



# WILD LIFE





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## CLEAN THE BLOOD

BY CZ WRIGHT

When I open my eyes, a lioness stands staring at me. A few yards away, just outside the spherical dome of the forgotten, overgrown arcology, she stands in the shadows of the dark undergrowth of kudzu vines overtaking the oak trees. She takes my breath away. I nearly stand up and approach her, wanting nothing more than to get a closer look at this magnificent creature. At the same time, her eyes seem to glow. They transfix me, holding me in judgment. Is she an agent of karma, here to punish my transgression?

Instead, I say, "What's a lion doing here?" but gunfire erupts overhead, drowning out my words in its rat-a-tat barrage. I curl up in a ball and hold my hands against my ears, grateful for my too-big hands on my skinny, seventeen-year-old frame. The others duck alongside me. Rilla's black bob swings, briefly uncovering tips of elf ears, as she swoops, swift and catlike, behind cover; Allium tucks her curvy dwarf form up small on my other side, her lavender 'fro the only part of her sticking up over the plascrete planter.

Risking a glance, I notice we weren't the rail drone's target. It fires instead at a trio of grey squirrels, who had chased one another through the branches and down the

white, papery trunk of a young birch growing near the glass wall through broken floor tiles. With shrieks and chitters of terror and indignation, the critters bolt back out the broken window through which they'd entered. Once they are out of range and the drone stops firing, I glance back at the doorway. The lioness is gone.

"What'd you find, Stub?" Rilla says after the rail drone resumes its quietly whirring patrol.

I blink, trying to remember what she is referring to.

"And did you say something about a lion?" Allium says with a grin and furrowed brow.

I struggle to gather my thoughts. "Nothing," I say to Rilla as she double-checks her load-out. "There's no Matrix signal out here that I can find." I turn to Allium, who looks at me with bewildered amusement. "And yeah, I ... thought I saw one ..." I trail off lamely.

Allium laughs. "Lions don't live in Wisconsin, baby. You take one too many blows to the head taming beasts with your famous daddy?" She grins and snarls the words "taming beasts," flashing white teeth. "Or you just daydreaming about running away to tame lions yourself?"

Heat flushes my face, and I stare at my feet. Too close, I think, but she couldn't know and probably didn't mean it. She gives me drek about my "famous daddy" all the time, but I'm nothing like my father. At least I don't want to be. "No," is all I can muster.

She ruffles my hair, and my anger ebbs away with the glide of her fingers. "Redhead mop top," she mutters, playfully pushing my head away.





Rilla studies the scene further inside. “A hardwired drone on guard duty, so there’s probably someone still here. Data’s in the basement, and our intel says there’s an elevator ... over there.” She points to a column in the center of the open dome.

“I’ve got a spell that can get us past the drone. We’ll sneak in and be home in time for dinner,” Allium says.

Suddenly, I am fourteen again, standing in pajama pants in the kitchen at three in the morning. “Wanted to sneak in and be home in time for dinner,” my father slurs, and his hot breath assaults my nose. The smell of liquor on him isn’t new, but the black eye, torn shirt, and bloody jacket are. “I didn’t get the gig. Some animal welfare asshat had told them I didn’t deserve my own show, and those prick trid producers believed him. So when they asked me how I get my beasts in line, I showed them.” He grins then, swaying. “It didn’t change their minds, but I felt better.”

Allium touches me on the shoulder, and a tingle shivers over my arm, returning me to the present. She taps me twice, then claps my shoulder and guides me, her non-verbal and non-visual means of making sure I didn’t lose the team when she made us all invisible and silent.

We work our way across the expanse of the open plaza. The floor tiles, which must have dazzled and gleamed once upon a time, are now littered with bird poop, riddled with cracks and chips, and choked with weeds.

Quiet is an entirely different animal than silence. All’s spell encases us in a stifling bubble of silence,

which presses maddeningly on my ears. We reach a tall, wide column in the middle of the plaza in which a brushed-steel elevator stands, and Allium’s hand runs down my shoulder to my arm. She takes my hand and places it against the control panel of the elevator. This is her asking me to try my powers on it.

Just before I dip into the Resonance to look for a Matrix signal over here, she drops her Silence spell. Relief rushes through me at hearing the noisy quiet return: I can hear my breathing and the thump of my heart inside my chest; the wind blows somewhere past the missing panels in the ceiling, rustling leaves overhead. Birds call, and the squirrels continue chattering their displeasure outside. A tiny pebble tap, tap, taps across the floor away from us. A heartbeat later, Allium drops her Invisibility, too, and I realize the pebble was either her or Rilla checking the drone’s sensor range.

“I think we’re good,” Rilla whispers and looks expectantly at me.

