

ACCALIA

By

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They called him Tony the Shoemaker. The man was Antony Marotti, a hustler from the streets of New York City. He had a way of smiling that made his lips appear crooked. When you looked at him during the day, you would think that he was just a typical Italian. However, at night he was a considerable cutthroat. You would not want to mess with Tony.

Short Italian men tend to make up for their lack of height by being exceptionally sly and brutal. He was tiny, energetic, and smart. Of course, there was always a corrupt way about Italians.

Here in the forest, where the gigantic trees grew, Antony Marotti tried to gain as much control as he could—just like in any place in New York City. This night was no exception when he came across a small family—Robert and his wife and their kid. The three were wandering through the forest, trying to find their way out. Tony knew the woods very well and offered to lead them to safety.

There was a rustling sound in the bushes as branches parted off from one another.

"Look! There is a light over there!" the little girl said, pointing up into the sky. Her name was Bailey. She looked happy in beautiful summer clothing, but no one believed her. They didn't even bother to turn. At last Bailey's father, Robert turned his head up, but he saw nothing at all. Bailey, who was strangling a Teddy bear with one arm, clutched her Daddy's hand. She was very wise and too cute for her young age.

Bailey continued looking up at the sky, reassuring herself that those strange lights were no threat to any of them.

In the tree branches, birds were tweeting. On the ground, crickets chirped nonstop. The wind blew dramatically, fluttering everyone's hair. The toupee Antony Marotti wore was not only always tousled, but it didn't even match the color of his real hair.

“Has anybody heard about the legend of Accalia?” Tony asked.

“No I’ve never heard of the legend of Accalia,” Robert said.

He looked insecurely at Mars and Bailey: “Have you guys?” They shook their heads to say no. “I am an Italian, and I have drifted around the world for quite some time. I lived here South of the border for a couple of years. Werewolves in Mexican culture are known as the Nahuales. The belief in Mexican werewolves is as real as it can be. Unlike American culture, where they have made a couple of famous werewolf movies, but that's all—”

A wolf howled in the distance, interrupting him out of his didactic message. Tony stood wide-eyed, and then he threw his tongue in gear again. “The werewolf legend prevalent in Baja California does not mix too much with American werewolf mythology, and ‘El Bosque de Los Nahuales,’ is nothing to fuck around with. I believe men can transform themselves into powerful wild beasts.” There was a pause. “Now, let me repeat, has anyone heard about the legend of Accalia?”

“What’s your point?” said Mars, Robert's wife, sarcastically. “You’re scaring us.” She asked her husband in a low tone of voice: “Are you sure about this man? Can we even trust him?”

“Yes, I am sure,” Robert said. He was startled by the hooting of an old owl from a distance, and he held onto the branches for support so he wouldn’t fall.

"There is an infestation of wolves," Tony said. "I repeat. She lives here, so let's try to stick together for everyone's safety, or the legendary Accalia could get us after midnight when the moon is full."

Another wolf howled from afar as if confirming that Tony was right.

Still pointing at the sky, Bailey said: "LOOOOK! I still see lights up there." The lights were shifting patterns from far away. It seemed as if it was from atop the canyons, where narrow, vertical slots with no easily found routes in or out, would quickly make it difficult for them to get there.

"Those lights over there are the eyes of wolves," Tony said, in his most serious demeanor. "Worst case scenario, it could be the eyes of Accalia, trying to hypnotize us to go to her." Tony held his crooked smile in place. "Like vampires, she can use hypnosis simply by thinking about you and bring you in. Sort of like fishing. You throw in a shiny lure, it glitters on the surface of the water, it attracts the fish, then they bite."

"Thank you for that forensic analogy, Mr. Marotti," Mars said.

Tony looked up at the sky momentarily and paused. There was no moon tonight, and that made it difficult for them to see clearly in the darkness. Better yet, we're lucky the full moon is not out, or else.

Three days ago, Robert and his family had arrived to camp out, but on their last day, just as they were about to go back to their suburban home in Southern California, their car had disappeared—maybe it had gotten stolen. They were left in the middle of the forest not knowing how to get back home. Also, their cell phone batteries had died, and there was no possibility that they could charge them. They had no other means of communication with the outside world,

which made it hard to call for help. While camping, Robert, and Mars had seen a pack of wolves as close as thirty yards away. Bailey had seen them up close, right outside her tent—one even caught sight of her with an icy-blue gaze that seemed to pierce her soul. But she was too scared to make any noise, let alone scream to alert her parents about it.

