

## *Dark Menagerie* Anthology from Storm Moon Press

As soon as he walked into the bar, I knew what he was. Even over the sour smells of stale alcohol, cigarette smoke, assorted body odors and the heavy reek of greasy food, I could smell him. The freshness of the wind, the sweet astringency of evergreen, a hint of warm fur, all of it threaded together with the neck-ruffling musk of a wild thing. Familiar, even though I had never seen him before in my life. The burger fell from my nerveless hands, bouncing and falling apart on my plate.

Deep inside me, in the place I let no one ever see, the wolf pricked up its ears and growled.

The man's face swung toward me, his eyes clashing with mine.

The shock of it reverberated through me, a blow that made every hair on the back of my neck lift in primal warning. Even across the dimly lit room, I could see the flash of fire that danced across the surface of his eyes. A flash I knew mirrored the one captured in my own gaze.

Whoever he was, he was like me and since the only werewolf I had ever encountered was the monster that had tried to kill me, that wasn't good.

The corner of his mouth lifted as his head rose in a nod of greeting. My stomach swooped, the bitterness of bile coating the back of my mouth. The burger I had been enjoying threatened to come back up, and I swallowed heavily to keep it down, grimacing at the ruined taste. My eyes never left him.

I wasn't the only one watching him. The entire bar had gone quiet as curious eyes scrutinized him, some covertly, some blatantly. I didn't have to look at them to know they were thinking the exact same thing I was: this man didn't belong here. On the surface at least. Dressed in a dark, sharply tailored suit, his inky black hair short and perfectly styled, he looked as if he'd just stepped out of some high-powered corporate office. He was as out of place in this setting as a fish in the middle of the desert, and I knew it wasn't coincidence that he just happened to walk into the same bar where I was.

"Kade? What's up? Is there something wrong with your burger?"

My eyes flicked up, startled. Jenna had materialized right next to me. I hadn't even sensed she was near. I didn't like that. It had been a long time since anybody had been able to sneak up on me, nearly three years.

"Yeah, Jenna. I'm good. Burger's good." My gaze flicked back to the door, but the man was gone. I scanned the bar, but couldn't see him. Everyone else had gone back to what they doing. He was still here though, I knew it. Dammit.

Jenna's forehead creased as she looked down at me. She was standing too close. The smell of her liberally applied perfume burned my nostrils. Displeasure coiled in my stomach, temporarily

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overshadowing everything else. She knew I didn't like her to wear too much scent, even if she didn't know why.

"You sure honey? Something sure seems wrong."

I shrugged off the hand she laid on my shoulder. Hurt flared in her dark brown eyes, but I didn't care. "I said I was good." She paled at the growl that roughened my voice, but I couldn't soften my tone. I just wanted her to leave.

Affront pulled the lush curve of her lips to painful thinness. "You're an ass, Kade Walker," she hissed. "You can forget our date tonight." Turning smartly on her heel, she stomped away. Her feet drove into the floor so hard, I was surprised she didn't strike sparks with her heels.

Date. I snorted. Funny thing for her to call being fucked hard against the outside wall at the back of the bar, on her break.

"Trouble with the ladies?"

My head whipped round. "How the hell did you do that?"

Ignoring my glare, the man, the werewolf, slid smoothly into the seat next to me. Not a whiff of his scent had warned me of his approach, and even as he sat right next to me, I could barely smell him.

He shrugged, a lazy movement at odds with the careful watchfulness of his brown eyes. "A trick," he told me calmly. "Would you like me to show you how?" His voice was smooth and dark, like molasses. No trace of an animalistic rumble. Not like my voice. His composure was irritating as was his scent, which slowly grew in strength until it mingled with my own. It took more effort than I wanted to admit to not breathe it in. Savor it.

"I don't want anything from you except for you to get the hell away from me." My words were barely distinguishable from a snarl, but I knew he'd get the gist.

-- from "Dominant" by Katya Harris

It's what drives us. The four of us.

The inner need compels us despite our ever-present want for normalcy. We can never have what others have.

"Please!" His screams echo. Our own piercing cries vibrate along the earth. Thundering hooves beat the ground, playing a symphony of death.

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Whoever he is, pleads again. We don't care, we can't. It's not in our nature to care. The four of us laugh. Our own laughter echoes within.

*Look at the little human run.*

*He's ours!*

*The marrow is ours.*

*Run, human.*

We laugh again despite the dulling chase. The four of us come to a mutual agreement: end it now. We speed up, easily enough to catch a human. Hunting humans has lost its thrill.

