. In his right hand he held the silver saber. Its blade gleamed and shimmered. His white hat had been sprayed with blood, but he looked unharmed.

Blackclaw snarled and rushed forward as fast as he could move. He heard other wolves behind him as they entered the stable, but he was focused on the man in front of him. Even if he were to be speared on the saber, he would kill the hunter.

The hunter kicked out and struck a wooden lever. Before Blackclaw could react, the cowboy rose in the air. The hunter's left arm was wrapped around a rope that lifted him with great speed up into the rafters of the stable.

Blackclaw was moving too fast to adjust and leap, but he raked his left arm up as he tried to grab the hunter's boot.

Pain ripped through Blackclaw's body as the hunter's blade slashed down with incredible speed and accuracy. Blackclaw crashed into, and then through, the back wall of the stable. He staggered to his feet and looked into the scene of destruction behind him.

Two horses had joined the fight. A painted horse and a large white stallion trampled the wolves who had piled up near the front of the stable. The horses were shod with silver and each time they knocked a wolf to the ground, he stayed immobile.

The Indian was in the rafters. Each shot of his rifle took a werewolf in the head.

There was a cacophony of gun fire from the far side and Blackclaw realized that the hunters had men in the buildings across the way who had opened fire on the werewolves crowded in front of the stable. He had no doubt that their guns fired deadly silver bullets.

An odd shape caught Blackclaw's eyes just in front of the hole his body had made in the slat-board wall of the stable. It was his arm. He looked down and confirmed that the slash of the hunter's saber had taken his left arm at the elbow.

He howled in pain and despair. He knew that he would not be able to face the hunter again this night.

As he readied himself to turn and run off into the night like a coward, he saw Rufus burst from the general melee and jump to the back of the stable. The masked hunter dropped from the rafters and slashed out with his saber. Rufus was fast. Rufus was strong. Rufus was overmatched in a single second.

The red-furred head of the large werewolf flew from his shoulders and landed out of sight.

If he had been afraid before, he was terrified now. The hunter turned and locked eyes with him. The masked man's left hand went to his pistol on his belt.

Blackclaw fled. He ran with abandon. His missing arm kept him from loping comfortably along, so he ran on his hind legs. He ran directionless for hours. The moon mocked him and called him a coward. He was, and he knew it.

When he finally arrived back at his camp, there were several other wolves there. Long-Stride and a couple of the wolves that Rufus had brought licked their wounds in the deep shadows of some of the larger rocks. Blackclaw found a place to sit and watched as the moon stared down on her pained children. She held no comfort, though, just disdain.

The Day After

The sun was full over the hills when the gunman and his Indian partner rode out of town. The surviving townsfolk had all showed up to bid their hero farewell.

Blackclaw watched through Long-Stride's looking glass. The hunter still wore the mask even as he was surrounded by folks who thought he could walk on water.

"Maybe he could," thought Blackclaw.

The white stallion that had taken the lives of so many werewolves reared back and pawed the air as they left town.

"They leaving?" asked Long-Stride.

"Look for yourself," Blackclaw said as he handed the glass back to the lean man.

Long-Stride limped over to a higher outcropping of rock and looked down on the town.

Blackclaw pulled himself up and walked over to where he had left a bottle of whisky that had a few drinks left. He looked around at the camp he would soon abandon. He didn't have any illusions that the men of the town would not come looking for them. Now that the full moon was gone, enough men could overwhelm and capture them.

Of his own pack, only Long-Stride and Graybeard were left. Long-Stride was too smart to make a comment that would be taken as a challenge. Graybeard had lost his tongue to an Apache shaman years before he was gifted with his wolf. But even if he could have spoken, Blackclaw didn't think he would. He was one of the few that Blackclaw trusted and relied on.

The old man looked up at his pack leader and nodded to the small handful of men gathered in the shade of a large rock. Those five were all that were left of the group Howler sent.

"At least Rufus is dead," muttered Blackclaw. "Though not by my own hand."

His own hand. Singular. He looked down to the stump of his left arm. The saber took it clean at the elbow and the powers of the moon sealed up the wound before he bled out.

He picked up the bottle he was looking for and motioned for Graybeard to follow him. He heard the old man get to his feet as he headed to where Long-Stride sat.

"I think we have the making of a new pack here," he said.

Long-Stride lowered his looking glass and looked at Blackclaw.

"You think?"

"Yeah," said Blackclaw. "I don't think any of them will want to go back and face Howler after this. I know I don't want to see him again."

Graybeard was beside him. He could sense the old man's approval of the idea.

"Where would we go?" asked Long-Stride.

"After them," Blackclaw said. He motion north past the town. "We follow them and seek our revenge. Before I die, I want to catch him, I want to kill him, and I want to unmask him. I want an answer to my question."

"What question?"

"Who was that masked man?"

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading this little story of Blackclaw and the end of his threat against the little town in the valley. I hope you enjoyed the twists and surprises that you encountered along the way. The paranormal west is a guilty pleasure of mine and I was very happy to be able to tell this story.

My hope is that you were entertained and that you will look for my other works to entertain you as well. If you liked this story, I would like to invite you to leave a review where you purchased it. If you would like to sign up for e-mail notifications of my new releases, please click [HERE](#).

Thank you

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