It had been nearly seven o'clock the next day, and they had heard more wolves howling close by and that had driven them further into the wilderness. That was when they came across the Italian—Antony Marotti. Tony had a haunting look on his face akin to that of an Italian mobster. It made Mars believe that perhaps he was an efficient, reliable killing machine, could have a hit list, and was there to whack one of them and then bury the corpse somewhere in the forest.

Assuming he knew the area better, Tony led them through the trails. He was scrutinizing the area for possible cave entrances.

"These caves don't look safe," Tony said. As they all continued to follow his trail, nobody remarked, as if to trust him on his word. At this point, their lives depended entirely on him.

As they followed, a few slugs, which made a sizzling sound moving at a slow pace like that of a snail, crawled on Robert's arm. Instead of making a big deal out of it, he just flicked the slug with his middle finger as far as he could.

"Look, there is a shadow up there!" Bailey said, in a nearly hysterical tone, and her mother tried to calm her.

They were careful not to get noticed by the ferocious beast.

"IT'S A WOLF! Everyone freeze!" Tony Marotti said, looking cautiously at a wolf who quickly moved and hid in the trees to watch the lair. It had big paws, strong jaws, sharp eyes, and a sturdy body. It headed toward the hill where it vanished into the bushes.

"Should we keep going, or should we go back?" Mars said to Tony.

"Let's keep going," Tony said. "I am sure we will come across people at some point. Then we will ask for help. You guys can ask for a ride back into town and eventually get home safely."

That same moment, the moon appeared. Its light radiated in a downward spiral motion, seeping through the branches like a spotlight. It was then that Tony saw the silhouette of what appeared to be not a wolf but a werewolf, and that realization kept them frozen in fear. The monster looked like a statue as it stood up. Then, it changed shape. Its hands were longer than that of a human, and its claws were sharp enough to rip their throats open. Tony knew it was growing larger by the second because its shadow was expanding. Its hair was continuously growing on its face and body at high speed.

"That one's not a wolf. It's a she!" Tony finally said. "It's Accalia, the Nahuatl. Isn't she terrific?" A look of awe crept into his face.

"Werewolves are overprotective of the ones they love and care about," Bailey whispered. "They are solid and can run extremely fast. And when you do something to make them angry, they can't control their emotions. They are loyal to friends and family though. And we're lucky it's not past midnight or else they favor meat, and they will devour us if they want to. I can tell you that much."

Bailey warned.

Tony urged the group by saying: "Let's keep moving. We'll take the far edge. Avoid looking at her eyes, or she will hypnotize you. Don't look at her fangs either. Otherwise, she might decide to rip your head off in one bite."

“That thing looks beastly,” Mars said. “She’s flashing her huge teeth bloodthirstily at us.”

"Don't look. Didn't I just finished telling you not to look?"

For a moment Robert was able to get a hold of Bailey and Mars’s hands just in case the werewolf decided to make a move on one of them or all of them for that matter. They passed the beast without being noticed as she stood there static like a mannequin.

The existence of werewolves was nothing new. The world of the forest was real alright. Humans shared the planet with creatures of the night that only existed in their wildest fantasies.

From this point, if the crew tilted their head up in a particular angle while the wind blew hard swaying the branches, they might be able to catch a glimpse of a bunch of lights that radiated in the night. No one knew what was causing those lights to fluctuate between bright and dim though.

"They're green, bright lights shining in the night. And what are we doing here in the first place?" Bailey asked. As they kept walking, her disoriented mind seemed to have forgotten that they had gone camping and now this misfortune. If they weren't careful, or if they made a bad move, they could end up in a tragedy.

It was getting late, Robert and Mars still talking amongst themselves, when Tony got brushed by a bundle of oversized twigs that slapped his face, one after another. It was annoying and hurtful that he tried to block them with his hands. One step, two steps over the shrubs, he kept on walking, counting to ten to control his anger. A dense, uncomfortable wind rushed by Tony's toupee, displacing it atop his bald head. He put a fresh toothpick into his mouth—the previous one had broken from consistent chewing.

Along the way, they passed by a tree which was in the shape of a werewolf.

"Isn't that a coincidence?" Tony said. "A tree in the shape of the legendary Accalia." He paused and cracked a restless knuckle. "Look, even wolf features are printed right on the trunk. Its branches resembled long arms and claws. The upper part of the trunk is crooked, and it looks like a thick neck." He placed his index finger atop two very pointy edges. "These two twigs resembled a werewolf's fangs and large teeth."

"This could be its huge mandible," Robert said, referring to a bulge on the trunk which looked more like an enormous tumor.

"Too much credit for a simple wolf's mouth, don't you think, Robert?" Tony said with smile on his face.

