

**Banebloods**  
Ana Gonzalez

People always cite the ocean as the most unexplored area on the planet Earth. There are depths that we are unable to reach and creatures beneath the surface that we can only attempt to fathom. While there is no doubt that the sea and its elusive inhabitants remain mysteries, there are also beings on land that we have yet to discover. Perhaps, it is our ignorance that saves us in the end. Who's to say that these unknown animals aren't dangerous or even fatal? There is a lot about our world that we don't know, and maybe it is our curiosity and drive for knowledge that will ultimately lead to our doom.

-----

Leo couldn't remember exactly when his birthday was. He knew that it was sometime in May because he recalled licking cream cheese frosting off beneath the hot summer sun. He could picture himself sitting at the wooden table, enjoying the cake his father always baked for him each year as part of tradition. He was very young then, younger than he was now.

If he thought really hard, he could remember the house they lived in. It was small to say the least, but he did love living there. If he wiggled his fingers, he could feel the plush surface of the beige carpet caress his hands, reminding him of the days when he would play with toy fire trucks and roll around with action figures in hand. If he looked upwards to where the sky should be, he could see the pale white fan that hung in the playroom spinning above him without uttering a sound.

Now, if Leo looked to the ceiling, he could only see a sickly shade of bleach matching the surrounding walls and floor. His clothes complimented the hue as they were also white and uninteresting save for a large roman numeral sewn in red across the back of his shirt. Having

been taken when he was still in elementary school, he had never learned what the X's and I's meant. However, after being at the facility for a long while, he had come to associate the number the loudspeakers would occasionally buzz out to the foreign symbols attached to his person: forty-nine, XXXX IX.

Leo had been in quarantine for about five years and he knew that they were at least forty-eight others who had Wolf just like him. Or rather, there had been forty-eight others. Given the nature of the disease that had turned his iris' yellow among some other side effects, he was one of the lucky ones. The eye color change is nothing major. Its when the spine collapses that things get ugly.

Leo shook his head as the horrific memory manifested in his mind. As much as he wanted to remember his beloved mother, with her long golden hair and the splash of freckles just below her blue eyes, he knew that thinking about her would also force him to remember *that*. Scrunching his eyes, he pushed his parent from thought as he had done for a while now.

“Subject forty-nine, it is time for your daily evaluation.”

Leo's pointed ears twitched. He turned his gaze from the ceiling to the wall to his right, anticipating the moment where a one way mirror would appear. Shuffling to the white cot that was his bed, he took a seat and awaited the officer to begin his questions for the day. They were always the same set of inquiries, save for the last few. Those varied.

Sure enough, a section of the wall slid away, revealing the gray surface of the dark glass. Leo stared into it, his mind conjuring a picture of what the person on the other side looked like. The voice over the intercom was always monotone, so he didn't have much to go on at first. Over time, Leo discovered that he was able to put more pieces together.

“Hello, forty-nine,” the voice above him droned. “How are you feeling?”

Leo shrugged. “Fine, I suppose.”

Same first question as always. He wondered what they expected him to say: my eyes haven’t been brown for years and my upper row of teeth have grown into an overbite, but I’m perfectly content. How are you doing? The kids doing alright? Everything fine at the office?

Glad this thing hadn’t taken his humor.

“That’s good to hear, forty-nine. Very good.”

The next couple minutes went by quickly. Have you eaten? Slept enough? Et cetera. All the while, Leo sat on his cot, gazing blankly where he thought the examiner was standing.

After asking him his plans for the day (really?), the voice took a pause. Leo took in a breath.

“Forty-nine. I’m going to ask you to think really hard for the following question.”

Leo turned away from the window and faced the blank wall ahead. Here we go.

“What am I doing?”

Another pause. The intercom was silent. Leo scrunched his eyes and focused. His ears rang with noise that he knew he shouldn’t be able to hear. Sharp, quick vibrations rang through his altered eardrums.

“You snapped your fingers seven times, twice with your left hand, five with your right.”

He heard the examiner scribble something else on the other side of the wall, the sound of a pen sliding over paper easing his sore ears.

“Excellent, forty-nine. Fine work.”

Leo suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

“This concludes the evaluation. We appreciate your collaboration, forty-nine.”

With that, the wall slid back into place and he was alone again. Releasing a sigh, Leo fell backwards onto the cot and looked at the ceiling again. Back to me and my thoughts.

