

## Coyote Grin

Jonas scraped at his burgeoning five o'clock shadow. It was fast money. A hook-and-drop job two hours south. If he pushed it, he could be back in his sagging mattress in Page before midnight. His rig roared as he downshifted into the last curve of this stretch of Highway 89. The chains rattling in his empty flatbed rose to a din on the decaying asphalt. He flicked on the satellite radio, trying classic rock, but the whining guitars and drums redoubled the drone rather than drowning it out. He settled on a talk show instead as he leaned on the accelerator. The police never bothered with this desolate place.

The show made time crawl. Their stories evolved in tired ways. Jonas frowned, killing it, before putting his call sign out on his CB a few times. Static answered. It looked like this would be a real lonely stretch as the orange sun slipped beneath the horizon and the long shadows from tenacious desert scrub striped the road. Twilight came slowly, and night all at once as headlights and running lamps clicked on. His Qualcomm system alerted him to an approaching turn. He eased on his brakes and swung his rig left onto a small gravel road. High beams pushed hazy tunnels of yellow light through the dust, illuminating a squat cinder-block office ahead. Piles of rock and construction materials loomed in the dark behind it.

Jonas reversed the bed under the lift that held his load of pipe and killed the engine. Gravel crunched underfoot as he stepped down from the driver's seat. Goosebumps prickled his back even through his work flannel, and a deathly quiet accompanied the cold. Jonas set to prepping his bed, hurrying through the tedium of untangling straps and setting chains. The drive took longer than he thought. He had planned to be out of here before dusk.

A sharp sound froze him. It started as a groan, like a rope under tension, but it rose to an animalistic yowl that raised the hair on his neck. He dropped the tie-downs and let his palm

hover by the three-fifty-seven at his hip. The creature yowled again. This time more desperate, like a varmint in distress.

“Damned coyote,” Jonas hissed as he dropped his guard and went back to his preparations.

The noise started again, now much closer and with a hungry edge. Heavy breaths intermixed with the cries and the stench of blood, rot, and sweat drifted in the air. Two empty trailers beside the little office began to rock. He drew his revolver and did a mental tally of animals strong enough to shake a heavy trailer like that. A bear came to mind, but in twenty years he had not seen one in these parts. Maybe that explained it, though. Any bear unfortunate enough to be stuck out here would be pissed off and hungry.

Feet shuffled behind the trailer. Not the footfall of an animal. He dropped the idea of a bear and filled his mind with the image of a meth-head looking for scrap to steal. Jonas sucked in a deep breath, fighting back a dry heave set on by the revolting odor now permeating everything.

“Hey! This is private property. Get out of here!” he shouted in his most commanding voice.

The trailers stopped shaking. The unnerving cries stopped too. Feet shuffled toward him. Jonas cocked back the hammer on his pistol.

“I’m armed and I’ll shoot!” he yelled, wishing he had thought of something more intimidating to say.

The footfalls died. For a moment, the quiet of the night settled in again, disturbed only by the gentle patter of the truck’s cooling engine.

“No,” a voice from behind the trailer said. It was English, the word, but not spoken by a human voice. “No, no, no, no!” The voice droned on like a yowling cat. “No, no, no, no—”

Jonas's legs shook. He widened his stance and raised his aim. A gaunt, dark figure stepped around the side of one trailer. Its legs curved back oddly, and it had eyes neither completely human nor completely animal. They shone back at Jonas in the soft orange glow from the running lights. It smiled, an animal's smile, but much too wide. The laugh that followed was a hellish sound. Jonas dropped his aim and sprinted back to his truck. He leaped into the cab and slammed down the plunger to lock the door behind him.

He blinked, and those horrid eyes appeared right outside his window. Two black hands smacked the glass and shook the truck. Jonas screamed as he jammed his key into the ignition and turned the engine over. The old beast was still warm. It roared to life, and he stomped the accelerator. Gravel flew from his tires as he sped away. He watched the figure in his mirror. It froze like a statue and smiled. He watched it fade into the blackness, and when he could not see it anymore, he turned his eyes on the road ahead.

"A meth-head," Jonas muttered to himself. "Just a meth-head."

He reasoned that the junkie had covered himself in roadkill and engine grease. Maybe he was deformed too, or so malnourished that his legs were bowed and looked weird in the dark.

"Just another junkie," Jonas repeated to himself as he turned north on Highway 89.

He white-knuckled the steering wheel while tremors rolled through his body. The loose chains and tie-downs hanging from his truck bed began to bounce and spark as they struck the asphalt. They would be ruined if he didn't stop. He should stop, but Jonas forced the old beast through its gears and commanded it to its top speed.

Ahead, a rabbit dashed into his beams. Jonas considered the brake pedal, but held the accelerator instead. He winced, expecting a gentle thump as his tires extinguished a life, but it never came. When he refocused, a black mass blocked his view of the road. Its hungry eyes fixed

on him through the windshield, and it grinned again.

Damp warmth seeped down Jonas's legs. He slammed on the brakes. Tires shrieked and the empty trailer bed flailed as Jonas cranked the wheel to throw the creature off. The bed jackknifed and locked his rig in a sideways skid. Jonas steered back into the skid to prevent the truck from rolling, and it careened off the asphalt onto the desert floor. He bounced violently in his chair, clinging to the steering wheel to hold his place.

The truck ground to a stop on a boulder caught in the undercarriage. The engine rattled and hissed. His headlights flickered once, then he lost all power and the night flooded in through the windows. Jonas yanked his phone out of his pocket and tried his field office, but the battery flashed low and it died too.