"Well, that's weird to look at a tree like that," Mars said.

"Yes, indeed you're right," Bailey said. "I swear to god I just saw a pair of bright green eyes staring right beside me. And what is it with all the howling in the distance? And it's probably not a tree at all but a real werewolf, so don't get near it. Let alone touch it."

As he heard another noise in the sky, Tony aimed his binoculars east. Then, he looked down, feeling insects tapping on his sweaty arms, forehead, and eyes. Swatting at a mosquito that was probing his forearm, he searched for something he could use to light their way. A dead tree was in sight, and Tony began to rip off some of its bark with his fingernails. A cracking noise as if shucking corn hit everyone's ears.

"What are you doing Marotti?" Mars said.

"I am going to make a torch. I don't want to walk in darkness all night."

"Will starting a fire stop a wolf from attacking?" Robert asked. "I remember my uncle telling me once that a campfire could do a lot to keep the wolves at bay."

"No, it will not," Tony replied. "In fact, I've heard that werewolves enjoy being near a fire."

"Then you're putting our lives in danger, you moron!" Mars said.

Tony ignored Mars's sarcastic remarks and instead gathered up all the bark chips and tied them tightly together to a thick branch with a long wire that he carried in his side pocket. His years of forestry experience had taught him every means of survival.

After that, he lit up the torch with his lighter. The bark began to light up, snapping and popping softly in the empty night.

"This torch will burn for a very long time," Tony said, smiling.

"You're useful in many ways Mr. Marotti," Robert said. "I'm glad we found you. I don't know what we would've done without you. Now we need to find help to get out of here before midnight strikes."

A flock of birds flew over them. A scampering squirrel rushed up the tree trunk and hid in the leaves. The chirping of the crickets got louder in the late evening.

Mars miscalculated her steps and almost lost her balance. Subsequently, she grabbed a bunch of herbs, praying that it wouldn't be poison ivy. Instead, an aroma of pine struck her, reminding her of previous Christmas trees she had put up in her living room.

"It's a full moon now," Robert said. "A full moon means the wolves are out, pointing their faces toward it, and projecting their calls upward allowing the sound to carry farther."

Tony pointed the torch toward Robert, and shafts of light made Robert's eyes appear demon-like.

"Have you seen the movie Evil Dead by Sam Raimi?"

"Yes," Robert said. "Why?"

“You look like Ash, the sole survivor who takes his girlfriend Linda to a secluded cabin in the woods...”

“Which one of the actors is that?”

A wolf howled, getting closer to them.

"That movie about demons, where they play back a professor's tape recorded recitation of passages from the 'Book of the Dead,' and then everyone turns evil..."

"Stop talking about Evil Dead," Mars said. "And start telling us who you are, Mr. Marotti." Tony's smile widened as if it would be his pleasure to tell them about him.

"You know, back in New York City I own various shoe stores," Tony said in reply to Mars's insistence. "You know good footwear, nothing better than leather in brown and black and white. I even had the pleasure of repairing a pair of shoes for Marlon Brando. Do you know who he is?"

“C’mon Tony the Shoemaker,” Mars said. “There is too much shit to face here in the wilderness so stop the bull-shit and let’s move on—” Tony’s face erupted with fake laughter. “What are you chuckling about Mr. Marotti.”

“In fact, they do call me Tony the Shoemaker here in California. I sell shoes for a living in Los Angeles. I’m telling you, I opened up various businesses of my own in New York City, Los Angeles, San Diego... and I want more in San Francisco...”

They all fell silent, not only listening to Tony brag about his shoe business but to the strange sounds in the void. Looking desperately through the dark trees, a pair of bright green eyes blinked, and then the hoot of an owl broke the silence. The crickets’ chirping seemed to have risen in unison too. Nature provided a feast of sounds that astounded the human mind. Not

to mention the crunching dry leaves, the wind whooshing between the trees, and the lapping of water against the jutting rocks, which made it a lonely and terrifying no man's land.

Lightning must have struck and cursed these grounds sometime back, and now they saw the creepiest things: Giant slugs, much larger than the ones that had crawled on Robert's arm earlier tonight. And who knows what else.

"Everybody, hide," Tony shouted, directing them all to the nearest bushes to camouflage. Tony slightly parted the leaves with his hands so he could take a peek first. Unfortunately, as they moved their feet on the underbrush, they created a noise loud enough to make whatever was out there take notice.

Maybe it was a ghost.

Maybe it was all sorts of shadowy figures.

Maybe it was you---maybe it was me--their minds were playing tricks on them.

