

The Definition of Monster

As he adjusted the optics on his Ambush .300, Dale Meyers brought the target he was sighting into clear focus. The 8-point buck was scraping its antlers on a red maple tree, meticulously removing the velvet from its antlers. In his tree stand, more than 100 yards distance, Dale sighed and panned right, continuing to scan the undergrowth for a sign of his quarry.

Despite his growing frustration, a thin smile appeared, struggling to emerge through the patchy growth of unkempt whiskers on his face which were threatening to become an actual beard. What was it the old Mainer had told them last October when he and his brother came here for Moose season?

"In Maine, we don't hunt deer. It would be like you Floridians hunting your dogs." That was the gist of it anyway.

Dale's brother Jim had laughed hysterically at the old man's candor. Jim had always been a laugher, quick to find and enjoy the humor in anything. That was one of the things Dale missed the most about his big brother. Life in his absence was humorless and quiet, far too quiet.

Jim had proposed their first hunting trip when the brothers were 21 and 19 respectively. For each of the past five years they had made the time to go on trips to increasingly exotic locations until last fall brought them to Osbourne, Maine, for what would be their final hunt together.

Having completed his arc and finding nothing, Dale lowered the rifle and looked skyward. The sun was fading fast, bringing an end to his day and his summer. He had dedicated two full weeks to the hunt, but it was to no avail. He had spotted plenty of deer, moose, and even a couple of black bears, but not the target of his hunt.

"I'm sorry, Jim," Dale said as he ran his fingers through the black mop of unkempt hair on his head. Pale blue eyes glistening, he said in a whisper, "I tried."

Head down in defeat, he secured his rifle to his backpack and began the descent down the 15-foot ladder from his tree stand. Motivated by a healthy, if not oppressive, fear of heights, he slowly descended to the ground. He skipped the last two rungs, jumping the short distance and landing with both feet at once. He grimaced at the raucous, crunching sounds his boots made, breaking the serene quiet of the dense forest. His grimace turned to a frown as the realization struck him: the forest had become quiet, far too quiet.

Turning away from the tree, he saw it sitting there, only 6-feet away, and froze as every muscle in his body locked in terror. The wolf was sitting, hind quarters on the ground, head held high, perhaps five-feet high, looking him straight in the eyes. Had he been looking at it behind the protective walls of a zoo, Dale would have marveled at the creature's beauty. The wolf's coat was white with streaks of tan with guard hairs banded in solid black. Intense green eyes stared at him with intelligent interest.

As it stepped forward, moving gracefully, Dale gasped at the impossible size of the creature. A full-grown timber wolf might reach six feet in length and 180 lbs in size. The wolf approaching him had to be eight feet in length and 300 lbs if it was an ounce. Dale should have been reaching for the rifle over his shoulder or the GLOCK 19 holstered on his thigh or the little Serbu Super-Shorty shotgun strapped under his vest, but his paralysis extended to everything except his memories.

Last October, he had descended from this same tree stand, and hopped on his ATV to meet his brother back at their campsite. His brother hadn't been there, hadn't answered the Walkie-talkie when he tried to call him, the forests in North-West Maine being far too remote for cell reception. Dale had eventually refueled his own ATV, and even though darkness was setting in hard, he went off in search of his brother. He still had nightmares about what he found. The wolf had still been there, still feasting when Dale approached. The headlight on his ATV hadn't provided enough light for a clear view, but Dale would never forget the hate-filled, yellow eyes which turned in his direction just before the wolf turned and bounded away into the night. The forestry service reported his brother's death as a bear mauling; this in spite of the fact that it had been almost 200 years since such a thing had occurred in Maine. He told them the creature that killed his brother was no bear, but his own testimony had been dismissed as delusions created by shock and sorrow.

Wait—Yellow.

Dale blinked, once, hard. They had been yellow; the eyes of the enormous wolf that killed his brother had been yellow. The wolf which now approached him appeared to be just as massive, but it had distinctly, green eyes.

