

The Heavy

By Cherie Priest

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Everyone already thinks I'm a goddamned hippie," Mark bitched. He gulped another swig from his Heineken and knocked his knuckles against the bar.

Josh threw back the last drops at the bottom of his glass, shrugged and signaled the bartender that yes, please, he'd like another double-dose of Jack. "If you didn't want any help, you should've shot it yourself."

"I *did* shoot it myself," he insisted. "And where's your friend? He's late."

Josh glanced at the ancient, nicotine-stained clock that hung crookedly above the roadhouse door. "He's got another five minutes."

"This is stupid," Mark said for the twentieth time. "It's going to turn out the thing that got those goats was just a big damn dog. And my wife's going to kill me."

"What for? You're not paying him anything."

"You said he doesn't charge up front?"

"He don't charge at all. He just fixes things."

"Why?" Mark asked.

Josh cupped his hand around his freshly refilled drink. "Because sometimes, things need fixing. And that's what he does. The Heavy fixes things."

The jukebox lit up on the one side that still lit up, and “Bad to the Bone” began to play. Mark checked over his shoulder, wondering what dumbass was too new to know that A-13 wasn’t really Lynnard Skynnard anymore.

He didn’t see anyone he didn’t recognize, so he turned back around and shifted on his stool. “Why do they call him that?” he asked.

“The Heavy?”

“Yeah. How come?”

Josh made a grin with the half of his mouth that wasn’t wrapped around the lip of his glass.

Before the song’s first verse was over, the hinges on the door gave their signature squeal and the streetlamp out in the parking lot poked its edges into the room, but just barely. Something big was blocking it.

“Holy *shit*,” said Mark.

The man in the doorway turned sideways a notch to let himself in.

He was not quite as big around as he was tall, and he was six foot five if he was an inch.

His bullet-shaped head was perfectly bald except for the chops that sprouted a wild retreat from his topmost chin. From the neck of his metal head T-shirt to the tips of his motorcycle boots he wore black over every last inch; and covering up the whole of his massive frame was a coal-dark trench coat that was bigger than a bedspread.

He tossed Josh a nod of recognition, and he stomped toward the bar. It wasn’t an angry stomp; it was a stomp of sheer mass. The big man pointed at a bottle behind the counter and the bartender picked it up and started pouring.

While he waited for that drink, the Heavy approached Josh and Mark with his hand outstretched.

“Hey there, buddy! I hear you’ve got a problem.” His voice was quick and friendly, and so was his handshake. He angled his bulk against the side of the bar, skipping the stool and letting himself lean.

Mark was speechless, so Josh got the ball rolling.

“Well, first off, by way of getting fancy—Mark, this is Kilgore Jones. Kilgore, this is Mark,” Josh said. “He’s the man with the problem.”

Kilgore nodded. He’d heard part already. “The man with the goats. Or the ex-goats, as the case may be.”

“Oh, I’ve still got goats,” Mark assured him. “Not as many as we started with, but we’ve still got them.” He waved his empty green bottle at the bartender, who popped the cap on another one and handed it over the counter, along with Kilgore’s drink.

Kilgore took it and downed it in one swallow. “All right. Fill me in on the facts, and I’ll tell you if I think I can help,” he urged. “It might be you’ve got a bad dog, and if that’s all it is, I’m still happy to lend a hand. But Josh thinks it might be worse than that.”

Mark blew a sad, honking note down the bottle’s frosty neck. He braced his feet on the stool’s rungs and twisted them there while he spoke. “I guess I should start with the goats,” he said. “I don’t give a damn for goats. They’re bad-tempered, ugly little things, and they smell like shit. But I lost my job at the Caterpillar plant, and my wife got this idea.”

“The goats were your wife’s idea?”

He bobbed his head. “Hell yeah, they were. Do I look like a man who needs organic soap in his life?”

Kilgore shook his head, and a row of tiny silver hoops in his left ear jingled together. “No sir, you do not,” he said. His oddly boyish face stayed composed and serious.

“Well, I’ve got it now—by the metric assload. I didn’t know thing one about goats, but Elaine did a bunch of reading, and a few days later she came home with a pair of Saanens. It was my job to clean and repair the barn, and it was her job to milk the residents—because God help me, I wasn’t going to reach down underneath one.”

Mark curled his fingers around the beer. “And anyway, now we’ve got goats, and we’ve got a website, and we’ve got soap, and lotion, and yogurt—and just about anything else you can comb, curdle, or cook that comes out from a goat’s undercarriage. That was three years ago. And now I’m the vice president of Signal Valley Farms, which is to say I shovel goat

shit and do what Elaine tells me. She's the president, since it was her idea."

