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About Wells:

Martha Wells was born in 1964 in Fort Worth, Texas, and graduated from Texas A&M University with a B.A. in Anthropology. Her first novel, *The Element of Fire*, was published by Tor in hardcover in July 1993 and was a finalist for the 1993 Compton Crook/Stephen Tall Award and a runner-up for the 1994 Crawford Award. The French edition, *Le feu primordial*, was a 2003 Imaginales Award nominee. Her second novel for Tor, *City of Bones*, was a 1995 hardcover and June 1996 paperback release. Both novels were on the Locus recommended reading lists. Her third novel *The Death of the Necromancer* (Avon Eos) was a 1998 Nebula Award Nominee and the French edition was a 2002 Imaginales Award nominee. Her fourth novel *Wheel of the Infinite* (HarperCollins Eos) was a 2000 hardcover and 2001 December paperback release. The *Wizard Hunters* (HarperCollins Eos/May 2003) was the first book in a fantasy trilogy taking place in the world of *Ile-Rien* from *The Element of Fire* and *The Death of the Necromancer*. The second book in that trilogy is *The Ships of Air* (HarperCollins Eos/July 2004) and the third is *The Gate of Gods*, released in November 2005. She also has a media tie-in novel, *Stargate Atlantis: Reliquary*, released in March 2006. She has had short stories published in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Black Gate*, *Lone Star Stories*, and the *Tsunami Relief* anthology *Elemental*, and has essays in the non-fiction anthologies *Farscape Forever* and *Mapping the World of Harry Potter* (BenBella Books, 2005). Her books have been published in eight languages, including French, Spanish, German, Russian, Italian, Polish, and Dutch.

Also available on Feedbooks Wells:

- [*The Element of Fire*](#) (1993)
- [*Bad Medicine*](#) (1997)
- [*Thorns*](#) (1995)

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It was the dead end of winter and Parker was riding through the Little Sally pass, his saddlebags filled with a payroll he really oughtn't have, wearing every stitch of clothing he owned and wishing he was someplace warm, like Hell. Up in the highest notch, just before the canyon started to slope down, he saw an old Indian standing alongside the trail.

The old man was knee-deep in snow, a ragged hide robe wrapped around him, his head slumped down and stringy gray-white hair falling forward so Parker couldn't see his face. He looked as if he had come just so far and couldn't go a step more. At the moment, it wasn't hard for Parker to sympathize.

He reined in, leaned forward and tipped his hat back. "Old man, do you need some help?" The horse couldn't carry two for long, but judging by the bony shoulders outlined by the shabby leather, the old man couldn't weigh much more than a child.

The Indian didn't answer. The horse stamped and snorted, uneasy. It was late afternoon, thick gray clouds overhead and the wind rustling the fir trees down the pass. Snow was falling, very gently, little flakes catching in the old man's hair. Parker wondered uneasily if the man had died like that, frozen stiff, standing up.

Then the Indian lifted his head.

His eyes were red, as if the vessels had burst and filled the whites with blood. The pupils were open slits of blazing light.

Parker's feet came out of the stirrups as he fell sideways off the horse, dragging the rifle out of the saddle sheath on the way down. As he landed hard, the startled horse leapt away like a deer and Parker had the gun aimed, all in one furious heart-stopping, scared-witless moment.

The Indian hadn't moved. Parker expected him to be doing something by now: turning into a *wendigo*, growing horns and batwings, or big teeth to eat the meal that had stupidly stopped to chat, but he hadn't moved. Parker kept the rifle trained on him but didn't fire. On the off chance that this was a shaman who hadn't

decided to kill him yet, he didn't want to make this worse than it already was.

The eyes he didn't want to look at were fixed on midair. Very quietly, the old man started to speak. The voice was raspy and hollow, but human. Parker couldn't understand him; there were three tribes around these mountains and the language could belong to any of them. Parker stayed where he was until the old man stopped speaking, and his head slumped again.

