

Volatilis Hericius

"Breaking news," the reporter of the seven o'clock news announced, "Police just carried in yet *another* dead body. This time it was found by the Hernando River Basin just half a mile away from Romania's most popular biking trail. We aren't allowed to see the body, but specialists say it was an animal attack, most likely a wolf. Ranger Johnson promises that his team will find the beast and euthanize it. For the sake of the community, I hope they can."

Ashley clicked off the screen and sighed. That was the fifth attack *this month*.

"Jack!" She called into the hallway, "Get the crew together! It's time to go hunting."

"Another one dead?" Jack poked his head through the door.

"Yep, makes the total five."

"Regular killings?"

"Definitely not."

"So it's supernatural?"

"More than likely."

"Large?"

"Oh yeah. Get the big gear."

"What about transitions?"

"I'm thinking no, but bring the vervain and wolfs bane anyway."

"On it!" He scrambled to the garage to pack the SUV with guns, stakes, nets, silver, sedatives, salts, and all that good stuff you need for supernatural killings.

"Get in the car," Ashley ordered. "Drive to the bikers trail. Oh, and we need to stop and get Susan and Bill." She slammed the passenger door shut and made sure that all the flashlights, batteries, bullets, radios, and knives were in the dash compartment. As Jack cranked the engine she double checked the water, food, and bait supply. All good.

“Onwards!” She pointed, and they were off.

“Okay guys, Susan and Bill take the south end while Jack and I head north. We don’t know what kind of creature we’re dealing with here so be prepared for anything. We’ll meet back up here in two hours.” Ashley clapped and everyone dispersed. This was the normal routine, splitting up into pairs. It made it easier in case someone ever got into trouble. Which happened to be often.

“I’ll keep to the east flank,” Jack said and fell behind. Ashley nodded and kept walking. It was only dusk, but the dense woods made everything darker, creepier. Using what little light there was, she followed a trail of dried blood that she’d picked up on. It was probably from one of the creature’s earlier victims. Ashley tried to ignore the feeling of paranoia creeping up on her, but there were too many snapped twigs and hushed growls for that. Something was definitely wrong. Visions of Jack, Susan, and Bill finding her mutilated body bedeviled her mind.

“Calm down,” she thought to herself, “You’re going to do something stupid if you don’t calm down.”

Ashley halted; a shadow was circling the area.

“It’s always a shadow isn’t it?” She cursed. Whatever it was wasn’t good; the animals were too quiet, not a single songbird’s melody rang out. She crept closer to a tree, hoping that it would somehow shield her from what was prowling.

“C’mon out,” Ashley called, “No use waiting around.” She placed her hand on the hilt of her gun as a lengthy broad figure emerged from the mist. It had sleek black fur that was raised on ends, trying to scare her. Leathery dark wings like dragons were spread out on either side of its body. Ashley was expecting some kind of lizard head, but no, it was a grey hounds (or at least something similar). It’s head was bowed to let out a menacing growl, but somehow it came across as...cute. No throaty noise could make that twitching black nose and dainty paws look evil.

“Aw come here boy,” Ashley beckoned. She made clicking noises with her tongue and clapped her hands. It was hesitant at first, backtracking every few steps, but eventually she was able to reach out and pet it. The beast whined and trotted back a few steps, then looked for Ashley to follow.

A voice crackled on her walkie talkie, "What are you doing?" It was Jack. "That's a Volatilis Hericius. A winged hound, Ashley! Shoot it! I'm not in close enough range."

"Relax Jack," she replied, "I think it just wants help."

"Nope uh-uh you are not doing this today. It's how they lure you in! They manipulate you into thinking that they're all cute and innocent and stuff and then... they strike." He made a noise and I imagined him pulling his finger across his neck to symbolize me getting killed. "Imagine it; claws tearing through your skin to rip out your vital organs and spew them on to the grass. It's not an instant death, but you'll be wishing it had been. So do yourself the favor of killing it now so I don't have to try and rescue your ass."

Ashley rolled her eyes while cutting off the walkie talkie. Jack didn't know what he was talking about. Plus he didn't see the pitiful look the dog gave her.

"Where to boy?" She asked, and followed the hound into the forest.

They reached a small brook where the water made trickling noises against the rocks; pretty peaceful.

"What are we doing here?" Ashley asked.

The moon shone on the hound's eyes, making them illuminate with a golden tint; eerie. He- correction- she whined and pawed at a hole near the river bank. Stuck in the hole was a little baby winged hound.

"Is this your puppy?" Ashley cried, pushing her blonde hair out of her face. She hated seeing the poor thing down there. "Don't worry, I'll get him out b-girl."

She positioned herself so she was lying on her stomach. As she extended her arms out to reach the pup, the hound pounced.

"Auughh!" Ashley screamed, as cougar-like claws made contact with her back. They sunk into her skin until the pain was almost unbearable, slowly moving downwards, shredding her back in the process. Ashley screeched again. The pain was agonizing. She tried to look for something to throw, but black spots danced across her vision. The hound panted, like it was enjoying watching its prey suffer, and it did. That's what a Volatilis Hericius was all about; luring someone in, dragging out a cruel game

of punishment, and then devouring a person's insides until it died. Ashley realized that she'd fallen into its trap.

"Jack!" She yelled, her blood thick and sticky around her as it pooled on to the slick rocks. "Jack!" She didn't get the chance to say anything more before the hound flipped her over and closed its jaw around her abdomen. Her scream was met with the sound of a gun firing and the yelp of a dog. It bellowed in rage. More shots.

"God help us," Ashley muttered, her eyes drooping. The last thing she remembered seeing was the beast rising up on its hind legs and arrows flying through its wings.

"Call an ambulance," Jack directed. He cradled Ashley's head in his lap to keep it elevated. Her injuries were pretty gruesome, if not fatal, and she was losing too much blood. She should have listened to him! She was smart enough to know about winged hounds; they were tricksters. He sighed, it didn't matter now. The mother and its baby were dead and being burned for good measure. Hopefully there weren't any more lurking in these parts. If there were, he'd give 'em a run for their money. Off in the distance Jack heard rather than saw the sirens that indicated the paramedics were near. Stroking Ashley's hair, he noticed how pale she was becoming and wondered what the outcome would be. He probably wouldn't like it and it probably wouldn't be fair, but this was the life they chose. This was the life of a hunter.