As the wolf came within inches of him, Dale clenched his right fist at his side, next to his holstered GLOCK, his paralysis broken. The wolf gave him a long, considered sniff, opened its gaping maw full of teeth, and then lowered its head down to the level of his hand and licked it with a rough, wet tongue the size foot-long at Subway. Then, after looking once more up into his eyes, the wolf dashed away, the night enclosing it before Dale could react.

When he arrived at his campsite, still shaken by the encounter, he packed up as much of his gear as possible. With the last rays of the sun fading to the west, it would be too dark, too dangerous to attempt the ride by ATV back to the park entrance where his Jeep Wrangler awaited him. With no other options, he spent one last fitful night in the forest, sleeping fully clothed in his Nomad camo suit with his back against a tree.

He set out at first light on his ATV to leave the uncanny forest for the last time. As his ATV cleared the forest and entered the small, parking area, he was surprised to find his Wrangler was not alone. On the far side of it sat a late-model Chevy Silverado which had seen better days. On the near side of it sat a motorcycle, a BMW F800. The old truck appeared to be empty, but a rider sat astride the bike, dismounting as Dale entered the clearing. She wore a form-fitting Alpinestars one-piece racing suit in black and white which accentuated notable curves. As he drew closer and brought his ATV to a stop, she removed a full-face helmet revealing jet-black hair, hazel-green eyes. She looked to be in early twenties with a pretty, girl-next-door face, make-up free, which wore a relieved smile.

"Oh, thank heavens," she said in a high, melodious voice. "I thought I might be stranded here for days, waiting for someone to show up."

Dale removed his own helmet and returned her smile. "Having some trouble with your bike?" he asked.

She wrinkled her nose, which may have been the cutest thing Dale had ever seen, and said, "I don't suppose you're a mechanic are you?"

Dale shrugged, "Sadly, I'm not, but," he said, pointing to the empty trailer behind his Wrangler, "That trailer will hold two ATVs. I suppose it will hold one ATV and a motorcycle if you and your bike would like a ride back to civilization."

"That would be awesome" she said earnestly. She stepped forward and offered him her hand. "My name is Elizabeth-Elizabeth Landry, but my friends call me Biz."

Dale smiled again and shook her hand, noting both the firmness and warmth of her grip. "Where you headed?" Dale inquired.

"All the way to Bangor actually" was her reply.

"Well, you're in luck" he said. "That's exactly where I'm heading. I have a flight to catch there myself, early this evening."

Fifteen minutes later they were cruising down ME-11, headed towards I-95 S and their destination, which was almost a three-hour drive. They passed the time with friendly small-talk, which was mostly about him. Biz had never been to Florida and wanted to know everything about the things-to-do in the Sunshine State. This gave Dale quite a bit to talk about.

Dale learned that Biz was French-Canadian, having grown up in Quebec City, though he couldn't hear any French in her accent. Currently, she was working on her PhD in Ecology and Environmental Sciences at the University of Maine, where she also worked.

After travelling almost two hours, they came to a Circle K just short of I-95. Dale pulled the Jeep up to the gas pumps while Biz hopped out to run inside for a couple of Moxies and some snacks. As she approached the store, she hesitated. "Uh, hey Dale. Take a look at this."

When he looked more closely at the store front, he was taken aback. All the windows were boarded over like they were in Florida and a hurricane was coming. "What is up with that?" he asked her.

She shrugged and nodded him over. She waited for him, and they approached the fly-wood covered door together. Dale reached for the door, but as he did, it opened just enough for the barrel of a Browning A5 to come out.

A gruff voice began, "State your bus..." but that's as far as it got. Biz, who Dale could have sworn was a half-step behind him was suddenly a half-step in front of him, holding the shotgun in her left hand while half-grasping, half-holding up the owner of the voice with her right hand. The owner of the voice was a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair and goatee. The expression of complete shock on his face matched the one on Dale's. Biz had grabbed the barrel of the gun, pulling it and its holder out of the store, disarmed and completely pacified him in a spit second.

