

# CAUGHT BETWEEN MONSTERS

an *Edge of Humanity* novel

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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***“No one should ever take ibuprofen  
the way Roland and Karen do.”***

*— my wife the Registered Nurse,  
to whom this book is lovingly dedicated.*



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*and Professor John Lindow, who taught me  
about the Norse contest of wisdom.*



# *Chapter 1*

SOMETIMES BEING HUMAN SUCKS.

That was all I could think as I lay there among the dirt and garbage, my head spinning from its sharp crack against the side of the old, abandoned Safeway. At least I missed the edge of the dumpster. That was some small mercy. I rubbed my aching head as my sore ribs expanded, letting air back in along with the stench of decay. Painful, getting the wind knocked out of you, and that blow to the head was going to need a lot of ibuprofen later. Why was I here again?

“Roland! Little help here?”

I looked up and saw my partner, Nelson, squaring off against that thing. The scene should have been comical. Nelson had too much pudge and too little hair. You might have mistaken him for an accountant, especially in his short-sleeved shirt and tie. Well, you'd have been half right. He used to be an accountant. But Nelson had the soul of an MMA champion – you could see it in his stance, his bearing, the way he held his billy club. You could almost believe he was a hero. Of course, it helped that the thing he faced had let its

human guise slip. While we shadowed it, the thing looked like Jed Brunner, track star and poster boy for the Aryan Nation. A few nasty blows later, its hair grew long and coarse, its fingers into claws the color of bruises, and its teeth into fangs stained yellow-brown from their diet of human flesh.

It took us five days to find this ghul. Had to be the right kind, too, none of those Western European cemetery haunters. No, the Rajah insisted on...

“Roland!”

The ghul lunged and Nelson rolled to one side, swinging his club at its knees as he went. He missed. I shoved myself back to my feet and almost lurched onto my face. My head pounded a rapid dance beat. No, wait. That was from Hy Brasil, the dance club on the corner and the only thing in this half-empty shopping center still pulling in a crowd. All my head did was throb.

No sign of my knife or billy club. The pockets of my khakis only contained keys and my wallet, and my windbreaker only held the sample bottle. Nelson and the ghul circled each other again. Both had taken enough lumps to hesitate, now each wanted an opening before attacking.

I sighed. I had no weapon. My options narrowed to something stupid, but let's be honest here. Everything about my life these days was stupid.

I roared and charged. Nelson feinted with his billy club to hold the ghul's focus and I drove my skinny, six-foot frame into its side in an open-field tackle that would have made my high school football coach proud. I caught it from behind, just below the rib cage, and we went down in a heap.

Nelson was right there. His club whistled past my head and slammed into the ghul's skull, the blow magnified by the asphalt. I grabbed the ghul's elbows and pinned its arms to its sides. Two, three, four, five more blows and the ghul stopped struggling. Nelson gave it one more for good measure, but this thing was out, and when it woke later it would have a worse headache than I would.



That made me feel a little better.

“Took you long enough.” He showed me teeth marks on his billy club. “The thing damn near bit me.”

“Sorry,” I said with a shudder. “Got my bell rung pretty bad.”

“Well you’re buying the beer.”

“Wait, I get beat half unconscious and I buy the beer?”

He shoved his billy club in my face. The fang scars looked worse up close, but Nelson would have suffered more than lacerations if those teeth had struck true. “All right, the first round is on me.”

“I—”

“The first round, take it or leave it.”

“Cheap bastard.”

“My paycheck’s no bigger than yours.”

Speaking of paychecks ... I pulled out the sample bottle with its rubber top and shoved it against what I hoped were the ghul’s incisors. Its teeth were all so sharp I couldn’t be sure. Rubbing from the back of the jaw, I massaged a biting motion and listened for the spraying sound of venom jetting into the bottle. A minute later the bottle was full and I sealed it with its special cap. I slipped the bottle into the pocket of my windbreaker.

While I was busy Nelson found my club and knife for me.

“Think we should kill it?” Nelson toyed with the handle of his knife, an army surplus Ka-Bar like mine. “It’s going to be pissed.”

“Ghuls are too practical for vengeance.” I shrugged. “All it will remember is that we beat it and left it alive when we could have killed it. It’ll probably go out of its way to avoid us.”

“It eats people.”

“What if we have to get more venom? Do you want to track down another ghul?”