Cold was creeping through Parker's blood. He pushed to his feet, chilled from the snow. Nothing happened. He started to make a wide circle around the Indian, but when he got even with him, the figure disappeared. *Damn*, Parker thought, irony coloring his fear. *This is going to be a day*. He took an experimental step backward, and from that angle he could see the old man again. Someone coming up the trail from the other direction would never have noticed anything.

Clumsy in the deep snow, Parker went on up the trail and spent a while catching his wary horse, and another while calming her down. And calming himself down. It had to be a warning, but he had come this way last year, and he knew this wasn't anybody's sacred ground. So what was the warning for? It was undoubtedly clear as glass, if you understood whatever language the old Indian's chimera spoke. Common sense said to heed it anyway and turn right around and go back. "Can't do it," he told the nervous horse regretfully. The payroll in the saddlebags said he had to go forward.

Parker mounted again and urged to horse on, slowly picking a path through the snow. It was getting colder and there was no use looking for answers where there weren't any.

It took a long time getting out of sight of the place, and Parker didn't look back.

But he wanted to, the whole way.

A storm chased Parker down the mountain and into the deep pine of the valley. It was dark and he was leading the horse by that time,

battered by the wind and drenched by freezing rain. The snow at the top of the pass was nothing but ice down here in the pines, just wet enough to find its way inside his coat and soak him to the skin.

There was a stage stopover and outpost a little way ahead, and he meant to stay the night there. It was far too early in the year for a stage to run through here, but there would probably be a caretaker. Unsure of what condition he would be in when he arrived, Parker had cached the saddlebags back along the trail, under a pile of flat rocks.

He hadn't encountered any man- and horse-eating demons on the way down the pass, or anything to show what the chimera's warning meant. But maybe it was such a lousy night even the demons were tucked up in bed.

Then ahead in the dark he saw a flicker of light. He pushed toward it, stumbling over invisible rocks in the dark, thinking, *That better be the post.*

As he got closer he started to make out details. The light came from a couple of hurricane lamps, the muted glow illuminating a row of wooden posts that had to be a stockade wall. He could see a broad wagon gate standing open, two men looking down at something crumpled on the ground.

The light caught blood, bright against the muddy ice. The damage was mostly concealed by the dim light, but what Parker could see told him it had been a man.

"Oh, fine," Parker muttered. This was just about all he needed. His horse, finally catching the scent of blood in the freezing wind, jerked her head and sidled.

The men looked up, startled, and there was suddenly a rifle pointed at Parker's chest.

"Easy!" he said, lifting his hands, showing one was empty and the other held the horse's reins.

One of the men picked up a lamp and carried it over, staring hard at Parker. Parker tugged his scarf down from his face so they could see he was human and opened his coat. He didn't have a speck of

blood on him and the gutted body was covered with it, steaming in the frigid air. "Who are you?" the man with the rifle demanded.

"I was coming down the pass when the storm started, wanted to take shelter here for the night," Parker told him. The cold rain was stinging his cheeks. "What happened?"

Nobody answered, and the one with the lamp withdrew.

"Hey, are you going to let me in?" Parker felt helpless, trying to pretend he could still feel his toes. He could hear they were arguing, but couldn't make out the words. If he had known he was going to end up like this, he would have let the army catch him and save the whole damn trip over the damn mountain.

"All right, come in!" someone shouted finally.

They had to throw a tarp over the body and drag it aside before he could get the horse through the gate. There was a sheltered lean-to just inside with another hurricane lamp; standing in the lee of it, out of the wind and rain, was like stepping into a warm parlor. Something short and wrapped up in furs started to talk to him but Parker's attention was caught by the young man with the shotgun who was closing and bolting the gate.

