

SHORT STORY

Advent

Alexander Rose
College of Business, Idaho
State University, USA

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CORRESPONDING CREATOR:

Alexander Rose, roselex@isu.edu

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The hunter becomes the hunted in the ruins of capitalist expansion.

With practiced ease, I descend the rope ladder from Nakamura Tower. Even a week's worth of rations in my pockets and cloak don't slow me down. I see Juice waiting below. He must have left Commons early. I can't blame him. I nimbly lower myself past the large mound of metal, Nakamura's first line of defences. The thin bars each support a line of white snow. Twisted metal cages like the bones of some ancient beast, a salted rib cage of colossal proportions. The younger kids are told that that's exactly what they are, but I know better. I can see deep into the pile, where some still keep their small castors. Some holdover from Before. Now merely a way to slow enemies. And a way to frighten the little ones. That doesn't take much. I whistle, and the sentry pulls the rope ladder back up behind me.

Juice stands, back hunched to the wind. It carries snow. From down here, it seems as if the snow still falls, but I know it's merely blown about, carried in melancholic swirls. My room in Nakamura Tower is on the 19th floor. I am fortunate. Juice nods a greeting, and I hand him a bit of dried goat meat. He blushes and tears it, taking slow, measured bites, pretending he isn't famished. Life is harder in Commons, harder for those without a family. They have no real food. They just have the packaged rations from Before. Soon that problem may be more pervasive.

I hunch my shoulders and look around. The sun is rising. The blacks of night are giving way to the greys of morning. The world brightens, though no light shines through the clouds. First the sky, then the snow. The two envelop everything. I pull my rifle from my shoulder and grimace down at it. It says 'Henry 44 Big Boy' on the barrel, and the wood is mostly intact, somehow. I again catch Juice eyeing it. Even though the Wheel has turned almost completely since Diego presented it to me at the Yule Mass, Juice is still infatuated with it. It is my shame.

For good measure, I thrust it toward him. 'Take it. You're a better shot than I. We both know it.'

He shakes his head emphatically and raises his hands in a defensive gesture, one hand still clutching the last bite of goat jerky. 'I couldn't, Vin, I couldn't.'

I sigh. I've tried to give it away. It is far too much a gift. It is my burden. But I will make the most of it. This Yule will be different. I have endured a year of Diego's gift. He doesn't know that I have planned this ever since. I grind my teeth as I recall the way the families gasped as he presented it, the final gift of the night. I was humiliated – all of Nakamura were. Who could have guessed the Jorgenson family had such an asset to give? Diego's smile is etched into my memory, but I stow it. Dawn is upon us and so too the time for action.

I scan the streets. All is clear. No sign of danger. Without a word, we set out away from the sunrise. We walk at a quick clip despite the snow. Our competent feet waste no energy in propelling us along our way. Soon, we approach the last outpost. From inside the low building with its red crowned roof, I hear

'Vincent Nakamura. Giuseppe. ...I hope you two aren't up to something stupid'. Beatrice San Martin. Gods, but she has eagle eyes. I guess that's why she was made outpost ranger at 16, young even for a San Martin. Her fur hood pulled tight around her head, she leans out of the outpost building. She didn't mean to insult Juice by reminding him that he doesn't have a family name. She's just a daughter of the winter, blunt and hard and cold.

'Out gathering, B. No need to worry', I say in my most confident tones. Juice nods, a terrible liar.



'Uh huh... well, I suppose you'll be as safe as any', Beatrice says, nodding to my rifle. Now it's my turn to blush. We both know what it means, what it represents. We both know there's precious little left to gather.

'Right'. We stare at one another a moment, and she turns back inside. Before her form fades into the dawn shadows she calls out, 'Need anything?'

It's a trap. If I ask for additional supplies, she'll know we aren't just out for a morning gathering trip. If I don't, she'll think me a fool to leave without precautions. I grind my teeth.

'Aye, an extra fur in case of the worst. Each. And maybe a few of the energy rations...' I add the last part nonchalantly, but I hear her chuckle.

Momentarily, she steps out with two large furs. We each drape one over our already prodigious outfits. A leather thong I take to draw it fast around me. She nods approvingly. I'm no greenhorn.

