

MANKINDS

The Blood Feud

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(SAMPLE)

Prologue:

Arrested

Teal and violet bands of the aurora borealis hang in the night sky, their static glow competing with the brilliance of the full moon. Below the lights, bitter gusts of winter wind sweep snow across the deserted main road, piling it in swirling eddies against silent storefronts. The shops stand dark and locked, with only a few cars buried under drifts at the street's edge.

Snow accumulates in sculptural drifts, the cold so bitter it stills all sensible activity. Loose-hanging signs creak and groan in the relentless wind. Above the frozen street, a black drone hovers with a barely perceptible hum, methodically scanning the building fronts while attempting to maintain its stealth.

The drone drifts toward the Valley View Motel, an aging structure hugging the road. It executes a deliberate sweep, zooming its feed in on entryways to capture minute details while maintaining distance. A burst of static flashes across the connection, freezing the image momentarily before the feed stabilizes.

An unmarked black SUV snakes up the street, tires crunching through the virgin snow crust before halting at the motel entrance. Two officers in tactical black exit swiftly, moving toward the main office and lobby. As they disappear inside, two imposing S.W.A.T. vans emblazoned with “POLICE - RCMP” converge on the scene, strategically positioning themselves at opposite ends of the building. Armored officers pour out, shields and rifles at the ready, rushing to predetermined positions.

A low, unearthly growl resonates nearby, smothered by the howling wind.

One officer, breath pluming through his balaclava, pivots left from the lobby door and signals the others. He advances toward a pristine black van parked directly in front of Room 4, its heavily tinted windows reflecting the glare of streetlights. The tactical team spreads out, flanking the door while carefully avoiding the adjacent window’s line of sight.

The officers hold their positions, their adrenaline-fueled heartbeats pounding a frantic rhythm. The commanding officer barks, “POLICE, SEARCH WARRANT!”

An officer kicks the deadbolt free of the door frame. Another tosses in a flash grenade. A deafening bang erupts, filling the room with blinding light. Multiple officers storm inside with rifles raised, while others maintain perimeter positions.

Inside, weapons instantly train on a man lying motionless on one of the two beds. He wears only a simple white undershirt and black pants, his dry boots still laced tightly. The bed beneath him remains perfectly made and undisturbed. He is a giant of a man, standing well over six feet tall with a muscular build. Thick, raven-black hair sweeps back from his sharp, aristocratic face. His complexion is pale, almost alabaster. Despite the roar of shouted commands, he remains eerily still, hands positioned over his stomach with fingers casually interlaced.

A crowd gathers outside, drawn by the flashing lights.

“ARE YOU ALONE?” the commanding officer bellows.

The man parts his lips, releasing a long, deliberate hush. A sudden, unnatural quiet falls over the officers inside the room. They lower their weapons slightly, their commands replaced by

hushed, conversational murmurs, though chaos continues outside.

Detective Martel steps forward, “Which one are you?”

The man tilts his head. His brown eyes catch the tactical beam, shining with an unusual golden tint.

“Are you alone?” Martel demands.

The man offers only stubborn silence.

Martel gestures sharply. “Get him up!”

As armed officers advance, the man uncrosses his fingers. He pauses to twist a heavy ring on his left hand. The slight movement causes the officers to hesitate, their rifles readjusting aim. With deliberate slowness, he plants his booted feet on the floor and rises to his full height. His expression conveys only faint annoyance, not concern.

Detective Grant approaches Martel, shaking his head, “The owner knows nothing.”

“They likely lied to him—”

“No,” Grant interrupts. “He genuinely has no information about this. He knows that the room was rented, but that’s the extent of his knowledge.” They struggle to process the situation.

“Search the area,” the commanding officer snaps. “Bring in the dogs. See if they find anything.”

The man submits quietly to handcuffing, allowing the officers to escort him outside while personnel continue their search.

“DeCartier!” Martel shouts over the wind in the frigid air. “Which one are you?”

