My Tattoo by Robert Tackett

“Come on, Grandpa Ninja! Please, please”? My grandchildren were all sitting around on the ground not wanting to go to bed. They knew that if I told them a story, they could probably get another 30 minutes out of me. We were in our backyard, “camping out”. They loved to be outside telling ghost stories at night. Their parents, my children, were inside the house, snug and comfortable. We had already had hot dogs and smores. Now it was getting late and time for them to get some rest. They knew I loved story-telling and it was just a matter of time before I gave in.

But which story would I tell? The story of La Llorona? Maybe the story of how I was shot in the face in the great war. Or, I could tell the story of when all the stars fell from the sky. It was decided for me by screams of, “Your tattoo! Tell us how you got your tattoo”! One of my favorites!

So, I began. “Ok, ok. Settle down and I will tell you of how I got my tattoo”. “Are you sure you really want to know how I got my tattoo”? I smiled mischievously around the candlelit room at all the little kids huddled around in their blankets.

“Yes! Yes! Yes”! They all chimed in at once. The little ones knew that he could not refuse their request. This was a family tradition. For their uncle to tell them one last bedtime story after a day filled with playing and visiting family members not seen in months and even years. A perfect way to end a wonderful day.

“Well, it happened so long ago, I can hardly remember it”. He began. “I was about ten or eleven years old at the time, just like most of you, and my boy scout pack was going camping way back in the mountains”…He began.

We had just parked our station wagon off the main road winding through the mountains. It was a little-known hiking trail starting point. As we tumbled out of the car grabbing our backpacks we were eager to begin our adventure. We all paused and looked out among the view. What a beautiful sunny day in the middle of our summer vacation. We planned on being gone for 3 wonderful, action-packed days. We were expected to challenge ourselves and survive only on what we could carry in with us, find in the wild and not be afraid to try some of nature’s food.

This was a big deal. It would be our first camp out. We have been training and preparing for this all year. We were stoked and eager to let loose out in the woods and test our survival skills. Our fearless Scout leader, Mr. Grizzell, was a great guy. He knew so much about the woods. He used to be a park ranger. His son, Ben, just had his appendix taken out and was at home with his mom. We were bummed he wasn’t on this trip, but we knew we would not have another chance until next year, so he pressured us to go without him. But he promised he would go on the next trip!

“Listen up”! Mr. Grizzell spoke. “Everyone have your backpacks”? We all indicated in the affirmative. “Then let’s go”! He indicated a faint trail leading off into the woods. A small sign nearby stated simply, “If you pack it in, Pack it out”. We all knew that in order for us to receive our Scout Camping Badge, we were to leave the area better than how we found it. This meant no littering and if we did find any trash, we would need to clean it up.

It was late morning and we had already been driving for three hours through the mountains to get this far. We were already feeling the beginnings of hunger pangs in our small bellies. Lunch was still about a two-hour hike away, after we reached the campsite. Whenever we arrived we would still need to set up camp and prepare lunch before we could snack!

“Can we have a snack now”? Asked Brian. Brian was my best friend. He was a little chubby, very outspoken. And when he had something on his mind, everyone knew it.

“I think we need to wait”. Replied Mr. Grizzell. “We only have so much food. If you just focus on the trail and the natural beauty around us, you won’t be so hungry”.

“The only thing I can focus on is a peanut butter and banana sandwich right now”. Brian quietly responded under his breath. But we all heard it loud and clear. Mr. Grizzell quietly chuckled to himself. We all knew he was just grumbly from hunger, as we all were. But Brian was probably the funniest and most happy-go-lucky guy of the six of us.

Onward we trekked through the woods, trying to spot every bird, lizard and flower. It was an awesome hike. The trees were tall with huge leaves and bushes everywhere. A slight breeze to keep us cool. It was perfect.

Before long, we came to a small clearing. Craig immediately took charge. He was a natural leader. Very charismatic and always had something positive to say. Craig divided up the chores.

Danny was assigned the Scout. He would look around for firewood. Enough wood to last the night. Danny was our class bully. Always picking on someone. But he was our friend and a good person to have around when there was another bully in the area.

