

I have always hated that moment, in the dead of the night, when everything is quiet.

It doesn't happen every night. On weekends, or during the holidays, I can sometimes go days without it. But sooner or later, inevitably, the moment will come that the last employee has taken their pay and left, the last drunk has staggered out the door clutching a bottle of their favorite poison, the last customer has gone home to a loving family or an empty house.

They don't think about what they leave behind when they go. It's enough for them to know that it will be there again when they return.

The thing that bothers me about that moment isn't the loneliness. I don't mind that; hell, I'm *grateful* to have some time to myself. No, what I can't stand is the emptiness. The hollow feeling left behind when I'm the only one in the building. The contrast between what's still in the bar and what they took home with them when they left.

Home is a concept that hasn't had any real meaning for me in a very long time.

On this night, the moment came at around three in the morning. I watched as the last group of college students gathered their belongings and left, drunk as lords and secure in the knowledge that they would never die. A pair of werewolves drifted behind them, grim men who had imbibed more than any of the students and walked away stone-cold sober. The very last to leave was the old drunk at the end of the bar, who raised his bottle to me on the way out.

I nodded back at him. One lost soul to another, as it were. I didn't know what shadows were lying over his past, or why he hadn't been sober for thirty years. In many ways, it didn't matter. I created this bar to be a place where nobody had to talk about the skeletons in their closet.

A haven for lost souls, in a way. There are so very, very many of us.

I watched the door swing closed, and then walked out from behind the bar. Many of my customers would have been shocked by that; many of them would have thought it was impossible.

In a sense, they were right. But even after a hundred years, sometimes I liked to pretend.

It was for much the same reason that I grabbed a bottle of whiskey as I moved. I didn't bother with a glass.

Sitting at one of the tables, I opened the bottle and traced my fingertips over the chessboard set into the tabletop. The werewolves had left their game set up, many of the pieces still on the board. White had checkmate in three moves, black in two.

I am not fond of chess. You have to plan to play chess, and I don't like to plan. My plans have never worked out well, not for me or anyone else. A delicate touch, to make the only games in my bar chess, billiards, and shuffleboard. A subtlety. The kind of tiny mockery that turns a prison into a work of art.

I swept the pieces into the drawer under the table and took a long drink of whiskey. The flavors were muted, and there was almost no burn, but for a moment I could almost convince myself otherwise. I could almost *remember*.

Memories are interesting things. I'm still not sure whether leaving me with mine was a small mercy, or the final touch on my own personal hell.

The newcomer in town was slender, almost effeminate, and expensively dressed. Many took him for a lawyer, a banker, or a politician. He carried himself in a way which was suggestive of authority, as though he was accustomed to his orders being followed.

There were places in town that he could have gone to blend in. This was all so very long ago, before Colorado was even a state, but there was still money in the area, and it had brought its inevitable attendants with it. He could easily have gone somewhere that he wouldn't have stood out. Instead, he walked into one of the roughest, nastiest bars in the city.

In hindsight, that should have been a warning. But then, I suppose that's the nature of hindsight.

I was there when he came in, drinking with two friends. We were all more stereotypical of that era, hard men who were suited to frontier life. John was a miner, and Michael worked for one of the ranchers near the city. For my part, I could never hold down a job for long. At the moment I was working as a laborer for the gold mill. It was backbreaking work, sometimes literally, and the pay was never enough.

To this day, I don't know why he chose to sit with us. I didn't question it at the time, which should have been another warning sign. I hardly even noticed him, and that wasn't natural.

One thing led to another. He drank with us for a while. The man said little, but he said it in a pleasant way, such that all of us thought he was a decent fellow. Some time later, he mentioned cards.

Shortly after that, he was looking at me and smiling. "You cheated," he said. He didn't sound upset about it. It was just a statement of fact. The sky is blue. The bread is burnt. You cheated.

"You calling me a liar?" I asked. At the time, I thought that I sounded dangerous, like an outlaw or a stagecoach robber. In hindsight, I suspect it was obvious that I was just a stupid young man who needed money to pay off gambling debts and had no real idea what to do about it.

"No," he said mildly. "I'm saying that you cheated. It's entirely different."

"What are you going to do about it?"

He looked around at the bar. At the time, I thought that he was sizing up his situation. I might not have been a dangerous man, but I had two friends with me and most of the bar knew me, and he was a stranger. Thus, I wasn't surprised when he pushed the money over to me.

