

Native Hunt
A Shadowrun Short Story
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The elements were in alignment. The four points created the symbolic diamond of the mystic gem which flickered like infernal fire, glistened like oily water, opaque as smoggy air, and solid as torn earth. In the center was the nearly-dead; the perfect coalescence of the antithesis of the Philosopher's stone: Philosopher's Rot. He had been easy to reach, that now nearly lifeless professor of comparative religions who lay face down within the twisted hermetic diagram. A prize easily won by silent stalking through the college campus' shaded groves. He was taken in the night under the statue of a Tyrannosaurus Rex; one of University of Wyoming's, now University of Sioux's, oldest surviving statues.

Steve – no one called him Steve anymore, only hushed whispers in the dark that mouthed the name "Nightmare" – raised his pestle high, his hands gripping the handle with the head descending towards Earth, and slammed the tool into the mortar. The bat-like pestle's blunt head crushed the brain within the large bowl, cracking the mortar into four pieces. The body at the center of the ritual exhaled its last breath.

Blood dripped from Nightmare's nose. He felt as though his spirit had faded; his soul in search of the medium through which to move his body. But it was not done. The professor's body melted into an acidic molten mass of steam and viscous fluids that ate away at the clothing and enveloped the professor's steel-rimmed spectacles. Nightmare could feel the torment spread out around him; the ritual a dreaded epicenter of suffering, loss, and extermination. As the radius of terror grew, the oozing body at the center of the ritual grew to a great height. And as the morbid mass grew, the torment spread out to nearly a kilometer in all directions of the forgotten prospector's mine; plants wilted, animals fled, metahumans knew despair.

Nightmare felt the voice as much as heard it from behind him, a deep grating voice he had become intimately familiar with over the past two years, "bind the spirit now," it said as if pointing out the avatar of the banal.

"I know," Nightmare thought to himself as he completed the ritual, binding the great form toxic spirit to the coagulating and malformed substance which had been the professor's body.

"The intel is good, goddamnit," Missouri Pete said over his commlink to the rest of his crew as he reached the crest of the hill's ridge. He turned and looked down. Several meters below him, Whiskey John, Alex, Max, and Lovage worked to maneuver around the granite boulders covered in lichen and avoid the cactus growing in between. Where there wasn't cactus or boulders, there was sagebrush which Alex took great joy in crushing under his massive troll-sized boots.

"I don't give a devil rat's ass, Pete," Whiskey John messaged back as he pulled himself up a two meter slab of granite. "Crazy Horse?! Fucking shit-speck hole on I80 in the middle of fucking nowhere! Why'd you pick a target out near Crazy Horse?"

"The intel is good, John. The toxic's head in these hills is worth the money." Pete messaged back to the John as he watched the big man climb up from below, though he knew the rest of the team was listening. He stretched his back and took in his surroundings. To his left, the east, and in front of him lay the small town of Cha-O-Ha, which used to be called Rawlins back when the U.S. still controlled the area. It fell on hard times when the mines, railroad, and BLM moved their jobs elsewhere in Wyoming. It then became a base of operations for the Natives during the Ghost Dance War. As part of the effort to wipe Anglo influences from the new nation, the Sioux Nation renamed the city in the early 2020's in honor of Crazy Horse, using his birth name, though most just referred to the town as Crazy Horse.

"We'd get a million clean if we just handed him over to the Draco Foundation," John replied.

"Half that for the head, and we don't have to worry about taking him alive," Alex responded cheerfully, "sounds like we have a better deal this way."

Pete turned from looking at the town and his crew. To the northwest he could just make out the Sioux military base at Sweetwater, some sixty kilometers away. He could see the dark line of the airstrip and the nearby artificial lake; a byproduct of the old U.S. uranium mine. To the north, there were two more ridges of hills, only one of which his crew needed to cross. Past the hills, in the haze of the distant horizon, Pete could make out the fault scarp white cliffs of the Ferris Mountains, "they look like eyebrows," Pete said to himself in reference to the mountain's cliffs.

"What?" Max asked as she pulled her self up next to Pete.