Biz gave the man a quick shake. "Is this way you greet all of your customers?" The man stood there, pale as a sheet and completely dumbfounded. Only her grip kept him upright. Had she released it, he would have collapsed in a heap. Biz glanced back at Dale, who still looked a little dumbfounded himself, shrugged her shoulders and gave him a questioning look. "What the frack is going on?"

The man blinked a couple of times, and the color began to return to his face. "You aren't infected?" Seeing blank looks on both their faces, he went on, "You don't even know?" Biz and Dale looked at each other, and then back to the man, both shaking their heads.

The man began to straighten himself, and Biz released her grip, on the man, not the shotgun. He eyed the Browning once then cut his eyes back to Biz and Dale. "It started at the airport. An Air Canada flight declared an emergency and landed at Bangor International. The flight crew was safe in the cockpit, but all the passengers were dead or infected. It spread like wildfire."

He suddenly jerked his head up, past the pair, and shrieked, "Oh, no."

They turned to find a small mob of people on the road, about twenty yards away, staring at them with expressions of equal parts hunger and rage. They heard a click behind them and turned to see the store owner had slipped back into his store and locked the door behind him.

Dale swore under his breath. His guns were in the Jeep. The mob was closer to the Jeep than he was. He felt a hand on his shoulder. Biz handed him the shotgun and nodded, her own face showing sadness and something else. It wasn't fear. Was it resignation? he thought.

Then the mob surged towards them, moving at the equivalent of a slow jog.

Dale stepped forward and took aim as Biz stepped behind him. He fired once, twice, three times, dropping a couple of the mob but a dozen more of the infected kept right on coming, marching without interest over the bodies of their fallen. Dale pulled the trigger a fourth time only to hear a disappointing click. He took the gun by the stock and held it like a club, successfully bashing the first infected to reach him, but the ones following it overwhelmed him, taking him to the ground. A woman's face appeared above him. She was blonde, blue-eyed and would have probably been quite pretty if not for the fact that the white of her eyes was blood red, and she had a thick layer of foam coming out of her mouth. She opened said mouth wide and began to move down to bite at his face, but as her head came down, the rest of her flew up. She soared fifteen feet into the air and landed in a heap beyond the gas pumps back in the road. Another of his attackers flew back, then another. In a moment, he was disentangled from them. He scrambled to the wall of the boarded-up store, putting his back against it as he tried to get a handle on the scene in front of him.

The infected were still coming, but an eight-foot-tall, white and tan beast with corded muscles batted them away until they were too broken to continue their assault. Whatever the infected were, Dale thought, they weren't zombies. It didn't take a blow to the brain to stop them, just overwhelming force. When the last of the infected fell to the ground, unable to rise again, the beast turned and looked at him. It stood on two legs like a person, but it had the head of a wolf, a white and tan wolf banded with black. Its eyes were a familiar, luminous green eyes.

Dale scrambled over to the useless shotgun and pointed it at the beast, which did the last thing he ever expected: It slowly, deliberately shook its head from side to side. Then it lifted both arms high in the air. It fully extended its arms turned its hands, and Dale heard distinct, popping noises. As he watched in fascinated horror, the beast shimmered and began to shrink in size. The long, wolf's muzzle retreated to become a girl's nose and mouth. Large, luminous green eyes turned hazel. In ten or so seconds, the beast was gone, and Elizabeth "Biz" Landry stood in its place, completely, gloriously naked. Dale didn't want to stare at her, but he couldn't look away; in fact, he couldn't move at all.

With the same look of resignation he had seen minutes before, Biz walked over to the jumpsuit which was sitting in a little clump where she had been standing behind him. "This isn't how I wanted you to find out" she said calmly, as she stepped back into the jumpsuit.

His reply was bereft of calm. His voice shook with something close to panic as he stammered, "What...what are you?"

