



SAVAGE

A Madman's Daughter story

The man came in the twilight hours between noon and night.

Jaguar heard his approach long before he saw him. His senses were especially sharp in these in-between hours, when the slanting sunlight painted the jungle underbrush in shadows. The midday heat burn-off meant the air was crisper, cleaner, more conducive to carry a scent. The breeze held traces of camphor oil and day-old hay mixed with the man's natural odor.

That smell only belonged to the doctor's assistant.

The tight set to Jaguar's coiled muscles relaxed, but he didn't come out from his hidden place between a fallen tree and a moss-slick boulder. He watched as the blond-haired man came down the trail, riding the bigger of the doctor's two horses, the one that always spooked in Jaguar's presence, even back when he had looked like a man. Smooth skin and a straight spine never fooled horses. Even then, they



had known him for what he truly was.

Montgomery. The name came to Jaguar suddenly from a forgotten part of his brain. Yes, Montgomery, that was what the blond man was called. It had been many days since he had last seen him, and his mind had a hard time holding onto words, names, anything other than instinct and impulse. Remembering Montgomery made Jaguar remember other things, too. Things like the doctor's injections. Looking in a mirror at a human face. A throat and mouth that used to form words so easily, when now everything came out like a growl.

Jaguar scratched the thick mat of hair on his arms. It itched coming in, like a rash of insect bites. But then again, everything about the transformation had been painful.

Though Montgomery guided the horse quietly, the snap of twigs and scrape of iron horseshoe on stone was unmistakable. If it wasn't for the horse, Montgomery would have been silent as Jaguar himself. Another memory awoke in that dying part of Jaguar's brain that used to be human: a blond-haired boy, Montgomery but younger, not long after his voice had settled, slipping along this same path years ago. Jaguar was a man then, the first of the doctor's creations that didn't have sloping shoulders or a hairy face, and he and the boy were friends. They played in the jungle, a game the boy called hide-and-seek. The boy was good at it. Jaguar was better.

Part of Jaguar wondered if Montgomery had come to



the jungle for another game like they had played years ago, before the boy had grown up. *Brothers*, that's what Montgomery had called them. Jaguar's palm still bore the faint scar from when Montgomery had taken a knife to it, and then his own, and bound them together. Blood brothers.

Jaguar crept silently along the mossy rim of the rocks, tracking Montgomery's movements. Enough of him was still human that he could read and understand the expressions on Montgomery's face. Serious. Grave. He hadn't come for games, then. Jaguar followed him until he stopped at a creek to give drink to the horse, and to splash his own face. Jaguar wondered if Montgomery's presence in the jungle had anything to do with the new experiments the doctor was performing. Experiments he was keeping hidden from his assistant, though Jaguar didn't understand why. The smells around the Blood-House laboratory had changed. There was still the bite of blood, the smell of steel, but now there were sharper, unnatural smells: liquids and powders kept in glass jars with labels in a language that was already making less and less sense to Jaguar.

Maybe he should tell Montgomery about the doctor's new experiments. He had a vague sense that brothers would tell each other such things; but as Montgomery knelt in the silt, inspecting a set of tracks, and then mounted the horse again, Jaguar decided not to.

Brothers once, but no more. Human once, but no more.

He had no business in the world of man.



Montgomery led the horse down a path along the stream, and Jaguar slunk into the shadows in the opposite direction. He knew on instinct where Montgomery was going, and he would beat him there and find out why the doctor's assistant who used to be his brother was hunting him.

He arrived at the cabin long before Montgomery. He had lived there since the last strong storm. The roof was rusted out in patches, but held well enough, and there were scraps of furniture within: a desk, a cabinet, an old wood-frame bed. It was there that he waited for Montgomery.

Rain started on the tin roof as Montgomery arrived. Jaguar smelled the horse tethered to the front porch; it stirred new feelings in his stomach that longed for more than grasses and insects. Things the doctor had forbade. *Meat*. Montgomery pushed open the creaking door, hat and shoulders damp with rain, a rifle in his hand.

He stopped when he saw the creature on the bed.

"Ajax," he said.

The sound of a human voice made Jaguar remember more. *Ajax—my name once, yes, but no more*.

"I haven't come to hurt you," Montgomery added steadily.

Jaguar did not move, because the doctor's assistant did not smell like threat. Montgomery came in and sat on a bench.

"Do you know why I'm here?" he asked.



Jaguar did not answer.

“Ajax, I know you can still understand me. You’re not that far gone yet.”

Jaguar worked the muscles of his throat, remembering how to speak, as he had once remembered how to hunt and how to hide. “That is not my name.”

Montgomery leaned forward, a patch of stormy light catching on his face. “What shall I call you, then?”

“I have no name.”

Montgomery sat up, and brushed the rain from his face. “I suppose names are a civilized concept, aren’t they? Something you gave up when you turned your back on all civilization, and on us.” There was harshness to his voice, but it softened, as did the tight muscles in Montgomery’s face. “I am still human, however, and so I must call you something.”

Jaguar thought.

