

The Most Delicate of Beasts

Before I say anything else, I will say this- I pay my debts. Some take longer than others to repay, but I pay. Almost always.

As for Silas, he had no business being out there that night this all started. But he was. And because of that, this is what happened...

He was still out in the barn when I pulled into his yard. It was quite late by the time I arrived, and perhaps on a subconscious level that was by my design. On a rare moment, I had the money I owed him- four hundred dollars in fifties, twenties, and tens, but mostly twenties, rolled up in a neat little wad with an elastic band. So, to his place I went, driving in the rain until the streetlights ran out, then even further until the pavement was no more. The water accumulation, made worse by the surrounding mountains, had turned the dirt roads into mud slides and the mud now splattered all over my car as I drove. After many dark trees I turned up his driveway. Soon, the fields at his farmstead were giving way to the tall rows of corn stocks that surrounded his house.

I had expected his house to be dark and me simply be resigned to pull away. I knew I could always pay him at a later date when I had the money again, but forever one to surprise, Silas was still up. By the time I was out of the car, he already had the side door of the barn open, holding it for me.

The rain came at me sideways as I ran through the darkness. My eyes strayed over to the corn field and I wondered how many eyes could be looking at me from there without me ever knowing. These foothills we lived in were a stopping point for many a

wild animal that came down from the mountains. Mountains which remained unmapped. Mountains that were dark and grey and covered in mist.

A puddle, deep and long as it was sudden, reminded me I was a fool for even being out. But, a debt is a debt, and I wanted to return his- while I still had it.

"I have your money," I said as I pulled my jacket down from over my head. Behind me, the rain continued with its splatter of large drops on the ground outside. Silas closed the door. The rain was heavy enough it made a faint but steady patter on the roof.

Normally not to be one at a loss for words, Silas was silent. He looked at me, on the edge of saying something.

"I just got in ahead of you. I need you to see something," he told me, ignoring my mention of the money. "I would have ended up calling you anyways. I thought it was a bear all along, killing them deer," he said. "We all did. But this ain't no bear."

That year, a surprising number of deer in the foothills of Cedar Creek county were being found disemboweled. Suspicions fell heavily on a rogue bear. Between Silas's lever action rifle and the suspected bear, the venison numbers of Cedar Creek were taking a nosedive that year. That rogue bear alone was reason enough for people like me to avoid the woods altogether.

Silas turned and walked towards the second section of the barn, the one that wasn't heated or insulated. There was a padlock on the normally open door.

"Expecting unwanted company?" I asked.

He looked at me with silence then unlocked the padlock and led the way into the other section of the barn. This section was unfinished, without the insulation and drywall. It was here he skinned and gutted his deer, bear and any other animal he was able to get his sights on. Once he even had a cougar, a fact which very few people knew about.

In this section, the rain was much louder on the roof. Its sound was no longer heard as a patter so much as sharp pings.

One single light had been left on inside this section, highlighting just its own immediate area away from the encroaching darkness. From a distance I could see what looked like a horse, partly hung with Silas's old block and tackle from the overhead beam. Even from a distance with the limited lighting I could see the brilliance of the horse's white hair with intermittent black spots. Such a glow came from it I wondered if the whiteness may perhaps glow in the dark if the light were shut off.

Spread around the floorboards was Silas's customary loose straw to make any cleanup easier. Much of the horse and the floor around it were covered in mud. The block and tackle, from its ten-foot beam, was normally reserved for Silas's smaller game conquests. I wasn't sure of its weight capacity, but height wise the set up was sorely under sized for the carcass it now tried to lift.

The horse's hind legs were drawn up as far as they could go against the rafter. However, the animal was so large its front quarter didn't clear the floor and its front legs and neck lay horizontal, pointed away from me.

Before stepping any further, I turned to Silas. "What have you done?"

Silas was finishing padlocking the door again, this time on our side. He then walked passed me. "I wouldn't have shot it, but it came at me. I didn't have a choice. It was getting pretty dark and I was walking out of the woods when I heard the shrieks. It was attacking a deer. Man, I've never heard shrieks like that. The deer was being gutted while it was still alive. At first I thought it was just a horse headbutting it. And even when it charged me I still thought it was just a horse. I didn't have a choice. I had to take the shot. It took two bullets to slow it down. Two more to stop it. I had to shoot it."