The short furry figure pointed past him, into the compound. "... Stable's that way, son. Got here at a bad time, you did—"

That was an understatement. Parker followed him out of the shelter. The freezing wind struck again, broken somewhat by the stockade. Parker staggered across muddy ground slick with ice patches. They blundered around the big dark shape of a stagecoach and into the stable, which was blessedly warm and far better than the lean-to. Parker waited until his guide got a lamp lit and asked, "You had a little trouble tonight?"

"You might say that now. This is wolf country tonight." It chuckled, face still invisible under the fur hood. "It's bad too, real bad."

There was a team of matched grays and a couple of tired pack mules already stabled. Parker picked a stall without waiting for permission, unsaddling the horse and starting to rub her down. His

hands were numb inside his gloves and clumsy, and his frozen ears were beginning to thaw, giving him a pounding headache. The fur-covered figure just stood there and watched. Parker guessed they were starved for entertainment around here. He decided to play naive, and asked, "So that fellow was killed by wolves?"

The figure laughed, shed the hood and a couple of knitted scarves and turned into a little old man with a salt-and-pepper beard, small eyes, and big yellow teeth. He reminded Parker of a chipmunk, and not in a good way. "Not wolves, one wolf. We got wolf trouble. A werewolf."

Parker gave him a hard look. "A werewolf? It won't be a full moon for another two weeks." Besides, he didn't think an Indian shaman would bother with a chimera to warn about a werewolf.

"This one don't need a full moon, don't need nothing. He ain't under no curse. Likes it probably. Sinful." He shook his head, a sad chipmunk. "Killed two men, and a horse, earlier today. I saw him, took a couple of shots at him, but he just faded away into the snow." He grinned. "You don't have to look like I'm daft, young fella. You can ask the stage passengers, they believe."

Parker wished he could ask the mules; they probably had more sense. "Yes, I might do that."

"You'll see, we're gonna have wolf trouble tonight. That's for sure." The chipmunk laughed again and headed for the doors. "Come on into the post when you're done. Stabling is half-price for the night, 'cause of the storm."

Parker finished with the horse, swearing under his breath. He was trapped for the night with a stage full of other people's problems and townsmen who thought everybody they met was a werewolf. "Probably all on their way to Miller's Crossing for a witch burning," he said in disgust to the horse, who flicked an ear.

Outside again, he couldn't see much of the posthouse in the dark but got the impression of a long rambling building. When he opened the heavy wooden door what little conversation there was stopped.

He stepped inside, letting the wind slam the door shut behind him. This was the long public room of the post, where passengers would wait while the horses were changed. The lanterns were smoky and most of the light came from the fire in the big stone hearth. The place smelled musty, like it hadn't been opened up in some time, and the walls were patched with yellowed newspaper.

There were three men — one sitting at the plank table, one standing at the hearth, and one looking as if he had just stopped pacing and was anxious to get back to it.

Parker tipped his hat politely. He hadn't seen an unfriendlier set of expressions since the last time he and Harry had robbed a train. He wished Harry were here now, instead of waiting for him in Piscaro, but there was nothing to help that. He headed for the fireplace and put his back against it, dripping on the sooty stone as the ice caught in his coat melted. "Quite a night." From this angle, he saw there was a woman seated at the table too, gloved hands around a mug for warmth. She wore a long black dress and her hair under her bonnet was very straight and very dark. Her face was calm and still, like something from an old Spanish portrait, but her skin was pale.

"Who the hell are you?" That was the pacer, apparently not in a very genial mood.

"Easy, mister, I just came in out of the cold," Parker said, sounding sociable to save argument. In his career he had always been more interested in acquiring money with as little notice as possible, and not shooting people. He didn't like trouble for trouble's sake. The obviously overwrought man glaring at him was well-dressed, in his forties, graying, built stocky but going to fat.

He snarled, "How can we be sure of that?"

Parker's mouth quirked at the nonsensical question. "Guess we're just going to have to take my word for it."

The woman said quietly, "Mr. Abernathy, please." Parker liked her voice.

