

THE QUARRY

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Chapter: Leporine, from *Primal*

Primal is a young adult novel set in Australia, in the not too distant future, after a corpse-reanimating disease has swept the globe. We follow a group of young martial artists as they fight for access to a 'safe zone'. After a mission in the bush, our main protagonist, Kaye, has been bitten by one of their infected friends (Tirin).

Serena drove the knife down into the back of Tirin's neck. She leaned on it, pushed down with her weight. She could feel the blade grating over vertebrae and it sent reverberations up into her chest.

The outstretched arm that had reached towards Kaye clanged down onto the tray like a headless snake. It twitched once and then finally, the thing that had been Tirin, was still.

Thoughts began to rage through Serena's mind like a bush fire. Had Tirin really spoken? Had she really heard the word? The plea for death?

She knelt in front of her sister, blocking the view of the body, but Kaye stared straight through her. It was as though she could still see the corpse of her friend there, reaching out for help in her final moments.

Kaye held her wrist tucked close to her chest like an injured paw. The bite mark bubbled red with puckered skin.

Serena had been looking over the top of the Ute, out to the battlefield, when she had heard the scream. Then she had seen the bite – Tirin’s barred teeth melding into flesh. She had smelt the salt of a fresh wound.

It was pure instinct that had caused her to kick out at the thing attacking her sister, like it was a rabid dog. Now the idea that it was Tirin who lay dead beside them was unfurling, hot and painful, in her mind. And worse, that Kaye might end up the same.

‘Get the med kit!’ she shouted to Fyke and Gruff. She could see a rectangle section of Fyke’s face in the rear-view mirror, panic-stricken.

She cupped her hands around her sister’s face like she had once seen her mother do.

‘You’re alright, Kaye-Kaye. It’s fine. You’ll be fine,’ she lied.

Fyke pushed himself out from the front seat of the Ute and vaulted into the tray where Kaye was folded in one corner, wrist drawn tightly to her chest.

He saw the body, Tirin’s blood already coagulating with grit and rust. Guilt licked a cold tongue down his spine.

Casualties are a part of war, son, came his father’s voice in his mind.

He stepped over the body.

He saw Serena crouched over Kaye. Then he saw the bite mark and knew what it meant.

He gripped the handle of the Dragon sword on his hip.

Kaye’s head was turned away from him and away from Serena. Eyes down. Resigned.

The leather grip creaked against Fyke’s palm as his hand tightened. He felt the loose rust from the tray’s edge there. Tiny flakes of metal embedded themselves in his skin.

He could feel the midday sun burning on his hair and rippling hot waves over his oilskin jacket. Sweat droplets were sprouting in his palm, making the grip slippery and uncomfortable.

The world has no time for sentimentality, his father’s voice said.

Already he threatened the whole team by bringing an infected host into the compound. Every second she lived, the parasite grew within their walls.

Unblinking, he slid his eyes over her form. He located the soft, pale skin of her neck.

He swallowed hard.

It'll be quick, he told himself.

In that moment he noticed small things – the sweat droplets making mini river courses down her neck. The tiny, fine hairs disappearing into her hairline. The determined line of her mouth that he knew well.

Then he saw the blood escaping from the wound, rising over jagged flesh mountains, down valleys of puncture marks.

The parasite would already be spreading.

This is how we survive, his father had said.

Survival at all costs.

Fyke gripped the scabbard with his left hand. He flexed his right and re-grasped the hilt. He took a deep breath. And drew –

The blade thunked through bone and muscle, solid and final.

It glinted in the fire light and in his father's green-grey eyes. But he didn't once look up at Fyke.

Now his father hacked the rabbit's extremities off with precise, well-practiced blows – head, front legs, back legs, tail. He tossed the parts into the fire and Fyke looked away. But he could still smell the burning meat.

The audible rip of his father pulling the skin from the carcass broke the silence. He gave a few final tugs to free it from white sinew and muscle. Fyke didn't want to see that pink, mottled body.

'This is how we survive,' his father had said. Then he tossed the limp, hollow skin at his son's feet. In the dusky half-light, Fyke couldn't help looking at the twisted fur.

The softness was all gone now.

Fyke thought of when he saw the rabbit that morning. He had felt stifled in the morning sun, the heat just building up for a summer day. It was reflecting off the grass, evaporating the 4:00am dew still clinging to the cuffs of his camouflage jacket

and pants. They hadn't shot a single thing yet and he could feel his father's frustration growing at the clumsiness of his son's ten year old feet. Compound bow hunting required silent stalking and Fyke kept scaring the rabbits away. He would step forward and suddenly the brush would flicker with movement as they scattered away.

'Be patient – a soldier has got to be patient,' his father had said. But that had been hours ago. He hadn't said a word since.

Then Fyke had seen something that wasn't the disappearing white flash of a tail down a hole. Instead, it was a rabbit with its back to him, loping on the outskirts of the grasses. It was young, a kitten.

It nibbled obliviously in the morning sun. Fyke could see its nose twitching, its mouth chewing tiny mouthfuls. He even noticed the texture of the rabbit's sooty brown fur. And when it moved, the light picked up hints of amber and gold.

Too easy, thought the predator in Fyke. But also too young, he thought.

He went to turn away. But his father, crouched behind him, blocked his path. Eyes locked on the kitten.

'This is survival,' he said in a low voice. 'We're not here to play games.'

Fyke looked at the rabbit. He hoped for a fleeting moment that it had moved into cover. But it remained, mouth chewing furiously and full of grass. The arrow was already nocked. The arrow release mechanism was on his wrist and clipped to the string.

He looked back and his father's eyes were on him.

So he raised the bow.

The rabbit seemed even smaller in the circle of his sight.

He could feel his father behind him, like a weight pushing between his shoulder blades.

Fyke took a breath and pulled the string to full draw.

'Survival at all costs,' his father whispered.

It was when his father made him retrieve the body that he felt the frail weight of the creature. He felt the tiny bones sliding under the fur. He had run a thumb over its ears, briefly, so his father wouldn't see. And they felt just like the plant that was named after them – 'rabbit's ears' his mother had told him as they knelt in the garden. Because the floppy leaves were covered in fine, soft hairs.

That moment – when the sun cut across the grass and picked up the golden flecks in the kitten’s fur – it was just a memory now. Just a moment of sentimentality.

And the world had no room for sentimentality.

That’s what his father had said that night by the camp fire. And he had said it many times since. When Fyke had sat alone in the stands after losing a Taekwondo tournament. When he was found reading a battered copy of T.S. Eliot’s poems. When he came home with his first black eye. And when he watched the black hearse that held his mother’s body drive away.

As the sword cut through the air, he looked at Kaye, hunched leporine-like and shaking. He saw the fine, soft hairs running up the curve of her neck, inches from the blade.

No room for sentimentality, his father had said.

But his father wasn’t around anymore.

He had opted out long ago.

Every muscle in Fyke’s body seized. The joints and ligaments froze and screamed as they tried to stop the sword’s path. The blade sped towards Kaye’s jugular vein –

But it stopped.

He stood panting. His arms felt ripped apart and he could barely lift them to sheath the sword. It slid back with a *shink* and Kaye looked up at him. In the light, he saw that her brown eyes were flecked with gold.