

End of Day
Laura Anne Gilman

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“End of Day” was born of a single line, a single voice coming out of the darkness, and the smell of smoke burning in the distance. The characters are some of the most disturbing I’ve ever written, and yet also some of the most endearing in their own way. It’s a cautionary tale, but perhaps not in the way that seems at first obvious ... This was also the story that inspired the entire “Dragon Virus” series, including “Dragons” and “In the Aftermath of Something Happening.”

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WHEN WE FOUND THE BODY stuck up on the signpost, we figured for sure the howlers were back. I mean, who else would leave all that meat there to burn?

Jody wanted to leave him there. Once howlers have their paws on meat, who knows what’s gotten into it? But you don’t waste. No profit to it. So while Roo and Nance stood guard, I got to shimmy up and unhook our corpse. All the joys my Changes have brought, slinging a dead weight over my shoulder ain’t one of them. And the flies kept getting into my nose and mouth.

Landing hard, I dropped the corpse on the ground. Flat white face stared back at me. I hadn’t noted that before. He was white. Pure white. The dark hair had me fooled, I guess. Like a signpost: dumb bunny here.

“Howlers caught him wandering,” Jody guessed, standing behind my shoulder and watching like the corpse was gonna get up and dance. I shrugged, cracking my fingers back into human-normal shape. Joints would hurt like hell, next time a storm blew up, but it was nice to be useful. Jody couldn’t have done that. Not Nance either. Roo could do anything it wanted, but it never did want. Couldn’t figure out why the Olders kept it around, except it was a cruel hunter, and we always needed the meat.

I toed the body, trying to decide if it would be worth stripping it. Roo rummaged, poking, prodding. Checked pockets, just in case, but wasn’t nothing there. The cloth looked flimsy, like something a townie would wear. Which scanned—that white, dumb bunny, corpse was a townie. Had been. Was meat, now. Roo gave a claws-up, meant the flesh scented clean. I gave it a fade. Nothing more boring than meat once it’s been found.

Nance came back with her Stick, and we slung the corpse wrist and ankle. Roo hefted it, muscles flexing under the burden. Stronger than sin, that was Roo.

You never wanted it mad at you. Not that it ever even snarled at me. We're both Changed, and Change makes strange bedfellows, the Olders say.

They mean it kind. I don't care. I'm useful, and useful gets fed first.

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Back home, the corpse was dropped in the kitchen for Leah to deal with. I don't want to know where it goes. Meat is meat, but some things you better just call stew. Anyway, we had to make our report.

Drew was in the office when we got there, waiting for the news. He's the oldest Older in our House. I think he's my parent, 'cause he never quite looks me in the eye. The ones who've got kids are like that, like it's all their fault.

Well, it is. But what can you do?

Nance tells it like it was, and Drew nods thoughtful like, moving markers on the map he's got tacked against the far wall. They track howlers, townies, anybody comes into range. I don't know what good they think it's gonna do, someone decides to oust us. Home's twenty-three bodies, counting Annie who's old, and the baby Simon. Twenty-three won't do shit a howler party come a knocking. But I don't think about that. I follow Nance, and she's the brains for all of us. Us four: me, Roo, Nance and Jody. I don't always like 'em, but I love 'em. You know what I mean? Two other hunter-packs in Home, but none like us. And none of 'em Changed.

Drew scoots us, and we scatter, leaving him nodding over his notes and stroking that pointy chin of his. My hand goes to my chain in reflex. Yeah. Looks better on me.

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Hallway's dimmed, cause it's daylight. Jody's for sleeping. Nance slams that down; Nance thinks like Olders, sometimes, that there's time and place and a not-time and place. Sleeping in daylight's a not-time. Roo's got its own ideas, you can tell, but don't volunteer them, same as always. Roo don't lead, don't follow. Just happens to be where everyone else is.