"Shhh...try not to make noise with your feet. Accalia could hear us," Tony said.

"Look over there, birds are glowing in the dark," Mars said in great fascination.

"They're not glowing birds," Bailey said. "They're giant slugs, shell-less terrestrials."

"Slugs?" Mars said. "Eww! I hate slugs."

"Yes, believe it or not," Bailey continued. "Slugs have a fundamental purpose in the environment. They are decomposers which means they eat waste and organic materials of other organisms. They help get rid of the trash that animals leave behind. In this case what the wolves leave behind."

"You mean these slugs will—" Robert said, pausing for a moment, debating whether he should say it or not. He went ahead anyway. "You mean these slugs will finish us off after

Accalia, or the Nahual as Tony the Shoemaker calls it, tears us apart with one bite to bloody meat."

"Exactly."

"Shhhhhh. Tone down your voices," Tony said. He was getting a bit irate now. He felt his heart getting more prominent as more turbulent blood flowed through his veins.

"These slugs could easily dry out," Bailey said. "Slugs remain where it is cool and damp during the day. They come out at night to forage for food. They usually eat—" Bailey stopped in mid-sentence when she heard a haunting howling series of sounds. Wolves. Another set of them resonated on the west side of the forest.

"They're everywhere!" Tony said, no longer able to hide his panic. "We're being surrounded. Sooner or later we're going to have to confront them. They're coming for us. Packs and more packs of wolves."

There were more buzzing sounds—blurs and babbles—grabbing their attention. The buzzing was louder and closer. Tony trained his binoculars to the upper section of the forest where there were no trees—only more howling.

"Some people find wolves to be haunting and eerie," Robert said, but no one paid attention to him.

Something was coming down the slope. Something big.

"They are coming from the place above," Bailey said. "From the canyons. The lights we're seeing are their eyes, staring right at us."

"Yes! That's where the grey wolves live," Tony said. "So no one can get through the canyons." Tony trained his binoculars up again. "Okay, everyone, listen up. Bailey might be

right. There is life up there. There are a lot of lights. That means a lot of wolves. Let's go by the caves instead."

All eyes were on Bailey—the smartest of them all. The girl who carried a Teddy bear.

The next hour was the coldest, longest one they had ever had in their lives. Antony Marotti and the small family were making their way deeper into the forest, beyond their comfort zone. They got into the open fields where they heard the sound of flowing water. And they turned the other way toward the creek. It was an indication that they were close to seeing other people who they hoped would help them. There were moments when it got so cold that it felt as if they were walking into a freezer (especially around the caves).

Beyond it was a series of caves. However, the cave entrances might lead to traps, and Tony was well aware of that fact.

But they had no other options, so he informed the others of his plan.

"Listen, we have no other alternative than to take the entrance to one of these caves and see where it takes us," Tony said. "Which one should we take? A, B, or C?"

A few yards away from where they were, was 'Wolf Hell.' They could tell by the constant howling, which was much louder than where they were before.

"I'm not going into those caves," Mars said.

"Then, do you plan to stay here lady? And wait until the pack of wild carnivorous mammals comes for you?"

Mars rushed toward Tony and poked him in the chest with her index finger. "Don't you have any fear in you?" She asked hysterically.

"Mars stop," Robert said. "It's not Tony's fault we're here. It's my fault. I put you guys through all this. I wanted to take you and Bailey camping and now this. But we'll be out of here soon. Tony will help us."

"I trust you," Mars said to Robert. "I don't trust the Shoemaker. He doesn't know where he's going."

"I haven't tricked you or anyone in any way madam," Tony said, smiling that crooked smile again, disguising the fact that he was starting to lose his patience with Robert's wife. "I know it's crazy here, but I'm sure there's a way out." He started toward one of the caves. "I'm going to take cave A... you guys are welcome to come in with me."

Tony disappeared into the mouth of the cave. The place smelled of moss, which reminded him of camping ground public restroom.

Mars grabbed Bailey's hand, "C'mon Bailey, hold my hand baby. We're going this way. I'm not following Marotti. You go on if you want to Robert, but I'm going back."

Robert held Mars's hand and didn't let her go. "Mars come with us, I trust this man. When have I let you down? We don't know what awaits us in the forest. Please, come with us."

Looking at the full moon, Mars wrapped her arms around her daughter and her husband in a huddle and began to cry in despair.

In the minutes that followed, they looked at the three cave entrances, nodded to each other, and crawled inside to catch up with Tony. Cave B looked as if it might cave in, making holes that would leave them trapped for a very long time, and they might even die there. Cave C seemed too narrow to fit in, risking suffocation. But in a few minutes, they were with Tony Marotti inside cave A.