I turn to leave, but she says with exasperation, 'Gods, but you Nakamuras are a proud lot'. From the corner of my eye, I see her hand flash. I snatch the projectile as it sails towards me. A box of the energy rations, the shiny label reading G: GATORADE WHEY PROTEIN BAR 20g PROTEIN CHOCOLATE PRETZEL. I tuck it in a cloak pocket. I wonder if she suspects we'll be travelling quite far indeed. She smiles at me, but there's little mirth in it.

'Gods keep you two.'

We nod and turn to continue, the grey sky and grey snow illuminated by the growing light behind us. We walk in silence, familiar with the beginning of the loop. But we aren't going that way. Not this time. I thought transgressing like this would assault my senses. That I'd be able to feel it in my bones. I don't. It's just cold. Grey skies, grey ground, silent but for the moans of the wind and the sounds of our steps. Breaking the rules is only transcendent in the planning. In practice, it's just another walk.

'How confident are you in these maps?' Juice breaks my reverie. He isn't accusing; he just doesn't want to throw his life away, cheap as it may be. I understand.

'Not. They aren't even maps. They're written accounts I found deep in the Nakamura collection. Even if they're only half true, we'll never need fear humiliation at the hands of Jorgenson.'

He sets his jaw. Most of the people live in the Commons. Few are of a family. Few taste hot food outside the Feasts, and fewer still need concern themselves with status and glory.

'You know it isn't just that. We need a real food source. We can't live on - '

'On rations? We can. I do.'

'Sorry. You're right.'

We walk in silence, and I lead us further from the loop, deeper into transgression.

'Tell me about them again', Juice says.

'Four legs. Horns. Like a goat. But huge. Giant. Their horns can be four feet wide. The big males can weigh over 1500 pounds.'

He chuckles. He doesn't believe it. I'm not sure I do. The largest animal I've ever seen was a cow. It had nearly starved when my father's cousin found it. Nakamura gained much prestige at that Feast, though the beef was lean.

I stop us at a great evergreen. The snow has brought down boughs. I lash several of them to my feet while Juice does the same. Progress is easier without stepping to mid-thigh in snow. I glance back up at the towering pines. The weight of the snow and the lack of light leaves even these lasting giants somehow more brittle, more fragile. I shake my head. I scan the ground for any sign of our prey. I scan the sky for any sign of Wraiths. Nothing. We continue.



We crest a ridge. The sun is setting. The timing is ideal, but our quarry is nowhere in sight. We can see back home, down at the foot of the mountains. The lights are on in the great halls. All is silent. They do not want to attract the attention of the Wraiths. We descend a couloir and traverse the ice into another grove of tall pines.

With the cold of night coming, we set about digging a cave in the snow. Once it's deep enough for us both, I build a small fire in the bottom. I have fire starters, some magic from Before. They burn fast and hot, even when they're wet. Before the moon is fully risen, dully lighting the persistent grey clouds, I have a fire for us. Snow falls on my head while Juice sets boughs over the top of our improvised accommodations.

Wrapping himself in his extra fur, Juice settles in across from me. I hand him an energy bar. It will be all for our supper. We can't afford to indulge if this hunt is a long one. I take small bites from the bar, enjoying the gentle crackle of the fire. I take a great handful of snow and place it in my mouth. I hold my mouth open so it will melt without hurting my head. Water and a cure for a groaning belly.

'Vin?'

'Mm?'

'Suppose it's true. Suppose there's goats out here that are as heavy as ten men - ' I swallow the snowmelt, protest: 'They aren't giant goats.'

'Right, but suppose it's true. What ate them? Everything gets hunted, right? So, what ate a 1500-pound goat-whatever?'

I pull my cloak around me. 'Moose. And I don't know. There's nothing in the account that mentions predators. It's mostly about how they move around, where they go and when.'

'Must be Wraiths, Vin. What else could get a 1500-pound goat?'

'I don't know. Must be dangerous, whatever it was.'

'But you've got that. He nods to the Henry rifle.'

'Aye, I've got that.'

The fire is burning low. I lean my head back against the snow cave wall. I drift off.

I come back before dawn. It isn't hard to do. No one ever slept well in a snow cave in the best of circumstances, and these aren't them. I wake Juice by dropping another energy bar in his lap as I stand to push the boughs aside. My eyes scan the floor of the pine grove, searching for movement. I see nothing and gingerly ease myself up and out of the snow cave. Juice comes behind me, his chewing of the frozen bar just audible in the predawn stillness. We use the boughs to brush over our shelter and strap a few to our feet again.