After check-in, I'm supposed to go for schooling. None of the other of the three: Nance and Jody're done with it, nobody tells Roo what do to. But they've hopes I'll learn something. Don't see the point, much. Townies read, townies die. The Olders say otherwise we're just howlers. Me, I see howlers livin'. What's the point? But it makes the Olders happy, so I sit for a couple hours: turn pages, sound out words. Look at the pictures of what was. Go couple-three days south, you see what was, too. Old stuff, gone now. Buildings, way bigger than Home, way bigger

than towns, even the biggest towns. Blew ‘em to bits, in the aftermath. People were gone, why not? Must’ve been fun.

I’m not supposed to think like that. Those’re howler-thoughts.

I don’t want to go for schooling today. So when the pack goes left, I tag along. Whatever’s better than sitting alone. Nance’s striding, tall-like, Jody bumping on walls, hopping up and down, getting in Roo’s way. Jody’s the dumb one.

“What you got?”

Jody, poking too close to Roo’s space. I thought for sure Roo’d slap him into tomorrow, but no. It just grins, broken teeth jangling like scares a lot of folk. That means it’s pleased about something, which is what *should* scare folk. Roo pleases about weird shit.

Nance puts herself between the two, blocking my view. I juggle around Roo’s long arms, trying for better position in the narrow hallway. Roo shakes its head. “Not here. The playroom.”

The playroom’s what we call downbelow the kitchen. Dark and cool, it had a dirt floor once, ‘fore Roo piled rugs and rugs down there. Now it’s cozy. Padded, too, so when we take to roughing, nobody gets more than a little slammed up. We troop down, one at a time sliding the ladder, and take usual slots. Roo pulls my tail when I land, so I follow it over to the side.

Its voice was the first thing I ever remember hearing, but you never do get used to its breath. “Stay tight, pretty ears. This is gonna get fun.”

I hate it when Roo says shit like that. Means blood most times, and guess who cleans up. Short list, and only me on it.

“Show,” Jody demanded, digging his heels in like he was Older giving a scolding. On him, all scrawn and skin, it looked dumb-butt. But Roo gives over, holding out one claw and unfolding it like it’s got an ache somewhere. But nobody starts, cause what Roo’s showing us is worth some air.

It’s little, way wee, Doonie would say. And gold and glowly, like a sip of the whiskey Mata gives us when we get cold on duty, only alive like a flame.

Only it can’t be a flame, ‘cause Roo’s holding it steady and even its hand isn’t that rough tough. Mine is, when I figure it to be, but Roo’s not like me.

Well, actually, nobody’s like me. That’s the Change for ya.

“What is it?” Nance comes in close, careful of Roo’s claws on account of

them being sharp sharp, but way closer than most get.

“Found it. On the meat.”

“You took salvage?” Nance drew back, real peevey. Salvage is supposed to go to all. Second rule, after Meat’s Shared.

But Roo shook its head, the flickeriness catching sharp edges on its face, dancing off the thin skin that always looks like the blood’s gonna burst out from under some day. “It won’t go. See?” And it turned its hand upside down and sure’s daybreak, the flickering whateveritwas stayed put, dancing upside down like it was safehome.

“Is it hot?”

“A little,” Roo answered Jody, more kindly I ever heard before from its mouth. “Not burn-hot, though.”

“What does it do?”

Roo shrugged. “Looks nice. Feels nice. Was in the meat’s hand, when I hefted it, came off into mine. Won’t cut loose.”

“Dangerous maybe?” I didn’t think so, but Nance should’ve asked that and she was too busy making pretty-eyes at it.

“No,” Roo said, sharp.

“Just asking...” I was going to back away, but my feet didn’t want to move. Matter of fact, they wanted to get closer.

“Not Tech.” It wasn’t a question Jody was askin’. Didn’t look anything like Tech. We get what Tech is drummed into dumb heads first off, before we ever make hunter-pack, before they let us go prowl. Tech makes folk scardey. Tech caused the Change. Only townies used tech, and it got them deadbunny killed.