"Quite right, ma'am," the man standing at the other end of the

mantle said. His coat was still dripping on the floorboards, and Parker figured he had been one of the two men at the gate. "No reason to be unfriendly." He looked at Parker. "I'm Gunderson. That's Preacher Johnson." He nodded to the dark-clothed man still sitting quietly at the table, "Mrs. Johnson," *Damn*, Parker thought, "and Mr. Abernathy. We were heading to Twin Rivers on the stage, but the ice storm hit and we had to stop off here." Gunderson was about Parker's age, with a droopy mustache and a flashy red waistcoat.

"That was a mistake," Abernathy muttered, starting to pace again. That was going to get on Parker's nerves sooner rather than later.

"There wasn't a choice." The preacher stood to put a comforting hand on his wife's shoulder. He was droopy and mousey-looking, and seemed to need the comfort more than the composed figure of his wife.

"Kind of early in the season to run stages through this route, isn't it?" Half-assed was more like it, but Parker wanted them to talk about themselves and not ask him questions.

Abernathy shrugged. "The weather was clear at Chandler's Ford. I thought it would hold. I have to get to Twin Rivers—"

"It wasn't your fault, Mr. Abernathy," the preacher interrupted kindly. "I have a position at a church further west. My wife is going to teach school there. We wanted to get there as soon as possible, so we took the risk of the weather."

Gunderson glanced at Parker, a little more pointedly. "And you're...?"

"Heading to Miller's Crossing." He wasn't heading there, but it was a logical destination for anybody coming down the Little Sally pass. "So you think wolves killed that man out there?"

They stared at him, stricken, except for Mrs. Johnson, who lowered her head a little and lifted a hand to her mouth.

Gunderson shifted uneasily. "That was the stage driver. Two other men have been killed since we pulled in at dusk. Old Jim, the post caretaker, saw... something attack his helper outside the stockade.

He fired at it, but by the time he got out there the boy was dead. It wasn't pretty. So the stage outrider went for help. He came back tied to his horse, tore up so much that Halday, our driver, hardly recognized him. The horse was bled so badly, it didn't last long either. Kind of left us trapped here, at least until morning." He smiled thinly. "You see why things are a little tense."

Parker frowned, trying to make sense of it. It sounded like whatever it was hadn't been stalking the area for long, or Jim and his helper would have been dead before this. It had to have been here at least long enough for some shaman to find out about it and put up the chimera to warn his people off. "You think it'll let you alone in the morning? You aren't going to try to leave when the storm lets up?" From what they had said, the thing liked to pick victims off one at a time. A stageful of armed people should be safe, even moving slow in the dark.

"These things don't have any power in daylight," Abernathy said, taking out a handkerchief to wipe his face. "A Haunt got stirred up in Pines one night, frightened a couple of folks to death. But it lost its power in the morning and just drifted around. You could see right through it, like frosted glass, and it couldn't do a thing."

Yeah, but that was a Haunt, Parker thought. Haunts didn't eat you. It was probably a mistake to attempt to talk rationally to these people, but he tried, "Why are you all so sure it's a werewolf? They don't usually—"

The door banged open, letting in a blast of cold air, Old Jim, and the man who had let Parker into the post. He took a hard look at Parker and said evenly, "I'd like you to turn over your pistol."

Parker lifted his brows. "Considering what's happening here, that doesn't sound like too good an idea."

"We didn't have to let you in," the man countered, still eyeing Parker unkindly.

Jim chortled at him. "Halday, I run this place, and just cause you people jinxed it with a wolf-curse is no reason for me to turn folks

away on a night like this."

Glad the chipmunk was on his side, Parker said, "Look, the thing he described isn't going to have to sneak in here. It'll just climb the stockade."

"That could be right," Halday agreed evenly. "It could also be that Jim's 'werewolf' is a crazy man playing games."

They stared each other down. Parker could see the man was afraid. Maybe frightened enough to do things he wouldn't ordinarily do. "What does that mean?" Parker asked him quietly. "You're going to run me out of here?"