Bill John was assigned the coolest job. He was tasked with finding cool stuff. He was probably the smartest of us all and had a keen eye for finding objects that could be used as weapons! Sticks and rocks! He would be finding us stuff for spears and crude wooden knives. We was our weapons expert.

Mr. Grizzell would supervise and give us advice, if we asked. But mostly, he was just there to verify our badge earning. He got out a scout book and began planning our time.

And then there was me, a quiet little guy who helped everyone. As Danny brought the firewood, I stacked it neatly near the fire pit off to the side. As Brian began to get lunch made, I helped set up the campsite and got the campfire ready. When Bill John brought in sticks for weapons, I stripped off the bark and sharpened the ends. I moved rocks and sticks and dug a little fire pit. I also found an area where we could use the restroom and made a straddle trench with our little shovel. I was busy.

Soon enough everyone was back and all the tasks had been completed. Lunch was ready! Peanut butter and banana sandwiches! Our favorite! Ice cold milk to wash it down. It was Bill John’s idea to use up the milk now while it was still cold. Apples and chips rounded out our gourmet meal.

Everyone had a stick, staff or a spear for protection and snakes. We told each other we were ready to fight off a bear. Danny assured us he would teach us how to throw the spears later. As lunch was finishing, Mr. Grizzell began frantically looking through his bags. “Hey, boys”. He got our attention. “Did anyone bring the marshmallows and chocolate bag”? He asked. We all looked at each other and we shook our heads “No”. “Well, I want everyone to check your bags again, real quick, just to make sure”. After looking, we confirmed our suspicions-Not a marshmallow anywhere.

Mr. Grizzell knew that the first night camping set the tone for the whole trip. He planned on us having smores after dinner and some scary stories. It was a perfect plan. He thought for a moment, looked us over quietly and made a command decision. “Okay, Boys. I’ll tell you what. I got a plan”. We all huddled together closer. “While everyone is cleaning up lunch and getting your tents ready, I will run back to the car and get our smore’s supplies. Then I will be back here in a jiffy before the sun goes down”. He looked at each of us in turn. “I’ll be about an hour, if I hurry”. We all knew that Mr. Grizzell, our beloved Scout Leader, had been a park ranger and a marathon runner. He was in great shape, so it should be easy for him.

“Okay, Mr. Grizzell”. Chimed in Craig. “We have plenty to do until you get back. And we’ll stay together”.

“Fine. Be careful and I’ll be right back. No exploring until I get back. Got it”? He asked. He knew he could trust us. We hardly ever argued and fought amongst ourselves.

“Got it”! We all echoed in unison. And with that he was gone. Just enough time for him to grab his hat and a walking stick before setting off in search of the treasure we had left behind.

As soon as Mr. Grizzell was gone, Danny exclaimed, “There goes The Grizzly”! We all chuckled. The Grizzly was our secret nickname for Ben’s dad. We joked fondly of it. We all had nicknames. But we only used them when no one else was around. It was an unwritten and unspoken rule. We didn’t want anyone else outside of our group teasing us and making fun of our nerdly tendencies. The Grizzly’s son, Ben, we called Little Bear. Bill John’s mother was always talking about their Native American heritage, so we called him Scout. Danny was Wolverine, because he was always ready to fight. Brian was Ogre, but in a kind of funny way. Craig we called Flash. After Flash Gordon, natural born leader and hero. And me, well, they all called me Wolf Cub. Because I was usually very quiet and didn’t mind being on my own.

We spent the next hour or so prepping our campsite. We cleaned up our trash, set up our tents, made a great fire pit and set up a hand washing point. The Grizzly still had not returned yet. So, Craig took charge and we explored our perimeter. We made sure we stayed close to camp and we all stuck together. Not because we were afraid of bears or mountain lions or anything. Another hour went by and still no Grizzly. We found ourselves back at the campsite sitting around. The sun was going down and Danny was showing us the finer art of spear throwing. Soon we were all throwing our weapons at our perceived dangerous monster aliens surrounding us. We were winning.

We had thrown all our sticks, rocks, knives and boomerangs, our ammo was depleted. As we went to restock our ammo supplies, Brian caused us to realize how late it was.

