

Blood Curse: Werewolf for Hire

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The man in the grey suit was good, I'll give him that. The first punch he'd thrown had been a feint to put me off balance for a side kick to the ribs that would put a man in the hospital, if it connected. As it was I was just barely able to recover my balance in time to sidestep the kick and close with him. I managed to catch the outstretched leg with my left arm. Having an opponent's leg is not as much of an advantage as you would expect when you are fighting someone who is well trained. Sure enough, Grey Suit grabbed at my free arm in an attempt to flip me off of him. I lifted his leg as high as I could and kicked the side of his left knee. The angle was good and the knee gave out allowing me to knock him off balance and drive him forcefully into the stone wall behind him. He was dazed at this point and a quick jab to the temple put him out. It would have been no problem to finish him, but that wasn't necessary and I didn't need anymore blood on my hands, even if it was just another hired gun.

I patted him down and quickly found a Glock 10mm pistol in a fancy shoulder rig along with two spare clips of ammunition. I checked the safety on the gun and tucked it into the waist of my pants at the small of my back. With my shirt pulled down it wouldn't show to a casual observer and it was within easy reach if needed. I had my own side arm, a Beretta 9mm, but I liked Glock pistols and it wouldn't hurt to pick up a spare. The fact that it would be untraceable to me was just an added bonus.

I dragged Grey Suit's limp body along the edge of the wall until I came to a row of hedges about 15 yards further back from where we were. I thought about it for a minute more and checked his pockets. Sure enough there was a key card there. A quick look in his wallet revealed a small slip of paper with a four digit number on it. This was either his pin number for his bank account or the access code that goes with the key card. I took both and smiled. Sometimes people are too predictable. I then took a small bottle of ether from inside the black jacket I had on and dabbed a bit onto a cloth. I held it over his mouth and nose until I was satisfied he'd breathed in a good dose. Between the concussion and the ether, I figured I'd have at least couple of hours before he'd be in any shape to tell anyone what happened.

The lighting along this side of the villa's wall wasn't great. From my earlier surveillance I knew that the darkness was a temporary illusion. If the alarms were tripped, the whole area for 50 yards around the villa would light up as bright as day in the glare of dozens of high-powered halogen lights mounted along the top of the wall at 30 foot increments on all sides. Right now, only every third light was on. I guess even crime lords have to worry about the electric bill sometimes. Whatever the case, the shadows made it much easier for me to move undetected along the wall. I just had to be careful in the bright regions every 60 feet or so.

Having Grey Suit's key card made getting into the compound much easier. He'd come out of an access door on the back side of the wall encircling the villa. This was the side I'd made my approach on simply because it is the least watched. The fact that only about

20 yards from the wall is a sheer cliff face that drops off about 100 feet into the Pacific Ocean made this the road less traveled. In my book the road less traveled is the path trouble always chooses, but then sometimes I'm a cynical bastard.

I slid the key card into the slot next to the number pad by the door. Once the card was in, a tiny LCD screen blinked to life and asked for my pass code. I typed in the numbers on the paper and was pleased when the small red light on the pad flashed green and I heard the click of the bolt disengaging. I had some equipment with me in a small backpack that would have let me make short work of bypassing the lock, but I never look a gift horse in the mouth.

I opened the door cautiously. According to the hand drawn map I had, this door actually led into the kitchen area of the main house. It was well past two in the morning and I didn't expect to meet anyone in the back pantry of the kitchen, but that didn't mean I shouldn't be careful.

A light was on in the first room I entered. It was a small storage room for dry goods. Since I'd mapped this out as my planned route of access to Don Ramirez's office on the second floor, I was glad to see that so far the building was laid out exactly as it appeared on the drawings I had. As I made my way through the rest of the servants' areas on the first floor I found that my maps were worth their weight in gold. I'd have to remember to thank Sam when I got back. I don't know where he gets all his information, but he definitely came through on this one.