Wind is gusting over the ridgeline, so we keep lower on the lee side, scanning the valley and couloirs for any sign of our quarry. As the brooding clouds begin to glow with the rising sun, I see it. At this distance, it's a brown spot the size of my thumbnail on a white snowfield. It's across the valley from us. Even at this distance, I can see the way it widens at the head. This is it, a moose, Nakamura's salvation, my vindication. I look up at the sky, and across the valley again.

Juice whispers, 'Half a day?'

'Aye, half a day. Keep an eye on him.'

We begin making our way deliberately and cautiously around the valley via a series of cirques which enclose it. At several points, the topography restricts our view, and I am nearly overcome with anxiety. To lose it now would be - it's unthinkable. Each time we spy it again, I am heartened. This is destiny. This is perfect. We do not speak. Nothing needs to be said.

We drop slightly in elevation to the tree line, hoping to reduce our visibility to the animal as we approach. I have to restrain myself, my excitement urging me to a reckless pace. These cautious decisions save our lives.



As the sun reaches its zenith behind the blanket of heavy clouds, we are passing through another copse of pines, shorter and more wind-blown than the grove in which we spent the night. Beyond the trees, a moraine divides us from a modest ridge that should afford us a view of the creature we came to kill.

A rippling splits the air over the moraine. I fall to my belly on instinct. I hear a soft *floomf* behind me. Juice must have done the same. The Wraith is visible, but not. The air shimmers and refracts and reflects the trees and rocks and snow and sky, a form without substance, the shape that of a person but defined by its absence. The only sound that marks its passing is a faint humming whine, quiet enough to not hear until it's upon you, but loud enough to notice when it is. It is moving quickly, descending the moraine, making for the valley. I quickly lose sight of it with my head flat on the ground, one eye partially obscured by snow, and the Wraith's incorporeality. We do not move.

Time passes. Perhaps an hour. Perhaps more. The sun is too dim to cast shadows, but the light gets long. We do not stand, but retreat deeper into this modest copse. Still we do not speak. Still there is no need. As quietly as possible, we begin scooping snow away, digging another cave. It is dark by the time we are done, the work laborious and slow as we cower.

Tonight there is no fire. I am gripped by fear. Not just of death at the hands of the Wraith, but of a less primal, more salient variety: pride. I did not realize the extent to which my mind had accepted the imminent success of our mission. The odds of finding the creature were so long, and we had been so close, and now one of those godsdamned demons had ruined it, snatched away my victory as its kind snatch away the lives of those whom they catch.

Now, in the hole, no fire tonight, I look at Juice and see the fear in his eyes. His is not driven by pride, but of the simple calculus that he could have died today. I reach into my jacket and take out more substantial rations. Dried meat and cheese. We have earned it.

I break the silence, sparing Juice the fear of it. 'It's gone. Has to be.'

He stares for a moment as if searching for function in his voice. 'Right. Has to be.'

'If it were coming for us, we'd know it.'

'Yeah.'

A pause.

He continues, 'Where do you think it was going?'

'The Wraith? Or the moose?'

He looks puzzled. 'The Wraith'. Clearly the moose has left his mind entirely, probably vanished from all concern the moment we saw the rippling form of the Wraith.

'I don't know. Where do they ever go? Where do they come from?'

He says nothing to this. Some time passes. The cold seeps into our bones. A hard day, insufficient food, a great spike of fear-panic-tension, and now this. Without a word, I gather branches as the snow begins to fall, insulating us once again from tonight's powder. Juice and I huddle together under our furs to share what meagre warmth we have. We do not see the ripple in the night air above the trees. We do not see the two red dots staring down at us from above. My eyes are closed.

Snap.

My eyes are wide open.

In the dim hole, Juice is awake too. Without a word, we rise. I peer through the boughs I laid. The clouds obscure everything. I gently lift a branch. Snow is disturbed, falling down, caking my forearm. I lift my head higher.



Tracks. There are tracks in the snow. They're maybe forty feet from us, crossing the moraine and skirting the copse of trees. It begins.

I gesture to the gun, and Juice hands it to me as soon as I have lifted myself above the lip of our hole. Silently, he appears beside me. We take a moment to replace the boughs on our feet that we use to traverse the snow. Quiet is, now, far more important than speed. The night is cold, gripping us. In that inky black, there is only the omnipresent hand of frozen lifelessness, enveloping us, crushing us in its indifferent grasp. But I exhilarate. Redemption. The animal has crossed my path again and with it, I'll put Jorgenson – never mind just Diego, the whole bleeding family – to shame. I'll feed Nakamura, the Commons, all, and I'll do it with the gift by which Diego sought to humiliate me.