“I’m hungry”. He simply stated.

“The Grizzly should be back any minute now”. Craig responded. Looking around, we did not believe him. It was too quiet.

“Brian and I made some beef stew”. I rejoiced. “Straight from the can and into the pan”! I laughed heartily. We all got out our eating utensils and ate in stony silence. I was quite dark now. All of us occasionally glancing down the trail from whence we hoped to catch a glimpse of The Grizzly happily trotting back. We each hoped to be the first to spot him.

After dinner, again we cleaned up. Sitting around the low fire, it wasn’t long before the moon was high and full. Showing it’s brilliance through the foliage of the tree tops. Trying to show we were not worried we decided to tell some scary stories. We were trying to keep our minds off of worrying for Mr. Grizzell. Danny started off with the tale of La Llorona! Better known and the wailing woman in white. Brian continued with his version of The Hook! Bill John told one story of sinister aliens from outer space who were collecting human specimens and replacing them with evil clones! Craig scared us the most with his rendition of The Doll! Afterwards, we all vowed to throw away any of our little brothers and sisters dolls as soon as we got home!

Everyone knew I did not have any scary story to tell, so none was expected from me. And I liked it that way. Glancing at his watch, Craig said, “The Grizzly should have been back by now”.

“Let’s get ready to go and find him”. Bill John added, “If he’s not back by the time we get ready then we’ll decide what to do”. We all straightened up the site and got our rocks and sticks ready for war. It seemed like a great idea to us at the time. Little did we know what was in store for us.

Soon we were ready. Each of us had our canteen full of water, Pocket full of rocks to throw at monsters, a working flashlight and a jacket for the cool evening air. We each had a stick as a spear and walking staff. We were ready for anything. Bill John carried the first aid kit and Danny had the compass. Brian took some apples as snacks.

We set off through the woods, back the way we had come. The full moon was slowly rising over the trees providing illumination to the faint path. The moon seemed to be watching over us. Following the trail at night, by flashlight was nothing like during the day in full sunlight. At night, it was downright creepy. But Scout did a fine job of leading and keeping us on the trail. At night the creatures roamed. Dangerous creatures, or so our minds imagined.

Shortly after beginning our search, we noticed, rather felt, that someone or something was following us. Since Scout was out in front, Wolverine decided to check out our suspicions. He disappeared off the path quietly and hid behind a tree. Flash Gordon’s plan was too continue for two minutes then come back and see what Wolverine had found. After the two minutes had gone by, we turned around and silently made our way back towards Wolverine.

“Run! Run”! Came Wolverine’s frantic screams. We did not hesitate to ask why. We turned and ran! As he came running up out of the shadows, the wild look in his frightened eyes told us everything we needed to know in that moment. We all fled down the dark path, flashlights bobbing in the shadows over the dark woods.

Scout was out in front and running hard. Then came Flash, me and Ogre. Wolverine quickly caught up to Ogre and passed him in the glow of the bouncing lights. We were putting distance between us and whatever was out in the darkness. Scout called out, “This way! The path is this way”! We all followed him in the darkness.

Flash Gordon, looking over his shoulder at Wolverine as he ran, yelled, “What is it? What’s chasing us, Wolverine”? We all waited for the answer.

“A bear, I think”! Wolverine spit out. “I think it’s a bear! A big one”!

“Keep running”, Yelled Craig.

It was gaining fast. We could hear it crashing through the woods, not far behind us. We all stopped suddenly as we came upon Scout, standing rock still and staring upon the ground. His flashlight beam slowly began sweeping the ground.

“What is it? Asked Flash. “Why’s you stop? We need to get moving”! We all quickly added our lights to show the area. In the eerie illumination we could make out a huge torn up piece of meat. Blood was everywhere. Something, some animal had been torn up and eaten right here!

“Oh my gosh”! Screamed Ogre. “It’s The Grizzly”! The scene came into sharp focus and we could make out the torn up clothing, the shredded human body, torn apart. Pieces everywhere. This had been our Scout Leader, Mr. Grizzell! The seriousness of our situation hit us hard, right in the stomach!