“You guys made it,” Marotti said. “Welcome back.”

Their clothing had turned damp with moisture. Some caves did have bats but mostly near the mouth of the cave. As soon as they entered, the bats were awakened, flying around and the sounds of their wings was a scary noise. Even inside the cave, they could hear the howling of wolves through the mouths of the tunnels. The smell of animal droppings was at its most potent now. It was evident that wolves got in there and defecated.

“Whenever the werewolves see the moon,” Bailey said. “They become enraged and remember how painful it was to become one, so they howl in frustration and anger and tear people apart.”

"You are a brilliant girl, Bailey," Mars said. "But there is no such thing as werewolves. We only hear wolves out there. Nothing more."

If only you knew, lady, Tony Marotti thought. And Tony suddenly had an image of being attacked by a feral wolf which was causing panic in him.

Bailey had gone to the library almost every day. It was a small old library at a walking distance from her house. That was where she had picked up her reading habits. It had rows upon rows of bookshelves. The doors to it were heavy glass. Very heavy for her to open. But the minute she had entered, she headed to her hidden spot. Near the front desk was a revolving shelf that had all the new books, which she skipped. In the back, it had a small area with bean bags, blocks, puppets, and children books, which she also jumped. To the right, there were two water fountains, one for kids and the other for adults. Then, she continued going to the right, passing the unisex bathroom. No one looked at the empty room where there were boxes of books with lousy reference locations. But those were usually her books of interest because she was able to

find them easier to read with a lot of pictures in them. For years, she had learned a lot about wolves and the wilderness and the moon.

They kept heading forth. The cave was going down as if into the core of the earth. They did notice gemstones protruding through some of the rocks. Rubies embedded into the rocks with beautiful huge stones with a lot of value.

"Look, Mars," Robert said. "Gorgeous rubies, aren't they?"

"Absolutely," Mars said. "It looks as if miners have excavated this section well. It's obvious someone had been trying to dig up rubies. They took as many as they could and left the ones they couldn't take."

To his left, Marotti's torchlight made a blotch of bright reddish light. The raw rock held the rubies in place. "Wow, look at this beautiful ruby embedded in stone.

Bailey looked at her feet, kicking a femur bone. Human bones. "What are we here for?" Bailey asked. "This place is creepy, and it reeks like hell in here."

"What do they need the rubies for?" Robert asked.

"For what?" Tony asked. "This is valuable stuff. Imagine how much they're worth. Let's say I hit this rock with a hammer and chip a huge rough rock. You take it to a ruby appraiser. He or she will check its color, clarity, carat weight, and cut. I could sell it for hundreds maybe thousands of dollars." He paced to touch a bright red huge raw ruby. "Too bad I don't have tools to yank this baby out of there, or else I would."

"Priceless," Mars said.

"Sparkly," Bailey said.

“You look like the type to steal a piece of red ruby and go sell it,” Mars said, smiling.

“Just kidding Mr. Marotti.” Mars stroked a ruby. She was charmed by them. “Red, the color of love... that’s all I have to say. It radiates warmth and a powerful sense of vitality—”

"Mom, don't touch them," Bailey said, pulling her mother away from the wall of the cave.

"The rocks are moving. It's obvious that whoever touched them before carried magic with them."

“Magic?” Robert said. “What exactly do you mean Magic?”

"They," Tony said.

“Who they?” Mars said. “Speak up.”

"They were in search of a major ruby, whoever should take possession of it, could activate a particular power."

"The major ruby," Bailey said, "has always been the talisman of passions that protects the existence of whoever inhabits here. Maybe the Native Americans, maybe the Incas, or maybe the wolves themselves. Its unhidden bright inextinguishable red hue has shined through even the thickest elements. It can give a human or animal immense power."

“That’s what we’re dealing with up here,” Tony said. “And just above the forks of branches, is where Accalia lays.”

Past the ruby embedded rocks, there was water leaking from above.

“Slugs. This cave is infested with slugs too!” Bailey said. “They know something is about to happen, so they try to stay as close as possible.”

“Stop talking like that, Bailey,” Mars said.

“C’mon let’s keep going into the other caves,” Tony said. But they reached a dead end.

“Damn, there is no way out.”

Tony put his hand on what appeared to be mud. Some of it avalanched toward his feet. He punched the wall of mud—the power of the punch loosened it up a bit—just as a hidden wolf jumped right out to bite his hand. It growled loudly, but Tony was able to break loose.