Nelson grimaced, but then looked up with a smile. “But we have the venom. And now, beer!”

“And now the Rajah. Beer after.”

Nelson sighed.

We left the ghul where it was, among the garbage.

THE RAJAH'S MANSION PERCHED HIGH IN LOS ALTOS HILLS, on six acres of hilltop that, even undeveloped, would cost more money than a guy like me would see in three lifetimes. Add in the ten thousand plus square feet of opulence, and the Rajah's place must have cost more than the GNP of several small Central American countries.

"You'd think this guy could afford to pay us better," I said as Nelson and I stood on the doorstep. Mind you, that doorstep included a covered porch twenty feet wide and ten feet deep, made from some sort of milky-white stonework with veins of purple and gold running through it. Three steps of the same material led up to it, and I could not see a single chip or smudge anywhere on that gleaming, polished surface.

And that was for people to stand on. People who might never make it past the ornately crafted red front door. I could only imagine what the Rajah spent on his bedroom. Probably enough to feed and clothe the Bay Area's homeless for a decade.

But it wasn't just the money. This sort of extravagance carried an arrogance along with it. For example, behind us I would have sworn the fancy sheet rock driveway — private road really — resented the presence of my beat up, used Camry.

I took the whole scene in with a wave of my hand. "You know he's getting top dollar for what we bring him."

"Every time, you say that." Nelson shook his head. "At least come up with a new complaint."

The door opened and there stood the butler. I could never tell exactly how old the butler was. Somewhere between sixty and ninety. His perfect posture accented his slim build the way the neat trim of his ghost white hair accented the red tint of his pale skin. As always, he wore a full, formal uniform, without a wrinkle or a mote of dust showing anywhere. Immaculate, from the trim of his eyebrows to the perfection of his shave to the shine of his shoes.

"How are you tonight, Jeeves?"

I didn't know what his name was. The butler never spoke in our presence. But I had to call him something, and Alfred would have implied that the Rajah had some kind of cool, Batman vibe.

Jeeves ushered us into our usual small waiting room. Two huge comfortable chairs for us, high backs and wide arms, both sunset blue. Between the chairs sat a carved teak tripod table holding a spotless silver ashtray. The chairs faced a leather recliner that sat taller than our seats. Above it on the wall was a painting of a tiger, shadowed in its den. The whole room was done in dark woods, with a throw rug on the floor in a red and orange pattern that looked Eastern to me.

“Something to drink, Jeeves?”

Jeeves favored me with a patronizing smile and left.

“When has he ever brought us drinks?” asked Nelson.

“Never hurts to try, right?”

“You always have to push.”

“Look, hospitality implies certain etiquette.”

“Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Anytime you’re finished, gentlemen.”

Nelson and I stared slack-jawed at the chair facing us. The door never opened. No special effects. Just, suddenly, the Rajah was seated, a short, thin Indian man with black hair and eyes, wearing a cerulean shirt and pants and a blood red smoking jacket. He wore slippers that matched the jacket, and a gold ring with an emerald the size of a dime on the middle finger of his right hand. He also had gold stud earrings, one in each lobe.

Some people might mistake the Rajah for human. Which would make sense, since most people don’t know that ghuls and things like the Rajah – whatever he was – were running around the San Francisco Bay Area, preying on human beings. There was a time when I didn’t know that either. I wish I still didn’t. I’d love to go back to that blissful ignorance, but it’s way too late for me.

Of course, even then, I would have recognized that there was something wrong about the Rajah. Heck, I did recognize it, the sense of menace, of threat that he carried. I still felt it — his wrongness — but I’d been around him enough that I only noticed it as a flutter in my stomach.

Still, when the Rajah looked at you, you felt like a rabbit facing

a wolf; you wanted to freeze or run, but it didn't matter which because it was already too late. You were dead. You just didn't know it yet.

"Good evening, Rajah." I forced the words out because I knew Nelson could not have. He had been working for the Rajah longer than I had, and had lost the ability to speak in the boss' presence without a direct order. Poor Nelson was sweating more right now than he did in our fight with the ghul.

"Are you here because you have milked a ghul for me or because you have failed and are ready to be eaten?"

"We have the venom!" I almost fumbled the bottle in my haste to toss it to him. "Here."

"There is still empty space in the bottle."

"There's a fill line. On the back. I passed it."