"I'm sure I'll think of something," he said, smiling at me. He then stood and left without another word.

I don't sleep anymore. I can't. But if I could, and I had nightmares, they would just consist of that smile.

I took my time about the whiskey, savoring it. I knew the ebb and flow of my bar as intimately as a man might know his heartbeat, and I had almost an hour before business would be picking up again. There was plenty of time.

Then again, I always had a surplus of time. "Water, water, every where, nor any drop to drink." An unpleasantly apt comparison, considering the nature of the poem.

After about forty minutes I returned to my position behind the bar, dropping the empty bottle into a garbage can. It was empty, both before and after I threw the bottle away. A small perk of my position. I then idled away the time polishing glasses, though they didn't need polished. It was a simple task, repetitive and mindless, and it soothed the part of me that wanted nothing more than to be a bartender.

Finally, just when the emptiness was getting to be too much to bear, a young woman entered. She was dripping wet, suggesting that it was raining outside, and looked quite bedraggled in her skimpy clothing and heavy makeup. To the best of my memory, and my memory for such things was literally flawless, I had never served her before.

A werewolf. Uncommon, to see a female of that species, but hardly unknown. She was still quite young, and carried the influence of the wolf lightly enough that most wouldn't have seen it, but I knew my customers. Another perk.

She was unhealthy. Damaged. Broken, in a sense. A strong person beaten down until she fit into place.

I had seen several werewolves of that sort, recently. There was something wrong in the pack, a sickness, a *corruption*. The signs were there, easy to read if you knew how to look, all of them saying that something had changed.

It was, I reminded myself, none of my business. It was nothing I could fix. The werewolves would sort themselves out, sooner or later, or someone else would sort them. I couldn't contribute anything.

She looked around warily, seeming confused, then walked over to where I was standing and collapsed onto a stool, slumping forward against the bar. "Beer," she said, sounding desperately tired. "Something cheap."

At a glance, she couldn't be more than seventeen. Much too young to be drinking, if one believed the modern laws. As a lycanthrope, she could have been any age and looked like that, but she couldn't have fooled me. I knew full well that she was hardly older than she looked.

I placed a bottle in front of her anyway. We're all damned, each in our own way. It isn't my place to say that anyone's road to hell is wrong.

"I've never been here before," she said, staring at the bottle. "A friend told me about it." She was lying, and poorly. A friend wouldn't have sent her here alone, and particularly not at this time of night. For that matter, if she had a friend, she wouldn't have needed to come.

I grunted noncommittally and went back to polishing glasses.

"You don't have a sign outside," she continued. "What's the place called?"

"Prices," I said. A simple name, and truth in advertising. It's always amused me that everyone hears me wrong.

This woman was no exception. "Right," she said. "I take it you're Pryce?"

I grunted, nodded. It was as good a name as any. My own name was long since gone, plucked neatly out of my memories the day I became this thing. After so long, I doubt anyone remembers it anymore.

"I'm Kyra," she said, drinking a significant portion of her beer. She then looked at it in apparent surprise. "This is good. What is it?"

"Microbrewery." I hadn't bothered to check the label, but I knew what I served. I could have told her the name of the brewery, the ingredients, and the date of bottling, had I cared to. Had she been interested. I knew my customers, and this girl didn't drink beer for the taste. She didn't drink for the alcohol, either; werewolves don't. No, she wanted beer for the same reason I had drunk that whiskey. To pretend. To *remember*, if only for a moment, what it had been like to be human.

She said nothing for the next several minutes, which was pleasant. Too many of my patrons are inclined to talk a great deal when they have nothing to say. Someone who was content to sit and drink beer in silence was a welcome change.

After about ten minutes, and most of three beers, my door opened again and a man walked in. He was an infrequent customer, a human with a little troll blood in him. I recalled him as an aggressive, rude loudmouth, a bully and a coward. Not a pleasant man, but thus far he'd been smart enough to toe the line, and I had tolerated him. Sooner or later he would break my rules, and I would throw him out.

When he came in, he immediately saw the girl. He looked her over, taking in multiple aspects of her appearance and dress, and grinned lecherously.

For her part, she looked terrified, miserable, physically nauseated. She looked at him, visibly nerved herself, and then stood up. "Sorry," she said. "Duty calls." She paused and turned to face me. "Do you have a back room?" she asked hesitantly. "...I really don't want to go out in this again."

I considered her for a moment, then grunted. "That hall," I said, pointing.

