

### Track One: Ripple

*Auvergne, France. November 1764.*

Clouds of vapor materialize then retreat. Ghostly apparitions, the cold gives the monster's pants form.

Dusk cedes to night. This is the "hour between dog and wolf." This is the hour between worlds. This is *his* hour.

Winter's come early. A thin veil of newly formed ice masks the churning beneath the surface of the brook. He prowls the bank on all fours, frozen reeds crunching under the thick pads of his paws.

He's just a dozen feet from the creaking waterwheel when the second oil lamp flickers to life.

He stops dead, his lupine body going stiff, his breath silent. He hides among the willows, secreted by lengthening shadows. He shifts his weight to his haunches, slowly rises.

Inside the mill, the silhouette of a woman beckons to a child studying at a desk. The boy stands and moves to join her near the stove. The creature's head cocks, his pointed ears tilting to catch their exchange of words. "*Le dîner est presque prêt.*" Dinner is almost ready.

He inhales deep. Chicken, boiling in onions. Bread.

But there's more, so much more. Masked beneath those broad strokes are subtleties, hidden scents.

In his human form, he could never detect these nuances. But now, his sense of smell is specialized. It is fifty times stronger. A nasal pocket traps odor molecules in a layer of mucous. The cilia of receptor neurons pick up the diffused particles. Signals are transmitted to his olfactory lobe.

The aromas are distinct: sweet, the woman's perfumed skin; sour, milk on the boy's upper lip; salty, the trace of sweat on her neck; and savory, the blood that pulses through their arteries, filling their muscle tissue, powering their organs.

His tongue rolls over his teeth, pausing on the tip of an elongated canine. The umami makes him salivate. Steaming drool escapes from his maw, melting the snow beneath him.

The wolf inside—yes, he has given over his body to *canis lupus lupus* this night—screams at him like a fiend from folklore. *Break down the door, give chase, and tear out their throats.* But his mind, a vestige of his humanity, holds him fixed. It tells the inner wolf to sit, stay. He has—no, *they* have—all night.

Pierre Delmas—husband, father, and the owner of this mill—is in Lorcières. He won't return until well past dawn. Of this, the monster is certain. He confirmed as much with Delmas himself just last week.

Sipping witbier in a darkened corner of L'Abattus Agneau, the monster watched as Delmas and a dozen farmers quarreled around a beer-soaked oak table at the front of the pub.

"Our grain is rotting at the gates as we speak," Delmas said. "Monsieur Gance, if we do not break this stalemate, the season is lost."

Gance raised a brow and shook his head. "Perhaps lost for those less enterprising."

*Enterprise.* The monster snorted. This man knew nothing of enterprise.

Henri Gance, the youngest of six brothers, was born into richness. His father's massive estate stretched thousands of acres east to west, virtually separating Auvergne from Bourgogne. Before his passing from Consumption last spring, the elder Gance had provided Delmas and others passage to the markets north to sell their grain.

With his death, the vast farm was divided between the brothers, Balkanized like so many other privately held lands in feudal France. Lacking the canals and rivers of England, the bequest necessitated the negotiation of new easements. Five of the six brothers eventually agreed to allow Delmas and his peers passage. However, the sixth, Henri, withheld signature.

"What right do you have to condemn our grains to decay?" an elderly man said, straining to stand. "There are people, woman and children, starving less than a dozen miles away."

"I claim and require no right but birthright, Monsieur Meursault."

Jean Meursault poked a shaking but furious thumb in Gance's direction. "Pure arrogance. Your father was a good man. He would be ashamed if he could see you now."

"You'll be able to convey that message to him yourself any day now, I'm sure, old man," Gance said, eyes on his goblet.

A wide man called Guy Debucourt interceded. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, this bickering achieves nothing. I'm sure we can find common ground."

"Yes," Gance replied, looking up, "that is, as long as your 'common ground' and the grounds of my property are not one and the same."

They debated like this for an hour, the monster barely concealing his smirk behind a stein.