"Hurry! Hurry! Let's get out of here!" Tony said, hearing more noises. They started running back the other way, and the wolf was trailing right behind them. "Hey! There is another hole over there! Let's go in!"

Suddenly they heard the sizzling sound of slugs, coming closer and closer. The slugs weren't as slow as snails this time. They were quicker like slithering snakes.

"Why do they make that sizzling sound?" Robert asked as they ran.

"Slugs, I think," Bailey said. "They make that wet sizzling sound so that it doesn't hurt them when they have to drag on the rough ground."

"Let's go left," Tony said. "Now! Let's take this smaller tunnel. Accalia, the Nahual, must be very close. C'mon, let's hurry."

They crawled their way in through a much smaller tunnel so narrow it was scary. The dim torch lit only about six feet in front of them. Tony had to be careful he didn't turn the fire off from his flame or else they would be in total darkness.

A chuckle escaped Tony's mouth. Then, he erupted with laughter.

"What are you chuckling about Marotti," Mars said.

"In fact, you guys want to know how I first started my shoe business?" Tony asked.

"Well, I started this shoe business by collecting old shoes. People threw away shoes that were still in excellent condition. Then I repaired them. I made a living first reselling them, and then with that money, I bought new shoes at a lower price and in bulk and then re-sold them for profit. On the side of the streets, I sold boots too until I collected more money than I needed.

Then when more money came in, I rented my first place to sell my shoes. In seven years I got to save up enough to be franchised. And started renting more locations."

"The wolf might still be chasing us," Robert said. "We need to get out of this slug-infested cave."

"Now isn't the time to tell your life story, Mr. Marotti," Mars said. "And I don't give a damn about how well you did with your shoe business. All I know is that I'm scared."

Tony stepped on his shoelaces and fell to the ground.

"Get up and move! Mr. Marotti," Mars said. "Hurry up."

Just after, they had to run through a long tunnel until they reached a dead end again, where there was another wall of mud. Tony punched the mud wall with squelching force. The entire cave started to tremble.

"This place is going to fall on us," Tony Marotti said, putting his hands on the end of the wall. He was about to punch the mud again when he stopped halfway. Suddenly the mud wall opened like a crack in the wall. They felt the strong gale, which came from somewhere outside. "We have reached the end of the cave. We're going to have to jump off the small cliff."

The howling of wolves was tremendous down there.

"Now what, damn it," Mars said.

"We need to jump," Tony Marotti said. "This is how we're going to do it. Mars, you go first, and then you Bailey. Then Robert, and then I will go last—"

"The hell with it. I'm not going first," Mars said. "You go first, Marotti. I want to see your ass roll down on some slope down below and crack your neck somewhere."

They heard a loud growling sound through the cave's mouth as if the wolves were merging in closer to them to devour them.

“Now, we have to jump,” Robert said. “This is going to be a high jump, but we'll be okay. Hopefully, there is soft dirt down below.”

Suddenly with extreme speed, they heard the monstrous growl, echoing closer and closer inside the cave.

"It's about a thirty-foot fall," Tony said. "Two stories. Not too bad. We need to jump now before the wolves reach us."

Tony was the first one to jump. He was able to turn around and leap all the way down. His body thudded when it hit the ground. A few branches cracked, and a few leaves crunched. Tony's torchlight had rolled somewhere as it struck a tree trunk and went out. A few dry leaves caught fire.

“Not bad,” Tony said. “Who's next? But wait. Let me soften the ground a little more with leaves.”

He started piling up all the loose leaves in one spot as if making the world's biggest pillow of dry leaves. Bailey and Robert jumped next. Bailey was light, and she landed smoothly on the foundation of leaves that Tony had set up to cushion their fall.

"Okay Mars," Tony yelled in his New York accent. "Your turn. One, two, three, and—jump!"

"Fuck you, Marotti. I am not jumping."

However, the horrible sounds coming inside the cave, which were closer than ever, made her change her mind. The howling was loud and ear piercing.

“Do it, Mars, before they get you!” Tony yelled, his patience wearing out.

Just as soon as Mars jumped, a few giant slugs—as big as baby seals—exited the mouth of the cave, making their way out.

The crew looked up and saw hundredths of lights. This time it was closer. In fact, too close. The lights were flickering, flaring, and glinting, taking an excellent hypnotic momentum. Right then we knew what it was to be in awe.

“There is something wrong here,” Tony said to Robert. “Something strange. Something I can’t explain.”

“Sure,” Mars said, giving him the sign of the evil eye. “Don't tell me you're planning to put a shoe store here, Mr. Marotti.”