It took another 30 minutes or so for me to move through the house and make my way upstairs. The tricky part was once I reached the upstairs office itself. The alarm system for the house and surrounding grounds was geared towards keeping people out. Once inside, you didn't have to think much of it, I'd had to dodge a couple of other "Grey Suits" on my way up here and it was their job to see to security inside the building. Except that was not the case for Ramirez's office. He was in Las Vegas for the week meeting with several of his "known associates" as the dossier called them. I didn't have a clue what the meeting was about and I didn't care. All I did know was that he was not going to be home again for several days and getting what I had come for was much easier with him out of the way, or so I hoped.

The map showed his office at the end of a short hallway. Sure enough, there it was behind two heavy double oak doors. Another key pad was installed in the wall next to these doors. I briefly considered trying my luck with the pass key I had, but decided that I didn't want to risk tripping the alarm if Grey Suit didn't have authorization to open those doors. I proceeded down the hall and stopped at a door to the left of the office. This was an administrative office for Ramirez's personal assistant and, if the map was right, it held a connecting door. There was no visible alarm system on this door, but just to make sure, I ran a quick sweep with another toy I brought along. This one detected the kind of magnetic fields used in most alarm systems. When I was satisfied it was clear, I tried the lock. Oddly enough it was open. So I simply walked into the assistant's office. It was a neat, well organized little office with very nice, if not overly flashy, furnishings. As I shut

the door behind me, I noted the several other doors in the room. One door on the right and connected her office with Ramirez's, and there were two to my left, a supply closet and a bathroom.

The lights Ramirez's office were not on, but there was a large fish tank positioned between the two doors on the left that was lit up brightly to show off the tropical fish inside. Salt water fish, what a nightmare to keep those alive, of course I generally consider the only good fish to be the one sliced up for my sushi. I did appreciate the tank for one reason though as it cast its eerie, quivering bluish glow around the room, providing enough light for me to work by.

I knelt by the door to the main office and examined the lock. The same style keypad as the others was present. I took off the small backpack I'd been wearing and pulled out what could best be described as a mutant palm pilot. The big difference between it and a normal palm, besides the fact that the hardware and software inside had been significantly upgraded, was the thin, flat ribbon cable running from the palm's top and ending in a card almost exactly like the one I'd removed from Grey Suit. I inserted the card in the security slot and started the program on the palm.

While the program ran through all its voodoo-witch doctor electronic magic I pulled a small box from my bag. This contained a fingerprint kit which I used to dust the key pad. It quickly became apparent which numbers were the commonly pushed ones and I paused the palm's program and entered that data. When it started up again the palm ran for less

than a minute when it stopped and the light on the keypad flashed from red to green. I smiled as I heard the faint “click” of the lock opening.

I opened the door so slowly that it took a full minute for me to get it wide enough to look into the room. There was some light coming in from a large bay style window in the back of the office revealing the expensive looking furnishings within. Heavy antique chairs with leather cushions; a huge, intricately carved oak desk with a black marble top; and a fireplace to one side with a carved marble mantle that matched the desk top. I used a small mirror to check the areas I couldn't see without opening the door further. I didn't see anything, so I cautiously entered the room.

I found what I was looking for right away. On the wall opposite me there was a large portrait of a strikingly handsome man posed holding a Winchester rifle in his arms and surrounded by hounds. The face in the painting was Ramirez, but the artist had taken some probably not unadvised artistic license when it came to his body. The man in the painting looked like a professional athlete ready to spring into action. The real Enrico Ramirez hadn't sprung into action for anything other than dinner for quite a while. I gave the frame of the painting a tug and it swung out on concealed hinges to reveal the small wall safe hidden behind.

The safe was electronically locked with yet another combination keypad. I was about to begin the tedious process of cracking the safe when the double doors to my right burst open. The room must have been sound-proofed because I should have heard the three

lugs coming a mile off. Dressed in loose fitting camo-pants and jackets, and carrying automatic weapons (the venerable AK 47 assault rifle favored by third world thugs everywhere I noted) they had kicked open the door. One had his rifle leveled squarely at me as the other two began to advance smiling evilly as they came closer with their weapons raised.

“Step away from the safe and keep your hands where I can see them” the one by the doorway barked at me in thickly accented Spanish.

I speak Spanish fluently but I decided to go for a quick feint. If you are going to escape a situation like this, your best chance is in the very first few minutes while your opponents do not have you fully under control and don't know your capabilities.