Delmas grew frustrated. "Please, Mr. Gance, listen to reason—"

Gance cut off Delmas with a wave of his hand. “Look, we’ve been through this before. It is all very easy. I’m happy to provide an easement across my land. In return, all I ask is for reasonable compensation.”

“What you’ve asked for is a third of our grain,” Meursault spat. “That’s a tax, pure and simple.”

Someone behind the old man nodded angrily and echoed him. “You’re no king, Gance. You have no right to levy taxes.”

“What? And I don’t have expenses?” Gance asked, touching his chest in offense.

“Like?” said someone in the throng.

“There is infrastructure to maintain,” Gance replied, looking past Meursault. “Plus, more importantly, there’s the cost of protection.”

“Protection?” another farmer, Frederic Malle, asked. “From what?”

Malle had not noticed that the other farmers had gone quiet. They exchanged nervous glances, confirming a communal but unspoken fear.

The monster laughed from a table away. This perturbed Malle. “From what?” he repeated, brow furrowing. “Highwaymen?”

Malle’s inquiry could almost be excused. There was a time, after all, when footpads and mounted robbers lurked the fields and woodlands, preying on the unsuspecting. That is, until last June, when the killings started in Langogne. Criminal activity had since been suspended.

“No,” Gance answered with a hush. “Not highwaymen.”

“What then?”

No one answered. All remained silent. Until—

“La Bête,” the monster said.

Malle gulped. “I see.”

*La Bête.* The monster had been called many things by many people. *The Wolf of Chazes. Le Loup de Soissons. The Monster of Besseyre Saint Marie. The Beast of Gévaudan.* Even *The Beast Who is Eating Everybody.* It was the Royal Wolfcatcher, Le Louvetier Royal, though, who called the creature, simply, “The Beast.”

*The Beast.* It was an abbreviation that inadvertently solidified the monster’s status as the country’s single and greatest manifestation of evil...and the single greatest threat to the monarchy.

Another moment of uncomfortable silence passed before Gance announced his intention to retire for the evening. “Look, gentlemen, I appreciate your time, but it seems no agreement will be had tonight. I bid you *adieu*—”

“Wait,” Debucourt interrupted. “Just how many hands will you make available to escort our carts?”

“Nearly a dozen,” Gance replied.

Debucoart sighed. “Then I’ll agree to your terms.”

“Me as well,” came another voice.

“Guy,” Delmas exclaimed, taking Debucoart by the shoulder. He leaned in. “You can’t mean it.”

“Mean it I do, Pierre. I can’t just abandon our grain. My family has worked too hard. Something is better than nothing, especially with that *thing* running about devouring everything that breathes.”

“We can’t stand alone on this issue,” Delmas implored. “Divided we fall.”

Malle interrupted. “I’m afraid I must accept Monsieur Gance’s terms as well.”

“What?”

“Pierre, people are going to starve—my family among them—if our grain doesn’t hit the market. We’ll have revolution on our hands.”

“I don’t care about hypotheticals,” Delmas said. “I care about the here and now, about my mill, my family.” He turned to Gance. “The King’s taxes are already unprecedented. How can we be expected to pay for this as well?”

Gance shook his head. “Those who fear looking in the mirror ascribe fault elsewhere. Don’t blame King Louis XV, and don’t blame me. If you can’t take responsibility for your station, Pierre, maybe you should blame The Wolf.”

The monster found this a curious but valid point. There was plenty of blame to pass around: the King, the laws of inheritance, opportunists, the drought. But the beast took particular pride in his role in dragging the region into poverty and famine.

The King regularly conscripted farmhands. They were forced to join his hunting parties. They left their wives and children behind, but dared not ask them to mind the livestock and the pastures. They knew well La Bête punished those who did. They told tales of how the monster preferred the taste of humans to animals. It targeted people, choosing them over cattle roaming the same fields.

“Monsieur Gance,” Delmas begged. “Please. Things are dire for my wife and son. There’s a lien on the mill, and sickness has struck the cattle. I worry for our newborn calves. We depend on the revenues from each and every grain.”

Before Gance could respond, however, another farmer assented to pay. “I’m in, Henri.”

And then another. “Me too.”

“As am I.”