“Marcus.” He meets the detective’s gaze with unnerving calm. He shifts his attention to the growing crowd, noting several onlookers capturing his image with their phones. A flicker of irritation crosses his pale features.

“Are you alone?” Martel demands.

“Yes,” Marcus lies smoothly.

Martel steps directly into his line of sight. “Marcus DeCartier, I am arresting you for three counts of second-degree murder.”

As the detective recites his rights, Marcus stares past him, watching the gossiping spectators.

“Do you understand?”

Silence.

With a frustrated gesture, Martel signals two officers to secure Marcus in the unmarked police car. Marcus settles into the backseat, showing a stark familiarity with the procedure. The door closes. He glances at the front-facing camera mounted inside and exhales softly, his expression giving nothing away.

Meanwhile, a second drone joins the first, both now scanning the surrounding area. Neither night vision nor thermal imaging distinguishes persons of interest from the ordinary bystanders in the growing crowd.

A police dog strains against its leash, tracking a scent between buildings. It follows faint boot prints in the snow with an intensity that makes the handler struggle to keep pace. As they round the edge of a house, the dog slows, sniffing the ground intently before whining softly and gazing toward the roof of the two-storey home.

The trailing drone detects a subtle thermal glow from fresh footprints on the rooftop. The remote pilot notes the anomaly. As the drone adjusts course to investigate, its feed deteriorates,

dissolving into a wall of static and pixelation. The pilot, fighting the controls, redirects the drone to continue its broader search pattern, unaware that the electronic failure has just concealed two figures hidden in the shadows of nearby houses.

Chapter 1:

The Daily Grind

Heavy curtains block most of the September sunlight. Beams slice through the gaps, illuminating dust in the still air. Another night survived. The relief is repetitive, but always welcome. The night holds no promises, only potential threats averted.

But it's another day.

The shrill, distant wail of a smoke alarm jolts Robert from sleep. He stares straight ahead, his eyes focusing slowly on the smart digital display perched atop a TV stand across the room. 10:42. The alarm cuts off abruptly—a neighbor's cooking mishap, most likely. The sudden silence amplifies the low hum of the display's power supply and the distant rumble of morning traffic.

A low groan escapes him. Robert unfolds his six-foot-three frame from the couch, the old fabric releasing a faint, dusty scent as he pushes himself up. He stretches, limbs stiff from sleep, until his joints pop.

Before anything else, his gaze sweeps the room in a familiar, anxious ritual. He checks the

deadbolt on the front door—still locked from the inside. The window latch—secure. Nothing out of place; everything where it should be. Only then does a sigh of relief escape him.

His small Transcona apartment is an organized mess. A tall bookshelf overflowing with graphic novels and manga stands against one wall. A pair of folded, insulated delivery bags sit by the door, and a large, closed plastic tote labeled *SORT LATER* takes up a corner. His wallet and keys rest in their designated spot on the battered coffee table.

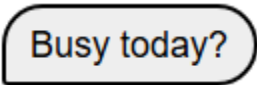
A few minutes later, a plastic mixing bowl filled with cold cereal and milk rests precariously on the coffee table, wedged between a video game controller and a stack of mail. The television drones on, broadcasting a random news talk show discussing technological advancements he ignores.

Robert hunches over his phone, scrolling through job listings on a website. One thumb swipes while the other hand rhythmically shovels cereal into his mouth. He is a young man, almost twenty-one. Muscle earned from long summer days of seasonal yard work gives his frame a solid build. His skin, usually a light brown, carries a heavy tan from countless hours spent under the sun—which

does little to hide the exhaustion shadowing his dark brown eyes. Dark, ruffled hair falls slightly over his forehead, adding to his disheveled look. He sits back against the worn-out couch, the fabric creaking faintly beneath him.

Recalling the date, he glances at the whiteboard calendar on the wall. Today is Friday, September 21st. Doodles of little characters and symbols clutter the grid, interspersed with drawings of the moon in full, new, and half phases. It has been three months since the last incident. That is almost a personal best since he started living alone. Yet he knows the peace is fragile. The curse is one of the few inheritances he received from his father. It twists him into a monster when the moonlight hits. He knows the stories, but he has never wanted to test the folklore tales. At least, not while he is still in control of the wolf within. The fear of potentially hurting anyone, let alone passing it on, is the cage that keeps his world very small.