The four of us tune together like a well-orchestrated piece. We know what to do.

As to who is who and who does what, it's all very unclear. We are so well attuned it seems as if we are one. We've been together so long our thoughts have intertwined. Our own individual identities have vanished. We all think and feel as one.

"No! I—" His last words die in a gurgle of blood, and his windpipe collapses under the pressure of our jaw. A bone snapping crunch and another final cry ends this chaos only to bring anew.

The four of us fight for supremacy; we fight for the best meat. It's truly the only time we seem to be individuals. But even in this frenzied state the old habit of *our* and *we* cannot be broken.

Our bodies slam against one another; we bite, kick and scream for dominance. The tenderest and most valued part of our quarry can only go to one of us. The heart. It's the whole reason we even orchestrate this little sham of a hunt. Without the heart of a human we will die. As individuals we must consume one every other moon. If one of us, as individuals, need it more than the another is inconsequential. Whomever reaches the heart first is the victor.

Our hooves smash the human's fragile bones. A kicking hoof rips open the dead thing's chest, exposing what we all desire the most. Our fighting intensifies, if possible, escalating to a height we haven't achieved in well over two centuries. Violence such as this was common place of ages ago.

A memory flashes within us. One of our old master:

"Look what I have for you today, my pretties."

A high pitched scream leaves Xanthos. We hate when Master calls us pretties. It's insulting. Although, what Master brings will serve as an apology.

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"King Diomedes, please?"

We laugh, although it sounds strange. Master only smirks, and we know exactly what his smirk means. Our excitement builds to near breaking point. We feed off the other's energy, pulling on our halters and ropes as hard as we can. The halters are woven with bronze and tethered to a bronze manger to keep us grounded.

We default to the one thing we can: pawing the ground. We've dug so often gouges litter the hard rock beneath. Our next meal comes ever closer, guided by Master's firm grip on his arm. A blindfold keeps this meal calm until the very end. It's a game Master seems to enjoy, though it does nothing for us.

Another scream rips free of Xanthos.

Master laughs, a hard cruel sound. It's the same laugh every time he feeds us. It's pleasant enough, but we would eat him too if given half the chance.

Anger breaks us free of the memory. Xanthos finally takes the heart. We all know the moment it's over, we can feel it. The source of our agitation devoured, we settle well enough. Only the typical flattened ears and nips show our individual territorial threats. Like this, one would think us normal horses simply feeding. However, our chosen diet of humans would clue any onlookers to our abnormality. When truly agitated we appear differently. Xanthos flinches and the rest of the memory leaks free:

Master turns to our meal. This poor human shakes so bad his teeth chatter. "Take it off." Master orders.

We scream and thrash to the best of Master's liking. We know it's what he likes, and if we behave as Master wishes he may give us another meal very soon.

The meal shakes as the blindfold is removed, but his refusal to look at us angers Master. A firm order and shove persuades the meal to finally scrape together enough courage for a look.

He stands horrified.

Our bodies, bigger than any horse, stand tall. Our hooves, as big as some humans heads, shine with an unnatural ore. Armor-like plates line the contours of our bodies, and protrusions harder than bone have a razor sharp edge. Horns spear from just above our eyes to curve backward. They've been compared to that of a demon on many an occasion. Once soft and shiny coats are now hard as granite. We appear as highly polished stone. We all have different colored eyes that share one common trait: iridescence. The trait mimics a ghost floating across our vision. Our manes stand short, chunks of what once was hair now come to form sharp points.

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Our once beautiful tails, now fused together, almost have a consciousness of their own. The ends exhibit a spear-like tool. A tool used for slicing our prey.

We were once beautiful creatures, but Master's diet of human flesh has turned us into monsters.

"Enjoy, my pretties." Master shoves our meal forward. This pathetic creature is denied one final scream as Deinos the Terrible snatches the boys skull in his powerful jaws: crushing. The sounds are sickening to some, but to us it is a sweet melody.

-- from "The Four of Us" by Lor Rose

Brother Mustang moved with the herd, his black mane falling across his face and covering his green eyes. The humans had remarked on how unusual his eyes were, but most had called it a trick of light or claimed he might have something wrong with his sight. Human words meant little to Brother Mustang, but Nohatu had listened well.