“*Moi aussi.*”

Delmas’ cause was lost. He drank deep from his goblet as he watched his

summit disintegrate, the farmers capitulating in turn. Even Meursault eventually acquiesced. Slumping in his chair, Delmas ordered another beer.

One by one the farmers departed. Gance excused himself as well, leaving Delmas alone with his drink. Soon that, too, was gone.

That's when the monster made his approach.

"Monsieur," the monster said, sliding a pint of ale in front of Delmas' downcast face.

Delmas looked up. "*Merci*," he said solemnly.

The beast nodded. "*Homo homini lupus.*"

Delmas cocked his head, raised a brow. "Sorry?"

"It's a Latin proverb," the monster said. "It means, 'Man is a wolf to man.'"

Delmas nodded. "That certainly seems the case."

The monster half-smiled, a long canine biting into his lower lip. "May I join you?"

Delmas gestured to a chair.

"My name is Alec," the monster said, extending a hand, "Alec Moreau. Forgive my eavesdropping, but the War has hurt us all. Still, I imagine the impact upon our patriot farmers and their families has been especially distressing."

Delmas took Moreau's hand and introduced himself. Plied with beer, he began talking. He talked late into the night, and then talked some more. He told the monster about his troubles, his mill. He told the monster about Gance's revocation of the easement. He told him how he left his wife and child alone during his excursions to the City. He told the monster everything.

Finally, the monster Moreau asked Delmas a question: "What would you say if I told you I might be able to help?"

Delmas was all ears.

"I will purchase both of your calves for one-hundred *livres parisis* apiece if you'll allow."

"Two-hundred *livres*? That's more than the salary of a huntsman. Why on earth would you do that?"

"I was once a lot like you, a farmer and a father too. Before that, though, I was a soldier, and I was called back into service during the Seven Years War." Moreau looked past Delmas, focusing on something beyond the walls of the tavern. He stared into space and recalled his tour of duty. "My company was sent to protect the settlement of Saint-Louis in Senegal. The trip took forty days. We lost half our number to malaria and wild animals, creatures I'd never seen before. When we arrived, we were two weeks too late. The post had been lost to the British. We retreated to Gorée, but we had lost our colonies in

Gambia too. Our holdings in Africa sacked, we returned north to join the front. We fought the Prussians. We fought the Duke of Brunswick. We fought the Germans. We fought everyone. For six years I bled in the name of the King. In the end, all of our fighting, all of the lives lost, meant nothing. The King capitulated, signed the Treaty of Paris, and I returned to France. I arrived at my house and found it was no longer my home. Strangers lived there. My wife and son were missing. The police had kidnapped them years earlier. Like the families of many soldiers, they were loaded onto boats and sent to colonize the Americas.”

Delmas winced. “I’m sorry.”

“So, unlike you, I care very much about the possibility of revolution. I care very much about a tomorrow without a crown.”

Delmas listened, chin in hand.

“The loss of my wife and son gave me new purpose: question authority, undermine the system, create chaos through design.”

“Chaos through design?”

Moreau asked Delmas if he ever read Voltaire.

Delmas went blank.

“*Candide*?”

It didn’t register with the peasant. It shouldn’t have. The Administrators of Paris banned *Candide* for its criticism of church and state, and Voltaire himself all but disowned it out of fear of persecution.

“It’s an adventure, but it’s the subtext that has people buzzing. Is Voltaire criticizing Leibniz’s theory of Optimism? Is he elevating Pessimism? Or is he sympathizing with Meliorism?”

Delmas frowned. He was lost.

Moreau didn’t care. He continued, almost to himself. “The answer: it’s not about ‘isms’ at all. *Candide* is about chaos. Not randomness or chance, but about chaos as order in a system. It’s about the complexity and unpredictability of life. It’s about how small changes to a cycle can have significant consequences, building and amplifying like a stone cast into a pond.”

“Ripples on the water,” Delmas said.

“*Exactement*.”

Delmas smiled. “That sounds nice in theory, but I’m afraid the idea of being a ripple is a little too grand for my family. We don’t know Monsieur Voltaire.”