The wind blew fiercely, fluttering Tony's toupee once again, which was moving about on his bald head.

Mars got in her husband's face again. "Where are we, Robert?" Tony's face froze for a moment. The gesture caught Mars's attention. "What is it with you Marotti?" Mars asked. “Where have you taken us?”

Tony twisted his face as if he was going to turn psycho on them but smiled instead. “I’m just teasing you,” he confessed.

“Bastard! Now it isn't the time for jokes, and you know it!” Mars said.

“Just chill out for a minute lady, goddammit,” Robert said.

Mars held Bailey's hand and started running the other way around the caves, away from the place where Tony and Robert were heading. “I’m out. You guys are crazy.”

No one said a thing. Robert watched his wife and daughter leave. This time without stopping them.

Instead, Tony and Robert looked desperately through the darkness, where more noises and grunts racketed all around them. They were getting closest to a light that fluctuated between bright and dim, making them believe that they were in the presence of Accalia.

“Let’s keep going Robert,” Tony said. “We will be free past the lights. I promise.”

Although they were still hiding in the dark woods, they heard the wolves right behind them on both sides and in front too. It surrounded them, getting ready to leap on them at any moment.

“It sounds like a wolf pack,” Tony said. “Again! The fucking wolves aren't going to leave us alone...”

The ground began to tremble. Something that resembled weeds started to sprout from the soil and grew larger. Then, much larger branches emerged, long enough to look like upright cobras. They kept growing to the size of a python. The plants were opening mouth-like structures that trickled blood from the needle teeth of one plant’s open gaping mouth as if it had swallowed a human in a single gulp. Poisonous tentacles started sprouting from the stems.

(maybe a curse)

According to Bailey, Tony thought. The heat energy of the lightning which had struck many years ago fertilized its grounds with power. That’s why the plants have a supernatural enigma. Not that it matters. Robert and I are going to die here today anyway.

Tony looked at Robert who was too busy taking care of a few wolves that were biting at his shoes. More giant plants were growing right out of the ground—plants which grew twice as tall as they were.

More slugs sizzled.

Tony darted a metal pole right through a giant slug. It created a wet muffled sound as the pointy stick went through its gelatinous body. The slug popped right in front of him as if he had poked a water-filled balloon.

To the side, they caught sight of a few wolves growling with strings of saliva dripping from their jaws, coming with panicky speed and hiding again as if playing hide and seek. Tony could hear the harsh, intermittent clickety-click of their teeth. A few tails wagged. Paws echoed everywhere.

“Let’s go into another cave and save our asses,” Robert said. “Now!”

“No, wait,” Tony said. “Let’s not go in there anymore.” He paused and cracked a restless knuckle. “The wolves want business with us.” Two more wolves with their deformed faces and gigantic, menacing teeth made an appearance, coming out of the mouth of one of the caves. Their ape-like jaws bulged out, and their fangs were disgustingly yellow and ugly. On top of that, there was an even more monstrous growl, echoing closer with vindictive force, roaring with fury.

Robert picked up a log with both hands, the way a warrior carries a sword, and held it in place just in case a wolf got too close. Their eyes were blinking like bright flashlights.

“Let’s keep going,” Robert said.

A wolf startled them, and now they walked around in a daze. One of them growled and snapped at Robert's sneaker, and then slid back into the darkness. Another one bared its large yellow teeth at them, blinking its red lantern evil eyes. Robert squeezed the log as if to threaten to crack a wolf’s skull: “Come on mother fucker, come and I’ll rip your head off.”

Shrubs surrounded the outskirts of the forest, and the trees banked with pine branches gave out a sweet, spicy aroma. In the high trees, a drumming woodpecker began chopping

wood, unaware that the werewolf dashed across from tree to tree. She was closing in on them. Too close in fact for their good. Robert caught sight of her: Her fury long clawed fingernails, sharp and pointy, darted into the trunks. And if those sharp eagle-like claws touched his flesh—as sharp as a machete blade—she would tear him open quickly.

Accalia pounded her chest one more time, and the giant killer plants halted, in fact, froze at ease, and the wolves stopped howling as well.

Robert stumbled upon bones, human bones that lay by the dry bushes. A wolf seemed to grin at Robert and made as if to jump at him but then halted when Robert began to swing around the log he held as if hitting a piñata.

Tony and Robert stared in fear as Accalia changed. She stood rigid in the moonlight. Her eyes began to change from their usual bright green to an insane devilish red, screaming in agony. Her actual bone structure shifted inside under her skin—a few bones protruded and ripped the fur of its coat, the way a blade cuts into a carpet. Her face contorted to a lone wolf's muzzle, extending out with large pointy teeth as sharp as blades.