"The mountains there, in the distance. Looks like eyeless eyebrows."

Max took a moment and studied the bluish peaks, "so they do."

"You feel that?" Lovage said, her voice tight and low as she came up beside Max and Pete.

"The wind? Yeah, it's been blowing since before the mountains were here," Max said pushing stray raven-black strands of hair that had escaped her braids off her brow.

"No," Lovage said as she glared at Max for the flippant remark. "It's not right h...look!" She pointed down the slope to the northeast.

"What'd I miss?" Whiskey John said on reaching the ridge and seeing everyone's attention turned towards the same area.

"Lovage was just informing us," Pete replied.

"Look at the cactus...and the sage."

The four of them scrutinized the plants as Alex brought up the rear, his enormous backpack bulging with equipment. "What?" John asked.

"The cactus, the sage, they're all dead. This place is tainted." Lovage said, her magical senses attuning her to land and sky. The horror of it forced tears to fall from her face. The rest of the crew looked out towards the next ridge which was sparsely covered in wilted wind battered scrub pines, dead sage, and desiccated cacti.

Max looked at Lovage and saw her gaze distant and unfocused. She knew that look; the mage was perceiving the astral space. Max decided to do the same. Though she could not project her spirit through the astral realms, nor could Max cast spells, she had learned how to see into the astral. Max relaxed and began to breathe in the rhythm that she had discovered allowed her to see the other world but a spike of pain shot through the base of her skull, twisting around her brain and weaving jaggedly down her spine. Max cursed and stopped focusing, "I can't see into the astral."

"The taint, it taxes us gifted. Even you, Max. It dampens your abilities. It must be attuned to the toxic...his power here will be inversely greater with respect to our weakness."

"Greeaat," Whiskey John moaned.

"We're getting close then. Final check," Pete commanded.

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The mine, which cut only thirty meters into the side of the hill, hadn't been in use since the 1920s. But just before the Ghost Dace War, the mayor secretly ordered the fire department to store hazardous materials at the old copper mine with the hopes of using the site as a possible national radioactive waste storage site. The contracts for such a site promised to be lucrative and the mayor had even had closed-door talks with Shiwase about selling the rights solely to the corporation. But the war changed everything. The mayor, outspokenly anti-native, was found hanging from the third story window of the Old Wyoming State Penitentiary. The hazardous

materials were forgotten as the front lines swept through the town. Slowly, one by one, over the years the canisters began to leak and as the chemical soup brewed within the mine more canisters degraded and spilled their contents until finally the floor was covered with a foul sludge, the air thick with acids that etched away at the walls like mad otherworldly Neanderthals.

Nightmare squatted at the mouth of the mine, his back towards the darkness, looking down at a black oily pool he had fashioned out of earth he had "stolen" from the uranium reclamation pit at the Sweetwater military base. He swayed slightly to his left and right, his gaze falling past and through the pool into the dark depths not of this world.

"Half-breed," he heard a thick guttural voice call out behind him.

"Do not call me that," he said still lost in the pool.

"But that is what you are," the voice responded, this time sounding as if it were several voices speaking in discordant harmony.

"The Newe is dead. I am no longer half-breed, only half."

"You know that is only half true. You cannot exist as a half, yet you live."

"True."

"Then," the voices began to merge into the singular, "what are you?"

Nightmare's jaw ground out the word, "half-breed."

"But if the Shoshone within you is dead, then what is your other half?" The voice asked with horrid glee.

"You."

"Very good," and with those words Nightmare fell through the pool, descending thousands of kilometers through lightless festering worlds of madness, rot, and pain. He focused on his goal and began to glide on acidic winds until the pallor of a putrid-green sun began to tear through the smog of void. Seeing a dark malignant spot, like some pitch festering tumor, on the desiccated landscape Nightmare began to descend. He drew in close and could make out the dark spot. It was a malignant festering stump of what was once an ancient magnificent oak tree. Upon the stump sat a grey chalice that looked as if it were made out of poisonous lead and half melted with tears of hardened metal running down its sides.