We stalk the footprints. Easy. Quiet. I try not to let my excitement best me. The rifle is nothing to me. It floats before me, loaded and ready. Juice breaks off to spot, following the trails higher up the ridge with his sling in his hand, club at his waist. They won't do anything against what we hunt, but they're the weapons of our people. As far as I know, this Henry 44 Big Boy is the only weapon of which my people might avail themselves against such beasts. Slings and clubs are well and fine for men and goats, but I hunt something else entirely. From up the hill, Juice signals to me. His first gesture indicates a cave. Good, we have a secure position to clean the kill. His second, though, is slow, almost confused. He indicates that the target is before me.

I lower myself to my belly and scoot over a knuckle in the terrain. Below me, I see it. A magnificent beast that those Before called a moose. It's as big as fifteen goats, easily. Its rack is nothing like horns. A complicated weave of bone splays across its head, casting shadows of madness across the white snow. No words, no account, no tales of Before could have explained this thing to me. It is majestic. I hear a *plink*. It is winter. The moose turns. It is survival. In trembling hands, I raise the rifle. Something moves behind me.

'YEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHH!'

The moose bolts. I whip around to see Juice leap from his hiding place, a club in his hand. In terror and confusion, my head lolls back and forth between Juice soaring through space and the moose sprinting impossibly through the deep snow. The moments tick by as if they themselves were suspended in the snow.

Then I see what Juice is jumping toward. A black form, not unlike a person. A Wraith? No. Too substantial. It is living shadow, not shifting absence. Terror fills my belly, and I taste defeat, the likes of which make my humiliation at Diego Jorgenson's gift taste sweeter than any treat. I lift the rifle, but before I can aim it, Juice is upon the shadow. He screams again and swings his club. On some dull level it occurs to me that he must have used the sling, must have made the plink.

The Shadow faces Giuseppe No Last Name, my friend, and lifts an arm to block his club. It is unfazed. How do you harm a shadow? He screams again but the scream is cut off, silenced, by a flash of light from the thing's other hand. Juice falls, not even a gurgle to herald him to the next life. Quiet as the snow.

But now I have the rifle aimed. My shame, my burden, the gift I can never repay. Maybe.

BANG.

The gun thunders its report. I work the lever, cycling another bullet into the chamber. Hot brass steams in the snow beside me. All is slow. All is seen. The thing stumbles and falls backward.

I run.



I can't lead the cursed thing home, and I cannot defend a snow hole from such a foe. So, I opt for a trick. Sprinting as best I can in pine-bough shoes, I make my way back to the moraine. I look behind me. Nothing.

I search for and find Juice's footprints. The cave is my only hope. I step carefully, sacrificing alacrity for certainty. My feet fall only in his footprints. The cave looms up, a maw on my right side. I dive in. Quickly stripping away the pine boughs, I leave them in a heap near the cave mouth. I have no light I'm comfortable using with that thing about. Could the Henry 44 Big Boy have killed it?

I slip deeper into the cave and wedge myself into a dark corner. The stone is dry and brutal. It presses into me on all sides, heartless and austere. I raise the gun and stare into the irregular circle of grey buried in the black. The cave mouth will tell me the truth of this thing. It must be a Wraith. What else could it be? But why was it black instead of a shimmer?

The rifle becomes heavy in my hand. How much time has passed? No sign of light in the grey. My heart pounds, but the fear-energy has faded. I stifle a yawn. My eyelids grow heavy. My chin jerks as I fight to stay awake. My jaw cracks with a ponderous yawn.

A dark form fills the entryway. It's smaller than I thought, perhaps a trick of the light. But I have this godsforsaken blight where I want it. No hesitation: I pull the trigger.

Click.

No. The gun does nothing. The creature turns to stare at me. Red orbs burn in its head, two points of malice staring right at me. I raise the gun like a club and charge. Leave it to the Jorgensons to humiliate me with a gift that doesn't work.

I feel a sharp pain in my belly. I look down and two prongs are buried in my gut. They appear to be on strings attached to the monster's hand. Before I can process the implications, my body convulses in agony. I drop to the floor. The creature stalks to me. I try to scream, try to fight, want to kick, lash out, resist, but my muscles refuse to respond to my commands. In a language I understand but which sounds odd and archaic to my ears, the thing speaks. It has an oddly metallic voice. 'I found two. Put the menial one down. Secured the influencer. Send a skiff. Pinging my 20 now.'

