

# The Hound

*by* Thomas Shaggy

You thought you had dark days.

The dark side of the moon had seen brighter days than this. Sunrise would be my sunset. That normal feeling of life when you wake up to the same smell of chow cooking in the morning that hits you in the face like a sack of coins, but never gets old. That manure stench of horses that needed to be let out hours ago singed the hairs in my nostrils.

I could barely see. Gunk filled my eyes still. My clothes were still worn from yesterday. My muscles peeled themselves apart as I stretched limb from limb and reached high into the air. I used the branch overhead to pull on my arms.

I called out to her.  
Her smell was in the air.

Your days aren't dark enough.

I pulled up my suspenders and put on my boots. I didn't tie them. I called to her again, still no answer. The fall air was dead and the forest dry and decrepit. A slight breeze could kick around a few leaves. Perfect for hunting. Ironically enough, for the deer, the season they are looking their best for a mate is the time they are easily revealed for a hunter like myself. But like the natives, they are cunning and move with the land.

A rustle outside? No one. Where is she? I paused and looked back in the tent.

The stew in the pot is bubbling over. That's what I smell. Venison, carrots, potatoes, and spices. She wouldn't have let this burn. I pulled it off the fire. I set it down next to the table.

Footprints. Two sets. I tracked for years for the Northern Army even before the war. The Hound is what they used to call me, Hound for short. I made a bloodhound look like a lad on his first hunt, a bumbling fool.

I searched the immediate area. I called to her again. A struggle? Tiny imperfections in the ground suggest indentation of nails.

Laura? Whoever this was wasn't careful enough. A path of leaves swept over tracks. The damp overturned leaves from the morning dew caught against the earth were all too obvious next to the cracked maple leaves.

Why hadn't I awoken?

The answer lay just a few feet from the fire. The wind had been blowing from the north across the camp and into my tent. A mixture of herbs from the Hills had been used to ensure a deep sleep. I picked into the tiny bowl. No clues here.

Not even the moon to light my way.

Someone had gotten good. The last sign was blood. She struggled; the blood was a lighter red, mixed with saliva. She'd bitten down into their arm, with a mouthful of blood she spit it back out. She knew I'd be coming. They knew what was happening. They must have knocked her out just past here. Signs of struggle ended. They put her up on their shoulder.

I sat and waited for the breeze. The faint smell of her hair tickled the inside of my nose. My eyes opened and I could feel my pupils constrict to pinholes.

And when the sun rises it will rise red.

I was on my knees. Begging God almighty to take me instead of her. As if by some miracle the life would be drained from my body and back into her. I swore to God, to God that I would find him and kill him myself. Innocent life. Tainted and ruined. She dangled from the tree. My teeth clenched so tight that they could have shattered under the slightest addition of pressure.

Her underwear dangled around her knees, that being the only thing keeping her legs from swinging into each other. She wore her mothers wedding dress. Torn to shreds it hung from her body in pieces. An eye more suitable for a punching bag than for seeing and a face that had been a scratch post for the local mountain lions.

I would be the mortal to hand justice to God. It wouldn't come in the form of steel from a blade or by gun powder of a revolver, but by my disbelief and preaching of the word of what happened.

My head hung low to the ground and my hands clasped together. I could have made diamonds out of coal. I screamed one last time. They weren't even words, just noises. I prayed to myself for strength. A rustle behind me again, but this time it walked a little closer.

I pulled my blade from the sheath attached to my back and spun to meet the stranger face to face. It wasn't who I expected. My body was ready to meet its maker. Instead, my eyes met that of a beautiful young woman in a dress. I didn't move my knife from her neck, but she walked around it, looking right through me at Laura. She wasn't threatened by me. I looked at the handle of my blade and was reminded again of the injustice of an idea I had prayed to for so long. The crucifix was no longer a symbol of purity to me. For at one time I'd use this blade to purify the spirit of whom I'd run it through.

No longer.

She knelt down at her feet and kissed them. Her final goodbyes she would utter under her breath. She didn't need to. All my years tracking down people and I couldn't sense what was right in front of me. My wife was killed for loving another, but a woman. It was an abomination of faith. My wife was murdered for love.

I cursed him again. She placed her finger over my dried and cracked lips.

I stopped for a moment and let the tears mix with the blood of my lips. I licked them slowly and the taste of blood woke up every taste bud on my tongue. I could catch my breath and look back into her eyes. She watched me as she walked away.

When the sun sets again it will be a blood bath.

I found the woman two days later ten miles from our camp. I stepped off my horse.

She'd been strung up from her ankle twenty feet off the ground. She wore the same dress I'd seen her in that day. The decay on her body suggested she'd been dead, rather mutilated, for about sixteen hours. The local wildlife picked away at the frozen flesh. Some used her as a home. It was a sight that was branded onto the front of my

mind. I cut her down. Both my wife and her would be burned and buried in the earth together.

The heat of the pyre burned my face. It lit up the night sky. The world knew where I was, but I knew not of the world. I became a light traveling through an endless dungeon of darkness.

A hound was what I was.

I looked at the tracks surrounding the nearby tree.

A hound that was taught by the best. Taught to find anyone and anything.

The tracks led North into the hills

A hound that sought blood for the evil deeds done upon man and who would bring justice to those that God abandoned. God abandoned me. A man is a man. If nothing else, he should believe in the endless good that he can do in the limited time he has on earth. I looked down at the handle of the blade once more.

...A symbol of the injustice in the world. The indifference of men.