The Heavy mentally jotted all this down and asked, "When did the trouble start?"

"A few weeks ago." Mark took another hard draw on the beer and nearly choked himself with it. He looked into Kilgore's face and didn't see a guy who was about to bust out laughing.

He just looked interested, and a little concerned.

So Mark cleared his throat and made a face that implied acid reflux, and he continued. "I found a couple of the goats all torn up. I figured someone's dogs got out, you know? Or if they weren't somebody's dogs, then maybe coyotes."

"Maybe," Kilgore said.

"Once we lost another couple goats, I started checking them out good before I buried what was left. And I'm telling you, it looked like they'd been ... I don't know. *Gored*, or something."

"Gored? Like by a bull?" Kilgore frowned.

Mark shook his head. "Naw, more like a baby unicorn. They were punctured, but the holes were too deep to be teeth." He held up his hands, trying to indicate his best guess. "It was like they'd been jabbed with something sharp, maybe the size of this bottle's neck."

"And how many have you lost now?"

"Eleven. The thing got one more last night."

Josh elbowed Mark. "Tell him the rest," he said.

"The rest?"

Mark stared at his bottle. "I shot it."

"You shot it?"

"I shot it," he said again. "But it didn't die."

"Ah." Kilgore said. "Does that mean you got a good look at it?"

“Not a *good* look. And the look I got ... I don’t know what I saw.”

The big man kept his somber face on and didn’t push too hard. “You want to tell me what it looked like?”

“You’re going to think I’m nuts.”

“Bet you I won’t.” But that wasn’t enough to make Mark talk, so Kilgore added, “Look, man. I’ve heard some crazy shit in my time, and a surprising amount of that crazy shit has turned out to be true. So I’ll tell you what. I’ve got stories that would make you think I’m as nutty as a tree full of squirrels. I’ll tell you one of mine if you’ll tell me yours.”

“Deal,” Mark said. “Go on. Surprise me.”

“All right, I *will*. Two weeks ago I was up in Knoxville, and I got stuck in an attic with a pair of vampires who were righteous pissed to see me.”

“Wait. Stuck...?”

“Now, I’ll grant you it was faster getting down than going up—I fell through the floor and landed on a table downstairs, which hurt like a sonofabitch. But that was after I ran one of them through with a sharp chair leg, and I poured some of Reverend Sam’s finest blessed H2O down the throat of the other.”

“Blessed...?”

“You heard me. What’d Josh tell you about what I do?”

Josh beamed, and Mark acted queasy. “He said you fix unusual problems.”

And finally, Kilgore laughed. It was a merry sound, sharp and genuine. It matched the way he talked. “I do indeed fix unusual problems—mostly the weird ones that no one else’ll touch. So if you think I’m going to poke fun at you, you’ve got it all wrong. You can tell me what you saw, and nothing you can say will send me running. Lord as my witness, I promise you that.”

Mark gave up. “All right,” he said, shaking his head left and right, and trying not to taste any more of his stomach in his mouth. “All right, I’ll tell you what it was.”

He picked at the label on his bottle and dropped it down on the counter with a clank. And then he said quickly, "It was a big black shape with glowing red eyes. There, are you happy?"

"Happy? *Hell*, no. Big black shapes with glowing red eyes are pretty far down on the list of things that make me happy, but I'd appreciate it if you could be a little more specific. Can you tell me what kind of big shape?"

Mark thought hard. "It was big, but low to the ground. Maybe it would've been waist-high on me, but it was long. It had a big head and a humped back."

"There you go, now you're talking. Keep going. Tell me about the eyes. Red and glowing, I've got. What else can you tell me?"

"It was dark," Mark said slowly. "And I couldn't see too clearly. They were close to the ground, like it's something that holds its head low. And I hit it broadside with at least two pumps from the shotgun, but it ran off and came back for more the next night."

Kilgore pursed his lips, and it made his whole face look small. He leaned himself away from the counter and stood up straight. "I believe you," he declared. "Now tell me, how far away from here is this farm of yours, and would you like to see something done about your problem tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"How many more goats can you afford to lose?"

Mark snorted. "I'd be happy to see the whole batch of them tossed off a cliff, but Elaine'll have my head if I don't put a stop to it. Besides, what if it don't stop with the goats or the dogs? What if she's out feeding the things, and it comes after her? Or me?"