It squats beside me. My muscles are beginning to twitch. If I can just summon the energy, I could lash out, strike it, funnel my fury into my fists. But it seems to read my mind. That same metallic crackling voice says, 'Can't take chances with you.' It reaches out, and in its hand is a small tube. The creature, it must be a Wraith, it can be nothing else, moves the tube toward my left thigh. My eyes follow the thing as if time itself has slowed to watch my fate sealed. When the tube presses against my leg, I feel a sharp pain. My body is flooded with warmth. All the ache of the cold and exertion flows out of me. The burden of my cares lightens. Suddenly it does not matter that I am doomed. Suddenly nothing matters. The lids of my eyes get heavy. The last thing I see is a distortion at the cave mouth and something like a floating bed materializes out of the shimmering that I associate with the Wraiths. My mind, distantly, thinks yes, this is surely one of them. Then all is black.

All is not black. I lie flat on my back. I am naked beneath an ephemeral, papery sheet. I cannot rise. I am cold, but not that cold. Perhaps this cave is warm. Has the Wraith brought me here to torture me? My eyes dart around, my body still largely unresponsive. I see tubes snaking into my arms. Above me, machines beep a rhythmic tune. There is a sound like a whispering curtain being withdrawn.

I manage to turn my head slightly. Walking into the room are two people. I see a red-haired woman dressed in black, the material sinewy and ribbed and studded



with little black lenses. She holds the Wraith's head under one arm, casually. I don't understand. She's talking with a slight man, taller by far than any I've ever known, but built like he isn't fit to carry a sling. I hear her say, 'No, it couldn't be helped. But this one is aristocracy, after a fashion. He could be an excellent candidate for the program. An influencer of his stature in the community could be just the thing to transition to volunteers.'

The man has a shrewd, calculating face. Both he and the woman are extraordinarily attractive but look as if they've never been outside. Their faces are unmarred by wrinkles or lines. They look weak, coddled, soft. They would be scorned even in Nakamura Tower for what could only be a lifetime of leisure and loafing.

'Play it.'

Above me, an image appears in nothing. It's so real I could touch it but for the scale. It shows a blue and green planet. It zooms in. There are people everywhere. Towering structures. There is fire. Mounds of trash higher than Nakamura Tower. Waters wash over millions. Migrants walking across the plains. It shows guns and germs and death. It shows beautiful people leaving tortured cities in floating, flying boxes. It shows them disappearing into a black void in the sky. It shows chaos behind. Death. A soft voice narrates it, telling me of resource constraint. Of sacrifice. Of value. Of culpability, people reaching beyond their means, people being profligate, obese, wasteful. The voice coos that the beautiful people in the great ships had no choice, that they had to preserve society, technology, science, and that they were the best ones to do so. This comes over images of pods falling from the bellies of the great boxy ships onto a red planet. The image zooms out, shows the red planet in relation to the blue one. Shows them drifting through an incomprehensible void speckled with infinite stars. The voice explains that what we call the Turning of the Wheel represents the progress of that blue orb around the sun, and that nearly three hundred have passed since. The image zooms back into the red planet, shows a city in a bubble, beautiful and green, shiny and luxurious. Warm. Clean. Safe. It shows happy people walking and talking, reading and working in white coats with computers and unrecognizable machines. It shows food that makes my mouth water, food I have never imagined before. A rainbow of fresh plants and meats, smiling families eating, watching a distant sunset through the dome overhead.

The image changes to a bizarre image of twisting strands bound together by bands in the centre. Something about their 'genetic processing and code management' has gone wrong, and they need new material. The image shows a man in a position not unlike myself, tubes protruding from his body. The voice explains in an upbeat tone that people like me can help, that we can save humanity. The image fades to black, replaced by an official-looking seal, the official government of People's Commonwealth of the NikolaBlue Project, an outline of one of the ships in the centre of a golden ring. 'Building a Better Future, Together.' Finally, that too fades.

The room lightens around me. The red-haired woman approaches slowly, her slender giant a step ahead. His voice is strong, despite his stature. 'So you see, this is our advent. We come now in the hour of your need and ours. We can help each other build that future. So tell me, Vincent of House Nakamura. Are you open to a little value proposition?'¹

NOTES

1. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, entities, places, events and incidents are either the product of the creator's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

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