-----

The hunters who trekked into the Western Amazon knew they would be in trouble if they were to be caught. Not only was hunting within the rainforest a serious offense, but the animals who lived within it were vicious and territorial. Despite these facts, the four-man party journeyed into the tropic wilderness, egged on by their lust for fortune and profit.

They were only planning to hunt for a few days. They were to attain skins, horns, what have you, and escape with the help of some local aviators who would transport them into Colombia for a flight back to the States. The timing had to be precise if they were to avoid getting caught.

It was on their second night in the rainforest that one of the men saw something extraordinary. A dog the size of an adult panther was drinking from a stream just off of the river. Its pelt was a mixture of browns and yellows and its tail was lush with speckles of white. Believing he had come across a rare animal (which in fact, he did), the hunter pointed his rifle at the beast and took the shot. He claimed that the beast stared at him with its large yellow eyes just before the bullet penetrated its skull.

Running off the high of killing a mysterious creature, the party abandoned the rainforest early and headed to the Rio Branco municipality to await their flight into Columbia. Their return into the United States proved unsuccessful, however, when local authorities in Cali discovered

their illegal enterprise. They were quickly arrested and the loot they had gathered whilst on their hunt was confiscated, including the body of the mysterious beast.

The Colombian government grew weary of the cadaver, having no animal file on record explaining what the animal was. Upon learning that the creature was from the deepest part of the Amazon, however, zoologists in the States took great interest. They paid thousands for the body to be brought into the country for further study. One may think that it was the body's arrival into North America that began the spread of Wolf and they would be right. That is, if they disregarded the exact moment the hunter, eager to show his companions his incredible kill, had slung the dead beast over his shoulder. That was enough.

-----

Olivia was laid sprawled on the white floor of her room with a packet of colored crayons in hand. She shook some colors out of their container and promptly picked up what she thought were yellow and blue. She couldn't see colors right anymore, and while she was very upset the morning she woke up and realized that her bedroom walls had changed overnight, she eventually accepted it as part of her condition. The man on the ceiling told her it was alright not to see colors right anymore.

Olivia was only six years of age. She was infected with Wolf just a few months before. She was taken to the facility in the ambulance her father had called. The people in the vehicle had told her that she was going to the local hospital but they lied. She hadn't seen her parents since that night and wondered if she ever would again.

The small child finished drawing a magenta sun and began to outline a green sea. She was happy that the man on the ceiling had given her things to do at least. She had crayons, dolls,

and some books with princesses inside. She was at first scared of the people in black plastic, though. They were the ones who carried everything inside the room and she couldn't see their faces. They didn't speak either and left through the wall quickly after putting everything down on the floor. At least she could tell they were regular people, though. Despite the things they had on, she could smell their scents beneath the layers. She noticed that, most of the time, they were just as frightened as she was. Although she now knew better, she always felt a lot better once they were gone.

Olivia was by no means completely happy with where she was. She missed her parents and Rufus, the puppy and her friends from school. She wanted to go to the park and to eat her favorite foods. She didn't want to stay here at all. Besides, they had spelled her name wrong on the back of her shirt. They forgot the O, both of the Is and the A. Even she knew how to write her own name! And why did the man call her fifty-five anyway? He never listened to her when she corrected him. It was rude.

For now, however, she had a beach to finish. Soon the man would ask her questions as he did every day and she still needed to draw an umbrella and a sand castle before then. Focused on the task at hand, Olivia sifted through the crayons, careful not to snap them in half with her overgrown nails.

-----

The corpse was delivered to a classified location in the middle of Nevada. The creature, labeled a cryptid by scientists, was examined and autopsied. They discovered that the animal was female and had been pregnant with kin. Monkey flesh was found in her digestive tract, the beast having just finished a meal before her life was cut short. Its jaw was lined with rows of sharp

teeth and its ears were large, having more than likely served quite useful for locating prey. It was only a few weeks into examination that news broke out about a disease terrorizing the northern region of South America.

Country leaders of the area were appalled by the outbreak, which had changed the eye color of citizens as well as mutating other areas of their bodies. Dental professionals were taken aback by the cases of enhanced tooth growth. Parents were shocked by the claws that now lined the fingers of their children. While not perceived to be fatal, the metamorphosis was causing chaos nonetheless. When one suddenly suffers change, it is difficult to accept when there are no explanations for such change. Of course, no one suspected that the cryptid was behind the disease. It was dead, after all.