The Rajah held the bottle up to the light. "So you did." He opened the lid and held the bottle up to his nose. His nostrils flared. "Pure ghul. Three shapes tonight, including primal. I would guess ..." he took a deep sniff "... older than one hundred, but not older than one hundred fifty." He replaced the cap. "Very high quality. Well done. Not only will I not eat you tonight, you will each receive a bonus. Return tomorrow for your next assignment."

"So soon? We both got pretty ... badly ..." My words trailed off. Nothing in the Rajah's posture or expression changed, but I suddenly felt as though he were reconsidering eating us. As though I needed to shut the hell up and live to see the morning.

"Tomorrow then," said the Rajah as he stood. We stood by reflex, and suddenly Jeeves was there, guiding us back out through the front door.

"Always have to push," said Nelson.

I DID BUY NELSON HIS BEER AT OUR USUAL PLACE, the Red Carpet Lounge. Sounds fancy, right? Wrong. The Red Carpet Lounge was a dive, the sort of place you didn't admit you'd ever gone into. It was a bar in a shopping center, and it didn't even have a real sign, just a neon

image of a martini glass.

Nelson and I didn't care about any of that. They sold us Angry Stoat Lager in bottles (probably the only drinks they didn't water down) and at fair prices. More important, the Red Carpet Lounge was downright mundane. Nothing supernatural ever came in, and as far as we could tell, nothing supernatural ever came near it.

It was the perfect place for guys like Nelson and me to drink after a hard evening's work.

Three beers later, I was home. Home was the front unit of a four-plex, the part that looks like a house from the front, but has an apartment behind it and two more upstairs. My place was tucked into a row of similar apartment buildings, with four or six apartments each, and parking spaces in the alley out back because street parking was a nightmare. Across the street from us was one of those giant apartment complexes, the kind with tennis courts, a gym, and at least one swimming pool.

That's life in the Silicon Valley. You get your choice of apartments because most of us could never afford to buy a house here. I felt blessed because my apartment came with two parking spaces instead of just one, which meant that both Karen and I always had places to put our cars.

Well, almost. All too often some jerk treated that second space as public parking. I got sick of going door-to-door to find the culprit and asking politely for something that I paid for as part of my rent. Finally I had to post a warning sign about towing, because no joke. I'd have towed them and smiled as I did it. After all those warnings and requests, it would have served them right for stealing my spot.

Anyway, Karen's spot was empty when I pulled up, so her shift at the diner must have run till midnight. She waited tables at a tiny place with great food. And I do mean tiny. They didn't have more than ten tables total, including booths. But they had a great location, right off of 280 near a community college, they were open twenty-four-seven, and they could out-cook any chain restaurant any day of the week.

As jobs go it wasn't much, but better than what she was doing when we met. I wish I could say as much for myself.

I unlocked the door, flipped on the lights, entered, and double-locked the door behind me. Our place was decorated in Early Crap: hand-me-down couches and thrift store tables and dishware. You could probably have bought all our furnishings for the cost of one paycheck, assuming you made minimum wage. Well, that's not strictly true. Our bed was pretty nice, which I guess said something about our priorities.

I stopped over by the flat screen television – which said something else about our priorities – and checked on Lancelot, my gecko. Lancelot sunned himself under his heat lamp on the left side of his tank, showing off his bright, Peacock Day colors.

“Have a good day, Lance? I bet you're hungry.” His tank sat on a hexagonal end table. No drawers, but two doors that swung wide open and gave me a place to keep Lancelot's supplies, including his supper: a small cage of live crickets. I fished out a few and dropped them in the tank with Lance. No reaction. “Not yet, huh? Well, they'll be there when you want them.”

Three bedrooms and two baths might have sounded like a lot except that the plumbing sucked and the walls were thin. How thin, you ask? They were so thin that we had lived in the place only a single night when we found out we could hear every detail of the very verbal lovemaking of our closest neighbors. They said things I could not imagine anyone finding sexy, but when I mentioned that to Karen, she said only that she had heard worse.

Still, their sex was more amusing than their fighting. I think it was their first big blowup about money that really cemented my nighttime habit of listening to radio talk shows for hours on end.

On the plumbing side of things, our pipes must have mastered the art of Zen meditation. They certainly never felt any pressure from water. A single good burrito could back up our toilets, and we had learned quickly that if one of us was in the shower, the other could not so much as wash his hands.