“We got to go”! Screamed Flash Gordon. Run for the car”!

We ran. The bear or whatever it was ran, it was right behind us. We heard Ogre yell, “Wait up”! Don’t leave me”! One of the first rules in scouting is to never go anywhere alone. Always have your battle buddy with you. We all knew this. We all stopped running and turned to wait for Ogre to catch up to us. Suddenly, out of the darkness, something huge and dark tackled Ogre and they rolled to the ground into the bushes. Ogre dropped his flashlight as they rolled. His screams were piercing in the dead silence of the night! He was screaming over and over. Our flashlights playing over the dark forest, blocked by the many branches and leaves. Looking for any sign of our friend. Nothing but the cries of a young boy being eaten and mauled. We could hear the sound of clothing ripping and meat rendering! Bones breaking and the screaming stopped. His cries faded away into the night.

“Go! Go! Go”! Yelled Flash Gordon. We ran!

I couldn’t bring myself to believe any of this. I must be dreaming. My head felt woozy, I felt as if I would faint. We ran through the woods, losing the trail almost immediately in our haste to create distance. We soon came to an open pasture. In our panic, we must have made a wrong turn somewhere, easy to do in this chaotic darkness. There was a small cabin in the middle of the overgrown field. High grasses and small bushes dotted the landscape in the full moon’s light. The cabin had a small light on the outside hanging on the wall. It was about a two hundred yard run to the safety of the cabin in the middle of this evil forest.

“Run for it”! Screamed Scout. “It’s coming”! We took off across the clearing. Now we were four.

Scout took off, out in front. We had forgotten all about our woodcraft safety and running in the darkness where any hole in the ground could mean a broken ankle. I was second, then came Flash Gordon. Wolverine was behind us all a few yards and running hard. The monster came crashing through the woods and was upon Wolverine so fast, he never had a chance. We never stopped running. His screams for help could be heard getting further and further away. We ran for the light without any other thought. Focus on the light! Get to the light! The light was our salvation, our beacon of safety in this mad, mad world.

Glancing over our shoulders as we ran, we noticed we had covered over half way to the cabin. Now we were in the hundred-yard dash for life! We saw the thing silhouetted against the light of the moon. It was big. It was hairy. It was death. Then it was after us again. Running so fast it was going to catch us for sure before we made it to the cabin. We ran for all we were worth. Scout made it to the cabin first and yelled for help as he opened the cabin door. I could barely make out a sparsely furnished hunter’s cabin, lit by a small lantern hanging on the inside. The little light spilled out the doorway and lit up a small area of the porch and front yard.

I was right behind Scout and not waiting to see if anyone was home we jumped inside and manned the door looking for Flash Gordon. He was a few yards behind us and the monster was a few steps behind him! I immediately calculated the speed of both and realized that Flash Gordon would not make it to the cabin before the monster overtook him. Scout was waving Flash in.

“Hurry”! Scout screamed. It wasn’t going to be enough. “It’s right behind you! Hurry! Hurry”! Waving frantically, Scout begged him to run faster. The monster was right behind him!

My mind quickly took this all in and I looked at Flash Gordon. I looked into his eyes and he looked into my soul. He was just steps away and cold realization set in as his foot landed on the porch. The monster reaching for him. His eyes opened in fear as he realized what I was about to do.

“No”!!! He screamed in anguish, as I slammed the door shut. He was two steps away. I was bolting the door. “Help me”!

Scout was screaming at me! And Wham! Flash Gordon ran into the closed door and immediately, something huge ran into Flash Gordon. His screams were muffled by the door and his cries will forever scar my soul. Horrible cries of fear and pain assaulted our ears. Flash Gordon was being eaten alive! The sounds of my scared and crying best friend could be heard through the snarling and growling of the monster as it tore him apart in seconds. Dark red blood slowly oozed under the doorway as we heard a body slide down the door and slump to the floor.

“What did you do”? Screamed Scout. “Why did you close the door”! But he knew, I could tell in his voice he knew it was the only chance we had. Tears were streaming down my face. What had I done? Now the quiet was deafening.