A notification banner drops from the top of his phone screen. He taps it, bringing up a text message app.



Busy today?



Robert taps the Like button and a small thumbs-up icon flashes briefly before he slides the app away. He continues swiping through job classifieds. Seconds later, another banner appears and he goes back.

Want company?



Good talk



He smirks and waits a few seconds, letting the joke land, before typing back.

Want me to come get you?

He knows the reply before it appears.



The smart screen on the TV stand cycles through photos stored on his phone. It lands on the formal wedding picture of his parents, Mary and James Morris.

“Cheers.” Robert raises his now-empty cereal bowl in a mock toast, tilting the bowl back to drink the last of the sugary milk.

A few hours later, sunlight glares off the hood of Robert’s weathered blue Honda Civic as he navigates the tight traffic of Osborne Street. The interior bears the permanent stains of countless deliveries and odd jobs. Bass thumps from the speakers. He keeps the volume just below the threshold where the blown cones buzz with static.

He runs a hand over the steering wheel, a quiet satisfaction settling over him. It was his first major purchase. He bought it used right when high school was ending and he was eighteen, paying with money saved from his parents’ estate. That money is long gone now. It wasn’t much, but it got him settled. Now almost twenty-one, all that

remains locked is an education fund that he has decided he has no time to pursue. For now, his survival depends on the insulated delivery bags riding shotgun. They are a constant reminder of the daily hustle required to keep his life running smoothly.

He steers into the drive-thru lane of Perk n Go. The coffee shop is squeezed into the heart of Osborne Village, surrounded by students and foot traffic. He hits the switch and the window motor whines in protest as the glass rolls down. The air fills with the warm, heavy scent of roasted beans and sugary pastries.

“Welcome to Perk n Go, what can I get for you?” A woman’s cheerful voice greets him from the speaker box.

“Yeah, I’ll get two chocolate cake donuts.” Robert leans toward the mic.

“Anything else?” The voice crackles back.

“Yeah,” Robert stifles a laugh. “And I’ll take Wyn if she’s free.”

The speaker crackles after a moment with suppressed laughter. “Two-twenty-four. Last window.”

Robert pulls up to the pickup window. He has a two-dollar toonie and a quarter ready in his hand. A young woman bounces into view, a playful smirk already on her face as she snatches the coins. She shoves a small paper bag through the opening with a little playful force. Her apron is dark brown, matching the visor pinned to her straight black hair. A nametag with the company logo reads “Winona,” though she prefers Wyn. Her dark eyes sparkle with amusement. She is restless energy contained in a uniform, a sharp contrast to Robert’s stillness.

“If I’m free, huh?” Wyn grins, leaning her elbows on the sill.

“Do I have to wait long?” Robert leans in. “I know it takes time to get one ready.”

Wyn leans slightly out the window. “You’re lucky there is a camera on me right now.”

Robert laughs. He eases off the brake and pulls the Civic ahead to park in the front lot.

Robert drives one-handed, chewing on a mouthful of chocolate cake donut. Winona Fontaine sits beside him in the passenger seat, the crinkle of her snack bag providing a steady rhythm as she

casually pops bright orange, cheesy snacks into her mouth. She might be out of her Perk n Go uniform, but her energy remains high. Her presence adds a necessary spark to the car's worn interior, a welcome contrast to the quiet intensity Robert often carries.

Her easygoing nature brings balance to Robert's life. Their paths likely never would have crossed if not for a shared, terrible experience a couple of years ago. It was an event that ignited Wyn's curiosity about Robert's closely guarded secret and cemented her place in his passenger seat.

His smartphone broadcasts a bright, cartoonish voice from the dashboard mount. "Gopher-Go!"

"Status, Number One." He checks the mirrors, playing up the *Star Trek* captain reference.