Oh, and we lived inside the San Jose border, so drinking the tap water was not an option. Stick some metal in the glass to use as poles and San Jose water will serve as good enough battery acid to produce a measurable voltage. A friend of mine proved it while we were in high school.

So I dug a handful of ibuprofen out of a bottle in the bathroom, but poured myself a glass of water from a filtered jug in the buzzing refrigerator. The appliances came with the apartment, but they fit in with our stuff perfectly – ancient and almost ready for collapse.

Probably the placebo effect, but swallowing the pills seemed to ease my headache. Or maybe it was just the water after the beer. I dug around in the fridge and found some leftover lasagna in a sandwich bag with a sticky note on it: “Thought you might forget dinner. There’s more in the freezer if you’re still hungry. Love -K.”

I threw the lasagna in the microwave and re-read the note while it heated. I liked reading Karen’s notes. She had that clear, loopy style of printing that I always thought of as girl handwriting. My own scrawl came out as fast as I could get the letters formed. Illegible according to my old teachers, but it looked fine to me.

I tossed the note and started the coffee pot, filling the grinder with a fancy Argentinian blend that Karen favored.

The microwave dinged, announcing that my instant dinner was ready.

While I ate I did my nightly homework: reading obscure occult texts. It’s not that I wanted to start casting spells. Only idiots believed they could get something for nothing, and when you played with magic the price was usually higher than it looked like before you started. No, ever since I took a job that had me doing things like milking ghuls for their venom and stealing secrets from ghosts I started trying to arm myself with knowledge. There were ways to read between the lines of the old texts that made them cough up real information, solid data accumulated by other innocent humans stuck dealing with monsters.

All right, so maybe calling me innocent took a stretch, but I

was still just a human being. No claws, no fangs, no magic worth a damn. Guys like Nelson and me had nothing to go on but our wits and gumption. Which meant, of course, we would've run screaming from any and all contact with the supernatural, if we weren't in debt to the Rajah.

The screen door creaked and I heard keys in the deadbolt. Hoping it was Karen, I poured us each a cup of coffee, real cream and fake sugar for her, black for me. I poured the first taste from my cup into the sink, then turned as the door opened.

"That lock still sticks." Karen stood an inch shy of five and half feet tall, just slender enough to give her peach-blah uniform curves that doubled her tips compared to the other waitresses. She always complained that her face was plain and her hair was mousy. I thought she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"Want me to oil it again?"

"I want you to call the landlord. And remind him about our dishwasher when you do."

"What about the dishwasher?"

"It doesn't."

The smell of her coffee put a smile on her face and she dropped her purse to take the cup in both hands. "God I love you."

"Damn right you do."

We kissed. I reached past her to double-lock the door, then started to turn away, but she stopped me with a drill instructor tone.

"Hold it." She reached up and prodded my cheek, sending fire through the left side of my face. When did ... oh, yeah. Ghul punch. "You've got to quit that job."

"Not really an option."

"You didn't get in fights like this when you managed that motel."

"Wasn't exactly a good job though. Only bright spot to that whole time was you." I smiled. "Remember when we..."

"Don't change the subject." Her words were soft now, her face serious, like she was looking at me in the hospital instead of me with a



bruised cheek. “Even the early shift at that club is too rough. You need to quit and find something else.”

Karen was guessing. She didn’t know I worked for the Rajah, much less what I did. I never lied to her, exactly, I just never told her.

“I can’t quit. Not until I work off the debt.”

Her mouth narrowed to a line, her finely plucked eyebrows lowered as she looked up at me. I knew that look. We were both in a bad way when we met. She got out, but she could tell I still had one foot in that old world.

“We can move,” she said, just above a whisper. “One bag each, ditch the car somewhere in Mexico.”

“Not far enough.”

“Canada then. East coast. Europe maybe. Anywhere.”

So this was why she insisted on us keeping our passports renewed and handy. Unfortunately...

“This guy will find me anywhere I go. I just need a little more time.”

Karen trailed her fingers across my cheeks, then laid a gentle kiss on my bruise, followed by another on my lips. She laid her head on my shoulder, wrapped her arms tight around me, waitress reflexes keeping her coffee cup level.

“All right. A little longer. But Roland, it has to be soon.” Her next words were barely whispered, more for herself than for me. “I want you safe.”

