

CHAPTER I: THE HERE AND NOW (THE HUNTER CONDITION)

*Be thou prepared, and prepare for thyself, thou,
and all thy company that are assembled unto thee, and
be thou a guard unto them.*

— Ezekiel 38:7

FROM THE JOURNAL OF DR. CARLETON VAN WYK

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A singular occurrence today, even by the peculiar standards of my investigations. I have had a different sort of revelation, I suppose, though I hesitate to use such religiously charged terminology.

I was pursuing #11, my current subject. It drove to a drugstore and I waited outside, confident that it would return to its vehicle. In the past, #11 has been frustratingly able to elude me when it perceived pursuit, and I was determined to stay as far back from it as I could. However, when I heard a commotion inside the store, I approached cautiously.

#11 nearly ran into me as it came out the door. Inside, people were screaming, but several were pursuing it. (I later learned their names: Jared, "Leaf" and "Oaken.")

It is important for me to capture my perceptions now, while they're still fresh in my mind. I saw #11, just as I have previously seen it: as a walking corpse, with sagging pallid skin and mealy rot in its eye sockets. What soon became apparent was that, at last, I was not the only person making this perception.

The creature before me resembled nothing so much as some complicated optical illusion: On one level, I could make out the semblance I normally beheld — a pale young man with a

ponytail and a dour expression. However, at the same time, I saw the decaying flesh punctuated with rotted gaps that appeared to me with only a minor exertion. There was no flickering, no overlap — not like a double exposed photograph.

Confronting #11 in such unplanned circumstances made me blurt out the question that had haunted me for so long: "What are you?"

#11's reply was an unpoetic "Fuck you!" and an attempt to claw my face with its hideous nails. I recoiled, drew my pistol and fired.

Then I saw the truly extraordinary thing. A slender black man (Jared) who appeared to be holding a large, red-hot metal bar in both hands lunged through the doorway and struck #11 from behind. A plump woman ("Leaf") and her ruddy companion ("Oaken") followed him closely.

True to form, #11 barely acknowledged the bullet wound or the blow from the glowing bar. Then it made a strange, almost flamboyant gesture. As it did so, a peculiar, sourceless blackness seemed to flow around it like a fog of ink. Surrounded by this shadow, it raced toward its car. I fired at it again and hit, as Jared shouted, "Where'd it go?"

"Don't you see it? The El Camino, that's its car!"

The creature was trying to pull its keys from its pocket. Jared, slashing wildly with the bar, moved toward it. I drew a

bead when Oaken yelled, "Don't shoot!" and put his hand on my arm. At the time, I assumed he was worried about me hitting Jared. #11 got its car door open and, seeing that, Jared struck at it again — a glancing blow off the creature that nonetheless shattered the car's window. #11 gave Jared a tremendous shove backward and slammed the door shut. I fired again and missed.

"What is that thing?" the woman demanded.

"No time to explain," I shouted, sprinting to my own car and continuing to fire at #11. I did not hit it.

I could hear sirens in the distance as I got to my car. I was fumbling the keys into the ignition when I heard a knock on my window. Jared looked in at me with wide eyes.

"You know what that thing is?" he shouted. I nodded.

"Then I'm coming with you," he declared. With only a moment to decide, I hit the electric lock on my car. He leapt into the back seat and we rolled off in pursuit, leaving Leaf and Oaken behind. Unfortunately, #11 proved to be elusive yet again. I drove by its residence but its car was not to be found.

Our trip gave Jared and myself an opportunity to make our introductions, once we had calmed down somewhat from the excitement of immediate danger. Jared informed me that he's a bartender. Not wanting to go into the tedious truth, I told him I was a consulting physician. We exchanged phone numbers and then he asked me, point blank, "What the fuck was that rotting thing?"

I explained that #11 appeared to conform in some ways to the behaviors and abilities of a mythical "zombie" or "ghost." He was quiet for a moment, then said that if he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed it. I concurred completely.

Once there was no immediate peril, Jared seemed to rethink his previous rash courage. He asked if "the thing" was going to come back to its house. I explained that it seemed to have some attachment to the building and often stayed there overnight when injured. I added that it did not appear to need sleep and told him of pursuing it once for 72 hours uninterrupted (the time it drove to Indiana and killed those two teenagers). He asked how it had vanished in the parking lot and how I had been able to see it. I said I didn't know.

I must confess that at that point I was hoping I had met another delver into the occult. I have long feared I was the only one. I hypothesized that my pursuit of non-normal creatures had allowed me to develop an immunity to their peculiar abilities. If Jared was a similar researcher, that would explain his immunity as well, but it was not so.

His story was this: He was in the drugstore to get a pack of cigarettes (he asked to smoke in my car and complained when I said no). Suddenly he heard a voice "like from nowhere" saying, "It does not live." He looked and realized that the man behind him in the cashier line was a walking corpse. Apparently no one else in the store saw the thing, except for "those two fat hippies." Everyone else fled when the "fight" broke out.

The woman, who was behind #11, asked it if it was all right (apparently thinking it was injured). It shoved her away and the man with her interposed himself between it and the woman.

Jared had seen enough. Since #11 had turned its back to him to assault the woman, Jared attempted to seize it. It broke his grip and fled, running into me in the doorway. I asked him about the glowing metal bar. Jared had no idea where it came from. He said it felt hot, but did not burn. It "just appeared."

Jared was increasingly impatient: He did not want to get out of my car to smoke, but he seemed unwilling to wait quietly. Eventually, he suggested going back to the drugstore. At that point, I was quite happy to part company, so I agreed.

The police were still at the drugstore taking statements. Jared's eyes narrowed when he saw them. He suggested I drop him at the corner. When he saw that I intended to re-enter the store, he said, "Just be cool. Act like you're just getting some smokes or something." In another mood I might have been amused by him presuming to tell me how to evade unwanted police attention. At that point I was just annoyed.

I was inside the drugstore before I saw that the "two fat hippies" were still there. The woman was saying something to an officer about "a badly injured man who became violent when approached." The man had buttonholed one of the officers and was quietly explaining that his wife had been under a great deal of strain. I was trying to hear what was going on, but at that point a policeman stepped in front of me, rolled his eyes and asked, "Okay, so what's your story? Violent robbery with lots of gunshots but nobody hurt, or the walking dead and black dudes with flaming swords?"

I gave him a nonplused look and said, "Actually, I just came to get a new *TV Guide*. My cat threw up on my old one."

He laughed and shook his head. Looking past him, I saw the hippie man looking right at me. He nodded, and I nodded subtly back.

Ducking into the magazine aisle, I looked around. Seeing no one, I pulled a bill from my wallet and wrote my phone number on it. I paid for the *TV Guide* and paused to tie my shoe as the police departed. The woman was still trying to explain to them what she'd seen, and their attempts to placate her were becoming increasingly brief and obviously feigned. She followed them to the parking lot, her husband trailing behind. As the police drove away, I approached them and held out the bill.

"I think you dropped this," I said.

The woman gave me a hard look with squinted eyes. The man's glance was more open and steady, and he took the money.

"I'm Dr. Van Wyk," I said.

"I'm Oaken," he said. "This is Leaf."

They left. I drove past #11's home. Still no car. I waited three hours, my mind preoccupied and perplexed. I have reached only two tentative conclusions: Perhaps I now see the world as my quarry does, and perhaps I am no longer alone.