“I don't understand you! I'm here from the gas company to check your wiring!” I said slapping the biggest, stupidest grin on my face I could manage and backing away from the men approaching me. “You've gotta hell of a squirrel issue here, let me tell you.” I continued and pointed at the safe on the wall.

The man in the doorway was still watching me with his gun casually pointed in my general direction. He obviously felt like I wasn't a real threat since I had no visible weapons and they outnumbered me three to one. “Hands up you stupid ass or I'll kill you now!” he growled and motioned with the barrel of his rifle.

As the two men had approached slowly, I'd been back peddling to keep my distance.

Until I felt my back hit the desk. I stumbled a little, like it caught me off balance. Then everything happened at once. The goons coming in at me took the stumble as an opening and moved in quickly to grab my arms, each dropping his gun to let it hang by a strap

from their shoulders. I had reached back with my hands as if to steady myself and grabbed the handles of two leaf-bladed throwing knives I had tucked away in gravity holsters on my back under my jacket. A snap of the clasp holding each knife in place and they dropped smoothly into my hands. As the first thug grabbed my left arm above the elbow with both hands, I brought my forearm up and stabbed him in the right bicep. The knife went in up to the hilt and, needless to say, he let go and grabbed at his now useless arm to remove the knife, the point of which was now sticking out the other side of his arm.

The other one had stepped directly between me and the man at the door. As I stabbed the one on the left, I twisted pulling that arm the rest of the way free and brought up my right arm with the other knife. The twist had put the second man on my right side. He bear hugged me, actually picking me up off the ground and pinning my upper arms. I was still able to move my lower arms and stabbed down and back with the knife in my right hand as hard as I could. I felt it sink into his right thigh and my hand jarred as the knife hit bone. He dropped me as one of his hands grabbed the knife in his thigh and the other groped almost blindly for me. I grabbed the grasping hand with both of my own and twisted his wrist sharply down and around, locking the arm at full extension and forcing his shoulder down.

The man by the door charged in with his gun pointed at me but not firing. I had control of the man with the knife in his leg and was using my leverage to maneuver the bigger man, keeping him between me and the barrel of the rifle. As the door goon got closer, I shoved

with all my strength against the locked arm of *Mr. Knife-in-my-leg* and he stumbled backwards. Only the grip I had on his arm prevented him from falling. Gravity and inertia were there to pick up where my arm left off when I let go and he fell backwards into the third man as he advanced. I grabbed another knife from my belt and threw it into the third goon who was already recovered from his stumbling collision and was raising the AK-47 to fire.

The distance was short for a knife throw, not more than six or seven feet and the knife hit home right where I intended. The blade was now sticking out of the gunman's right shoulder just above the arm pit. The rifle fell to the floor as I leapt, slamming into him hard and knocking him over. I followed him down and grabbed his greasy hair on each side of his head. One quick slam and he was out. Unfortunately the man with the knife in his arm had extracted it and was coming at me with it gripped in his left hand. I was still on all fours on top of the now unconscious man. Instead of rising up, I rolled left and kicked out, catching his knife hand on the inside as I rolled. The knife flew from his hand and stuck in the wooden paneling of the wall a few feet from the safe.

Despite losing the knife the man kept coming, yelling out a comment about my mother that I won't repeat and I am fairly certain isn't true. I ducked under a clumsy haymaker punch he threw with his good arm, and the ridge of my hand met at the base of his skull in a sharp chop before he could recover. He went out and I turned my attention to the last man, the one with the knife in his leg. He wasn't moving and I could see that he'd landed badly and was also out cold.

I checked the hall and didn't hear any alarms or see anyone coming, but that didn't mean much. I closed the double doors and picked up one of the now discarded machine guns. The lock on the doors was splintered but the handles were still in place. I took the gun and hung it by its strap over the door handles then twisted it and looped it again over the door handle. A quick spin and it was tied off tight. I didn't think it would hold long, but the doors were sturdy and it should slow down any visitors. I jammed one of the nice leather backed chairs under the other door at an angle, then I returned my attention to the safe.