Nightmare drew his dagger, the orichalcum etched blade, the jaw-bone of his father, sat upon a hilt of steel and bone. Its black satin wrapped bone handle warm in his hand. He stepped up to the trunk, his other hand reaching for the chalice. It seemed as if to absorb the light of the hellish sun, shadows on its surface, light weeping from the edges of the tears.

"As below, so above," he incanted and grabbed the object.

A great shadow arose from the far side of the stump, coalescing into madness itself. A form like that of a four-armed man, only rotted and pulpy like a diseased tree from which criminals are hung, took shape and roared, "you dare!"

"I succeed!" Nightmare roared back and swiftly drew his blade across his forearm. Sending the chalice to his dagger hand, he let the blood flow into the cup.

Shades arose from under the exposed blackened roots of the stump, pulling upon his legs. But Nightmare stood fast. The pustulent tree-thing rose up, towering over stump and man, and the roots of the stump began to tear free of the sickened ground. But Nightmare heeded them not. He pulled from a pouch the gory brains from his earlier ritual and dropped them into the chalice and then grabbed the cup with his bloody free hand.

The shadowy talons of the shades at his feet tore into his calves and he nearly fell. Haunting visions of failed quests for the chalice filled his spirit, ancient souls from the past age of magic trapped for eternity, driven mad, stripped of self. Punishment for their failure.

Nightmare roared again and drove his dagger into the contents of the chalice. Noxious steam exploded into a cloud and he deftly threw the contents upon the stump. Greenish fire leapt up where the gore struck the dead tree and the great spirit's scream shattered the essences of the shades. The fires gave birth to a conflagration that consumed the stump and spirit alike. In a flash, all was silent, and the putrid sun shown down upon a still and lifeless landscape.

"I succeed," Nightmare hissed and then began to ascend towards the pool, chalice in hand.

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"Goddamnit!" Alex yelled over the commlink. He was sitting safely at the far end of the valley which ran northwest to southeast and curved to the south, blocking his line of sight to the mine.

"What?" Whispered Missouri Pete.

"This wind! It's playing havoc with the fly," Alex was nearly nauseous as the augmented reality window of the MCT Fly-spy video, fed directly to his brain via his commlink, swirled and spun as the five centimeter drone was buffeted about the sky above the canyon.

"Bring it low, the walls of the valley are blocking much of the wind," Pete said.

"Right," Alex replied and sent the mechanical insect into a nose dive. The wind pushed it several meters laterally and even lifted it back up several times before it finally came low to the ground and regained control. "That did it," Alex smiled and mentally commanded

the machine to fly low to the ground, then up the side of the valley. He parked the drone on a large rock some ten meters outside the mine's entrance.

A hundred meters further down from the drone, Missouri Pete lay flat on a lower ledge of a thirty meter cliff that ran along the northern side of the valley. His Walther MA-2100 sniper rifle's barrel extending several centimeters past a dead sagebrush, the branches cleared to allow the scope a clear view of the mine and its entrance.

Lovage crouched down on the southern side of the valley, up a small ravine. She was intently watching the mine, waiting for their target to emerge. She could barely make out Whiskey Pete and Max who were crouched above the mine waiting to leap upon their target should the others fail. Max was focusing inward, fortifying her body for the battle to come through her mystical connection to her own essence.

A patch of red to Lovage's right caught her attention. She turned to look and there, from the base of a boulder, three Indian Paintbrush flowers bent where the wind directed. "They aren't dead?" she whispered with a smile and then reached out as she drew her ceremonial dagger. She whispered a prayer to the spirits and cut one of the three flowers free and then gently placed it in her talismonger pouch.

"Holy shit!" Whiskey John's words electronically projected to his team members via their commlinks.

"What?" Pete replied urgently.

"You won't believe this," Max said, "The fucker is emerging from the pool!"

"What?" Pete asked confused.

"Got it, here's the feed," Alex said and piped the video feed of his drone, which sat on the bolder that blocked Pete and Lovage's view of the event, to the rest of the team. The video displayed on Pete's cybereyes and on the HUD of Lovage's glasses.