“Oh my God”! I screamed. “What is that thing”? I was looking to Scout for answers. Answers we were too young to understand.

Scout’s eyes were full of fear. “I don’t know! We got to get out of here”! He was frantic.

“Hell no”! I screamed. “It’s out there! It’ll get us”! I whined.

“Are you kidding me”? Scout asked incredulously, “Did you see how big that thing is? He can knock down this whole house”! He countered matter-of-factly.

Looking around the small one room cabin fir the first time, I noticed Scout was right. One rickety looking door. One drafty window. Almost bare cupboards. A flimsy table and one broken chair, but not much dust.

“Oh crap”! I whined. “What are we going to do”? I asked to no one in particular.

Now we could hear it again. The monster, bear, big foot, whatever it was was on the move. We could hear it’s footsteps as it made it’s way across the porch and around the corner of the cabin. Slowly raking it’s claws along the walls as it went. Deliberately teasing us letting us know where it was and where it was going. Toying with us.

Suddenly everything went quiet again. Our backs were pressed against the door, the table in front of us and the dark forboding window opposite the table. It was out there! Looking at us through the window! It could see us! My blood ran cold, my heart pounding in my chest.

Crash! The window exploded inward as the horrible thing came crashing through. Snarling and growling, it was trying to gain it’s footing. Scout screamed! I turned and quickly unbolted the door flinging it open wide. From the corner of my eye, I saw Scout scream at the top of his lungs as he and I charged through the doorway. He was yelling, “Run”! I ran.

I was out the door, over Flash Gordon’s body and across the porch before I realized Scout wasn’t with me. I quickly glanced back and saw him jumping from the porch as the thing dove across the porch and tackled him into the high grass. The screaming began again. I tried to tune out the sounds of my last friend as I ran across the meadow back the way we had come. I will always remember the sounds of my friend until the day I die. I ran as fast as my young legs could take me. As I ran, I did notice that I was running towards a bright, full moon hanging just over the treetops. It’s glow lighting up the land and the woods. The woods will hold a small promise of safety if I could just make it to the woods. Maybe I had enough time to climb and hide in a tree. Does this thing climb trees? I wondered silently.

I was halfway across the meadow when I heard it’s godawful hunting howl. “Owwww”! Owwww”! It was after me now. And running fast. If I could just make it to a tree, maybe I would be safe, I prayed. I begged. I was a few yards from the tree line thinking I might make it. I could feel the monster behind me and knew I would not. I dared not look, I did not want to see death. The sounds of it running were eerily quiet, just the crunch of it’s feet over the tall, soft grasses let me know how close it was. It’s breathing could scarcely be heard. But there was the stench of blood and death. It was overwhelming.

Suddenly, without warning, a shadow rose up in front of me at the treeline. An ambush! I quickly thought. I was doomed. Swoosh! Something whistled past my ear. In the dark I couldn’t make it out. Swoosh! Another. I heard a thud, the sound of meat being stabbed with a knife. Then I was tackled from behind! I found myself engulfed in it’s monstrous embrace. The foul creature smelled of death. It’s grip was strong as iron. I felt it’s razor sharp teeth dig deep into my forearm as it dragged me to the ground. I was screaming. Panic seized me. Nothing made sense anymore. As we fell to the ground entwined, his weight knocking the breath from my lungs. I was helpless. I remember noticing that the monster was huge, hairy and smelly. I grew faint, my head dizzy and my vision slowly shrank to darkness. I knew I was dying. I faintly heard another swoosh and thunk, as of meat being struck by a fast moving projectile. I mercifully blacked out.

When I came to some time later, the first thing I noticed was the natural quiet of the night. I full moon was bright and high in the sky, ready to make it’s decent. Things were back to normal. A nice cozy fire was going a few feet away. I was somewhere in the forest now, laying on a blanket, with a large rock for a pillow. A strong and pungent smell of herbs was lingering in the air. I noticed the stars were clear and bright up in the night’s beautiful sky, sparkling in the heavens.