"Thanks, Pryce," she said. She took a deep breath, then went to talk with the man. They stood out of earshot of the bar, but I knew that they were discussing money, and more specifically how much of it she was to be paid for performing vaguely specified actions. He looked pleased as a pig in shit. She looked as though she were about to vomit.

It was not my place to judge, I reminded myself. Not my place to condemn. Men and women lived their lives, and sometimes they got hurt despite having done nothing wrong. There was no rhyme or reason to it.

I could not provide justice. I could not make the world make sense.

I could only stand ready to pick up the pieces. I could provide a refuge, a place to go when you didn't have a home, or a friend, or a hope.

A haven, for those with nowhere else to go.

After the stranger came to town, two weeks passed uneventfully. For a few days, I worried that there would be repercussions for my actions, but none was apparent, and gradually I began to relax. I began to think that his parting line had been an idle threat, or an expression of bravado. He had no proof, after all, and no way of knowing who I was. And it wasn't as though I had taken that much from him, in comparison with his apparent wealth. I convinced myself that he had simply moved on with his life, and I had nothing to fear.

Then, two weeks later, I went to sleep in my bed, and woke up elsewhere.

That building little resembled the bar in which I currently make my residence, a fact in which I take some pride. At that point, it was just a warehouse on the edge of town, an empty shell of a building with little to make one take notice of it. It was visited so seldom that no one noticed when people stopped visiting it entirely.

There was no one else there when I woke, no explanation of what had happened or why. I tried to leave immediately, and swiftly discovered that I couldn't. Only two steps out the door and I felt weak. A third step left me unable to stand.

I kept trying to leave for the next week. The furthest I made it was twelve steps. It felt as though I were hemorrhaging, and the weakness was so great that I was certain I would die if I kept going. I barely managed to crawl back inside, and it was nearly three days before I could stand again.

That was the last attempt I made. The message was clear. There would be no escape.

For some time I held out hope that someone would come looking for me, that my friends would notice my absence. As days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, I was forced to acknowledge that this was not the case. I had been cut out of their lives, as neatly as my own identity had been excised from my memories. There would be no rescue.

I no longer felt any need to eat, and it soon became apparent that I was incapable of sleep. There are no windows in this building, and the door is inset so that I cannot see the sky. But I could look out the door and see the lighting change in the outside world, and I could mark the passage of time in that way.

I spent the first two months like that, watching the world pass me by and trying to come up with a solution. I tried many things, ranging from the desperate to the absurd, none of which had the slightest effect.

Finally, when I had begun seriously considering an attempt to determine whether I might truly kill myself by walking too far from my prison, someone walked through the door.

For a moment I thought that it was the same man I had cheated. He had a similar aura of confidence, as though he expected that the world would reshape itself to accommodate him. But he was more personable, and far more *memorable*.

"Good morning," he said, nodding to me.

I eyed him warily. The resemblance to the other man was unnerving, and I thought it suspicious that he had come into my prison when no one else had. "Who are you?"

"Call me Hunter," he said with a smile. "And you are?"

I debated giving a false name, shrugged instead. I didn't say anything.

He nodded again. "Took your name, did they? Unfortunate. I wish I could say I was surprised, but that sort of pettiness is rather typical of them. You might want to choose another name. They're useful things. Help you retain a sense of self. Think about it."

"Who is 'they?'" I asked, seizing on the only part of what he said that I really understood.

"They," he said. "Them. The old ones. We'll get to that. For now, there's a more immediately relevant question in front of you. What do you want this place to be?"

"I don't understand."

"Well, it's really quite simple," he said, sitting down and leaning against the wall. "You're a part of this building now. A god tied you to it, and not even I can break that."

"There's only one God," I said, reflexively.

He snorted. "Maybe, but if so He's fine with letting other people pretend to be gods to screw with us. Anyway, what I'm saying is that this place is a part of you, and it's going to decide who you are. So right now it's empty, and as a result you're feeling empty, vague, like you don't have a purpose."

I thought about it. What he'd said summed up how I'd felt over the past months fairly well, but I didn't want to admit it, so I said nothing.

He smiled knowingly. "Right. So you can't change the influence this place has over you, but you *can* decide what it looks like. So the question in front of you is what you want it to turn you into."

"A bar," I said, almost without thinking. It wasn't a hard choice; most of the pleasant moments in my life had been in bars. There were large gaps in my memories, but I could remember that.