"Exactly," Kilgore said. He adjusted his coat and cocked his head toward the door. "Josh, you know where this farm is?"

"I do."

"Then you're riding with me."

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Signal Valley Farms sat in the shadow of Signal Mountain, Tennessee, and it was only a few miles away from the derelict roadhouse where Kilgore Jones had joined the party. As he drove his semi-black, beater Eldorado around the mountain, his passenger tinkered with the radio and groused about the knobs.

Josh punched the round handle and said, "You need a new one."

"That *is* the new one. You think they came with cassette players in '67?"

"You're a real dinosaur, man."

Kilgore smiled, but it was a grim little smile. "You said the turn's coming up?"

"It's right here. Right over there, I mean. Look, see? There's a sign."

The edge of the right headlight clipped a low-swinging sign with a picture of a goat and some purple flowers. Kilgore turned the long car slowly, and its tires chewed against the gravel. The unpaved road turned out to be a driveway, but it was a long driveway and it made a dead end at a ranch-style house with one light burning.

They parked up near the house.

Josh and Mark milled nervously while Kilgore rummaged through his trunk. He produced a battered book with a burgundy leather cover, a fistful of stakes that should have lined a garden, a pump water gun with loudly sloshing contents, a digital camera, and a pair of six-shooters. Then he lifted out a small flashlight and checked its batteries.

"I told you, I shot the thing already," Mark said.

Kilgore methodically packed a camo-green duffel bag with everything except for the guns, which he popped into the holster he wore under the trench coat. "I heard you, and I believe you. But I'm willing to bet you didn't shoot it with bullets like these."

"What are they, silver or something?"

"Silver-plated," he said. "It works just as well, and I ain't made of money. I'm not saying these'll work or anything; hell, I don't know what you're up against here. But not much can stand up to this assortment. And

oh yeah, this.” He reached back into the trunk and pulled out a machete as long as his arm. The light of the trunk’s half-dead bulb glinted against the shiny, sharpened edge.

Josh did a good job of appearing unimpressed, but Mark went green. “Is that a magic knife or something?”

“No magic here,” he said, then changed his mind and patted the side of the bag. A rectangular square showed in outline through the fabric. “Except my mom’s old Bible.”

“What are you, some kind of preacher or something?” Mark asked. “Is that why you do this?”

Kilgore shouldered the bag and shook his head. “Almost exactly the opposite, my friend. I do this because I’m *not* a preacher. Now if you’ll kindly point me at your barn, I’ll get myself to work.”

“It’s back over there. You see the roof, through the trees?”

“Yes, I do.”

“All right. There’s the barn over there, and behind it there’s a little run-off that turns into a creek when it rains. Watch out for that. It’s none too deep, but it’ll trip you up if you don’t see it.”

Mark reached out a hand and Kilgore took it and shook it. “I want to thank you,” Mark said. “I appreciate you coming out like this. Is there anything I can do to help you, or anything you need?”

“No sir. Just you and Josh here go in the house and stay there, and don’t come out—no matter what you hear. You two understand?”

“Sure do,” Josh answered for them both.

And when they were safely inside, Kilgore looked into the distant sky. He saw the outline of the barn roof, and as he began to walk toward it, he started his mental checklist. He kept his voice to a whisper. It wasn’t the world’s quietest whisper, but it wasn’t supposed to be.

If he was too quiet, nothing would hear him.

“Probably not a vampire,” he said. “It would’ve sucked the goats dry but not torn them up. Might be a demon. But usually they get other people

to do the sacrificial killing. It's not much of a birthday present if you've got to buy it yourself. Chupacabra, maybe?" He'd never met one, but that didn't mean they didn't happen. "Never heard of a goatsucker this far north."

The barn was barely more than a sharp-shadowed shape, squatting low and square along the ground. Within it, a few odd bleats of curiosity gabbled and small hooves shuffled back and forth. The smell of straw and shit wafted from underneath the locked and barred-up door.

Kilgore held his head against it. "Everybody all right in there?"

"*Na-aa-aa-p*," somebody answered.

And something else answered, too—from over in the gully. First it was just the sharp, out-of-place pop of a branch, and then there was another rattling, the hard clack of two rocks coming together as if they'd been stepped on.

Kilgore pulled his head away from the barn door and reached for the gun that hung under his left armpit. He was a practical man, and he saw no good reason to ramp up slowly.

Another big twig broke, and another knocking set of rocks sounded like footsteps to The Heavy. "Josh, Mark. That'd better not be *you*." But the pace of the motion told him it wasn't made by anything two-legged. There were four feet ... moving at a sharp and regular clip.