The pungent scent of fear mixed with the anxiety of the horses around him. He nickered softly, trying to calm the mustangs. But Brother got nowhere with them. Being rounded up and taken away from all they knew had pushed them too far from who they were. Nohatu attempted to soothe him, but Brother was beyond listening to him. Like the other mustangs in the pen, Brother bolted when the men came close, pushing more frightened horses into the pens across from theirs. But then Brother Mustang trotted forward, his long mane flowing in the light breeze as he moved toward the mares. The horses behind him, too scared to move toward the humans, continued to tremble at the back of the pen as he ran along the gate and drew the attention of the mares.

The humans laughed. "Look at him showing off for the girls," one called.

"Damn fine animal," another said, moving closer.

Brother Mustang ignored them, though Nohatu listened closely as Brother spun on his back legs and trotted along the short length of the pen again. He wasn't flirting, and even if Brother was capable of doing such a human thing, he wouldn't be right now. Not in a situation like this with them all trapped and the heavy feeling of helplessness thick in the air. No, his methods were far more practical. The mares across from them, barely a quick trot away if the tall fence hadn't been blocking them in, were frightened, and Brother Mustang couldn't stand for mares and young fillies to be in such a state.

When they'd all lifted their heads to watch him, Brother slowed, came to a stop before them, and knickered. His soothing noises floated to them on the morning breeze, and as Nohatu watched through the mustang's eyes, the mares began to calm. Their heads drooped and their

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shoulders lost some of their stiffness. Brother Mustang continued his quiet calls, easing the mares into calmness. Though Nohatu could feel the mustang's own anxiety as it coursed through his veins, he admired the beast for his ability to not let that emotion show to the mares.

“Hey man, get that one out of there. Didn't any of you idiots notice that he isn't a gelding?”

When the feel of rough rope touched Brother Mustang's cheek, he was predictably startled; Brother Mustang jumped back on his rear legs, pulling away from the humans who had quickly come up around him.

Though Nohatu attempted to calm him, the beast refused to listen. He saw men around him, closing in on his space and pressing in on him from all sides. One grabbed for his mane, but Brother Mustang pulled away. The man fell into the dirt with a curse. The gate opened, and Nohatu looked beyond it, wishing for the open fields he saw past the cold metal surrounding them but focusing on the space between the pens and the men shouting at them.

He urged the beast to look, but he saw nothing but the men closest to him. The immediate threat. It was never that simple with Brother Mustang. Nohatu urged him forward, grasping at his mind and begging for his trust. When Brother refused to give it to him, stubbornly believing he knew best, Nohatu took control anyway and though the pain of their splintering minds tore at his thoughts, he managed to get the big horse to move away from the men, to the open space between the pens to where he was herded into a pen further down.

Nohatu released him, easing his hold on Brother Mustang's mind as he came back to consciousness. Instant resentment pushed between them, skirting along their bond and making Nohatu sorry for what he'd done to the beast. But he knew it was the right thing to do as Brother Mustang settled into the pen and walked along the edge, checking for weak spots in the metal. He was confident there had to be a way out of the maze of humans and their traps. Nohatu wasn't nearly as sure.

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Sweaty and tired, Justin pulled into the dirt parking lot, dust flying up around his big tires as he turned the truck into a space facing the high metal pens. He tipped his wide brimmed hat up with his thumb and leaned forward over the steering wheel, resting his chin on top of his knuckles. He breathed deeply, letting the classic country on the radio play through him as he looked out over the packed corrals. Horses in every shape, size and color would be on display today, all of them ready to be sold and go home with people far too unfamiliar with their kind to be trusted with them. His opinion on the subject had to be pushed aside, though. He had a job to do, one he was paid fairly well for, and he didn't have time to contemplate the merits of the general public bringing home wild mustangs.

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A bureau officer came up to his window and tapped loudly on the glass. Eying him wearily, Justin turned off the old truck and opened his door, forcing the man to take a step back. "Paperwork?" He held out his hand expectantly.

Justin nodded. "Sure. Right here." He'd been to these round up sales six times in the past year, and he knew the routine. He handed over the paper with his adopter ID on it and turned back to his steering wheel, waiting as the officer checked out his information.

"All the way from Byers, huh?" he asked, typing the information into his phone.

"Yeah. Long drive," Justin replied, sounding just as tired as he felt. Thankfully traffic had been light for the drive. It had made the hours go by a lot faster. Still, he was anxious to get out of the cab and walk around the pens.