Wyn takes the role of navigator. She taps the accept button and studies the map, calculating the route instantly before the GPS line even renders. "McDonald's on Fermor. You need to flip a U-turn." She points back with her thumb, snack still in hand.

Robert immediately changes lanes, maneuvering into a turn lane back the way they came.

“You’re getting too used to this.” Wyn wipes a smudge of orange dust from her thumb.

“It’s money. And it’s simple,” he replies, keeping his eyes on traffic.

She huffs, leaning her head back against the headrest. “Well, yeah, if you can drive.”

“I’m pretty sure you could get your license,” he chuckles.

Wyn gestures toward her own face, indicating her Indigenous features. The dusting of orange powder on her cheek undermines the seriousness of the motion.

“Shut up, that wouldn’t even matter.” Robert shakes his head. “You never tried.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t even need to try,” she retorts, lowering her voice to mimic a stuffy official. “You showed up with your pale skin and good clothes, and they said ‘Okay, you pass, here you go.’” A hint of genuine angst underlies the joke.

Robert exhales heavily. “Are we really doing this? You want to talk about privilege?”

“Chill. Chill,” Wyn backs down quickly, sensing the shift. “It’s fine.”

They fall silent as Robert pulls the Civic into the drive-thru lane, stopping in the queue. The rumble of the van in front of them vibrates through the windshield.

Wyn breaks the silence, her tone shifting from playful to concerned. “So, everything fine with you? Nothing... happened... recently?”

Robert glances sideways at her, “No, it’s not that time of the month for me.”

“Ha. Touché,” she replies flatly.

He pulls up to the speaker box. A tinny voice recites the standard welcome greeting. Robert shouts back an order number from his phone screen. He is already pulling ahead before the voice finishes instructing him to.

Wyn tries to catch his gaze again. “Seriously, are you okay?”

“Seriously,” he meets her eyes briefly before focusing on the pickup window. “I’m fine.”

He accepts two large paper bags from the employee. He hands them wordlessly to Wyn. She takes them, already planning their positions in the insulated bag on the floor to make everything fit perfectly.

As he pulls out of the drive-thru, only then does the heavy sigh escape him.

“Look, I’m sorry. I just can’t find a different job during the day. I’m going to have to work full days for a bit.”

Wyn shakes her head, frowning. “That’s too risky.”

He cuts her off, “I’ve checked. I can work until six right now while the sun is up, and I can start early when the moon sets. AND! It’s just past a half-moon right now.”

Wyn scoffs, retrieving her snack bag again. “You think you have it all figured out, huh? What time?”

“Tonight, I can start around two. Then three tomorrow.”

“Dude, you’re going to get no sleep.”

“I just need a couple of days. Then it’s not worth it.”

“So when is the full moon?”

“Next week, the twenty-sixth.” An immediate pause hangs in the air after his answer.

Wyn inhales sharply. “Well, you sound prepared. Need me to watch over you?”

“No, I should be fine this time.” He glances over, gauging her reaction. She forces a tight grin in response. “You can come by tonight if you want.”

She laughs with a hint of sarcasm. “So I get to watch you sleep, and then either stay there alone or be bored with you in your car when no one orders their Happy Meals at 3 AM.”

“Your call,” Robert laughs back.

“Let’s be honest here, I’d rather not face an empty parking lot at that hour,” Wyn admits, tucking a stray strand of black hair behind her ear. “But I’ll come for moral support or whatever you call it.”

Robert chuckles. “Moral support from a tired snack monster? I don’t think that’ll help much.”

“You’re lucky I am your friend,” she teases playfully. “Most people would ditch you just for not having a proper sleep schedule.”

“Hey, I’m grateful! Even if you do have messy fingers,” he glances at her cheesy fingertips.

Wyn holds up the snack bag, her expression perfectly straight, though a playful glint shines in her dark brown eyes. “This, my friend,” she declares solemnly, “is a delicate balance of deliciousness and sheer survival. The cheesy goodness simply cannot be resisted.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Robert shakes his head, a smile finally breaking through.