He revised his guess. Not feet, perhaps. "Four ... hooves?"

He listened for the firm, approaching patter. The creature was tracking around back, to the right. Kilgore tracked around to the left, keeping the barn between him and the thing that was crawling out of the gully.

The Heavy kept his eyes on the ground and his ears on the edge of the property, at the line where the creek run-off turned and flowed through a row of trees. His squint told him where to tiptoe past the building's corner and how to miss the watering trough. His ears detected a wet snuffling sound and the hard, knocking clatter that, yes, sounded like hooves.

As Kilgore circled the barn, the thing circled too, intrigued enough to follow but not bold enough to charge.

"Here, critter-critter," he called softly. "Come on out and get me. I'm just a slow, fat man. I'm easy pickings for a bad old thing like you, and I'm a

real hearty meal. Are you hungry?"

He narrowed his eyes and peered through the night.

"Come on, now. Come out and let me get a look at you."

Around the back of the barn there was a covered storage area that came up to Kilgore's thigh. He put his left hand down on it and tested the wood. It might hold. It might not. But he was running out of barn and he was going to have to make a stand someplace. The platform was as good a defensive position as any.

He stopped his retreat and lifted one large leg. "Shit," he mumbled, and he said it a couple more times as he hauled himself up. But then he stood, and the storage lid held. It didn't want to. It bowed and creaked underneath four hundred and fifty pounds of man plus all his supplies. Kilgore dropped the duffel bag and unzipped it, all the while trying to keep quiet so he could listen.

Around the corner, something big was tracing Kilgore's scent trail.

The Heavy pulled out his Bible. It was way too dark to read so he stuffed it into his belt, and the book bent against the strain ... but he liked feeling it close. He held up the gun and aimed it down at the corner where the inquisitive snuffling was coming up fast. Mark had been right. Its head was low to the ground.

He shouldered the bag again.

It was too dark to see anything with real certainty, but near the earth there was motion in the nighttime blackness. Something blocky congealed, creeping snout-first from behind the edge of the building.

One dull red eye sparked into view. It blinked and the scarlet dot flickered, and focused, and turned to face the man on top of the storage box lid.

The second eye came around, and behind it came a high set of peaked shoulders.

The eyes locked on Kilgore and they brightened with greed.

"What ... a werewolf?" he asked, knowing this guess couldn't be right. The shape was all wrong, the joints and muscles were strung together

differently.

It snorted and scraped its hooves beneath its body.

The suddenness of its momentum almost took the Heavy off guard, but not quite. This wasn't his first rodeo, so to speak, and his trigger finger answered the charge with three rounds fired quickly and directly at those vicious little eyes.

The thing screeched a piercing objection. The bullets knocked the creature away from its path and it shook itself like a dog but it didn't go down. Instead, it went forward—head set low and body set barreling—into the storage bin.

Two boards busted outright, and combined with Kilgore's exceptional weight, this was enough to buckle the whole structure.

He tumbled down and off, falling and rolling over the edge and onto the creature, which grunted and tried to turn around in time to bite.

But once he got rolling, Kilgore was hard to stop, especially when he tucked his head down, pulled up his knees, and let the momentum take him. There was too much mass and too much inertia; nothing short of a gorge or a brick building could slow him down.

As it turned out, he happened to be rolling toward a thickly overgrown gully.

His body steamrolled over tall grass and skinny sapling trees. It bounced where appropriate and jolted to a rough and terrible pitch over the edge of the gully and down only a couple of feet to the v-shaped bottom ... where he wedged himself to a stop.

He lowered his arms and shook his bullet-bald head.

Above, and around the curved path he'd mowed or flattened with his accidental retreat, the clattering quick clop of four hard feet approached. It wouldn't be long before the creature saw the man or smelled him, or simply followed the trail of the trampled foliage.

At least, thank God, Kilgore thought, wasn't stuck. But his leg was pinned underneath him, and his ribs were aching from the turbulence. He sat up and retrieved his leg. He'd dropped one of the guns, but he had both hands free—and he used them to pat himself down for a damage check.

His ass was numb. His knee was torqued. His right wrist was starting to swell. A dozen other assorted bumps, bruises, and scrapes made themselves known with a low-grade hum of pain.

None of it was so bad that he couldn't get up.

