

# The Creature

## A Modern Order of Guardians Short Story

by

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## The Creature

Confusion. One moment, sand dunes. Warm. Comforting. Sun sinking in sky. Waiting to hunt. Warming the blood. The night comes. Cool night. Fresh meat. The next... stones. And trees. Stones make all look strange. Must get away.

Trunks of trees pass by in a blur. Must get away.

Then stop. Still. Waiting. Watching.

Off again, racing to the next point. Get away.

Stop. Wait. Leaves rustling. Footsteps? Turn and look. Nobody there. All is wrong. Night is wrong darkness. Trees too green. Smells. So many smells. Wrong smells.

Rush to the next tree.

Stop. Look. Caution. Sniff the air. Smells everywhere. Going in all directions. Green ribbons in the night. Older ones dull. New ones sharper. Organic. People. Too big to eat. But they have things to eat. Small animals. They have small animals. Some had them with them. Where people, there is meat. But dangerous. Always guarded.

Hunger gnawing. So hungry.

Follow the smells. Rush to the next trees. Green smells lead towards the salt. Saltwater. Bad to drink. But people gather by saltwater. Trail leads to people. Away from the stones. Must get away. Away from the doors. Towards the sea.

The trees come to an end. Stars visible in sky. No more canopy. Wrong stars. Wrong smells. Still... open space. Grass swaying in the breeze. Feels strange on legs. Where is the desert? Night not as cold as used to. Grass is not sand.

Over the space, buildings. So many buildings. And lights. Stars trapped

on the ground. Overwhelming smells. More and more people. Some walking nearby. Stay still. Stay quiet. Wait. Listen. Hide. Wait.

Time passes. Then, all quiet. People gone. Must move silently. Careful. Stay out of sight. Move slow. Closer to buildings. Places where people nest. Human nests. All sleeping.

Must find place to feed. Find place to hide. So hungry. Uncertain.

Follow strongest scent. Stop at wooden wall. Covered in scent. Green with smell. Can hear... birds roosting. Can smell birds. Behind wall.

Find gap. Squeeze head under. Listen. Listen. No sound. Squeeze self through. Into space. Wooden walls all around. Sharp smell. Birds. Stay still. Be sure. People smells, but none fresh. Move slow. No signs. Careful. Wooden nest there. Move slow.

Can smell birds inside. Metal wall. Fence with small spaces. Too small to fit through. Smell of birds overwhelming. Hungry. So hungry. Scrape at wall. Go beneath. Dig. Scrape. Deeper. Scrape.

PAIN! Heat of agony! No move. No get away!! No move. Feet steps. Person. Blade. Sharp. Cry out. No sound. blackness.

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Jerry shook his head. How the hell had this happened? He wiped the blade of his knife on a cloth and retrieved the crossbow bolt from the warm corpse. He cleaned the sticky blood from that too, almost retching at the putrid stench that came from it. He hated that smell. Like rotten eggs and cheese.

How the bloody hell had one of these things got through? What were they playing at? Even if it was close to the Summer Equinox, these shouldn't be here. What if one found a child? What if one crossed in daylight?

He stopped still. The bathroom light in the next house had come on, throwing dim light over the almost pitch black of the garden after midnight. He waited, simply remaining still, patiently listening to the faint hum from the extractor fan, which carried on even after the light was turned off. The late-night wanderer returned to bed.

Only when he was sure they were well and truly gone, and the hum of the fan stopped, did Jerry go to his shed and fetch a sack, shovel and several

dustbin bags. Using the shovel, he manhandled the rotten smelling corpse into the sack. It must have been three feet long, if you included the tail. The head looked like that of a mastiff, but without fur, just snakelike scales stretched tight across well-defined muscles on broad shoulders and a slender body.

The body seemed to be rotting, even as he watched. Much faster than it should have been. He could almost see it decomposing, so, muttering a spell of preservation under his breath, Jerry closed the sack and put it into several more dustbin bags, to keep the smell inside. His chickens were fussing in their coop, no doubt worried by the rancid scent of the fast-decaying Cacarith.

Jerry grunted as he picked up the heavy sack, carrying it in a silent, unhurried fashion down the side of the house and through the side door of the garage. He closed the door quietly behind him, dropped the dead beast onto the floor and flicked on the light-switch.

