

Are you afraid of the dark?  
You should be...



# Lycanthropes

Edited by Jennifer Andersen



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# The Bear

by Michael E. Shea

# The Bear

## Preface

The air exploded in a flash of bone and steel and blood. The clash of metal rang through the forest. An arrow pierced through the darkness, its barbed head tearing through flesh and muscle. A roar echoed off of the mountains far to the west. A cry broke through soon after. Then silence.

Char stood over a pile of black fur and red blood. He held a curved sword, jagged half way down the wide blade and hilted in bone. He held a large thick bow in the other. Lorfel and Ranur stood behind him, panting. Lorfel, a short man of twenty-six held a large axe in both hands and still prepared to swing it hard. Ranur, the largest of the three held a pike in one hand, its tip hanging low towards the ground. He buried his other hand in his gray tunic.

"Did it get either of you?" Char's voice rasped low in the silence of the night.

"No" Lorfel said. He planted his axe head on the ground with a thud and leaned on the tall handle. There was a pause. Char turned towards Ranur.

"Are you hurt?"

"Mm...My hand." Ranur took his hand out of his tunic. Moonlight gleamed red off of the ragged wound. Char thought he saw a glimmer of bone.

"Did he claw you or bite you?" Char's voice held an urgency that set both Lorfel and Ranur on edge.

Ranur paused and then spoke low. "He bit me."

Char picked Lorfel and Ranur as his hunting partners for their speed and sharpness in battle. They had hunted beasts of the deep woods all of their lives. They hunted the beasts that hunted men. They all knew the risks of battling such creatures. The old man dropped his curved sword, drew his bow, and fired. The arrow hammered into Ranur's chest, burying itself in his heart. Lorfel saw the gleaming arrowhead sticking almost a foot out of his companion's back. Ranur fell face first to the ground.

Char's eyes locked onto Lorfel. The old man expected the shock in Lorfel's eyes at the death of their friend. Yet Char saw something else in the man's eyes; something he did not recognize. Char narrowed his eyes. Lorfel kept his gaze on the old man, not looking down or away. Char

lowered his bow and turned toward the massive black-furred body on the ground and then realized what he had missed. Lorfel's leg was bleeding.

The delay was the chance Lorfel needed. Lorfel hurled the axe underhand from its rested position. It soared towards Char's head. The old man, seeing the movement in the corner of his eyes, tilted back as the massive blade of the axe cut through the air. The blade missed him by four inches but the handle hit him solid in the side of the head. Blackness closed in as he reached for another arrow. Lorfel was gone.

Lorfel ran south throughout the night and half way into the next day. Char had hunted these beasts for forty years and Lorfel had no doubt that the old man would find him if he didn't move fast. The wound in his leg throbbed but he ran anyway. At the midday sun Lorfel stopped. He itched all over. Lorfel pulled back the hasty bandage he had wrapped around his leg earlier and saw the severity of the wound. Lorfel had pulled his leg up just as the beast's jaw clamped down. One tooth dragged a line across his left calf. Now the wound was black. Dark veins spidered across his lower leg. The blood around the wound felt thick and sticky like syrup. Dark hair sprouted on his arms, chest, and legs in alarming rates. His muscles ached horribly. Five hours later in the last conscious thought Lorfel ever had, he wished Char had fired that arrow into him. Two weeks later, his muscles torn and rebuilt, his bones crushed and reformed, Lorfel wished for nothing but blood.

## Chapter One

**D**ark clouds covered the moonlit sky over the town of Relis. The steady fall of rain turned the ground into a sea of mud. Crashes of thunder echoed over the treetops.

Jonse ran. A tree splintered and exploded behind him. Vibrations sent puddles of water into spasms. The crack of thunder shot new bolts of electricity through Jonse's nerves. He expected a huge claw to slash down on his shoulder any second. Jonse's legs pumped, narrowly avoiding the roots and stones that promised to send him to his death. His lungs were about to explode. He wished he had never come out here.

Each thudding of the beast's huge paws sounded closer and closer. Jonse didn't dare turn and look behind him. He had seen enough when he stumbled upon it as he tracked through the forest. He had seen just enough of the creature to know it was not any normal beast of these woods. He had seen enough to know it was nothing he ever wanted to see again.

Two hours ago Jonse had been safe in his warm, dry home. Safe, but

not happy. He had argued with his father over his plans for the next few days. For months now, Jonse had planned a trip to Whalesong with his friends. They threw angry words at each other for nearly an hour. In the end, Jonse slammed out of his home, his blood boiling. He needed to cool off and the woods outside of Ralis was just the place for that.