Halday didn't answer and his expression didn't change. The others were watching like it was a stage drama; whatever happened, Parker didn't think they would interfere. Then Halday said slowly, "You can stay. But I want to keep your gun until you leave in the morning. I already took the rifle out of your gear in the stable." He added, suddenly a little self-conscious, "It was the only thing I touched."

Parker's eyes narrowed, but it was almost fair, under the circumstances. He debated being jumped by Halday and Abernathy and probably Gunderson and Johnson too, and ending up out in the cold with the thing the chimera had been left to warn about, versus being stuck in here unarmed with the thing the chimera had been left to warn about. Either way, it was better without the cold. "It's a deal." Smiling affably, he unbuckled his gunbelt and stepped up to hand it to Halday.

Somebody suggested food, and Jim said, "That's a good idea. Come on back to the kitchen and I'll get us some dinner."

But it was Mrs. Johnson who silently took charge, taking meat and bread out of Jim's larder. She turned the meat over on the table, studying it, nose wrinkled thoughtfully, before she cut it up for sandwiches, did the same for the bread, and sifted the coffee like she was looking for weevils. Jim allowed her free rein, chuckling to himself about a woman's touch in the kitchen. Considering how bad

Jim smelled at close range, Parker didn't think she was doing it out of a sense of duty at all, and he had never been so grateful in his life.

She took her gloves off to work, and when she handed him the plate he noticed her hands were pale and neat, the nails filed back nearly to the quick.

The kitchen was a smaller room and the potbellied stove kept it almost warm. Nobody seemed to want to talk, but Parker still wanted to know more. "So what did you see?" he asked Chipmunk Jim. Jim stared at him blankly, and Parker clarified, "When the first man was killed. He was outside the stockade? What did he go out there for?"

He was trying to get Jim to tell the story from the beginning, knowing people always came out with details that you would never think to ask about. Or that you didn't want to ask about in front of the concerned parties. From what the others had said, it sounded like the coach had already been inside the stockade, and Parker would have liked to know who was stretching their legs out in the yard and in sight when the man had been killed, just to settle his own mind. But Jim shuddered in his bulky coat and skipped all that, saying only, "The light was failing early because of the storm. I just got a glimpse of it, running off into the trees. I heard it howl."

"That doesn't mean it's a werewolf," Preacher Johnson said quietly, making everyone look at him in surprise. He had his hands wrapped around a mug of coffee for warmth, his eyes on the fire inside the stove's belly. Mrs. Johnson didn't look up at him. "There are creatures of darkness that could do this, that could curse this entire valley."

Ignoring the interruption, Jim continued, "Dark as pitch, running like a wolf but on two legs." He shuddered again, but Parker read malicious enjoyment in that, not fear.

Starved for entertainment, Parker thought again. "If it's not a werewolf, then it could be somebody using craft, making a chimera of himself to make it look like he was with the others. And if that's so, he could have killed your guard with a spell, and not his hands."

Abernathy snorted, but Halday and Gunderson stared at him. Gunderson said, "You ask questions like a lawman. Are you a lawman?"

"I was raised by Jesuits." It wasn't true, but it did tend to shut people up.

"Why do you think it's not a werewolf?" Halday asked, sounding more like he might be willing to listen to the answer. Parker chalked it up to the Jesuit thing.

"It's not a full moon," Parker pointed out. But it seemed like there was another reason, too. Parker's gut was telling him that even if everybody on the coach except Halday was a werewolf, he would have still bet the whole army payroll that something else had done this.

Parker never managed to get more sense out of Jim, and nobody else had seen anything to speak of. Finally Mrs. Johnson went down the hall to one of the bunkrooms to retire. Parker thought the back of the house had to be nearly as cold as outside, but she seemed to want the privacy. Gunderson had gone out to take Halday's place guarding the gate. The others were in the kitchen.