The strip-light staggered into life, illuminating a very clean space for a garage. At one end was a workbench which, without close inspection, looked very like many others, but had some odd attachments. Down one side of the garage was a bank of metal cupboards, which looked a bit like lockers from a train station. On the opposite wall were well used noticeboards which were currently empty, other than an old Pirelli calendar with a naked model looking out of it.

Jerry's wife hated it, but it marked the garage as his territory and acted like a charm to ward her off.

Jerry was dressed, head to toe, in camouflage gear, looking like nothing more than a middle-aged, overenthusiastic, outdoor sports nut. His face was covered in green and dark grey paint and he would have looked laughable, except for the seriously heavy-duty crossbow slung across his back, and the long hunting knife at his hip.

Moving to the bench, he carefully cleaned the crossbow and bolt, this time with something out of a bottle, making sure it was perfectly free of blood, before stowing it in one of the lockers. Then he took his phone from his pocket, dialled, and waited for an answer.

"It's me," he said. Listening to the answer from the other end, he said, "I know it's late... Of course it's important. I wouldn't have called otherwise, would I?... Don't give me that. Get your arse out of bed and meet me at the Circle... Well, that's up to you, isn't it? But if Max and Andro hear that you

couldn't be bothered to make the effort and climb out of your fetid bed, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes... How will they find out? Because I'll tell them you idiot... That's better. See you in 15 by the kiosk."

Jerry shook his head in disbelief. What was happening to the Guardians? They were all so bloody lazy. He took a moment to compose himself, before calling another number. When it was answered, he said; "I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr Crabbe. But you need to see this... In 15 minutes?... Yes, I called him first... Reluctant, to say the least. He wasn't very keen on leaving his bed, but he'll be there Mr Crabbe... Indeed. See you..."

Andro Crabbe had rather abruptly hung up, and Jerry looked at the phone for a second in disbelief. The rudeness of some people. With a grunt, he lifted the sack once more, turned the garage light off, locked the side door behind him and went to the front of the house. He opened the boot of his Volvo estate, heaved the sack into the back, hoping against hope that there wouldn't be any leakage or smell, and pushed it closed, being careful to be quiet about it.

He climbed into the driver's seat, started the car, and reversed onto the deserted street. Jerry drove carefully, just below the speed limit, through the Austen estate and onto the Branchester Road. It really wasn't far to Beacran's Ring, and he might have left it a while before setting off, but the sooner the Cacarith was out of his house and away from Bickering on Sea, the better.

The Volvo swept silently into the car park, pulling up behind the Coffee Kiosk. Jerry turned off the engine and lights, and waited in silent darkness. All he could see in the darkness was the wall of the Coffee Kiosk in front of him, but that went dark when the sensor light timer flicked that off too.

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Chris Farmer and the Crabbes arrived at the same time; headlamps dazzlingly bright as their cars swung into the carpark entrance, under the metal height-restriction barriers, and pulled up next to Jerry's Volvo. He climbed out and waited in the light of the sensor light.

Andro Crabbe was bulky, looking like nothing more than someone who starts fights in bar. His brother, Max, who was younger, but more senior in rank, looked older than his twenty years, and he was wearing what looked like a dressing gown and wellies. "So, what have you got for us, Jeremy?" he asked.

Chris Farmer, the Guardian on call, interrupted; “I told him it was a bit late for this sort of thing, Mr Crabbe, but he insisted. I’m sorry.” He was short and stocky, running to fat, and looked hassled to say the least. His thinning hair was sticking out in all directions and he spoke with an unmistakably northern accent.

Andro turned his gaze onto the shorter man; “Don’t apologise, Christopher. I’m sure Jeremy wouldn’t have called were it not important. I’m more surprised, if I’m honest, to see that you’re not at the circle yourself, so close to the solstice.”

It was too dark to be sure, but Jerry was pretty convinced that Chris was blushing. He could go a lovely shade of red at times. “Well,” Chris replied, “It’s still a couple of weeks away. I was going to start camping out next week. There’s no panic, after all, and the nights are getting colder.”

“It’s still your place to be at the stones, Chris,” Max said shortly. “What’s happening, Jerry?”