With her closed fists, Accalia pounded on her dark, thick hairy chest while howling. Then, Tony saw Robert being picked up. He was screaming crazily. His legs moved in a circular motion as if pedaling a bicycle. It took only two blows and a fatal bite to take care of Robert who was only able to say, 'HEEEEEELP—'

And dead.

"Goodbye, Robert."

And then Accalia mangled Robert's body to a point where it was cut in half and ripped into pieces like a rag doll, and she tossed the pieces to the wolves to feed.

But the werewolf howled ferociously, jumping toward Tony the Shoemaker who turned to run.

Tony tried to escape, but his fear immobilized every joint in his body. "I'm going to die." And that was when he remembered he had something with him.

Tony had faith in his gun. He retrieved his .45 from the side of his pants and shot one silver bullet to Accalia's chest but missed terribly and got the sidearm instead, gushing a jet of blood into the air. It did hit a nearby wolf whose body fell to the ground with a thud.

Seeing that Accalia was in trouble, a pack of wolves lunged themselves at Tony who turned around and shot one wolf right in the head. Its brains scattered like scarlet confetti.

"I never leave without my gun," Tony said, kissing his gun at the section where it wasn't too hot from the gun's hammer. He smiled crookedly, and his dark eyes glistened in the gloom.

A gust of wind blew away Tony's toupee permanently. He saw it go flying like a paper plane. A hairless and shiny bald head glimmer in the moonlight. Once Accalia noticed Tony wasn't shooting anymore, she lunged directly at him. Tony shot another silver bullet, but that one made the hammer snapped, but no projectiles came out.

Coming from the side, a wolf struck Tony's gun arm. As a result, he dropped the gun on the ground and lost it somewhere in the bushes. Quickly, he searched for it, and when he got hold of the weapon, he started firing again, hoping he might have one last bullet left, but Accalia had jumped to his neck and bit into it. "Dammit! My magazine is empty!"

"What the fuck is going on?" Tony shouted in bewilderment. "Don't let me die here alone," Tony Marotti said to absolutely nobody.

The werewolf's evil hypnotic eyes had turned back to green, and it stared fiercely at Tony.

Tony screamed in pain. He was feeling weak now—he was losing too much blood.

Accalia clung to Tony's back, choking his neck. Her powerful jaws ripped on the Italian's skinny, soft limbs. Then a leg went flying. Tony fell to his knees, gasping in exasperation. Trickle of blood gushed out like a giant water balloon explosion. Right away, his eyes had taken on a glossy dark marble look—the look of death. He gave out one last jerk to attempt to free himself, but Accalia was angry and tempted to kill the short Italian for once and for all.

The wounds bled from various areas: neck, shoulder, back, and hips. According to modern mythology, if Accalia didn't kill him, Tony could become a werewolf just as soon as the next blue moon arrives. But realizing it would be a terrible breeding idea, she made sure three litters of blood gushed everywhere, which would surely kill him.

In a final attempt to survive, Tony made a fist and smashed it onto Accalia's large body as if to fight her, but to no avail. She started shaking him. Tony's head went from one side to the other until he weakened. Wolves that were hungry for blood and human flesh were harmoniously cheering the legendary Accalia, coming in for the attack whenever they saw a chance. Exposing his smooth neck again as it settled back in place, Accalia sank its teeth deep into him one final time. There was a loud growl that seemed to fill the air as Accalia finished the job and then vanished.

"Mommy," Bailey stopped, hearing a series of howls in the deep forestry, noticing her mother was still running. She had to run behind her and snap her awake, actually by pulling her arm down to set the brake to her feet. "Mom! I think we should go back and find daddy!"

“Are you crazy?”

Bailey began to cry as her mother kept running away from the tenebrous howling. They were almost back to the precise spot they had camped in for the last three days.

"Look, Bailey," Mars said. "We are precisely in the same spot we started, but the wolves turned over our tents, probably looking for us. Food is gone too. Look this is where our Jeep was parked before it got stolen, I could see the oil stains—"

Someone was coming. Headlights merged from the trees, going down the hill and into the campground. The sound of an old engine roared as it came down the asphalt curbs. Its bald tires rolled across the creek's squeaky boards.

"It sounds like a truck," Mars said. "I can smell the diesel." She held Bailey's hand, hugged her, and kissed her forehead. "C'mon, let's head towards it."

Mars and Bailey ran toward the truck, waving their arms to announce they were alive and in need of help.

Somewhere, far across the caverns, a haunting howl pierced deep in their ears.

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