Parker waited for the place to get quiet, then he went out on the porch.

The storm had died away earlier while they were eating, leaving the night still and frozen. There were lamps lit out in the yard now, several hanging from the porch roof and lighting the area around the gate. In the pools of yellow light, he couldn't see anybody moving, just the fine coating of ice. He had never been warm enough to take his coat off, and his clothes were still damp, but he stepped off the porch and walked toward the stable, ice crunching underfoot.

The sound was oddly loud in the quiet and Gunderson stepped out of the lean-to beside the gate to stare at him. Parker, determined to maintain a friendly and innocent demeanor no matter what, waved. It was too dark to see the man's expression, but he didn't wave back.

Since Gunderson had seen him and it would be good to have a more obvious reason for walking around in the cold, Parker stopped and opened the stable door. He held it wide enough for the lamp light outside to penetrate the darkness. The horses and mules stared curiously at him.

Then a patch of ground a few feet away exploded from a shotgun blast.

Parker bolted for the corner of the stable almost before he realized Gunderson must have shot at him. In the dark patch between the two buildings, he flattened himself against the wall and called out, "What the hell?"

"I saw it! It went this way!" Gunderson was running across the compound, out of the lamplight, toward the outbuildings.

"Don't follow it!" Parker yelled. "That's what it—" *wants*. *Oh, for God's sake*. He ran after the man.

Past the barn, between two tumbledown outbuildings, Gunderson jolted to a halt, lifting the gun. Something moved in the shadows, a fast blob of darkness. Parker saw Gunderson go down and the gun go flying. He dived for it, landing in the frozen mud and snatching it up. He rolled and fired the other barrel into the dark thing standing over Gunderson. It jerked, snarled, and tore away from the body, hunkering down only a few paces away.

Parker rolled to his feet, holding the empty gun like a club, thinking, *Back away slowly, then run, very very fast*. Then the creature laughed, a high-pitched growl of amusement, and bolted off into the dark.

He took a step toward the body, but there was nothing to be done; Gunderson had been ripped open neck to groin, blood pooling dark on the frozen ground. *Saw that one coming*, Parker thought sourly. It could have gotten him, too. It obviously knew the gun was empty, having tricked Gunderson into firing the first barrel. But he figured it had done what it came to do; picked another one of them off. Then he felt a prickle along his hairline and looked up. Mrs. Johnson was

standing a few paces away on the other side of the body, a neat figure in her dark coat and bonnet.

"Mr. Parker," she said with perfect composure, drawing her skirts back from the blood.

"Mrs. Johnson," he said. She didn't look at all discomposed for a woman standing over steaming insides. *Yep*, Parker thought, *Just out for a walk on an icy winter night in an isolated outpost populated by strange men and murdering werewolves*. Of course, she might just be having an affair with Halday or Chipmunk Jim. He tossed the useless shotgun down next to the guard's body. "I don't have a gun."

"Neither do I."

"But I don't think you're unarmed." He circled to the right, trying to get a better view of the body without touching it, keeping one eye on her. She went left, keeping one eye on him. "Did you see it?"

"I saw what I was meant to see," she said, her voice as neat and precise as her movements. "Why did he shoot at you?"

It could have sounded like an accusation, but Parker knew it wasn't. "He didn't. He thought he saw it creeping up on me. But there was nothing there." He added, "He saw what he was meant to see."

Her fine mouth twisted in agreement. "It's unfortunate."

Then the door to the post banged open and hurried footsteps crunched on the snow. Mrs. Johnson vanished into the dark with a flick of her skirts. Parker yelled, "Over here!"

Abernathy, Preacher Johnson, Halday and Chipmunk Jim were running toward him from the post.

Johnson moved up beside Halday, saying with grim fear, "So it's in here with us now."

"Maybe it always was." Abernathy looked white-eye scared. "This thing ... it didn't start until we got here."

"That's what I said," Jim put in, not helpfully.