"Holy shit," Pete whispered. The video feed revealed a shaven head emerging from a pool of brackish oily liquid that could only have been centimeters deep at best. Rivulets of the foul waters ran off the man's smooth scalp as a hand emerged and reached out for solid ground.

"Now?" Whiskey John pleaded.

"No. Hold," Pete replied sharply.

"It's a portal. The pool's a gate, a rift!" Lovage relayed to the team.

"I thought you couldn't take your body into the astral?" Max said, her grip tightening on the handle of her hand-made spear as the unnatural emergence continued.

"I know, right? This guy's way over my head," Lovage cringed as if hiding lower behind the rocks would block out the vision being played out on her glasses.

"Just keep to the plan," Pete messaged to his crew as he eyed the video feed while looking through the rifle's scope trying to time the moment the toxic magician's head would rise into view from behind the boulder.

Lovage squinted at the video feed, the man held something in his left hand, it looked like a dull grey opaque melted wine glass.

The bald oil-slicked head rose up, cresting the horizon of the boulder like an apocalyptic moon, and Pete fired.

The armor piercing round traveled at nearly a kilometer per second and would have reached its target at just over a tenth of a second, but after traveling for 0.096 seconds, just sixteen meters from piercing the base of the target's neck, a shimmering field of ethereal force enveloped the now standing, toxin soaked, man. Reactively, the man jerked as his protective shield took effect, and the round merely grazed his shoulder, blood, mingling with the chemical sheen, began to gently leak down his arm.

A fifth of a second later the man heard the muffled shot coming from up the valley.

Max leapt from her position just as Whiskey John fired two rounds from his Ares Predator. From the mine blazed a sulfurous oozing mass of chemical chaos. So large and swift, it intercepted both Max's descent and John's bullets. The rounds hissed harmlessly into the acidic mess as if hellishly embracing the added lead. Unable to control her parabolic arc midair, Max landed against the mass and kicked her self off of it to land on the ground nearby. Jelly-like slime steamed as it slowly ate away at her clothing and boot until it reached her flesh. Her eyes welled up from the pain.

To either side of Max rushed shimmering nearly-invisible spirits that manifested on the physical plane; one as a dust-devil whirlwind, the other a column of flame. Both tore into the terrible oozing chemical horror. "I don't think my spirits will be able to..." Lovage was cut off as Pete fired another round from his Walther.

This time the shot knocked the man down just before he could complete an incantation. "Target down," Missouri Pete said as he watched the final moments of the man's fall through the video feed of the MCT spy-fly drone's camera, "Focus on that thing."

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Nightmare lay still. His entire body wracked in such agonizing pain that he was blinded and deafened by it. It took all his will to

ignore the wound. He could feel his grip still on the chalice. He reached out with his senses, calling a name only he alone knew. Within seconds he felt the presence and whispered to it through blood choked lungs, "help me."

"You know the cost, half-breed," it grated.

"Yes."

Immediately he felt a searing warmth arc through his body. His wound closed, his right lung sealing itself, his bones and muscles re-knitting themselves. He was healed and euphoric as if his body held no weight. Then the presence was gone. Forever freed from Nightmare's command. Its name erased from his mind.

Nightmare opened his eyes. The shadow of his oozing guard hovered over him, fighting off spirits, a woman, and a man. Then he saw the fly on the rock. He knew immediately that it was unnatural, a man-made machine. He focused on it, his lips curling into a snarl, then clenched his fist. The drone on the rock, two meters away, imploded and let out an electrical pop as its frame crushed into its circuits and battery.

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"We got this," Whiskey Pete sang with bravado, swinging his axe into the malevolent spirit just as the horrific creature pounded a fist-like appendage into Lovage's fire elemental and sending it back to its astral metaplane home.

"My fire spirit's dead." Lovage sent over the commlink to her companions, "the astral is bad here. I'm sorry we're not much help." She focused again and sent another arrow of pure mana at the toxic spirit. If it was damaging the thing, the monstrosity did not react to it. And each casting taxed her stamina.

"Shit!" Alex cursed.

"Why'd you take the video feed down?" Pete asked.