I remember myself with another flush of embarrassment and check into the Resonance. I put out my hand and visualize little blue tendrils emanating from me to spear the electronics, searching out any signal with which I can interface. I find nothing. But as I begin to withdraw, an impression of sudden alertness—like when you’re trying to sneak past something you think is asleep and it picks its head up—floods my body with ice. I half-expect an alarm to start blaring. I wrench my hand away and shake my head, eyeballing the controls. “Nothing.”



Rilla digs a pry bar from her bag. "Sometimes, the old ways are best," she says ceremoniously, then jams the end of the pry bar between the doors and heaves them open. Inside is a nondescript and clean corporate elevator. A light glows overhead.

"Gimme a lift," Rilla says. Allium levitates Rilla, who pushes the hatch at the top of the elevator car up and to the side, then pulls herself through. Before long, we all stand on top of the car inside the elevator shaft. We each anchor our rappelling gear and begin to lower ourselves to the ground floor. Once we reach the bottom, we face another pair of doors. Rilla retrieves her pry bar again and nods at Allium, who casts another spell. Silence smothers my ears again, and Rilla slowly pries the doors open.

I glimpse motion through the widening gap and instinctively leap away, shoving the others to one side with me. Dents and sparks pepper the back of the elevator shaft—someone is shooting at us. Allium leans over my arm and flings a spell through the gap. I let the others go, and Rilla slams the end of the bar between the doors and heaves herself backward, leveraging them fully open.

On the tiles outside the door lies an unconscious human man dressed in a lightly armored security uniform. He wears a compact rifle in a sling across his body, and lines of blood run down his face from his ears, eyes, and nose.

We stand at an intersection, low-ceilinged, with pipes and wires running above our heads. Allium lifts the heavy silence from around us, and I take a breath like I've surfaced from deep water. We stand frozen for a moment, gauging whether anyone else is approaching. Rilla makes a hand gesture that communicates "follow me" and picks up the guard in a fireman's carry. She nods toward the next couple of doors. Allium scouts ahead, then indicates we are free to follow. I am beginning to feel like a member of this pack, silently communicating and efficiently carrying one another toward continued survival.

I open the door for Rilla, and she steps in and drops the guard on the maintenance closet floor among mops, buckets, and shelves full of cleaning products. She relieves him of his weapon and commlink and places a tranquilizer patch on his neck. Then she pulls a few zip-ties from her bag and roughly binds his wrists and ankles. Finally, she stuffs a rag in his mouth. "That ought to hold him," she says quietly and hands me his comm. "Make sure that isn't traceable."

Prodding the device with Resonance, I find it as barebones as could be. This guy's comm only serves as a simple walkie-talkie down here.

By the time I look up, Allium has swung back to join us. "Coast is clear, at least for a ways. I found the

security office."

We follow Allium down the hallway, around a corner, and into a room filled with screens. On the floor are a pair of guards, lying unconscious in drool. "We should probably pack those two in with the other one," Allium says. "I don't know how long they'll be out."

Rilla picks up one of the guards and nods toward the screens. "See what you can find," she tells me. "If we're really lucky, you'll be able to access our data from here. We're going to go scout around."

"Here, hang on," Allium says, and sets a warm hand on each of our heads. A moment later, her voice sounds in my mind, even though she hasn't opened her mouth. "We're linked up with a Mindlink. Telepathic communication. Best kind of wireless, baby!" Allium lifts the other guard with a Levitate, and I notice beads of sweat on her forehead.

"Keep an eye on things until Alli and I find the data center," Rilla says.

"Be right back, sweetie," Allium says out loud, gives me a wink, and leaves the room behind Rilla.

I glance over the panel, in which are set about twenty different camera feeds. It takes me a moment to piece together what is where, but a map on the wall beside me helps.

A swath of bright red on one of the camera feeds catches my eye. It looks like a red belt lying across a large steel exam table that dominates a room lined with walls of big, boxy animal enclosures.

And suddenly, I'm fifteen again, standing in the dark inside a piss-stinking chain-link cage before a wall of enclosures. My heartbeat gallops painfully through my skull, and tears I can't hold in mingle with the blood and snot running from my nose. My father is locking me inside as he rages, red-faced, about how I'll learn to mete out proper punishments whether I like it or not. The belt in his hand—the one he snatched away from me after I couldn't hit the cat—matches his red face, and my eye is swollen almost closed from its bite. One of the tigers pads out onto the concrete behind him, having nudged its gate open. My father must have forgotten to latch it in his anger. I don't tell him; deep down, I want the tiger to jump him, and I pray I don't give it away on my face. But a second later he notices, and he unloads on the animal, whipping it with that red belt, pressing it back into its pen.

Movement draws my eye and pulls me from my reverie; Rilla and Allium appear on a camera feed as they creep down the corridor, having apparently dumped their prisoners. I wipe at my eyes and swallow down the powerless feeling still clinging from my flashback. I set a hand on the panel, wind back the camera feed, and loop on a length of inactivity. I scan the feeds and find two in which I see guards. I refer to the map, then