And then it all came rushing back to me in an instant. Our camping trip. Finding Mr. Grizzell. The crazy chase through the woods. Losing my best friends one at a time. Cowardly locking the door of the cabin to safe myself. A monster was eating my friends. Running headlong towards a shadow. Being tackled by the monster and I remember vividly, the pain of it biting my arm. I frantically looked down to my arm and noticed a bandage wrapped around my right forearm. Wrapped with a funny dressing and a smelly one at that. The odor of herbs, roots, and plants was coming from my bandages.

I quickly looked around for the demon that had eaten my friends. All was quiet. No sign of the creature. I felt safe, but I did not feel like I was alone. Someone had helped me. Where was he? A figure emerged from the darkness. I could tell it was a man from the light of the fire. He was carrying some wood and had a small leather pouch slung across his chest.

“Well, glad to see you are awake. How do you feel, little warrior”? The tall stranger asked. As he made his way closer, to the fire, I could make out his features. He was obviously an Indian. A real native American Indian. Dressed just like I saw them in the movies. Long, straight black hair with a feather intertwined in it. Square jawed, sharp nose and dark brown eyes. Copper skin. Indian alright.

I took a moment to let everything sink in and I focused o his appearance. He didn’t look scary. I was not afraid. He wore a beaded choker necklace with red, white and blue beads tightly held against his throat. His torso was muscular and bare, sweat gleaming in the firelight. A leather armband encircled his right bicep. He wore some type of leather breeches with leather fringes at the outside seams and shin high moccasins completed his authentic look.

He moved with sound. As he reached me and the fire, he crouched down placing the wood next to us and he sat on a large rock next to me. He continued, “You okay? What’s your name little warrior”? He asked, looking me in the eye. He spoke perfect English, not what I was expecting. Without waiting for my reply, he continued, “I am Dark Wolf Running of the Dark Woods People. You must be thirsty by now and I am sure you are hungry”.

I realized he was right. He offered me a small leather water skin. I sat up and drank the cool, delicious water. Best water ever. I drank quickly, careful not to spill any of this precious liquid. My head became dizzy for a moment, my stomach growled loudly.

“You’re safe now”. He began, not waiting for my answers, he continued, “The Umbra is dead. I am very sorry for your friends. We will bury them in the morning, after you sleep. But first, we have business to do”. With that, he took off his leather pouch and gently placed it on the ground in front of himself. He took out some small items, a blue rock, a very sharp-looking needle, a small ball of waxy stuff wrapped in a green leaf, a small piece of bloody meat, also wrapped in a green leaf, a small wooden bowl and a large black obsidian arrowhead.

Dark Wolf could see that I was looking at him with the questioning eyes of a twelve year old boy, frightened, in shock from losing almost all his friends in one horrible night. He explained, “You were attacked and bitten by the Umbra. A dark creature of bad magic”.

Looking at my arm and bandages, I could still feel the painful bite as the teeth sank into my flesh. I nodded at the obvious truth.

“That poison now runs in your veins. I stopped the poison from going to your heart with strong medicine. But it will not hold for long”. He was pointing to my arm and then to my heart. “I must hurry and make big magic or you will become one of them. The monster of the deep, dark mountains”. He began by using the arrowhead to scrape the black rock, making a fine powder into the little bowl. I watched him, mesmerized. Still feeling light-headed. He took a stick and stabbed the wax ball and held it over the fire. As the ball melted, he let the drops fall into the bowl with the blue powder. Mixing the two he chanted a rhythmic tune under his breath. It was hypnotic.

Next, he took off my bandages and bade me sit by the fire. He dipped the yucca needle into the colored liquid and began poking the color into my skin, in the middle of my bicep. He began his story. “The Umbra has many names. Ancients called him the One Who Walks Among Men. Scientists call him a lycanthrope. People of the dark ages called them shape shifters. And some, who are less informed call them werewolves”.

“Werewolves”! I exclaimed in complete surprise. I had been thinking rabies from a bear or something like that, something easier to imagine. He must be crazy, I thought. There’s no such thing as a werewolf.

