

The Breech at Shade Tree Orchard

By Ron Koppelberger

They were breaching the boundaries of Riverside Common. They had flittered about the edges of the Common for the past several days, finally venturing close to the heart of the tiny township. A few of the more courageous had gone to explore the far edges of Riverside, never returning. The rest held up in their homes while listening to the faint echoing howls and screeching exclamations near town's edge.

The twilight presented the bloated pumpkin sun setting slowly into the frayed forest edge and a great glaring moon, full, wan and amber hued, haloed by harvest seasons and a cloudless indigo fringe.

Star Friday, Cadence Cross and Glenn Costa stood near the double glass doors of Sunder Feed and Farm Supply. They had bolted the doors and turned the bright sodium lights off in the parking lot, The expanse of cement stretched to the edge of the road and the woods behind the feed. Stars Camera was parked out front near the body of Paul Shirker. He had volunteered to get help and now he lay cold, bloody with his car keys still in hand near the front sidewalk next to the topsoil display.

A barking howl filled the dampened spaces between the isles of feed, filtering in from outside in easy currents of terrifying utterance. Star looked at Cadence and whispered, "There gonna try to get in at some point Cadence." Cadence ran her fingers through the braided corn silk tresses that framed her face and said in shaking fear, "They probably killed everyone in town jus like Paul."

"They couldn't have gotten everyone Cadence, we got away, some of the others had to of escaped as well." Star said in her bravest voice. Glenn walked to the back of the feed. There was a tall pole barn shaped in a half circle attached to the back of the store. The corrugated metal ran from floor to ceiling like a tunnel and bales of hay, cat food, dog food, sow and pig feed, and horse feed lined the walls in the barn. A set of plastic swinging doors separated the front of the store where the shelves were lined with hardware and insecticides of all types, from the tin can that formed the feed area.

Glenn looked through the feed isles hoping for a weapon of some sort. Star stepped into the back of the store and said, " How about these Glenn?" she held up the long blade of a machete for Glenn to inspect.

"I'd prefer my Winchester but that'll do us jus fine." Star handed Glenn one of the three machetes she had found in the hardware and tool isle.

Cadence took her machete reluctantly. "I hate weapons Star, but I guess I don't have any choice." she said looking at the silver blade.

“Not really,” Glenn said matter-of-factly, “You can wait until those things break in and end up like Paul!”

“No thanks.” she said “I prefer the machete.”

Outside it became darker, the sun finally disappearing into the edge of the earth’s shadow. A maelstrom of silhouettes tall, wolf like and fast flittered near Paul’s body. They tore and ate and feasted. When Star looked out of the double glass doors she saw the sharp deadly maw of one of the creatures. Covered in scarlet, raving human flesh, the creature was part wolf, long snout and pointed incisors, part human with perfectly formed fingers. She watched as the creature slid it’s delicate hands across the glass smearing Paul’s lifeblood in great red smears. The creature’s head tilted back and it screamed as if in pain, it was then that Star noticed the black painted fingernails and the shredded remnants of bobby socks on the wolf-thing.

Cadence stepped up behind Star and asked, “What the hell is it?” Glenn moved between Star and the glass doors with a large sheet of neon-colored poster board.

“If they see us they’ll try to get in.” he said as he blocked their view with the cardboard sheet. “Hand me that roll of tape!” he pointed to the roll of clear packing tape next to the cash register. Cadence handed the roll of tape to Glenn and stepped back as he fixed several pieces of the colored cardboard across the windows. When he finished he said, “ Help me move this desk in front of the door!” they all got behind the heavy oaken desk that served as the front counter and slid it to the front of the door. Outside something brushed up against the glass. They moved further into the store as screams and wild piercing howls filled the parking lot, the space between them and the door and the nocturnal terror. Cadence looked at Glenn and asked again, “What are they?”

Glenn thought for a moment before responding. “Last week I saw a caravan of military trucks and transports heading toward the old Shade Tree farm.” the Orchard had been in disrepair for as long as he could remember. The orchard was full of dead orange trees, grey spears and gnarled dead citrus branches, trees by the hundreds filled the acres of Shade Tree Orchard. “They did something, they let something loose, a virus, some kind of curse that only the military guys know about! They’ve been up there for a week now doing god knows what.” he emphasized with a clenched fist. “We might be the only ones who aren’t infected by this thing Cadence!” Glenn said in shaky realization.

