

The Girl Chased by Wolves

By Ciel Lenz

The coffee is hot, still boiling, burning my milky brown hands red and scalding my tongue. Please let the pain help me stay awake. I check the calendar hanging above my desk again; I can't help myself, it can't be back again so soon. My eyelids are so heavy, it's painful. My research notes blur and double. I've barely started on the new stack of books I grabbed from the library after track practice. My eyes won't focus on the words. Maybe it's the headache from my hair, tied back tightly for sprinting heats. I should have let my dark-roast curls down when I got home, but I'm running out of time, so I haven't bothered to change—only stopping for coffee refills. I can't sleep, anything but sleep. Please focus, eyes! This book could have the answers I need.

How many mugs of coffee have I had now? Six? Eight? The taste still lingers bitter on my tongue, but I have been pushing past my distaste for months now. There's a localized earthquake in my body. Jitters from too much caffeine. How much caffeine does it take to overdose? Can you overdose on caffeine? Isn't caffeine poisonous to animals? It's just beans boiled with water. I drain the cup. My throat is burning, but why should I give a fuck? My nerves are shot from stress anyway. I need to refill my mug. Empty cups mean sleepy eyes and I can't sleep. I'm not allowed to sleep.

Sharp. Ice pick. Cold. Pain. Head spinning, brain hurting, cup still empty. So much pain, too much—shit my hands, the cup! Smashing. Ceramic shards in my feet, my hands, broken mug, no more caffeine. You can't make me! Can't make me sleep, not tonight I won't! Why am I holding my head and not another mug? Pain, pain, pain, more pain. Sticky hands, did I break skin? Not again. So many questions about my head, wounds, blood on my hands, world going

dark. When did I lay down on the floor? No. Not again. You can't, I won't! Staying awake is . . . is



The burn of expanding lungs. I jolt up. I lost the fight, dammit, I lost the fight again. This world is so cold. Abandoned cars rusting in the street, faded graffiti, permanently overcast. Layers of grime coat every window thickly enough to leave them opaque. The rest of the windows are broken, shards of glass litter the ground by each one. Whatever broke those windows did so from the inside. The streetlights don't work either: they've all been shot out. Under each one is a pile of orange plastic fragments.

The sidewalk and roads are cracked, the cement buildings slowly crumbling into dust, revealing steel skeletons. The rancid smell of full dumpsters wars with that of wet dog. There are only three sounds in this lifeless world: my breath, raspy and choking; my heart, too fast and dizzying; them, breathing steadily behind me. Breath warm and wet on my neck. I know what I will see when I turn around, know it will scare me. But logic is irrelevant in nightmares. I turn to face it. Slavering jaws, stained muzzle, wicked sharp teeth as long as my pinky finger, lips pulled back into a snarl, eyes bright yellow like lightning against the storm-cloud fur. It is always the wolf. At least six feet tall and seven feet long, bigger than even a gray wolf in the real world, it towers over me even when I'm standing at my full five foot, seven inches of height. The sight of it brings the burn of vomit up my throat and I swallow desperately so I won't be sick. The first few times I didn't swallow. Throwing up doesn't help here. I learned that my first regional track meet. The wolf growls, huffing rotting meat air into my face. It is done being patient. It nods at me, telling me without words to get up. At this point, I know the drill as well as it does. I'm still shaking—from the caffeine of the real world or the adrenaline of this one, I can never tell. Clambering to my feet is difficult, and the wolf is impatient now.

“I know, I know,” I mutter, shaking out my limbs. I don’t have time for a proper warm-up and I can almost hear my coach yelling at me for starting cold. I settle into my starting position like this is a high school track meet and not a hellscape. The wolf yaps and I shoot off like it’s the starting pistol. Track meets overlay months of running in this realm. My nerves are so shot at this point, they should probably just give out. I can barely hear the wolf chasing after me, my heartbeat tangling with my bare feet slapping the pavement mixing with the wolf’s surprisingly quiet paw falls—it’s just a constant beating on my eardrums.

Each empty street has fewer escapes. Muscles in my legs cramp and burn, stitches take residence just below my lungs; each breath seems to bring less relief than the last. I’ve always been a sprinter, not a long-distance runner.

I stub my toe on rubble while stumbling through the next turn—warm breath brushes my neck. Why do I never have shoes here? The wolf is breathing down my neck again. My face is wet but it’s warm: not sweat, must be tears. I’m so scared, it’s numbing me, I can’t . . . I take the next alley, searching, praying, for a ladder, a fire escape, even a window ledge, anything. Nothing. Just another dead end. Every time, nothing but dead ends. I want to turn around slowly, but there is too much too fast.

The wolf is boxing me in with that awful doggy-grin facsimile of a smile, and I hate it. It growls, but it sounds like a chuckle, it’s laughing at me, I know it is. Cold bricks press against my back. When did I back up? The wolf is stalking towards me. Taunting me. I can’t even brace for the lunge it takes me by surprise even when I know it’s coming. Teeth bury in my throat before I can scream. Blood bubbling up out of my mouth and down into my lungs.



I turn onto my side to avoid coughing blood all over my sheets. I know I never made it into my bed, only to the floor (I wonder

who got stuck with carrying me to bed). I cough and hack until I can't feel blood bubbling into my trachea when I breathe. I ignore the puddle with the ease of long practice. It will stain, but there are so many blood stains on the floor already, one more won't make a difference.

Steadying myself on the wall, I head into the bathroom, I need a hot shower. I turn the tap all the way to red and stand under the spray, still fully clothed. Whoever put me to bed just took off my jacket and let my hair down before tucking me in. This is fine. I can't feel the heat turning my skin bright red, but it's fine.

Only when the room is completely filled with steam do I let myself go, banging my knees on the shower floor and choking on my sobs. Great wracking sobs that make it a struggle to breathe. I try to be quiet; I don't want to disturb my dorm mates, only letting out noises quiet enough to be drowned out by the shower. It was only a nightmare. My forehead presses against the cold tile of the shower floor and I hug myself tighter, nails scraping welts into my back from the force. It was only a nightmare the first time.

I can only feel the water when it turns cold. I am so cold. I'll get up for practice when the sun rises. Promise. I'll dry off, check the calendar, and paint a smile on my face. Cover up the shadows with concealer. For now I'm free. Free until the next full moon, when the wolf returns.