The twisted knee made a loud pop when he bent it, but then it felt better so he kept on crawling to his feet. Somewhere along the way, his bag had come unzipped and the contents had scattered; he'd lost some of the stakes, and the water gun had broken, leaking its contents all along his path. But he still had a light he was afraid to use, and he still had that second gun, which remained in its holster.

And his Bible was still stuck in his belt.

When he placed his hand on the rocks at his waist in order to make that final pull to bring him upright, he found his machete.

Something in the way the blade shifted caught the moonlight and gave him away. No sooner had he snared it and braced himself for trouble, than trouble came galloping between the trees that remained.

The creature knew these woods, too. It knew where the gully was, and even though it couldn't see much of the man who was standing in it, it could see that enormous knife glittering in the skim-milk glow of the half-covered moon. And it wasn't much afraid of knives.

Then again, it had never been struck with a knife that was flung by a man who weighed nearly a quarter of a ton.

The blade sank deeply into the soft tissue between the beast's jaw and shoulder, and again Kilgore's ears rang with the monster's ferocious squeal; but now the squeal sounded wet. Something was broken, and something was bleeding. No cry should sound so choked and damp.

The beast turned away from the edge of the gully, not quite fast enough to keep from dropping one leg over the edge. It scuttled and scrambled, and it did not fall over the edge—for which Kilgore offered up a quick prayer of thanks. Whether or not the creature was injured, The Heavy didn't want to end up trapped in a trench with it.

With a labored groan and another pop of his knee, Kilgore heaved himself up over the gully's edge and flopped down onto the low, angled

ground.

The skittering scuff of the monster's hooves limped out ahead of him, back toward the barn.

"Sure," Kilgore said to himself. "Sure, you're hurt." If this monster was anything like others he'd encountered, it needed to feed and feed quickly if it was going to recover.

Running was damned hard, in the dark, on a trick knee—but The Heavy got a slow trot underway, and he hated it. He hated chasing anyone, or anything. Over the years, he'd developed a tactic for monster fighting, and that tactic did *not* involve a whole lot of dashing around.

He was big and he knew it. It was easy to look slow and soft and vulnerable. It was easy to draw the predators out to him.

But the damned monster was loping toward the barn, and toward the frantically chattering goats locked within. Kilgore did his best to lope faster.

He burst out of the vegetation with his remaining gun held firmly upraised and cocked. The object of his chase beat its head against the barn door, ramming it again and again, and squealing with each impact. The machete was still protruding from its neck, being farther jammed with every head-butt.

Kilgore tried to roar, "Oh no you don't!" but he was winded, and it came out in a raspy cough.

The creature turned. It scratched one front hoof into the dirt like a bull preparing to charge.

And Kilgore didn't waste any time unloading three more shots into that rolling, bucking shadow the size of a bear.

While it shuddered and shrieked, The Heavy drew his Bible with his free hand. It snapped up out of his belt, and he held it up over his heart like a shield.

He approached the creature with swift and measured steps. It was dying. Nothing man, beast, or other made a noise like that unless it had glimpsed the light on the other side and felt the Goodness of it burn like lava. It writhed and whimpered, and it splattered Kilgore with hot, gushing sprays of blood as black as oil.

“In the name of the Father,” it spun around in the dirt, throwing a death tantrum. “And the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” Kilgore told it as he came up close and brought the gun down. “*I unmake you.*” One of the hateful red eyes glowered up from the paste-like mud.

Kilgore fired into the eye because it was the only thing he could see well enough to aim for, and the fire there winked out.

The creature quivered. One of its legs twitched, scraping a mindless reflex.

The Heavy exhaled a huge breath and backed away. He knew, and the deep-bitten scars in his calf could attest, that there was no such thing as “too careful.”

Keeping one eye on the carcass, he rifled through his bag and pulled out his flashlight. “Now let’s see exactly what the hell you are, Mr. Goat-killer.” His thumb caught the sliding switch and the bright white beam cut the night so sharply that for a moment, the man was blinded.

When his eyes adjusted, he followed the circle of light down to the gruesome mass of bullet-broken bones, torn hair, and hooves. And that’s when he saw the tusks. “Tusks? This is...” He used the edge of his steel-toed boot to nudge the pulpy skull. “A goddamned were-pig. Were-boar. Were ... son of a bitch.”

The corpse shifted by slow, nearly imperceptible degrees, sliding around in the muck and losing the edges of its hulking shape. Kilgore reached back into the bag and whipped out the digital camera. He readied the flash and framed the shot. He caught the image just in time.

A moment later, the thing collapsed into an unrecognizable pelt.