Dusk settles over the city, painting the sky in deepening shades of orange and purple. The blue Honda Civic winds its way toward Robert’s Transcona apartment complex as the moon asserts its presence in the darkening sky—now a bright, waxing gibbous bulging heavily past a half-moon.

Robert feels a familiar energy stir. It’s a low vibration humming just beneath his skin, a phantom itch in his muscles that scratching won’t fix. He tells himself he must get inside before the moonlight

truly takes hold, before the beast surfaces... though a part of him knows the tightness in his chest is just plain anxiety, amplified by the moon's growing light.

He pulls up to the curb, cuts the engine, and hops out immediately, pulling the hood of his sweater over his head. He walks briskly toward his apartment door, not looking back.

Wyn watches him from the passenger seat, smirking. She waits, counting the seconds, curious how long it will take him to notice her absence. One... two... five... ten... He disappears inside without a backward glance. With an amused sigh, she pushes open her door and gets out.

Carrying a crumpled fast-food bag, Wyn follows him inside. The apartment is dim, the main light off. She sees Robert moving from window to window. The sharp clack of plastic blinds echoes in the room as he checks each one, ensuring they are tightly shut against the encroaching night.

Wyn leans against the doorframe. "Were you just going to leave me out there?"

"I knew you were coming," Robert replies without turning. He is already busy clearing a space on the battered coffee table. "You did this a few days ago too."

Wyn can't hold back a genuine smile. She spots an overflowing garbage bin near the kitchenette and stuffs the crumpled bag—filled with her own car trash—deep inside. “You really need to take this out,” she mutters. She heads to the small kitchenette, retrieves two cans of Coca-Cola, and sinks onto the sofa.

Robert joins her moments later, carrying their end-of-day snack—a plate, a knife, a brick of cheddar cheese, and a small saucer filled with pickle slices. A half-empty bag of crackers already sits nearby.

Wyn eyes the simple spread. She could easily jab him about his idea of dinner, but she knows this reflects his tight budget. She also knows Robert takes pride in hosting, however humbly, and would be upset if she refused his offering just to save him food or money. She picks up a cracker.

“Are you sure you are going to work tonight?” Wyn watches him saw uneven slices from the cheese block. “Even if you went to bed now, you would only be getting about three or four hours.”

Robert pauses, knife hovering over the cheese. He considers this. “Maybe I can start a bit later?”

Wyn's attention shifts to the smart screen on the TV stand. A small, glowing talk-bubble icon blinks faintly in the corner of a displayed photo. "You have a text," Wyn nods at the screen. "Want me to read it?"

Robert gives a quick upward nod.

Wyn picks up his phone from the coffee table, unlocks it, and navigates through dozens of uncleared notifications. She opens the text app. "Your aunt says... 'Are you still coming this week? If so, when?'"

Robert stops cutting. "She's moving next week. Right?"

"Yeah," Wyn nods. "She's moving next Friday."

"Dammit," he scowls. "I thought I was supposed to go next week, but she wants me there before everything is packed."

"It's only Friday," Wyn points out. "The weekend just started. You can still go. Make a day of it."

Robert looks at her. "Are you available tomorrow?"

“You want me to go with you?” Wyn scoffs lightly.

“Well...” He leans slightly towards her, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “I find there is less shouting when there are witnesses.”

“She’s not going to like me.”

“What’s there not to like?” Robert grins playfully.

Wyn’s hand, holding a cracker, freezes halfway to her mouth. The playful light in her eyes extinguishes, and her gaze drops to the table. She says nothing, her new stillness a stark contrast to her earlier energy.

Robert shifts gears, adopting her earlier teasing tone. “It’ll be the only time you will get to see my old room.”

Wyn just gives him a skeptical, side-eyed stare.

Robert offers an out. “You can just say that you work, so you can’t.”

Wyn lets out a deep, heavy sigh of defeat. “For moral support... like I offered.”

“Great.” Robert flashes an exaggeratedly large, toothy grin. “Tomorrow okay?”