“Don’t say that Glenn!” Star said hoping for the best. “There have to be others like us, people hiding from these things.”

Cadence looked at both of them, “Did you see, it was part human, or it used to be human, there might be hundreds of them, maybe thousands.” Riverside’s population was a little over five thousand. Glenn clenched his jaw, “Dammit, they should’ve know better, they should have, the friggin army, they should’ve known!”

“Maybe it wasn’t the army.” Cadence offered “Maybe this is a punishment, with war and mankind’s hatred for each other, maybe it’s God’s punishment.”

“I don’t believe that Cadence, it has to be simpler than that.” Glenn said.

The delicate passing of seconds repeated the breath of silent serpents and tigers in wait; a pause, the howling screams had stopped for a brief moment.

“Do you hear that?” Star asked, “I mean it’s quiet.” The temptation to look outside was overwhelming and Cadence ran to the glass doors and peeked behind the orange sheets of poster board. Her screams pierced the silence of the moment as she staggered away from the door. It had been a flash of convergent horror; the street light illuminated the deluge of wind washed horror. One of the creatures stood in a cascade of blood; it rained from above, from the sky, but only on her or it, like a shower. The wolf like snout dripped red gore, liquid crimson and the wind, blowing at the bobby socked wolf thing from the side, a small tempest, localized in the space where she stood; bright sprays of blood spattered in an ethereal mist, a cloudy haze to the creatures side. It was a scene from hell; her eyes, wild ebony orbs filled with lusting hunger and madness. Cadence said hysterically, “We’re gonna die, we’re never gonna get out of here!” Glenn grabbed her and pulled her close,

“We’ll get out of here Cadence, they can’t get to us here hon. Someone will find us.” Glenn said attempting to console her. Cadence cried, her tear streaked checks pressed against Glenn’s bosom. Her tears were warm, wet giving him a sense of communion. They had to make it he thought, they couldn’t die like Paul had, they couldn’t.

It was close to 10 P.M., Glenn found an all-weather radio on one of the shelves. As he tore open the box he wondered, how far had it gone and how many were there? They had some kind of ethereal power, a magic or a darkness from hell. He still wondered how they had done it, the army, had they opened the door to hell? What was the breach and where had it come from? He took the twist tie off the cord to the radio and plugged it in. For a moment he thought all he’d find was the static hum of nothingness, then finally a voice, careful, controlled and fatherly. They gathered themselves, Cadence seeing a glimmer of hope with the radio and Star hesitantly expectant.

“... find shelter immediately! Do not approach the infected, do not approach the creatures, do not approach the area of Shade Tree Orchard west to Riverside! This is just a temporary quarantine, we’ll have this under control by dawn.” the man on the radio promised.

Glenn turned off the radio and said, “They’ve quarantined Riverside.”

“I know, I heard him Glenn.” Star said a note of trepidation in her voice.

“Will they get here at dawn, will they really Glenn?” Cadence said angrily. “How are they gonna get past those things?”

“I don’t know Cadence, let’s jus wait it out and see what happens hon.” Glenn said reassuring her.

Outside the creatures raged and it rained blood in frothy mist and dark magic, the showers centering on each individual beast in the form of an ethereal tempest. The wind blew around them and great smears of the scarlet essence flittered and twirled around their fanged grins. They explored the boundaries of the feed, screaming, howling in torn cloths like ragged flags of terror, in wolf like grimaces, hunger, desire and ebony eyed passion fulfilled their need.

On the north end of Riverside, Vern Pursey was battling mosquitoes. The new bug light he had bought was sizzling and popping as mosquitoes and other various flying insect life flittered across the blue neon light and the 120 volt wire. He was fascinated with the new light starring at it and watching the tiny sparks light up the night. Vern paused for a moment his reverie disturbed. It had begun to rain. “Dammit, he said under his breath. Glancing down at his hands, he noticed the rain had streaked them in dark rivulets and beaded tendrils. “Whas this...” he questioned as he rubbed the back of his hand. “Looks like blood.” he said to himself as he turned to look behind into the face of silent gaping madness. The creature howled and Vern staggered back in surprise. In the space of a breath he took in the creatures appearance; he saw a large, obese body clothed in a raggedy three piece suit and it was drenched in blood, dripping soggy, surreal in the blue black light of the bug zapper. Vern didn’t react as the sharp fanged mouth bit into his neck and tackled him to the ground. Several others appeared screaming in tempest clouds of blood.