He considered me for a moment and nodded again. "Yes, I can see you as a bartender. That works. I'll get some renovators in here to fix the place up, and then we can start working on a customer base."

He stood up and walked towards the door. I debated letting him go, but curiosity got the better of me. "Why?" I asked. "Why are you helping me?"

He paused, not looking back at me. "There's a war on," he said. "End of the day, that's what it comes to. There's a war on. And we need every soldier we can get if we want to have half a chance of winning."

"No," I said. "I learned my lesson."

I couldn't see his face, but I could hear the grin in his voice. "There's the problem. You thought the lesson was 'don't cheat a god.'"

"What else would it be?"

"Don't get caught," he said, and stepped out into the sunshine.

About half an hour passed while the werewolf and the troll-blooded jackass were in the back room. The bar began to fill up during that time; it was early yet, but there were people who had to be at work before dawn that wanted food before they began their days, and a handful of night owls getting a last drink before they ended theirs. My taproom was hardly bustling, but there was conversation and laughter and *life* to drive the emptiness back into the corners. There was work for me to do, enough to keep me from thinking too much.

The man walked out of the hallway. He looked satisfied with himself, and didn't pause as he swaggered across the room to the door.

Behind him, the werewolf emerged from the hallway. She was visibly distraught, her expression guilty and sickened. "You didn't pay me enough," she called after him. "We had a deal."

He didn't look back. "You're lucky I paid you at all, bitch," he said, reaching for the door.

I debated for a moment, then made my decision. When he grasped the doorknob it didn't turn, and when he slammed his shoulder against the door it didn't even shudder.

"Pay her," I said, loudly enough to be heard by everyone in the room. "Leave. Don't come back."

He turned and sneered at me. "No," he said.

The bar went silent. The speech, the laughter, it all died out in a moment. The silence rushed into the room, bringing with it the hollowness that normally only filled the space when it was otherwise empty.

I hated him for that.

I walked slowly around the bar and towards him. Patrons shifted away, leaving a clear aisle between us. I proceeded down it, moving slowly enough to convey an impression of inevitability. "Last chance," I said, once I was within arm's reach of the jackass. I allowed my voice to fill the space, rumbling through the walls and rattling glasses behind the bar. A minor bit of showmanship, but one that could convey a message clearly.

He grinned and punched me in the face. His fist bounced off me, as though he'd hit a wall rather than a man.

It is not my place to pass judgment. I cannot condemn another for the path they've chosen to walk.

But there must be rules, in order for my bar to serve as the haven I made it to be. There *must* be rules, there must be *order*.

And a rule has no meaning unless it is enforced.

He backed away rapidly once he realized how little impact he had had on me, but I reached out and grabbed him by the throat, dragging him back. Almost three hundred pounds, but I lifted him easily into the air with one arm. Even that was an affectation, done to improve the show. I could have achieved the same result without even moving from behind the bar.

He scrabbled ineffectually at my hand, his fingers scraping against my flesh as though it were made of stone. My fingers closed slowly, inexorably, like tree roots breaking a stone. I blocked off his airway, mostly so that I wouldn't have to listen to him any more, and then paused to think about what I wanted to do.

Anything truly impressive would be a waste, with so few people here. *Pour encourager les autres* is a valid objective only when there is someone present to encourage.

Then again, this message only really mattered for one person. And while something extreme might disturb someone so new to this world, even young werewolves are no strangers to death.



I shook the man once, like a dog shaking a rat, and with much the same result. A broken neck isn't such a terrible way to die. Merciful, in comparison to what I might have done.

A wallet fell out of his pocket while I was shaking him, as did a small bag of off-white powder. A drug deal, then, rather than prostitution. Interesting, that I had misread the situation. That seldom happened.

She had been instructed to do this by the pack, then. I couldn't picture her having chosen to participate in such a business, and I knew that werewolves often dabbled in such things to finance their activities. Another symptom of the sickness in the pack, that such a task would be given to a relative innocent to perform. It was unnecessarily cruel.

I picked both items up and tossed them to the girl. I considered destroying the drugs instead, as I had no fondness for such things, but the only result would have been the punishment of the girl.

Besides which, I had no right to criticize. We all make our choices. My opinion of those choices was largely immaterial.

She didn't notice, being preoccupied with the dead man, and had to pick them up off the floor. In the meantime I returned to my position behind the bar, carrying the corpse with me. Around me the room returned to life, my patrons satisfied that the problem had been dealt with and all was right with the world.