Ignoring him, Johnson was glaring at Abernathy. "What do you mean? You think it's one of us? Is that what you're saying?"

Abernathy flung his arms up in exasperation. "You heard the old

man, none of this happened before we got here! It has to be one of us. I said we should all stay together, but Halday and I were alone in the bunkroom when the shots woke us. Where were you?"

"I was with my wife, where do you think?" Johnson said coldly.

Abernathy stomped back inside, but Halday held a lamp while Johnson and Parker got the body wrapped in a tarp and carried it out to a shed near the stockade wall, where the other three bundles were. If it hadn't been for the cold, the place would have smelled like a charnel house by now. "It can't be one of us," Halday said as they crossed the yard on the way back. He sounded as if he was mostly talking to himself. "No one was alone, except you." He threw a sidelong look at Parker. "And you don't have blood on your clothes."

"Thank you for noticing," Parker agreed.

Johnson said, stubbornly, "It must've climbed the stockade, then got back out again."

And he'll stick to that story 'til it kills us, Parker thought. He said, "I'll take the watch. If I can have some shells for the shotgun."

Halday stopped and eyed him. "It's my job, I'll do it."

Lack of blood only went so far, apparently. As the others went into the house, he said, "I'll check the horses, then," and headed toward the barn. He glanced back, making sure Halday's attention was on the gate, and stepped into the shadows between the two buildings.

He stood still a moment, feeling his feet freeze, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Now he could finally have a look for what he had originally come out here to see.

He made his way through the dark, past the rundown outbuildings. It was too dark to search without a lantern, but on this night that would be like traveling with a brass band.

He reached the stockade wall, and felt his way to the corner. He couldn't see a damn thing and reluctantly tugged his glove off. His fingers were mostly numb, but the marks carved into the post were wide enough to feel with the back of his hand. He stepped away,

pulling his glove back on. Those were some kind of hex signs, and the carving wasn't new. They were pointing inward, meaning to protect whatever was in the compound. "Not doing such a great job at that," he said under his breath.

Unless they were. *It could be that*, Parker thought. He should have gone with first impressions.

He went back to the house, moving quietly, keeping to the dark patches. The floorboards of the back porch didn't creak, and somebody had left the latch lifted on the kitchen door. But Chipmunk Jim had been awful careless for a man who was being stalked by a werewolf or whatever the hell. Parker had thought about trying to enlist Halday's help and already discarded the notion. Appearances aside, Johnson would probably be the one most likely to keep his head. But explanations and proof would take too long, and they would all end up with their insides steaming on the ground. And he still wasn't certain where Mrs. Johnson fit into all this, if she was an innocent bystander or cheering from the grandstand.

He had to pass through the front room to get to rest of the house, and Johnson was in there with Abernathy, sitting on opposite sides of the room, both watching the door. Parker nodded to them as he went through to the back, down the dark hallways, past the locked doors that led to rooms for storage of supplies and beds for passengers, past the presumably locked door to the bedroom Mrs. Johnson had taken.

Halday had put the guns in a locked room in the back that did the duty of a safe for mail. Parker felt for the lock with a certain degree of confidence; he had been a safecracker before it got easier to just blow the things up. But the hasp was already broken.

Well, you should have seen this coming, he told himself wearily. He stepped back and pushed the door open with a finger.

Jim was standing inside, leaning against the cabinet where Halday had put the guns. He chuckled merrily to himself. The chipmunk teeth were now long and white and pointed on the ends. He said, "Now tell

old Jim what given him away."

"There was hex marks protecting whatever's inside the stockade. If you could do that, you could stop anybody with a wolf curse," Parker said, to give himself time to think. Jim had long dirty claws now too, long sharp ones, that hadn't been there an instant ago. His coat had fallen open to show nothing under it but a squat muscular body covered with straggly black fur soaked with blood. Jim had smelled pretty foul as it was, but the cold had disguised the worst of the odor. "But it's not a wolf curse, is it?"