She turned towards him, zipping herself back to modesty, and smiled thinly. "Why do you ask questions to which you already know the answer?"

He smirked. He couldn't help it. The classic X-Men reference broke through his hysteria. "You" he said more firmly, "are a werewolf."

She winked and simply said, "True" with a nod of her head. She tensed as Dale's expression turned dark.

"Did you kill my bro...." He cut himself off, not finishing the word *brother*. Instead, he continued, "Why do you ask questions to which you already know the answer?" They stood, considering one another in silence for a moment. Dale continued, "You didn't kill my brother."

"No," Biz said immediately.

"Do you know what happened to the wolf that did?" Dale asked quietly.

"It died." Biz sighed and continued. "I know you don't understand this, but the wolf that killed your brother was a rogue, not a member of a pack. Pack law forbids killing or even biting humans. When rogues break those laws, people like me are dispatched to deal with them. We are all about coexisting, like the bumper sticker. We just prefer to do it with anonymity."

Dale's eyes brightened with understanding and a bit of anger. "Are you telling me you killed the wolf with yellow eyes? The wolf that killed my brother?"

"Yep. I've saved your life twice now" Biz told him, but as she did so sniffed, and then blurred forward. In a half second she was holding up his left arm, looking with wide eyes at a human bite-mark on his forearm. It was glistening with little droplets of Dale's own blood. She looked into his eyes, her own filled with dread. "Or maybe only once" she added, her own voice shaky this time. "You're infected. I can smell it."

"Why do you care?" Dale asked with sincerity. He looked over at the trailer behind his Jeep and back at her. "Is there anything actually wrong with your motorcycle?"

She didn't reply, nodding her head from side to side instead.

"Then why are you here?"

She paused, considering her words before speaking. "Lycanthropy is caused by a virus. We call it Lycan Virus or just LV. Seventy percent of humans who come in contact with it....they fall into comas and die. Thirty percent of humans who come in contact with it survive the changes the virus makes in them and become weres. A tiny percent don't just survive. They thrive. When I first saw you, smelled you in the forest, I could tell immediately. You would thrive."

Dale let out an ironic little snicker. "You were considering turning me into a werewolf?"

"It isn't too late, Dale" Biz said intently. "Weres don't get sick with anything. The LV virus kills all other invaders. All you have to do is give your consent."

Dale pulled his arm out of her grasp. Well, he had realized by this point that her strength was far beyond human normal, far beyond his own. She released his arm.

"A werewolf, a monster, killed my brother, and now you want me to give my consent for you to turn me into one?"

Biz looked a little hurt. "You think I'm a monster, then?"

Dale glanced at the mass of broken infected then back at Biz.

"I could have turned full wolf and simply left" she said. "I only did that to save you, or to try to save you." They regarded one another in silence for a few moments. Biz took a step closer to him and said, "It isn't too late. I can still save you."

Dale looked again at the pile of broken infected. "So, to keep from becoming a monster, I have to let you turn me into a monster?"

Biz shrugged. "What's your definition of *monster*, Dale? I'm a born were. I've been what I am my whole life. I don't think what a person *is* makes them a monster. I think what a person *does* makes them a monster." She turned then and looked at the pile of infected herself for the first time, and then turned back to him. "It looks to me like the world is going to Sheol. You're strong, Dale."

He began to shake his head, but she reached forward and clutched his shoulders with both hands. "It's true. You can't see it in yourself, but I can. You're strong, and you could become so much stronger." She moved her right hand from his shoulder to his cheek, holding it there gently. "Sometimes what a person *doesn't do* makes them a monster too."

He looked deeply into her eyes, and then gave her a slow nod.

As he looked, the flecks of brown in her eyes faded away, replaced by luminous green. He kept his eyes there, on her eyes, not looking at the muzzle that began to grow or the teeth that began to extend from it.

Her eyes never left his as she raised his injured arm to her extended muzzle and gently bit.