I could smell alcohol on Silas's breath. I followed him closer to the animal.

"Holy Mary, Silas. You shot a horse."

"I-I don't think so," Silas answered, not taking his eyes off the carcass.

I walked around it. Much of what I had thought was mud from the other side of the bay was actually blood. Its color became more apparent as I drew nearer to the light.

I was about to tell Silas he had once again gone too far when I saw it.

On the animal's forehead, centered and just above the animal's eyes (one of which had been shot out, leaving a now empty and very dark void), was a spiralled horn. This horn was two feet long and aside from its spiral looked like it could be made of ivory such as an elephant or rhinoceros would have. Like the rest of this animal, much of the horn was colored a dark red with congealed blood. Deer hair and small tatters of flesh hung off it.

Up close, the beast smelled much worse than what I remembered my experience with dead things to be.

I stopped short of touching it. "Is that real?" I asked pointing at the horn with my foot.

Silas gave the horn a hard kick. The beast's head and neck vibrated then went limp again. "You tell me. Ever think these things were real? What am I supposed to do? I can't report it. It's not even season for anything. They'd throw me in the clink and swallow the key. But I could maybe say it attacked me. Here."

"They'd ask too many questions and you'd just jumble it up. This can't be reported or told, Silas. Not to anyone."

"It's gotta be worth something," Silas wondered out loud. "At least the head. Or even the horn by itself."

I looked at him. "Listen to me. Shake you head. Pull your truck in, we'll load it back on, and dump it far way from here and hope its never found. And if it is, it won't be linked to you. Don't be stupid. At the very least, this has to be really bad karma or something."

Among the rain pings, small light footsteps ran across the top of the roof and I looked at Silas.

"Must be a racoon," he said. "They've been busy up there tonight."

Silas refused to discard the animal and decided to sit on the situation for the time being.

I left his place shortly after that, with more errands to run. Before and as I returned home I thought at length about the horned beast. I told no one. Nobody would have

believed me anyways. With all of the excitement of the- whatever it was, both Silas and myself had forgotten about the bundle of money I owed him. It remained in my pocket.

I called Silas the next evening and didn't get an answer. The evening after that I finally reached him and he filled me in on the troubles he had had.

The day itself after my visit was uneventful, but later that night he was outside having a cigarette and heard a short whistling from around the corner of the house. Every time he would go around a corner he would seem to just miss the cause of it and it would be there again just ahead of him. This went on for a few minutes then the whistling was gone. Silas was sure it was some of the community kids, perhaps that blasted Boyd Street scooter gang, and thought of shooting one, then decided the twenty years in prison wasn't worth it.

The next day he had woken up to find his four truck tires slashed, leaving him with no way into town. That next night, Silas was outside having another cigarette when the whistling started again.

This time he decided to let his dog Moses out loose. Normally this isn't an option as skunks or porcupines can pose an issue, but this was an extraordinary situation. Once outside, Moses had his nose in the air picking up a scent. After hearing the whistling himself and seeming to have Silas's assent, he chased whatever it was while Silas ran around the other direction with his flashlight off for stealth purposes.

The plan worked, for as he rounded the first corner Silas was narrowly missed by a small black blur running ahead of the dog. It only looked two feet tall and was not much more than a darkened shadow. It was humanoid in shape and gave a surprised yelp when

sidestepping Silas. By the time Silas thought to turn his flashlight on he caught only a fleeting image of a back disappearing into the corn field. At that point Moses had also rounded the corner and ran into Silas head on. Silas wouldn't let the chase continue into the darkened cornfield, (even he was spooked out by it) and that was the end of the whistling for that night.

Silas's problems continued the next day.

He had taken every tire off his truck then caught a ride into town for repairs. Not thinking, he had left Moses in the house. When Silas returned home later that afternoon he could hear his smoke alarms going off and his house was filled with smoke. Somebody had gone on the roof and blocked the stove pipe with branches of fir brush and ears of corn stocks. Moses, still in the house, was dead. There was more whistling that night but Silas didn't even try to chase it. He had come to terms that this wasn't no Boyd Street scooter gang.