“There might be a need to panic,” Jerry replied. He addressed Max as he opened the boot of the car; “You might want to hold your breath,” he said sardonically, dragging the sack out of the car and shutting it again. Then, handing the torch he’d brought to Chris, to shine on the bag, Jerry undid the dustbin bags and sacking.

“Bloody hell,” Chris said. “Is that what I think it is?”

“My word,” breathed Andro, “A Cacarith.”

Max looked like he was about to vomit.

“Stinks, doesn’t it? It was after my chickens,” Jerry said.

“That was lucky,” Max managed to mutter.

“Can you imagine the mess if it’d gone into town,” Andro added. “Do you think it was alone?”

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” Jerry answered in a disparaging tone. “Not all of the watch team were in their beds tonight. The signal went out from Wendy Lansley, to say she thought something had gotten through, but she wasn’t certain what. So, I took some precautions. Didn’t you get her message, Chris?”

An embarrassed silence enveloped the chubby Guardian as Jerry

continued, “I regularly lay a scent, anyway, just in case something like this happens. It leads them towards the old meadow behind the estate and then to me. The only reason I keep chickens is as bait. All I have to do is lay something fresher, which I did, and take cover. It found its way into my garden and I shot it, while it was trying to work out how to get through the wire fence into coop.”

“Well done, Jeremy,” Andro breathed. Max looked deep in thought, as if hearing another voice, and said to Chris, “It looks like you’ll have to forego your warm bed at the moment, Chris. And double the nightly watch at the stones, while you’re about it. If this came through, who knows what else might find a way. The Cacarith wouldn’t have been looking for a way through on its own. It might be a sign that something else is.”

Andro said, “Jerry, would you be kind enough to place this specimen in the lab? Max, can you give him a hand? We can have Jolyon see what he can find out before it rots down entirely. Then I’ll dispose of it.”

“What about you, brother?” Max asked.

“I’ll give Jolyon a quick call and help Christopher make his arrangements. If Jolyon can get here quickly, he should be able to autopsy the Cacarith.”

Max stared at his older brother for a little longer than was necessary, before following Jerry.

Jerry picked up the sack and carried it to a metal door at the back of the Coffee Kiosk. He keyed a code into the door lock and opened the door. There was an unexpected staircase on the other side which led under the car park. He went through, followed by Max, who clicked closed behind them. As soon as it did, any hint of gentleness drained out of Andro’s face as he turned toward Chris. His voice was flat with rage. “You idiot. What the hell are you playing at?”

“But... I thought... but...”

“Don’t ‘but’ me you damn fool. You sodding well should have been at the circle, where you belong. You know there’s supposed to be two of you at all times. You’re just bloody lucky nothing else seems to have gotten through, or we might be sweeping up body parts in the park.”

“But... I thought we had time...”

Andro took a step forward, causing the shorter man to step back. “No, you didn’t. You thought you’d get some sleep, or something more unsavoury. You’re

a disgrace to the Order and bloody lucky that Jerry's such a good hunter. And why was Wendy up there on her own? Have you any idea how dangerous that can be? How dare you risk the life of another Guardian? Especially one under your command, just so you can stay in bed. You're a sodding disgrace..."

"Hold on," Chris, it seemed, had some backbone after all, "Do you know who you're talking to?"

Andro grabbed his collar and pulled him close, "A sodding idiot."

Chris, sweating and stammering, still managed to stick up for himself. He was a Guardian, after all. "My grandfather was a hero of the Order, you know. You can't talk to me like that."

"Can't I? It's a pity your grandfather's blood didn't run more truly in you, you lazy bastard."

"But... It's still three weeks to the Solstice... I thought there was time..."

"And, if you'd read the latest report, you'd know that the spaces between are very thin this year. Thinner than ever before. We need to be more cautious than usual, and more alert."

Chris Farmer looked stumped. "You didn't read it, did you?" Andro accused.

"Well... you know how it is..." Chris mumbled.

Andro's left hand was a blur as it swung round, catching Chris on the side of the face and sending him sprawling to the carpark floor. "Wendy read it though, didn't she?" he continued as Chris climbed back to his feet, seeking against all hope to preserve a shred of dignity.