The rain didn't stop Jonse as he headed east into the woods. He dreamed of leaving the stables, leaving his family, and heading off on an adventure. He could go to the King's city and see the sites few of his village ever saw. When his mind returned to the present, he didn't recognize his surroundings. The rain fell harder. A knot tightened in Jonse's stomach. A cold sweat broke out on his brow. He climbed over a fallen tree and pushed through a large brush.

Then he saw it.

Gleaming red eyes almost ten feet off of the ground burned into him. A mouth opened showing huge white teeth dripping with streams of saliva that bent in the wind. A flash of lightning contrasted the beast against the night sky. It was huge. Jonse felt a deep rumble as the creature growled. He ran.

Air burst in and out of his mouth in furious gasps. His body wanted to collapse. He ran almost a mile before it hit him.

Jonse heard the sound of tearing cloth and felt himself pushed forward. He fell to his face in the mud but was back up in a second. His back was cold. His legs were numb. His left arm wouldn't move. Adrenaline and shock kept him from realizing that the beast had torn off almost all of the skin and half the muscle in his back. He ran twenty more yards before falling again. Mud filled the massive wound in his back. He was very cold. Jonse closed his eyes like a child, imagining that what he could not see could not hurt him. For a moment it seemed to work. He opened his eyes in time to see a flash of long white claws in an explosion of lightning. He saw nothing more.

## Chapter Two

**L**onghorn stood with his hands tucked into his loose leather belt. He looked through his open window and over the small town of Relis. Forty families, mostly farmers and tradesmen, lived in the village. A small dirt road cut across the town, separating the tavern, church, and stables from the blacksmith, general goods, and the sheriff's office. A series of farms surrounded the town in three layers of a circle, each with a small home and often a larger barn. Relis had supported the

townsfolk for six generations and most, if not all, of the villagers loved the town.

Longhorn's office held only a large oak desk, chair, and a tall locked cabinet. Longhorn found it comfortable enough. A door in the back of the office led to a larger room with a bed, oven, three chairs and a table.

The sheriff sat in his large chair, tipped back on its rear legs, and put his feet up on his desk. He stretched his arms behind his back and clasped his hands behind his head. He took in a large breath, let it out slowly, and closed his eyes.

The wooden door burst open with a crash that almost sent Longhorn head first over the back of his tilting chair. It was Carson, the town's unofficial messenger. The boy was fifteen years old and took it as his personal mission to inform everyone in the town of every piece of gossip he knew. For most of the town folk, Carson was a great annoyance, resembling a mosquito buzzing close but never landing on a sleeping man's ear. Longhorn considered the boy a necessity for one reason: no one else seemed to want to talk to the new sheriff.

"The Fickle son boy is dead!"

Longhorn dragged his feet off of his desk and set his chair back onto all four legs before doing anything else. He believed in taking everything one step at a time. In this circumstance, not falling over backwards and cracking his skull open was more important than understanding Carson's shriek. All four posts firmly planted on the floor and his own boots flat on their soles, Longhorn took a moment to reorient himself with the boy's words.

"Who's dead?"

"The horseman, Fickle son. His boy, Jonse, is dead!" Carson still hadn't lowered his voice and Longhorn patted his hand down in the air and clenched his eyes shut. The boy understood and his next words were far more soothing to Longhorn's ears even if what he said was not.

"They found Jonse out in the woods. He ran off last night and they didn't find him until this morning. He's all cut up, Sheriff. They said his head was stuffed way down into his chest and his guts were all strung out in the trees!"

Longhorn felt a small burst of pride when the boy called him Sheriff, but the severity of the situation pushed it aside. Few others in the town, when they bothered to acknowledge him at all, called him Sheriff. Most didn't speak to him at all. They preferred his predecessor.

Longhorn moved here a year earlier when he heard the small village needed a new sheriff. The previous sheriff, a massive man known as Bron Greentree, had been a hero to the town. He apparently routed a gang of

brigands who used the town for smuggling and slave trading. Greentree had been sheriff for almost fifty years. Even if he had spent most of those fifty years drinking free ale at the town's only tavern and most likely skimming off of the taxes he collected for the King, Greentree was the town's hero.

One day Greentree fell over dead in his office. There was never any explanation but his massive size came with a massive appetite and many felt, though few ever spoke this out loud, that his heart simply could not keep up with his stomach. The town's hero had died and the town sent a message to the King's city with the news. Longhorn had been the response.

For twenty years Longhorn had served in the King's army. He fought in two wars and was promoted once in each war. He once led two hundred men against an equal number of southern barbarians and lost only six men. The Voth barbarians lost sixty. He served as commander of the watch for ten years. On his forty-fifth birthday, Longhorn decided it was time to retire. When the message came that Relis needed a new sheriff, he jumped at the chance. Longhorn figured that keeping peace in a town of forty families was easier than leading an army against the hordes of the south.