“I am showing you this big medicine in case you ever have need of it”. He admonished. “Pay attention”. He continued, “We must create a protective band around your arm. This will trap the bad medicine and keep it from going to your heart, This blue rock is Mother of Light. It is also called Azurite, by your people”. Placing it on the ground, he opened up the green leaf and he spoke as he chopped up the small piece of meat and explained solemnly, “This is a small piece of the Umbra’s heart, we will mix it with the big medicine of Mother of Light. We will use this liquid wax of elk sinew to bind them together. “I will use the power of the great American Bald Eagle to mix the powers together”. He took the feather out of his hair and began to mix the stuff together. It took on a dark, mystical shade of deep blue. He looked me in the eye before continuing, “This will hurt, but not as much as loosing your friends or knowing what will become of you without this band. This is the needle from the great Yucca plant. This I will use to create your magic”.

I nodded my understanding. He dipped the needle into the mixture and began the tedious work of tattooing a magical tribal band to my right arm. The whole time I was sitting, I was thinking of my friends. Friends who were killed without reason by a horrible monster. Scout, Flash Gordon, Ogre, Wolverine and The Grizzly. I never felt the needle. It took forever, the moon was almost down now and the sky was beginning to lighten. Dark Wolf continued his story and he tatted the band around my arm.

“I have been hunting this Umbra for many moons now. I am far from my people. First, I was a part of a small hunting party. This Umbra had attacked our village and killed some of our children. So the Elders sent us to track down and find it. To kill it and bring an end to it’s evil. But it was a mighty hunter. It managed to kill my team, one by one we fell. Until only I was left”. He looked away towards the night. I noticed a tear form at the corner of his eye as he remembered his lost friends. Brothers. “I tracked it here to this forest across the mountains. I came across your trail and tried to get in front of it, but I was too late. I followed it as it killed your friends, I was too late to help them. You came running towards me, bringing my sworn enemy within my grasp. I will be forever in your debt. My bow is strong, of the mighty oak. The string made of the sinew of the majestic elk. My arrows are tipped with the obsidian from the hot mountain. And tonight, the Great Spirit gave my arm the strength of the bear. He allowed me to see with the eye of the eagle and allowed my ain to strike true. Into the heart of the beast my arrow sank. But not before he fell upon you and sank his poisonous teeth into your flesh. Now I have placed this big medicine around your arm, it will help keep you from becoming a monster”. He leaned back and smiled at his work. The fire flickering over our faces and our bodies. He continued, “My people will need a warrior one day. A warrior who will fight with his heart and soul”.

Looking him in the eye, I reflected on my life. I had never been much of a fighter, I never jumped up and volunteered for anything in my life. My friends, who had these traits were all gone now. I looked at my new tattoo, aglow in the firelight. I gazed up at the moon as it began to fade out and I stated, “I will forever be a warrior for the Dark Woods People”. I was filled with a new sense of purpose, of pride and a warrior’s spirit. My eyes were open now and I would be ready for the real world.

We gathered our things and went into the forest to find the bodies of my friends and we buried them deep in the heart of the woods. In the only clearing we could find, out behind the small, simple cabin. Five new graves were lain. Dark Wolf explained that nothing is perfect and nothing lasts forever. One day these graves and the cabin will erode with time. I knew what he said was the truth and one day the pain I feel would subside.

He explained that the world isn’t fair. When the moon is full, I must not let my spirit break and fall to the evil coursing through my blood. My faithful friend, Ben, has always been at my side helping me cope and get through the most dangerous times. He is the only one who believed my story when I came out of the woods and made my way to the ranger station seeking help. The local sheriff said that we had been attacked by a wolf pack and our story soon faded from memory.

Over the next few weeks, Ben and I, helped Dark Wolf turn the cabin into a safe haven. We added chains and reinforced the walls, doors and windows. Ben would bring me back to this cabin during the full moons and he would sleep inside until sunrise, allowing me to hunt the deer and elk while the full moon shone brightly over the dark woods. He kept my secret all these years.

Today, my arm hurts as it does with every full moon. But some nights, like tonight, I hunger for the taste of fresh blood. I yearn for the fresh kill, to drink my fill of the warm, sweet life-giving nectar. Tonight is the worst I have felt in years. I can your hearts beating in your chest as your blood calls out to me…