No time now for subtlety, I rummaged into my backpack and pulled out a sealed tube. I snapped off the end and curled it like a toothpaste tube spreading a thick gray paste in a line around the edge of the safe's door. When that was done, I squeezed out a bit extra into a little mound in the corner and stuck a small silver cap in it. I sidestepped with my back to the wall and pressed a button on a small transmitter. If you were hoping for a jarring explosion, you'd be disappointed by the exaggerated pop and sizzle that followed. After about 15 seconds, the thermite derivative and magnesium detonator had done their job and the safe door thumped loudly to the floor, its edges still glowing white hot.

It was a fairly large model for a wall safe, with three small shelves inside. The first shelf held several bundles of cash in various currencies; I skipped over this and went to the second shelf. It held what appeared to be a gold plated Ruger Nighthawk pistol, and ammunition for it, as well as a black velvet box, the sort you'd use to hold a very

valuable piece of jewelry. The third shelf held the prize I was after. Six small figures, each about the size of a Barbie doll, two female, four male. Each had a tag tied to the leg stating a different name and each one had a small pouch tied neatly around its neck. I didn't know what each pouch contained specifically, but I knew it would be hair, nail clippings, a vial of blood (with anti-coagulant mixed in) or some other similar item collected from the person named on the tag. I reached for the figures. The next thing I knew, I was laying against the far wall, smoke rising from my gloved hand. The fingers of the gloves were now burned and cracked, but at least my fingers didn't show any signs of damage.

I got to my feet a little unsteadily and decided that I'd been luckier than I thought considering the force of the ward had knocked me across the room. I went back to the safe and studied the contents again. Nothing inside the safe showed any sign that it had even been disturbed.

I pulled a small crystal on a silver chain from my front pocket. I should have done this before I messed with the safe at all, but I had been so distracted by the mundane that I forgot the whole reason I was here and what that could mean for security.

I held the crystal close to the money on the bottom shelf and the assorted contents of the second shelf. Nothing from the money but I did get a faint glow when the crystal was near the ammunition. Probably cursed bullets. Mean son of a bitch! Even if you survive the shot, you get stuck with some other bit of nastiness. I moved the crystal up to the third

shelf and it glowed brightly when I waved it near the figures. The glow faded as I moved the crystal farther from the figures. I smiled. I may not be able to conjure a puff of smoke, but I know sloppy warding when I see it.

I removed the biggest item in the small pack I was carrying. The intricately carved wooden box looked like a fine cigar box but was covered in a writing I couldn't understand and had finely worked silver hinges and clasp. I opened the box, triggering a spell laid on it. The runic writing lit up in a pale green color. I reached into the safe and slowly pulled out the shelf that the dolls were resting on. Sure enough, it slid out just like it was designed to (adjustable shelves are handy). I tipped the contents of the shelf into the cigar box.

The box did not look as though it would hold all the figures, but they fell unceremoniously into it without a hitch. Then, just because, I took the second shelf out and dumped its contents in as well. I only wanted the ammunition and the gun, but until I had a chance to have Tabitha look at the bullets, and figure out what was on them, I wasn't going to even touch them. Despite my earlier mistake, I am generally much more careful when dealing with magical items.

I took one last look into the box before closing it. The gun, ammunition, figures and the velvet jewelry case were all jumbled inside with what appeared to be plenty of additional room. I closed the lid and watched the writing flash from green to red and then the glow faded. The silver clasp was now tarnished and looked rusted. When I held the crystal next

to the box there wasn't even a spark. A deck of magician's playing cards wouldn't read as mundanely as the box. Perfect.

I placed the box back in my bag, and threw the cash from the safe in on top of it. Waste not, want not, I always say! Now I just had to figure out how to get out of here. At that moment, I heard a banging at the door and a number of voices apparently shouting from outside (good sound proofing). An intercom on the desk barked to life with the sound of an authoritative voice from outside speaking in heavily accented English "Gringo, you can get out of here alive if you open the door and give up. Otherwise we gonna come in and you are never gonna come out!" His thick accent would have made his words sound comical, except for the deadly nature of the situation.

I dragged one of the unconscious men over and laid him out across the foot of the door. He was a heavy guy and made an excellent dead weight.

"Hey gringo, don't be a damn fool. Give up and you might just get out of here alive, heh. What do you say?" he paused, "I'll give you one minute to think about it.