"You want work?" I asked, dropping the body out of sight behind the bar. I could dispose of it later, without difficulty or fuss.

The girl started and then nodded hesitantly. "Yes," she said. "I...yes."

"Tomorrow. Noon. Be here."

She nodded again, gratefully, and left. I didn't watch her go.

She must have been even younger than I'd thought, to agree so readily. To be so confident that what I was offering was better than what she had. That was far from certain, even if my initial estimate of what she had been doing to leave her feeling so guilty had been accurate.

It's not such a terrible thing to sell your body, after all. Far worse to sell your soul.

Hunter was as good as his word, arranging for extensive renovations. I had no idea what the renovators he hired were, although I could already tell that they weren't men. In hindsight, they were most likely dwarves. Excessive for the task, probably, to hire such skilled workers, but he clearly had the resources.

It took nearly a month to finish the process of converting an empty warehouse into a functional bar, during which time I saw Hunter somewhat regularly. After that, it was only a few days before

customers began to trickle in. I quickly learned that they were not the same sort of crowd I was accustomed to seeing at bars. They were freaks, myths and monsters and creatures out of nightmare, angels and demons and everything in between.

Lost souls, one and all. In time I learned to distinguish them, and to understand them. Then I began to feel a sort of kinship with the beings that frequented my establishment. And finally I came to understand what Hunter's purpose had been here, why he had gone to such lengths to help me.

I never saw him again after I had that realization. Perhaps he ran out of luck, and was caught by one of the gods he hated. I think it more likely that he simply knew that his work was no longer needed, and moved on. The investment had been made; the returns were inevitable.

Over the years I came to a better understanding of my nature. I was tied to this place, yes, and it shaped me, but I also shaped it. As more powerful beings began to frequent my bar, more and more power seeped into it. Tied to it as I was, I grew in power as well, until eventually I came to rival even the strongest of the creatures that came into it. I became a force to be reckoned with, and I began to impose order on my clientele.

It took some time for them to listen, but it hardly mattered. I was, as Hunter had explained to me, functionally immortal. I was as much a part of this bar as the walls and the stones, and so long as it existed I couldn't truly die. You would have to burn the building to the ground to end me, you would have to crush the foundations and sow the earth with salt, you would have to wipe the very *memory* of it away.

It was, in a sense, a gift. A balance to the curse which had been laid upon me. I was uniquely constrained, but I was also uniquely empowered. It was, as I had learned, typical of a deity. Giving with one hand. Taking with the other.

I never learned which of the gods had done this to me. In many ways, it didn't matter. One was much like another. For all of them, the hardest part of determining whether their curses are crueler than their blessings is always telling one from the other.

My patrons learned. Some slow, some fast, but all of them eventually learned that there would be no killing me, or putting me in my place. My rules would stand, one way or another.

Many left. Disappointed by the changes I had instituted, or ashamed at having been so easily defeated. Others, however, came, glad to have a safe place. Neutral ground, where all grudges and vendettas are put on hold.

Even monsters need somewhere to call home.

The werewolf returned the next day, as I had anticipated. She walked in precisely five minutes before noon, nervous but resolute.

I put her to work serving food. It was simple work, if not always easy, and safe. There was no one in this city foolish enough to harass one of my employees. The consequences of such a mistake had been made very clear.

I kept part of my attention on her throughout the day. She performed adequately, if not superbly. Sufficient for my needs, at any rate. Presumably her work would improve over time. If not, I could address that issue at a later time.

It was a quiet day, as such things went. Most of my patrons were local. All of them were familiar to me. My own work was routine, not requiring much thought. Food and drink went out and money came in, as always.

The only real excitement during the day was when a half-leprechaun picked a fight with an apprentice mage, saying something about theft. Judging by the young man's face, it was an honest grievance. I told the two of them to take it outside, and as far as anyone else was concerned the matter was settled.

I spent some time thinking about it. It was unfortunate, as such fights always are. There's a war on, after all, and we need every soldier we can get. Neither of those two was likely to contribute much—their powers were dwarfed by the scale of the combatants—but every loss was a loss that we could not afford in this fight.

The conclusion of the war is foregone. Beating them was never in the cards for us. But we can hope that they will at least know that they were in a fight.

As for me, it's enough that when I finally get to leave this place, I will die knowing that I cheated the gods, and I won. In some small measure, I *won*, and nothing they do can ever take that away.