Moreau chuckled. “Pierre, even the smallest of pebbles can have an impact. I’m but just one stone produced by the system, and I fully intend to create more. For instance, what would you do with two-hundred livres?”

“That’s easy. I’d put my son in school,” Delmas said.

The monster smiled. "There is nothing more radical than an education."

Delmas grinned.

So it was settled. The-monster-that-called-himself-Moreau gave the man one hundred livres and the promise of another hundred in one week's time. Delmas need only bring his calves back to this very address. The innkeeper would hold the calves for the monster and the funds for Delmas. Moreau even paid for a room in advance so Delmas need not travel home in the pitch.

Delmas dutifully returned a week later. The exchange was made.

Now he sleeps deeply in the best bed L'Abattus Agneau can offer, his belly full of lamb and beer, his pockets full of gold, and his head full of dreams. Now he sleeps unaware that his alleged benefactor has transformed into a creature molded in the forges of hell...and that this creature awaits just outside the door of his home.

After the embers of the fireplace have died down and the house is dark, the monster enters. He passes the boy's bed in the front room, moves to the rear of the mill. Madam Delmas sleeps in a small chamber behind the kitchen. He bends down and slides through the doorway, his massive shoulders and head pressing the frame. There's a creak of oak grinding against oak. She wakes, screams at the silhouette of the thing filling the casing. The monster is on her in a beat, her arterial blood pulsing down his gullet the next.

He sways as he gulps hard from her throat. His eyes roll back into his skull. He's lost in the richness, the pleasure of the kill. He almost doesn't hear the front door open, the boy running through the snow.

Almost.

The hunt is on.

The next morning, the monster walks the stream north. He picks his teeth with a cattail. He stops to drink at a swirling pool devoid of ice and stares for a moment at his reflection. Despite his human form, he sees nothing but the Beast staring back. His broad, rounded forehead, high cheekbones, wide nose, and narrow chin are covered in meat and mess, bits of what once was the son of Delmas.

The monster shrugs. Creating revolutionaries is a bloody business.

Now it's off to the north. North to a farm owned by the youngest of six sons, north to his next victim. Tonight, the monster will play equalizer. Tonight he will fertilize the fields with Gance's blood.

At least Delmas will no longer need to worry about easements in the years to come.

Chaos works in mysterious ways.

### Track Two: Apron Strings

*Indianapolis, Indiana. 2 September 2001.*

Theresa Gerig says she already told the cops everything. Anyway, the Cinnabon will be busy soon. The dinner crowd hits City Center Mall in half an hour.

The masked man thanks her, promises that his questions are few. He'll be out of her hair in ten minutes, probably less.

"I don't know," she says, biting her lip.

He says he needs her help. He's read the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department's report. He calls it a "shoddy" piece of police work. "Something's missing, some detail glossed over by witnesses or neglected entirely by the IMPD."

He's tanned and unshaven. She fixates on a faded red tattoo, the number 38, on his neck.

"Murder investigations deserve more effort," he says. "Hade's flames, murders deserve an opportunity to be solved." A hand balls into a fist. He looks straight into her eyes. "And you just might be the key."

She's nodding. OMG. He. Is. So. Intense. Her face goes flush. "Um, okay, I'll try to help." After all, how many people can claim to have been interviewed by a gladiator?

He corrects her. "Centurion."

She doesn't know there's a difference, apologizes. "A centurion."

"No. *The* Centurion." His voice is like gravel. "And I can't quantify that. My guess: probably not very many."

He's angst-y and older, a loner, probably a bad boy. He smells a little of stale beer. He'd drive her mother crazy. She leans in. "Okay, Mr. Centurion," she says, popping her gum, "So what do you want to know?"

His eyes narrow. "Everything."

"Everything?" she asks.

"Yes. Everything you know about John Hooper and the night of August 6<sup>th</sup>, the night he died..."

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Thank you for sampling *Freaks Anon!* The novel, published by Grand Mal Press, will be available on February 29, 2016.

All proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated to Stand Up To Cancer (SU2C). Private donations can be made at <http://do.eifoundation.org/goto/mattdarst>