Just what I needed. Tuco from "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly" threatening me in marginal English. I checked the side door to make sure it was locked and that the chair I placed in front of it was secure. I took my backpack off, and stripped off my clothes. I stuffed them into the pack with everything else except the Glock I'd taken earlier. I chambered a round in it and stepped around the desk. The view from the window was

excellent. I could see for miles in the pale light of the half moon. The ocean waves rolling in the distance, the security lights that had been dark when I came in, now blazing to life lighting up the courtyard below and the grounds outside. Oh yeah, and a whole lot of guys with guns running around both inside and outside the villa's high stone wall.

I stepped back from the window and bunched up the straps on the backpack, putting both of them in my mouth. I raised the Glock and first shot five random rounds into the double doors behind me. I shot high and figured I wouldn't hit anyone on the other side, but at the same time it would most likely startle them and give me a bit of confusion to work with.

Sure enough, a second after I stopped firing the door began to splinter as it was hit by heavy fire from the other side. In the confines of the room the sound was deafening, and the shrapnel from the door was whizzing dangerously around me, but I was already on my way out. I emptied the rest of the rounds in a quick spasm of fire directed at the window behind the desk. I dropped the gun even as the last spent casing popped from the side ejector slot.

The window had shattered outward under the fire and I leapt as hard and far as I could. I willed the change as my feet left the ground and felt my body shift. It wasn't an instant change, but it didn't have a lot of dramatic movie effects either. If you were looking up from the courtyard 20 feet below as I leapt out, you'd see the shape of a medium sized

man, and then it would be like I went out of focus and by the time you finished blinking to clear your eyes, the man was gone and only the shape of a large wolf would remain.

If you kept watching, you'd see that wolf, with a backpack in its muzzle, land gracefully in the courtyard, right in front of two startled men and then bound off before they could react. By the time the men in the house had broken into the office and gotten to the shattered window to look out, they would just catch a glimpse of the wolf leaping to the top of a truck and from there over the high wall and out of sight. Tell me I can't make an exit when I have to!

Because of the dramatic escape and dash across the countryside to the forest, I was forced to abandon the small boat I'd rented to get me to the base of the cliff unobserved. I wasn't too worried. I'd rented the boat from a local fisherman. It was an unmarked piece of junk and I didn't see any way it could be traced back to him or me when it was found. I'd paid the man \$100 U.S. to use the boat, no questions asked. That was easily more than twice what it was worth.

The woods near the villa were thick, dark and (to a human) scary looking. When I am a wolf my perceptions change accordingly. I saw the area as extremely inviting. It would hide me from my enemies and allow me to hunt with ease if I so desired.

With my hearing, and other senses enhanced, the gloom of the forest was as clear as day. I could hear shouting and motors, even the occasional gun shot, from a few miles behind me. Those noises faded as I quickly moved deeper into the wilderness. I looked up through the trees and found the moon. Based on its position, I was actually running ahead of schedule. I relaxed my pace from a run to more of a decent trot and took in my surroundings.

Men had come into this forest recently hunting. I could smell the stench associated with gunfire and death. Modern weapons don't emit the clouds of smoke that old style black powder guns did, but cordite still leaves a distinct scent. Soon enough I came upon the

body of a deer. It was a doe; she'd been shot through the chest twice by a high powered rifle and it looked like she'd died almost immediately. Out of curiosity I sniffed around a bit more and found where the hunters had been. There had been three men, all drinking heavily from the taint their scents carried. They had been hiding out behind a thicket of bushes barely 50 feet from where the deer lay. I honestly don't know how they could have been quiet enough for the deer to wander that close to them without realizing they were there, but I guess it was their lucky day.

I don't object to hunting. I can't without being hypocritical. Part of the nature of my gift (to some it's a curse, but not to me) is that I do have certain urges that must be satisfied from time to time. So once or twice a month I will hunt in the forests near my home. I will hunt, kill and feed. It is not pretty or nice, but it is, pardon the pun, the nature of the beast. This however was not true hunting. This was needless slaughter. If you kill it, you should eat it. The wolf in me, or I guess the "me in the wolf", understood this concept clearly and was sickened by the pointless death.