Longhorn was right. Keeping the peace in Relis was easy. Surviving the sheer boredom was not. Every one of the few conversations Longhorn had with one of the townsfolk included mention of the previous sheriff. Everyone who entered his office gave him a critical look before a single word passed. Every whisper he overheard as he walked down the town's single dirt road spoke Greentree just loud enough for him to hear. All Longhorn could hope was that they could not mourn the hero of Relis forever. There were more important things than vanity, however. Longhorn had a job to do.

"Where is the body?" Longhorn fixed his brown eyes on Carson. Carson stepped back, seeing a fire there few in the town had ever seen.

"Out north. On the trail to Ralthorp's farm about half a mile and then into the woods near the river." Longhorn strapped on his wide leather belt hanging the long sword he carried low on his left hip. He pulled his blue cloak off of the wall peg and wrapped it around his shoulders. Longhorn put his hand on the boy's shoulders.

"Show me."



# Unexpected Changes

by J. M. Messana

# Unexpected Changes

## Part One

She felt the darkness slip around her. She had been afraid of the dark for as long as she could remember. Ever since she was a little girl, trapped in her mother's closet while horrible things were being done in the room. It was perfectly acceptable for the girl to fear the dark. Her shrink said so. But then the quack had also wanted to put her in a sensory deprivation tank to rid her of said fear.

She would keep her fear of the dark, thank you very much.

She quickened her pace, her heels clicking sharply against the asphalt. Her head shot up as the noise reached her ears. And screamed as it barreled straight at her.



Kylie Trussie bolted upright, the sheets tangling around her legs. A pale light streaked across the cream colored walls. Sweat slicked skin stuck to the cotton sheets and the little camisole top she'd worn to bed. She shivered as the wind rustled the curtains. Kylie took a deep breath as she blinked her eyes into focus. She'd had this nightmare for the last three nights. And every night, it got closer.

If she was the type of girl to believe in things like that, she would take it as a personal warning against herself. But she wasn't the superstitious type, so she tried to shrug it off.

Kylie turned to face the red digital glow of her blue and silver alarm clock. She groaned as she focused her eyes. It was quarter after three. She had to be up by seven to make it to class on time.

Pushing back the covers of her bed, she slid off the twin mattress, her feet hitting the cold tile of the floor. She shivered a bit, her hand raking through her dark hair as she made her way to the door. Popping her head out, she checked to see if Tessa's party had broken up yet.

It must have, because only the faint sound of rock music videos came from her suitemate's room. She tiptoed across the carpet and slipped into the bathroom.

She rinsed her face off, making a note to take a shower in the morning. Tessa would be asleep still, anyway. Kylie gave a small chuckle at her friend.

Tessa Fontaine had been Kylie's suitemate back in their freshman year at Overnly College. Tessa had been living with her best friend Hannah Meade, from high school, and Kylie had been living with a stranger. Hannah had gotten pregnant and married her boyfriend, right before finals. Zoë Stevens, Kylie's roommate, had transferred to a bigger college after the winter semester.

So, Tessa and Kylie decided it must have been fate, and had remained suitemates since then. That was nearly four year ago. Or, would be, when they returned in the fall for their last year of college. Both had opted to live in singles. They liked each other too much to wreck the friendship by sharing a room together. She dried her face and turned off the light, sneaking back into her room.

It was when she woke up from these terrifying nightmares that she was truly happy that she had a single. Tessa had found her after the first one, and had thought something had happened to her. She shook the memory away, trying to hide the fear that raced through her. It was crazy of her to be so frightened by this. She checked the alarm clock, before snuggling back under her comforter, her stuffed monkey under her arm as she gazed up at the stars through her window.



It was quarter to seven when she opened her eyes grudgingly. A steady blare of rock music assaulted her ears as she blearily gazed at the alarm clock. Kylie glared out the window and peered across the still dark space between the buildings. There was only one window that was lit. She glared at the young man who was... eating Chinese food? At seven in the morning? She slammed her window shut and angrily yanked her door open. Taking a step out into the foyer, she collided heavily into Tessa.

"Hiya, kiddo," she said brightly, before she caught the deadly look on Kylie's normally serene face. "Whoa, what's wrong?"

"Some idiot's blaring his radio."

"Really? I didn't hear anything."

"Across the way. The guy eating cold Chinese." Kylie jabbed her finger toward the window.

Tessa scurried to peer out the window, letting herself into Kylie's room. She gave one of her infectious little laughs as she turned back to Kylie.

"It's Jon, he's always up this early." Tessa shrugged.

"Is he always so rude?" Kylie grumbled.

Tessa gave her a look. "Kylie, I can barely hear it. He must have just turned it down. You know how when you turn it off at night, you always have the radio too loud for when you wake up and turn it back on. That