"I didn't! Something else did."

"Shit! The toxic mage is still alive, people!" Pete called out over the connection to the crew.

Max sidestepped a flailing acidic appendage in order to look behind the oozing thing for the fallen man. She winced as she momentarily placed her weight on her left foot where the slime had eaten away several layers of skin. "He's gone," she sent over the airwaves to her team as she quickly scanned the empty space around the pool. Max started to shift her sight into the astral but was met with the sharp pain in her nerves again.

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Nightmare exhaled as he cloaked himself in the protection of an invisibility spell. Just as he began to inhale a woman stepped out from the side of his furiously flailing guardian spirit. She was beautiful, tall, dark skinned, sharp-eyed with an elegant aquiline nose. She wasn't Shoshone, no, but she was of the people, the blood was there. Nightmare caught himself. He didn't care. He was no longer of the people, he was only their death.

So enraptured by her countenance Nightmare almost failed to recognize that she was starting to astrally perceive. When he finally came to his sense he cringed for he was sure her spear would be through his heart before he could react. But then she winced and cursed.

His toxic guardian spirit swung wildly behind itself at the woman, but she easily ducked the attack. He heard the male on the other side of the spirit sink his axe deep into the oozing guardian, which shuddered and visibly shrunk in size by nearly a meter, to which the attacking male let out a string of joyous expletives.

The woman's head spun in the direction of the attack and she began to shift her weight so as to engage the hulking beast. Nightmare's lips once again curled into a snarling smile as he began to cast another spell. But in bringing up his hand, his elbow kicked a pebble into the pool beside him. The woman's eyes went wide, her lips mouthing something that he couldn't hear, as her spear shot down straight at his abdomen.

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Max never heard the pebble plop into the pool; the violent sloshing and grinding noise of the spirit and John's vulgar war cries drowned out everything save the wind. But she saw the ripples in the pool out of the corner of her eye, "he's invisible," she sub-vocally messaged to the rest of the crew as she swiftly thrust her spear at a subtle depression in the dirt that vaguely looked like the impression of a lower back.

As her spear descended, the weakened but still wildly powerful corrupted spirit's appendage slammed against Max's shoulder, shoving her down and into the boulder by the pool. Her spear missed its mark and sunk into the foul water, tearing a line across the dirt boundary as her grip dragged the spear with her.

The toxic jelly burnt on her right shoulder, as her left connected with the boulder. With such force was she slammed that even after the great rock stopped her shoulder, her head continued on, slapping her temple against the rock as her neck popped at the strain.

Max stumbled, but swiftly regained her ground. She cocked her neck in the opposite direction, relieving a symmetrical cracking sound. She ignored the blood coming down her temple.

Just as Max gripped her spear for another jab, she could see the outline in the dirt of the man's form kicking away. She aimed again but her concentration was cut short as a high pitched scream erupted from on the other side of the spirit.

Lovage stifled her own scream. She was looking into the astral as she watched the toxic spirit grab Whiskey John by the arm and yank him hard to the right. She could see his emotions, his aura, darken with pain. Pulling free from the grasp, John tried to raise his axe for another swing but only his right arm seemed to listen. John looked at his left shoulder, his clothing eaten away by the acid jelly, his flesh dripping as his cyberarm's weight pulled the artificial limb free of the corroded boiling flesh. Then the cybernetic arm fell to the ground just as Max back stepped enough to see it twitch once in the dirt.

With John screaming at the empty space where his left arm once was, the hulking spirit stepped back, swatting at Lovage's air elemental as if it were nothing more than a horsefly, and turned towards Max just as another bolt of energy slammed into its torso from Lovage.

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Relieved, Nightmare began scooting back only to feel fear rise within him as the woman survived his guardian's slam and focused back on him. He then heard the man scream and watched as the woman backed up to see what was happening. Nightmare, taking advantage of the woman's distraction, backed up another meter and then stood; again focusing on casting a spell at the woman. But even before he could draw the first twisted ribbons of magical energy around him for the spell, his spirit moved and blocked his line of sight to the woman. He cursed. Then he noticed on the opposite side of the valley, up a small ravine, there was a woman. Not of the people but small, blonde, petite, anglo, weak and worthless. He focused his power on her. As he neared completion he realized her eyes were not focused on anything, her face overly slack and relaxed. It was then that he realized she could see him in the astral, and that she too was casting a spell.