“Jaguar,” he said, because that was the only way he now thought of himself.

Montgomery considered this, and nodded. “I’ve come here because the Doctor doesn’t like that you’ve made the decision to regress.” He ran a hand over his face, the bench creaking beneath him as rain dripped in through the holes in the roof. “When I told him you’d decided to regress, he was furious. Even more furious with me that I’d allowed you do it and spared you the injections these last few weeks. He says if you won’t return to the compound, and take the injections again, and act like a man again, then I’m to hunt you down



and kill you.”

Jaguar’s eyes shifted to the rifle.

“I came to ask you to come back,” Montgomery continued. “Not because the doctor has ordered it—because we need you there. Balthazar and I will shortly be leaving for London, and I’ve no choice but to leave Alice alone with the Doctor. You how easily she frightens around him, how harsh he can be. He’d never hurt her, but I’d feel better if you were there, watching over her, like old times.”

Thunder sounded outside. Jaguar could smell wet, scared horseflesh, and it made his stomach rumble more. Blood. Meat. Marrow. “That is no longer my world.”

“But Alice...”

“Alice is part of that world. I am not.”

Montgomery leaned forward with an expression Jaguar thought to be frustration. “It isn’t just Alice. The Doctor will have to administer the treatments to the beastmen, and he doesn’t know how to talk to them like we do. He has a rougher way. And I fear, while I’m gone, in his laboratory...”

Montgomery stopped speaking, and Jaguar’s mind went again to the experimentations he had spied the doctor doing without his assistant’s knowledge. Experimentations he suspected would continue in Montgomery’s absence. Without his assistant there to temper him, there was no telling what the doctor would try to achieve with those harsh smells and tanks made of glass.



“I will watch the girl until you return,” Jaguar said at last.

This seemed to ease Montgomery’s tense shoulders, and he sat back and lit a cigarette from his shirt pocket, fumbling with the damp matches. The smell of burning tobacco was a fierce pull in Jaguar’s gut. As a man, he used to love the warmth of cigarettes. He looked down at his thick fingers, wondering if he would be able to hold one now.

There were some things, a few things, about being human that he would miss.

The smoke from Montgomery’s cigarette settled in the space over their heads, trapped in by the leaky roof. “Is there anything I can possibly say to convince you to take the treatments again?”

Jaguar thought there was a sadness to his voice, but it could just be the rain on the tin roof. Family was a man’s concept, not a jaguar’s. Montgomery wanted him to be a man again so he could have a brother again, someone to be on his side and not the doctor’s. Balthazar, the beast-man made from a dog and a bear, was devoted to Montgomery, but he had never been smart like Jaguar had.

“I am not human, human,” Jaguar said, stumbling over the foreign words. When Montgomery had first taught him to speak English he used to have the habit of repeating words; a habit he was falling back into now, the more an animal he became. “I am an animal. Animal.” He scratched the itchy fur coming in with a black fingernail. He was lucky that the doctor hadn’t mixed animal species with him, like with his



later creations.

Montgomery took one final puff of his cigarette and put it out on the rotting old table. He stood abruptly and picked up his hat.

“I’m sorry that’s your decision,” he said. “Nevertheless, thank you for looking after Alice. I leave for London day after tomorrow, and I’ll be back before monsoon season with more supplies and more animals. There’s no telling how long the treatment will hold on in your system; the change might come fast or it might not. If, when I return, you’re nothing more than a jungle cat, try not to jump off a tree and kill me, won’t you?”

Jaguar remembered another word: joke.

The rain came harder overhead. Montgomery looked at the rifle on the table. “The Doctor’s orders...” But he stopped, and slung the rifle over his shoulder. “Blast and damn the Doctor’s orders. I’ll tell him you’re dead, and he never needs to know any differently.”

Jaguar didn’t nod, didn’t blink. It didn’t matter to him what the doctor thought.

Montgomery paused at the door. “Goodbye, brother,” he said. He put his hat back on, and a small yellow flower tumbled off onto the cabin floor.

Jaguar looked at the flower. Animals didn’t say goodbye.

He listened for the sound of the horse’s hooves fading into the heavy rain, taking with it the meat-and-blood scent



that so stirred his hunger, and then he was alone in the cabin with the last of the tobacco smoke. He went to the door, walking on two feet in fits and jerks, and felt something soft beneath his paw. He looked down.

The flower. Sweet and fresh.

He wasn't sure what impulse made him do it, when every other impulse craved to hunt and to kill. An empty, broken jar sat on the table collecting rainwater. He put the jar on the mantel and the flower in the jar. He did it the next week too, and the week after that, until the weeks lost meaning, and his fur finished coming in, and walking upright grew harder by the day. He did it until Montgomery returned with a girl who wasn't Alice, a girl who, beneath her clothes, smelled just like the doctor. A girl he watched over when she got lost in the jungle because he remembered a long-ago voice in his head asking him to watch out for a girl.

The last flower he put in the broken vase was a white one.

Some things, he thought to himself, are harder to let go.