I jerked my head back the direction I'd come from. I could hear movement and voices behind me. They were not that close, but I was wasting my lead sniffing around instead of heading for the alternate rendezvous I'd set up.

I sniffed the air and took a moment to figure out my bearings in the woods. Soon enough, I caught wind of what I was looking for and bolted off to my left away from the approaching men.

It took me less than ten minutes to cover the remaining few miles to the rendezvous. I'd found the little-used dirt road the night before when I'd scouted the villa out in wolf form. The van we were using looked like an old UPS van, right down to the crappy brown paint on it. Hell, for all I know it was an old UPS van. I could make out its shape through the trees even before I came to the edge of the woods around the road.

I was still a good ten yards or so from the tree line when the other smells around the van finally cut through the stench of patchouli incense, a small brazier full of it was set up and burning behind the van to act as my homing beacon should I need it. (With the wind on my side I could smell that awful stuff at a range of five miles easily). I should have picked up on it earlier, but I hadn't. I dropped my bag and crept silently forward.

The van was there, but I couldn't see Sam. He should have been there waiting for me. But I could smell him; he was here or at least nearby, and then I picked up something else about his scent. It was mixed with blood. The hackles on my back rose and my teeth came out of my muzzle in an evil, silent snarl. I moved along the tree line outside of unaided human sight until I was about 30 yards up the road from the front of the van. No sign of anyone around so I bolted across the lane into the woods on the other side and proceeded back towards the van. That's when I heard them. They were speaking quietly in Spanish and I cursed the patchouli for covering their scents. I was just going to have to breakdown and get a GPS system for stuff like this, it is the twentieth century after all.

“Hector said to hold him” the first voice said in just above a whisper.

“Well he’s held isn’t he?” another voice sharply replied. I heard a sound like someone smacking an uncooked steak against a marble counter.

“Stop it man! If you bust his jaw up, he won’t be able to talk.”

“Does it matter? What can he say that we don’t know? This is private land and he was trespassing, so we shoot him and dump the body out in the woods. These are the boss’s lands; the police don’t come here without an invitation. Why are we even bothering? When the other one shows up, we grab him and we are heroes man.”

I could see them now. They were in the trees just ahead of me, set up behind some bushes so they’d have a good view of anyone approaching the van. Sam was tied to a tree behind them, blood dripping from his mouth and a nasty looking cut above his left eye. They couldn’t have been at this long, the blood hadn’t even started to dry. Sam started to stir and groaned loudly. At the sound, the man closest to me stood up, hunched over and made his way back to where Sam was tied up.

“That’s it Gringo” he said as he drew a nasty looking machete. “You ain’t making anymore noise... ever.” He smiled wickedly as he brought the blade up, preparing to strike down on the side of Sam’s neck.

I snarled and leapt at him. I was in motion before he could start to bring the blade down. Unfortunately, I waited a hair too long. He heard the snarl and turned, managing to get his other arm up in time to block my jaws from locking onto his throat. He had the

machete ready and brought it down on me. I knew it was coming and rolled, still locked onto his arm with my jaws. The blade cut into my back haunch but he was the one that screamed as my mouth filled with blood from the torn flesh of his arm.

As a wolf, I weigh in at more than 300lbs of muscle, bone and razor sharp teeth and claws. So when I hit him, he went down. I shook my head violently back and forth and was pleased when I tore away from him with a mouthful of moist flesh from his forearm. He continued to scream as I jumped from his prone form just in time. I'd seen the other man begin to move in my peripheral vision, and saw him level his gun. He would have probably put a bullet neatly through my back if I hadn't jumped. Instead, his shot went through where I was a second before. Since I wasn't there, the bullet carried on to the next possible stopping point, which was the prone man's chest.

"Oh Jesus, Miguel!" the first man spat as I charged in on him.

He was still in shock from shooting his friend and I slammed into him like a freight train. No subtlety here and no mercy. Like I said, when I am the wolf, my perceptions change. He was an enemy and had hurt one of my pack. That was enough for me and I was more than enough for him. He screamed as I let the wolf in me have his way. Fortunately for him it didn't take long for the screams to stop.

I rose with the taste of blood filling me with fury, and howled into the dark night.