He threw the phone to the floor. His grandpa had told him not to linger in these parts, especially at night, but back then he told him lots of things that didn't make sense. His grandpa's mind was gone long before his body. Jonas visited him nearly every day in those last weeks while dementia turned him into a breathing husk. His grandpa said that he had killed something out here once, and that others like it would want revenge. Those memories felt so old he wasn't sure they were even real, and he needed the money.

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he opened the truck door. He aimed his pistol into the night as he slowly stepped out and rounded the cab. The creature was there, a sliver at the edge of the darkness. He cocked the hammer and centered the sight on what he presumed to be the middle of its body. He squeezed the trigger. The pistol rocked in his hands, and a shot rang out. The creature didn't move or even flinch. Jonas paced forward until he saw its eyes shining back at him, centered the sights on its chest, and fired once more. The bullet thwacked the creature's chest, but it only smiled.

Jonas turned and sprinted into the darkness. The creature kept pace, lingering at his heels as if toying with him. He pushed harder, tripping over rocks and barreling through bushes, until suddenly there was nothing underfoot. His momentum carried him over the edge of a ravine. He tumbled in a blur of black sky and dark earth until he hit bottom flat on his back. He stared up at the stars, choking for air while he waited for the creature to come finish him. It never showed.

After an age of sweeping the swirling patterns of darkness for signs of his demise, Jonas climbed to his feet and limped down the wash until he spotted a deep alcove in the rock. He crawled in on sore arms and bruised knees and pressed his back to stone. Violent bouts of shivering kept him awake and alert, with eyes locked on the entrance until the first signs of morning tinged the sky pink. Cracked lips and a withered tongue begged him to move. He crawled out the way he came, the pain now twice what it was in the night, and surveyed the creek bed stretching to his left and right. The powder-like dust covering everything answered his inquiry. This wash hadn't seen water in months, years even.

Jonas shambled along the sandy bed, hugging his arms tight against his body until he found a place where the walls became shallow enough to walk out. He faced the sun, east toward the highway, and stumbled through the desert. In these late autumn days, the sun was anemic. Like the dry creek bed, it only teased of something that had existed before. A lethargy took his mind. He shuffled through the dirt on stiff limbs, tripping over pebbles while he slowly succumbed to the cold and dehydration and fought off thoughts of death.

A man came into view ahead. His blurred vision snapped into focus and his heart raced. Jonas couldn't work out where the man came from. Jonas looked back at his footprints and realized he had no sense of how long or in what direction he had been walking. Maybe the man had been there the whole time. Maybe he had been following him.

The man had skinny arms and the kind of leathery skin only a person who has spent most of their life in the sun could have. He closed the space between them in quick strides.

“To,” said the man. “To,” he said as he gestured west.

A deep crease wrinkled Jonas’s forehead.

“To,” the man repeated in his heavy accent.

It clicked into place. Not *to* but *tó*. *Water*.

Jonas saw nothing in the distance, but a hogan was not just a home. It was part of the landscape. He may have walked right by it. The man gestured to Jonas’s arm, which was caked with blood and dirt, and spoke words Jonas could not understand. It seemed like an offer of help, so Jonas nodded, and the man began walking west.

Smoke rose from a shack with a corrugated metal roof nestled at the base of a hill. Jonas looked to the man. His eyes grew wide, and he shook his head before turning his back to it. Jonas performed a charade of drinking water and pointed to the structure, but the man again shook his head and refused to look in its direction. Jonas took a step toward the smoke, and the man grabbed his arm and pulled him back with a surprising celerity. He spoke again, another string of words Jonas wished he had bothered to learn.

Jonas took another step, and again the man tugged him back. Jonas raised his palms and lowered them in a motion he hoped would convey calm, but the old man turned away and began striding in the opposite direction. He chased in a light jog, trying to stop him, but the man kept shirking his grip and speeding up.

Winded and defeated, Jonas let the man slip into the horizon the same way he had appeared and made his way toward the plume of white smoke that promised warmth. He knocked on the rounded planks that fashioned the door, his legs tense, ready to run. An old

woman with a lopsided face greeted him. She stepped aside and beckoned him in. The warmth of the fire licked his skin, even from a distance. The woman gestured to a straw mat on the floor and gave him a big plastic jug filled with water. Jonas sat cross-legged and ripped the cap off, chugging down half the contents before remembering his manners.

Jonas lowered the jug and capped it. She motioned for him to set it down while she slipped a hand into a pocket and extended a palmful of chalk-white dust toward him. His brow creased. She leaned in over the powder, and he mirrored her. Over her shoulder, Jonas glimpsed a stack of bones. Fragments lay in a worn metate beneath them. He recoiled, but she puffed a breath, and the dust coated his face. It stung like bile as it trailed down his throat and into his lungs. His heart raced and blackness crept into his vision. He tried to run for the door, but a thundering buzz consumed his hearing, and his thoughts slipped away from him.

Jonas woke on the straw mat, head pounding. Whispers of smoke trailed from a fire burned to flake ash. He scrambled to his feet and burst through the door out into the night again. He moved faster than he had ever moved in his life as he ran into the emptiness. Wind whipped at his face. Shrubs swayed in his wake. His lungs burned. His legs ached. He tried to stop, but he couldn't. A low voice in his mind pulled him forward. He watched in agony as the desert rushed by.

Ahead, a flickering light emanated from a rocky wash bed. Bones arranged in intricate spirals cracked underfoot as he slowed and entered a cave. A small fire glowed in a cramped corner near the back. Crooked teeth revealed the mouth of a dark figure near the fire. Its face was human, but its mouth hung open like the jowls of a hungry snake. Jonas screamed inside. He tried to turn away, but that other voice in his mind interceded the command. He was a passenger now.