I stopped by the day after that to find Silas preparing for war. He was making up snares in the heated part of the barn and had black and green lines painted on his face. He had wooden spears with sharpened ends leaning against a wall and motion sensor lights prepared on a table. His rifle was strapped on him every step he took and he looked like he hadn't slept in a few days. "I've got a plan," he assured me. I knew enough of Silas to know whatever his plan was meant almost certain death for his adversary.

I remember asking him if he still had the creature in the other section. Silas wouldn't answer. He told me he would reach out to me when he had something to report.

An evening later the phone rang. "I got him."

“Who?”

“The little fiend that’s been messing with me and killed Moses.”

“Did you shoot someone Silas?!” My heart raced as I asked him this question.

“Not someone. Something. This is even crazier than the first night you were up here. Come. Now.”

The weather was fortunately better that night than the first night of all this. Silas was once again waiting and opened up the barn door for me.

“What the hell are you mixed up in?” I asked.

“Man, I wish I knew,” Silas answered.

He unlocked the padlocked door again and led me into the non insulated part of the barn, like on the first night. Silas told me that at first he wasn’t sure if he got it, because it jumped back so much, but that must have been from the velocity of the rifle’s bullet.

The horse like creature was still laying there, and as I got closer I saw braids had been woven into the tail and mane. Silas’s hacksaw was set down beside its head. A small groove had been cut into the horn, and a small pile of powder was beside it.

“What’s all that?” I asked him.

“The horn is hard as rock. I’m on my fourth blade and that’s as far as I got. The braids- that wasn’t me. This thing was able to get in here somehow.”

I didn’t have a chance to have a closer inspection as Silas led me to a corner in the bay where a chair sat with its back facing me. This section now also had a light turned

on and I walked around the chair and looked. A small creature, lean and no more than a few feet tall, was limp and leaned against the backrest. Under an earthen colored hat, his face was pale with week old stubble and an open mouth revealed crooked teeth. A large hole went through an upper corner of his chest and part of his shoulder. Around this, much of the clothing it wore was a red stain that almost looked black.

“What the hell is that?” I asked.

“Not sure, but it was armed. It had some knives and a bow with a quill full of arrows. Sharp little things too, they are. It must have something to do with the other thing.”

I tried again to help him rid himself of his conquests and maybe come home with me for a few days, but he wouldn't hear of it. I left, and this time I remembered I had his money in my jacket pocket. I just didn't say anything.

I did not hear from him the next day, or the day after. The day after that, he left a message on my phone.

“There's more of them. A lot more. I gotta-.” At that point he seemed to have lost his connection.

By the time I got the message it was dark, and Silas did not answer my phone calls. There was no way I was willing to go that night in that possible zoo of chaos in the dark.

I waited two mornings after that, taking a full day longer than I thought necessary. As I drove up his driveway, the corn stocks were at their highest and claiming their innocence in the presence of the sun. There was no sign of life in the yard. Silas's truck

was there and still jacked up with the wheels waiting to be put on. The door in Silas's house was hanging on an angle. It was off one hinge and the large bay door to his barn was open.

I got out of my car, along with my own dog Mr. Dresden, and my own gun. I'm not stupid.

Mr. Dresden went in front of me with his nose in the air. First, we went into the house. There was a slight mess throughout it, the same kind of mess large people might leave if they wrestle for ten minutes in every room. I found the phone Silas would have called from in the kitchen. Its line had been snipped. There were drops of blood in some of the rooms.

In the barn, I walked through the insulated then the non insulated partitions. There was no longer any sign of the horned beast or the small champion that had accompanied it in one way or another. The loose straw had been swept away and the floorboards looked like they had been scrubbed. No blood, no stray hair, nothing.

I didn't see the point in hanging around the property any longer than necessary and left. I had seen all I needed to.

I still think of Silas now and then, mostly when I am sitting down and see his bundle of tens and fifties sitting on my fridge. I spent the twenties. But I'm good for it. When and if he returns, I'll have it for him. As I said, I always repay my debts.

Since this all happened my doorbell is often rang and every time I go to it nobody is there. It happens at all hours and with no time pattern. When it rings late at night or even if its just dark I stay in my bed with my gun and have very little effort convincing Mr.

Dresdon to do the same. It's likely just the Boyd Street scooter gang. I'm sure they have a chapter here in town.

Well, pretty sure.