“Nope,” Roo said too cheerfully. It wasn’t much on cheerful, especially not to Jody, and this was making me creep.

“So what then?” Nance got the thinking look means she’s making a plan. Roo cradled the flickering gold-fire, holding it close like it’s whispering in its ear. I look close, wish I hadn’t. There’re things in the flame, things that oughtn’t be there. Spikey-edged circles and green shimmers and things that smell townie, smell old and bad and like nothing we shoulda brought in here. Like somebody dying-sick. Looked wrong, smelled wrong, was wrong wrong wrong.

“Can I hold it?” Jody, bouncing on Nance’s shoulder till she swatted him back. Roo cuddled the flame like it’s never cuddled nothing, and prickly chills started walking up my spine like bad winds out of the wasteland.

“Don’t touch it,” I said, but wasn’t nobody listening. Feet finally started walking back, and so I guess was outta range when Roo broke loose. Didn’t know what, maybe Nance shoved it or it just took spiteful the way it does sometimes, but faster’n even I thought a Changed could move Roo flipped its hand again, tossin’ the flickery-thing at Nance. It hung on his hand, still, but parts went flying, sparks like splutter-candles Doonie lights sometimes. Nance got back but not fast enough. I seen meat get eaten, when the Howlers came by. This wasn’t that pretty.

Jody went whacked, tried to get it off Nance, only it spread to him too, chewing up flesh like flame shouldn’t. No burnin’, just blood and sizzle-dissolving smelling and flickering and glowing brighter and brighter until the room was filled with darkness ‘cause my eyes were closed and I was down on the floor being one with the carpets there until a weight feel on my shoulder.

“Niyaaaaaa!” And I tried batting it away only it wasn’t it was just Roo, teeth glinting in the real-dark now.

“Come on, pretty ears. Time to get moving.”

It moved back up the ladder. There was something kindamaybe moving in the corner. I couldn’t look. I didn’t want to look.

Of course I looked.

The only sound that rose was me splattering my insides over what was left of life.

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Roo was telling later like it wasn’t its fault. Was stuff as was supposed to be. The glowy thing told it what to do. Whispering-like, only not. Whispering in the blood, in bones. Deadbunny brought it, but we was meant to have it. Drawn down from Old stuff, it was, made from the Bad Day. Livestuff. Changed, like us. Glow-thing told it so, Roo was claiming. I wasn’t hearing it. It—Roo—says it did what was needed to do. Nance and Jody, they wasn’t like us, not halfway. Even less so the Olders. Changed gotta change, them was slowing us down.

The glowy thing ate Roo’s brain, was my thinking. Didn’t say so much: me not bein’ the stupid one. But we went through the House like shadows; Roo moving, me just following, the glowy thing slamming and eating and the screaming just went on and on and on...

Maybe I am the stupid one. Shoulda known the meat was bad news. Shoulda known, shoulda seen. When Roo was pleased I shoulda run.

And then I'd be alive, and Roo'd be alive, only not together, and the others, they'd still be dead.

Roo's sayin', was them as made us. Them and their stupid Old ways. Made us and didn't have the balls to die. Never knew it was so bitter, all those years. Roo's voice was the first I ever remember hearing. Roo's hand was the one as slapped me when I was dumb. Never be sorry, it'd say. Never regret. Sorry's for townies; regret's for the dead. Don't you be a townie, and don't you be dead.

Meat is meat.

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I hear them, up in the winter night. The dead. All dead. We watch the howlers movin' by. Slipstream out of sight, eat what we find. Roo's happy. This is what it thinks Changed life should be; away from the ones who made us, livin' in the world they can't take.

I hear them, sighin' and fryin' all over again. And when Roo's busy I slip down and watch what's left of the House. Maybe Drew—what's left if anything's left if the old god-book was right he's all gone elsewhere-better now—knows I'm nearby.

Maybe he's even caring.

Never be sorry. Never regret. Never forgive.

Never forget.