"You can't hit me!" Chris accused.

"Wanna bet?" Chris flinched because he thought another blow might be on the way. "Didn't she tell you she'd be out tonight?"

Chris was looking for blood in the corner of his mouth when he said, "She mentioned it."

"And what did you say?"

"I said I might see her up here..."

Andro nearly exploded on the spot, taking another threatening step; "You said what!? I thought you were her superior. But you let her go out alone and



said that ‘you might join her’? Why the hell would you say that?”

“Well... I was tired...”

Chris spun on his heel again, staggering this time from the right-handed slap. It hadn’t been as hard as the last one, but it still rocked him. The Guardian spun back round to face his attacker; teeth in a snarl and eyes ablaze with anger and wounded pride.

“Go on,” Andro said, a heavy threat in his voice, “I dare you.”

“You shouldn’t have hit me... ,boy. You think that because your brother is the chief Guardian you can throw your weight around? Well you can’t, and you’ll regret that. Just because your family lord it over the rest of us. I’m not the only one who got to be a Guardian because of my family, am I?”

“I’m not a Guardian, you dick! I’m Max’s protector and when you let stuff like this happen, he’s the one who suffers. You might not be the only one who got here because of his family, but most of us know what the hell we’re doing. AND we understand the threat this time and place faces if we get it wrong. And thanks to you, the Cacarith got through.

“It was only Jeremy’s quick response that saved your skin, you little worm.” His voice dropped to a whisper, “Now, get out of my sight, before I rip your lungs out.”

Chris Farmer’s mouth opened a closed a few times. “I’ll talk to the Council about this in the morning,” he said feebly.

“Yes. You will.”

For several moments the smaller man stood there, clenching and unclenching his fists, looking for some good way out of the situation. There was none. Suddenly, he turned on his heel, stalking back to his car, muttering under his breath. The little man slammed his car door harder than he should have, meaning that it took him several attempts to close it properly. Then he skidded out of the car park in a shower of gravel, almost crashing into the trees on the opposite side of the road in his recklessness.

“You’ve made an enemy there,” Jerry said from the darkness.

“How long have you been listening for, Jeremy?” Andro asked, once more calm and overly polite, eyes still fixed on the spot where Chris had skidded out of the car park.

“Most of it, I reckon. I can understand why he wanted to stay in bed. It won’t be long before all of us are going short of sleep for a few weeks.”

“Where’s Max?”

“Throwing up inside. Is he ill?”

“No, he gets like this close to Solstice. And idiots like Mr Farmer don’t help. How could he let his junior go to the Stones on her own? When the walls are this thin, as well. He hadn’t even read the latest report. He’s been lazy and reckless, and it’s not behaviour fit for a senior Guardian.” Andro turned to Jerry. “Do you remember when I was shadowing you?”

“Yes.”

“When I overslept on Solstice eve, what did you do?”

“I think I talked to your Da, and he suspended you for the rest of the season. But you were young, and never made the same mistake again.”

“And that’s my point. Christopher is not young and he’s not learning. It’s not the first time he’s overlooked something either. But Max would just let it go.”

“So why are you tearing him off a strip?”

“I’m Max’s protector. And as far as I’m concerned, that includes people like him!”

“I understand. But you’ve still made an enemy.”

“He never liked me very much anyway.”

Max chose that moment to emerge from the Coffee Kiosk, looking very pale. “You alright?” Jerry asked.

“I thought I was, before smelling that thing.”

The hunter turned to Andro, “I’ll call Jolyon for you. Then I’ll wander up to the Stones. I’ll never get back to sleep now.”

“What about the extra support tonight?”

“It’s too late now. You can sort it out in a few hours... when you’re in front of the Council with Chris Farmer.” Jerry looked smug.

“Council?” Max asked, weakly.

“Chris wanted to report a few things to the Council, that’s all. Andro here disagreed with him.”

“Oh.”

“That’s not entirely accurate, Jeremy,” Andro protested.

“Perhaps not, but you’ll need to talk to them about doubling the Watch, so it might as well be at the same time.”

“Thank you for being so helpful, Jeremy.”

“That’s my pleasure.” Jerry turned away, took out his mobile phone and walked into the woods in the direction of the Beacran’s Ring.

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