"Oh, no. That was just a joke." Jim chuckled. "You weren't the only one I was teasin'. Funny, huh? What's the point of someone being a werewolf and smelling the witchery on me, and then not being able to tell anybody about it because you can't say how you know? Now that's funny."

"You used a chimera to make Johnson and Abernathy think you were with them when Gunderson was killed." Parker took a step backward, trying to think where the nearest weapon was, if he could make it all the way outside to Halday and the shotgun.

Jim shrugged. "Didn't have to. Just gave them a little nudge to make 'em fall asleep. I was in the yard with you the whole time, boy. When they come running up I just stepped up behind them like I'd been following them the whole time."

Harry had always said Parker liked to make things too complicated. He took another step backward. "So you thought you'd live in the woods, eat folks, for fun?"

Jim shook his head, grinning. "I came out here to get away from the witchcatchers back east, but the damn Indians sniffed me out. The local medicine man made one of my rituals backfire and I ended up like this. I hadn't tried any since; they're dangerous stuff."

Parker took the last step and slammed the door, but Jim was damn fast. He was just turning to run when the door burst open, knocking him flat. He shoved to his feet and slammed his way about seven paces down the hall when claws caught in his coat and yanked

him flat.

Parker twisted around and saw Jim leering down at him. Parker kicked at his kneecap, connecting hard, and sending Jim falling forward, flailing. Parker rolled and scrambled up, lunging forward again but a set of claws wrapped around his ankle and pulled him down.

Then the nearest door flew open. It startled Jim enough that he let go when Parker scraped at his hand with his bootheel. It gave Parker just enough time to get his feet under him and throw himself through the door and into the room.

He landed on the dusty floor and realized the dark figure looming over him was Mrs. Johnson, bonnet askew and furious, holding an ax.

Jim lunged in after Parker and got the first swing right in the face. He staggered back, yowling like a wounded bear, and Parker shoved to his feet, breathing hard.

A faint line of consternation between her perfect brows, Mrs. Johnson handed him the bloody ax, saying, "Better cut his head off to make certain."

There wasn't much else to do under the circumstances. Parker took the ax and said, "Yes, ma'am."

What with all the explanations of how Jim turned out to be a monster, Parker didn't get a chance to talk to Mrs. Johnson in private until the next morning, when Halday and the others were occupied with harnessing the horses and loading the coach. They were going to take Jim's poor packmules with them, since there was no telling when the stage company would be able to get someone to take over the post.

The sky was gray and overcast, but it didn't smell like more rain was on the way. Mrs. Johnson was standing primly on the porch, wrapped in her dark coat, her little hands gloved again. Without looking at him she said, "You knew. About me, I mean. When?"

Standing below her on the muddy ground, Parker leaned against

the post. "When you took your gloves off in the kitchen." He thought that would have been a good moment to take her hand, but across the yard, Preacher Johnson was holding the horses for Halday and had one eye on him. It was a shame. He had never had a woman hit anybody with an ax for him before, and it had quite turned his head. He just explained, "You keep your fingernails cut back so you don't accidentally scratch anyone. What I didn't realize is that you were checking the food to make sure Jim didn't put any curses on it. He looked so unhealthy, I just thought you were checking it over for rot."

She nodded slightly, keeping her eyes on the other men across the yard. "He knew, as soon as I stepped off the coach. As I knew what he was." She folded her hands tightly. "You haven't said anything yet, so I assume you don't intend to."

"Oh no, ma'am," Parker assured her. "My friend Harry has the same condition."

She looked down at him then. Her face was still serious but her dark eyes were smiling. "You haven't told me your name," she said, not making it a question.

Considering what he knew about her, Parker couldn't see why not. "It's Robert Parker, ma'am."

Parker managed to be the one to hand her into the coach, though Preacher Johnson gave him a dark look. Parker just tipped his hat and smiled.

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