A second before his spell could take effect he saw a shimmering aura surround him. He ignored the simple illusion and completed his spell, connecting the dark spool of mana that he had gathered to the soul of the woman at the other side of the valley.

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"That's him," Lovage said to Pete over the commlink as her spell illuminated the man's invisible form. Then a thunderous force of pallid energy slammed into her. Lovage had protected herself against magics as best as she could when they entered the toxic mage's territory, but with the tainted land and the toxic's greater power here, the spell tore through her defenses, crushing her spirit, draining her soul. Blood spurted from her lips and out her nose as she slumped over. Her illusion spell fading.

That brief moment was all that Pete needed. The glimmering light outlined the invisible man's form. Pete nudged his rifle to the left, aimed, and fired. The armor piercing round reached its target just as Lovage's illusion spell faded. There was a spray of blood as the man's chest was ripped through for the second time within as many minutes.

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Nightmare felt the blood rush from his body like a summer thunderstorm torrent. His lips whispered but no voice answered. He couldn't even hear his heart beat. But somewhere, out in the distance, he thought he could hear malevolent laughter. With one last act of will, Nightmare clenched his left hand. The chalice was gone. Then all was black for Nightmare.

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Max was dodging and weaving the horrifically deft appendages of the grotesquely viscous apparition-made-manifest while she frantically thrust and jabbed her spear over and over again into its semi-fluid form. The magic of the spear helped to protect it from the acidic corrosives of the creature, and with each hit the spirit diminished bit by bit until finally Lovage's air elemental became more than a nuisance as it buffeted the toxic spirit about.

The muffled sound of Pete's silenced sniper rifle echoed off the valley's walls. "Mage is down...again," Pete messaged to his crew as he kept his sights firmly centered on the now visible body.

Whiskey John regained his senses. Raising his axe awkwardly with just his right hand, he began swinging mercilessly into the spirit until the acids ate away the blade and he was simply clubbing the toxic monstrosity with the haft.

Lovage's air elemental slammed hard into the toxic spirit, sending John to the ground from the force. Max side stepped the two

spirits as they nearly merged. The malevolent spirit again shrunk and was now only as large as a man. The air elemental dissipated. Max gripped her spear with both hands and lunged in at the toxic's back. Sinking the blade deep, she arced up tearing a deep crevasse through its form and ripping free through its amorphous head.

Whiskey Pete laid on the ground, eyes closed, just waiting for the spirit to finish him. When death did not come, he opened his eyes and saw a spear tip rip through the top of the spirits form. As the spear exited he thought he saw a pair of glasses, caught on the spear then flung free, tumbling end over end through the air and landing with a cracking of both lenses.

Like a punctured balloon filled with rotted milk, the foul spirit dropped to the ground. Max leapt back, avoiding all but a small spray of the acidic substance on her legs, but John bathed in the corrosive thick liquids as they splashed over the earth. He screamed. Then fell unconscious.

* * *

"How's everyone doing?" Alex asked as he piloted the thunderbird across the Red Desert just under Mach.

From the cabin of the GMC Banshee Pete watched the monitors displaying Lovage and Max's vital signs. "Lovage is stable," Pete replied.

Max, half-naked with her head, shoulders, legs and foot bandaged, looked from Pete to John who was laid out next to Lovage. Despite their best attempts they couldn't get all of the toxic material off of John and even now the bandages on his legs were slowly being eaten away by the stuff.

"And John?" Alex asked.

"Not good, but my doc in Rock Springs should be able to take care of him, though he isn't cheap."

"Well then," Alex said with a laugh, "we know how John's spending his share of the reward."

Pete looked from John to the large container with biohazard signs on its lid and sides, "If we get to the doc in time."

"Shit," Alex sang, "in this baby, we could stop for lunch in Denver and still have time."