3 years ago, the mutation took a turn for the worst. Infected adult females began to suffer anatomical changes. Studies confirmed that they became quadrupedal, their bodies shifting to rely on both hands and feet for movement, and lost regular levels of human intelligence. They became feral in nature, lashing out in fits of violence when approached and seeking meat for sustenance. If there wasn't a panic beforehand, there surely was now. No one knew why the disease had turned females into ravenous beasts and as quickly as armies killed the mutants, the more the change spread.

Then, the lycans (as they were called by the world) began to attack humans when the livestock population ran out. Like a starved animal forced to rely on drastic measures for survival, the creatures found a new source of food in the abundant human population all around them. Cities were evacuated, refugees sought asylum in other parts of the continent, and the panic spread.

By the time the lycans began their carnivorous rampage, the first signs of Wolf appeared in the States. The disease had spread like wildfire and one-by-one, with everyday people finding displaying the telling symptoms. Unlike the outbreak in South America, however, the lycan mutation occurred much quicker in the U.S. In just a few days after initial infection, mature female humans all over the country turned into ruthless killers, wreaking havoc while on the hunt for food. Out of fear of the disease possibly spreading elsewhere, Canada shut down its border and the remaining continents of the world banned travel in or from the Americas. Millions of people were effectively quarantined with no hope for escape or help. While a great deal of the lycan population was neutralized following the combined efforts of military forces, the disease only continued its spread, resulting in more hungry lycans running amok.

“Werewolf disease,” was the name some people choose for the phenomena, connecting the Wolf disease to the mythical tale of hybrid beasts. It did make some sense in a way. The disease was causing increasing numbers of creatures to appear and the unsightly transformation involved was quite reminiscent to the legend. What did not correlate, however, was the manner in which the outbreak was spread about. While ancient stories claim that being bitten or scratched by a “werewolf” turned the victim into one, no reported cases concerning Wolf supported this theory of infection. Those who had been attacked by lycans and had survived the ordeal did not transform into one, not even adult female survivors. The initial symptom did manifest in each case, but the dreaded metamorphosis never did. While this information provided much needed relief and limited understanding about the lycans, scientists all over the globe were still confused by how Wolf spread about.



It took much more time before a morbid idea was proposed. Perhaps it wasn't the lycan itself that spread the disease. Something else was, something we couldn't see.

The day that hunter in the Amazon had killed the cryptid, he had ended the life of a host to millions upon millions of tiny beings nestled within its fur. As the body was transported out of the rainforest and across countries, these microscopic passengers, with their bellies still full of their host's blood, dropped off to find new homes where they could. Some perished in their desperate search for a provider, but many succeeded. The very moment the fleas attached themselves to humans, they realized just how ideal they were as new nurturers.

It was too late now to try to locate these parasites. After all, their reproduction cycles meant that countless numbers of Wolf-carrying fleas were roaming all over the Americas. While being bitten by fleas that had already attached themselves to Lycans did not turn you into one, they still mutated some aspects of the body, robbing the host of their original human qualities. It seemed that scientists had solved the mystery surrounding the spread of the disease but not the problem itself. That is, of course, until they considered a possibility for a cure.

Scientists from all over the world posited that, if they could obtain a population of infected fleas from a live cryptid host, they could possibly create a cure from studying the parasites. The beast that the hunter had shot dead years ago was useless but scientists were optimistic that another 'original host' was alive and well somewhere deep in the Amazon. Namely, the offspring that the dead mother had given birth to.

With a new goal in mind, the governments of the Americas decided to launch a project with the goal to find the cryptid's spawn. Infected citizens displaying the Wolf symptoms but who were also not at risk of becoming Lycans (which came down to all males and young female

children) would be studied and trained to harness their altered bodies. Leo was one of seven other subjects who had exceptional hearing. Olivia and two others had developed a keen sense of smell. The remaining subjects had greater muscle mass, had increased agility, and some had even grown large teeth capable of penetrating steel pipes.

Soon enough, all of the subjects who were clear for the field would accompany a squadron of military officers into the Amazon. By using their abilities, they would assist in the tracking and capture of the offspring and ensure that it be returned to the States alive. Time was running out for humanity. Female children would eventually age into adults and would transform into Lycans. If the human female population in the Americas died out, scientists, world leaders, and citizens alike feared that their race would go extinct in a matter of ten years. Finding the cryptid's child was the only hope left for an antidote.

Leo and Olivia had no idea what was in store for them. Neither of them had a choice.