As they devoured him, he took a moment to contemplate the creature in the suit. Slavering over the top of Vern, its necktie dripped crimson into his eyes. The last thing he noticed was the city seal stitched into the bloody cloth. As his life ended he realized the creature was wearing Mayor Braggs cloths.

Closer to the southern end of Riverside Mel’s Truck stop was a giant conflagration as black oily smoke poured from the ruins of the gas pumps and convenience mart. One of the big trucks snorted and spit exhaust as it barrelled into the flames. Inside the driver screamed and howled, blood obscuring his view as

the truck crashed. It was raining blood inside the cab and as the creature crawled through the flames there was a great hiss as the front tires melted and blood mixed with the burning gasoline.

The eastern line of town was a scattering of orange tree orchards and sorghum fields. Shade Tree Orchard was at the outer edge of the Commons. The old farmhouse and weedy lot was scattered with empty jeeps and the remnants of a Bio Hazard containment convoy. Inside, the farmhouse buzzed with the sound of high tension wires. From the front of the house bright crimson light poured in waves from the broken window panes. Someone had placed a no trespassing sign on the heavy oaken front door and the body of a camo-clad soldier lay draped across the front porch steps.

The interior of the house was a scattering of equipment, gages and a giant gold-colored metronome and two or three dozen cages, big enough for a human being. The house smelled of garlic and roses and a thick roiling mist poured upward from the cellar. Deep within the confines of the cellar Sgt. Negee lay bleeding near the reflective panel that had been designed to allow the breech, the gateway between here and there. They had been fast, furious and hungry as well as contagious. Negee remembered they had come through screaming and howling. His checks were still moist with the blood that had poured from the breech, thick, viscous giving birth to monsters and demon wilds. Negee inhaled deeply, coughed and began crawling toward the basement steps.

West from Shade Tree Orchard Glenn, Star and Cadence sat near the back wall of the feed listening to the creatures' pound on the corrugated metal walls in the back of the store. Hollow, thumping and shrieking gasps of frustration echoed hollowly throughout the feed. Suddenly, there was the sound of glass shattering near the front of the store and cadence screamed, "They're coming through the front door Glenn!" Glenn grabbed a bale of hay and put it in front of the plastic double doors separating the front of the store from the back.

"Come on help Cadence!" Star yelled as she threw a bale of hay toward Glenn. Glenn stacked the hay in front of the door as fast as he could; in the front they heard the sound of shelves being overturned and growls of determinant possession the sound of spattering rain and wild tempests howling in delirious search.

They had the hay stacked to the top of the door when one of the creatures attempted to gain entrance. Furious hands and rivers of blood, dripping through the hay bales, amber and scarlet hued glistening, descreying an inhuman magic, an ethereal enemy fated by wombs of crazy breech.

A slender arm, bruised, once delicate, slick scarlet and purple, reached inward between the hay bales. The creature screamed and tore at the hay knocking down one of the bales to reveal a ghoulish grimace, wolf like all teeth and grinning a bloody need.

The wind and red rain poured through the opening and Glenn stumbled falling to the floor just as the hay pile tumbled down around him. The mystery of life and the probability that they would all die ran through Glenn's mind as the creature climbed on top of him. He could hear Cadence screaming and... what? Gunfire? A sharp report of automatic fire... Pop, pop... pop! The creature lay still, silent atop his bosom, the crimson shower and the wind abated as a camo-clad figure pushed away the piles of hay and the body of the wolf thing. "Come on!" he said to the three of them. "I don't know how long I can hold them off." Glenn stood on shaky legs, dripping the blood of a thousand nightmares. He read the name patch on the soldier's breast, it said "NEGGY".

Neggy ushered them through and around the desk and broken glass doors into the waiting hummer. He gunned the engine and headed west Toward Rapid Zaine the next closest town.

He had stopped the gold metronome, its rhythm still, quietly waiting. The breach had closed but maybe it was too late. Negee looked to the open fields of sorghum before them, here and there were rain showers of blood, some distant some directly to the left and right of the two lane blacktop.

They followed the road to Rapid Zaine and in a haloed harvest moon, a breach in the dark shadows the future beckoned the wants of the survivors and the desires of the determined few, in hope and the need of a fated dream.

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