-- from "Horsefeathers" by Caitlin Ricci

The slender dolphin's fin sliced through the surface of the unnaturally calm water. The moon shone off his hide, dancing over the white spots on his back as he leaped into the air, stealing a breath. He had no time to take a graceful jump; he had no time at all to be joyful. He was being pursued. Two bottlenose dolphins were hard on his tail.

Nothing he could do threw them off. Turn, dart, twist, as he fled one, then the other was right there, anticipating his every move. His swimming was labored, and it had been a long pursuit. But the dolphin had one thing in his favor.

He wasn't just a dolphin. He was something more.

He was a shapeshifter.

Nathan had been minding his own business, not bothering anyone, not in anyone's territory. It had been so long, his being Dolphin. Too long. His latest partner, the one with the accountant job with its business suits in a land of Bermuda shorts, and the smile that said everything was okay, he was a bit skeptical in thought, a bit cynical in action. A bit cutting with his remarks. A bit quick with his fists. It was easier not to shapeshift than to explain to him that his unassuming, all but a twink boyfriend could blend his shape into that of a delicate spotted dolphin.

It was easier to be normal, to be human.

It was easier to say nothing. It was easier to just sneak out on some nights, to go down to the micro beach of Key West and blend into the water there, to blend into Dolphin. To give in to the call of the ocean, just for a few minutes, never long enough for Paul to start wondering, never long enough for Paul to ask a thing.

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Never longer than it took to walk the dog.

But now?

Nathan knew he'd gone too far. He had fallen into his old patterns, had strayed into their territory. And he knew what happened when he did this.

He couldn't wait.

Already, Nathan was feeling a heat in his groin, an urging that Paul, with his safe life, his safe job, couldn't fulfill. He was close, so close. Flipping his flukes and coming to the surface for a breath, he could see the lights of the houses close to the beach. He could do it, he could get away, get back to Paul without a word, without the feelings of guilt. He was so close.

The bottlenose dolphin smacked him on the side, the much larger body throwing him off his rhythm. Nathan tried to resist, but the bottlenose's partner took that moment to slam into him from underneath. He leaped into the sky, looking for any safety from the two thugs. How could he be so close and yet still be caught? His heart began pounding faster, and it wasn't from panic or from his exertions.

The larger, huskier of the dolphins—the leader—swam under him, pushing him from below. The other one punched with his beak into Nathan's side, into his lungs. And that's when it happened: the dominate one swung under him, belly up. Nathan only had the briefest warning before something tried to push its way into his genital slit. He squealed and dove to his right.

There was nothing for it—Nathan drew into his mind, finding his human Self. Finding and forcing it to come back into consciousness. To come back into his body. The shoreline was so close all he had to do was swing his legs down, feeling the soles of his feet brush the sand there.

He was safely back in his human form. The dog was barking from where he had left her tied up, no doubt thrilled—as dogs were—at seeing her owner in the water. He almost shouted out to Maggie that he was okay when he felt a strong hand grab him by the hair.

“You don't get away that easily.”

Forced to his knees, waist deep in the water, Nathan looked up at the man who held him down. “Fuck you.”

He couldn't get away?the man was much stronger than him?but he didn't have to make it easy for them. And he knew it was them, the two of them.

He wasn't the only dolphin shifter on the island.

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The leader grabbed him by the arm and, between them, he was dragged ashore. They didn't take Nathan far before throwing him unceremoniously onto the sand. All three men were naked. If he could have wished for movie-style shifting with clothes intact?like werewolves?in that moment, Nathan would have. But that wasn't how real life worked. It never was.

And he was aroused. As were they. This was part of the game, part of the deception. It always was. As was his anger.

Trying to maintain as much dignity as he could when faced with two much bigger men than himself, he glared up at them. "What do you want?"

The taller man stepped up to him, a smirk on his face as he stared down at Nathan. "Come now, that should be obvious, shouldn't it?" He waved his hand down to his crotch.

The man's erection was only inches from Nathan's face. There was a stirring in his own belly at the sight, and at the way the other, shorter man jerked at his own dick, making it just as hard as his lover's. Nathan licked his lips.

He shouldn't have been feeling this; he should have been getting ready to fight. He should have been preparing himself to defend what was Paul's. Anything but this... this longing, this want for what they were about to do.

Furious with himself?with the situation?Nathan lashed out. The leader jumped back when he almost hit his erection. The man's partner slapped Nathan across the face.

-- from "Breathe" by Arielle Pierce