

Urban fantasy noir
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Railwalker: Tales of the Urban Shaman:

WOLF

by

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1. Bay City

“Well, well, what have we here?” a voice called out.

Suzi turned towards the voice, but kept walking. A big man in dirty jeans and a worn woolen pea coat was crossing the darkened street towards her. Just my luck, she thought, to run into some thuggish would-be rapist who cribbs his lines from old DV shows. She'd been getting jumpy since she started for home tonight, kept thinking she saw things moving in the shadows, thought someone was following her, but she'd dismissed that as her imagination. It hadn't been this guy, she was sure, he had been there ahead of her. But he was no imaginary stalker, he was all too real. Another figure oozed from the shadows ahead, moving diagonally across the way to intersect her path. Make that two thuggish rapists, she thought, and her right hand in her pocket gripped the little knife Sal had given her, as her left hand strayed to her borrowed Marilyn pin, stroking it and invoking the goddess' protection. What the hell was I thinking, she wondered, going out alone at night when there's a killer about, like one of those ditz-brains heroines in the DV horror shows.

She slowed, as her path approached the second man. He was smaller, slighter, though still larger than Suzi, and he looked familiar. When he passed beneath the streetlight, she knew him - Carter Evans, one of those men of all work who hung out at the Bar of Gold. There was an alley to her right. She glanced down it quickly, thought she saw movement; if there was a third man there, that would be no escape route.

“Out after curfew,” said the first man, coming up behind her. “No telling what could happen on these streets to a girl out after curfew.”

Suzi took a step right, towards the street, trying to avoid getting trapped between them against the buildings, or the third man -- if there was a third man -- in the alley.

“Yeah, no telling,” Evans smiled.

“Fuck you, Carter Evans, get out of my way. I’m going home, ain’t I?”

“Now, that’s not a very grateful tone to take with your generous neighbors...”

“And potential clients!” added the first.

“And potential clients,” Evans acknowledged, “who donate their time off to keep the streets safe.” He reached out to catch her left arm. She glared at him, keeping his attention on her face as her right hand, hidden from his view by her body, drew the knife from her pocket.

“I’m off duty,” she growled through her teeth. “You want a fuck, you come see me during business hours. You mess with me in the street, the Guild will blacklist you, no harlot in this city will take your money ever again.”

“Is there a problem here?” came a third voice. They all looked to see a tall blond man in a long black coat who had silently appeared just a couple of yards away.

“Just a hooker out after curfew,” the big man said. “Not your business, pal. Move along, unless you want to be cited for breaking curfew yourself.”

The man put his hands on his hips, which pulled his black coat aside to reveal a Guardsman’s badge pinned to his tunic. Plain clothes, Suzi thought, must mean he’s a Tracker, or an officer.

“The Council hasn’t announced any curfew,” he said, his voice tight and angry. “And if it does, it’ll be enforced by the Guard, not some committee of drunken vigilantes.”

Suzi shook off Evans’ hand, stalked past the Guardsman, muttering “thanks” as she passed – or almost passed. The Guardsman’s hand shot out and caught her by the elbow, held her fast in an iron grip. She looked up, to see a deep anger burning in his eyes. Much as Suzi would have liked to see Evans and his pal get taken down a notch or two by a real Guardsman, this man’s anger frightened her. Suddenly she wanted to be very far away before it was turned on the two

Safety Committee men.

“They’re right that the streets aren’t safe.” he said quietly. “You’d best be getting home with no stops along the way. Take a friend along next time you have to go out at night.”

She nodded, he released her. She hurried off down the street.

Rainer Auden, City Guard Tracker, looked at the two men before him as he listened to the sound of the girl’s boot heels receding down the street behind him. These two were drunken bullies, probably would have beaten and raped the girl; though he couldn’t prove this, he knew it in his bones. Auden had no fear of these men. He didn’t even need his sidearm, he could kill them both with his bare hands as easily as they could kill a bottle of beer. And he longed to do so. He desperately wanted to lay into them, beat them bloody, feel their flesh split and their bones crack, hear their screams of pain as he vented his broiling rage on their worthless carcasses. He was practically vibrating with the desire for it. He took a long, slow deep breath. Much as they might deserve such punishment, he was still a Guardsman, and these low-lives were not the source of his anger. He toyed with the idea of trying to provoke them, give himself a good excuse for the savage beating he longed to give them, but he could see from their submissive postures that they were cowards, these two, they would not be provoked to attack a guardsman, however abusive his language. He gave it up as a bad idea.

“Get the fuck off my streets,” he growled.

The two scurried away, leaving Auden alone in the dark avenue. He stood, silent, seething, until the sound of their footsteps was gone. He was technically off duty, knew he should go home, get some sleep, but his empty apartment held no attraction, and though he was tired, he was not sleepy at all. The killer was still at large in his city, one who had killed not only innocent citizens, but a member of the Guard as well. It was embarrassing and infuriating, as if the killer they called the Beast were mocking them, rubbing their noses in the fact that they couldn’t even protect one of their own from his predations, let alone the people of the city. Though by all logic there was not a damned thing he could do to further the hunt right now, especially not in his fatigued condition, his anger kept him wandering the streets.

Finally, Auden stirred, and turned his steps toward his home. There was a bottle in the

cabinet in his living room which, if it wouldn't help him sleep, at least would help him reach unconsciousness. It was the only sane option left to him.

He had taken only a few steps when he heard the scream. Behind him. The hooker, he thought, as he spun and raced in the direction she'd gone. His exhausted brain was spinning, hoping for the harlot's sake that the scream was in reaction to another vigilante, or a random mugging, but hoping too, deep in his own heart that the impossible was about to happen, and he would come upon the Beast at his grisly work, perhaps even quickly enough to save the woman. At the next intersection, he stopped, looked both ways. His subliminal memory of the sound of the woman's footsteps said they'd gotten suddenly fainter, which suggested she'd turned here. He saw nothing but empty streets, a few parked runabouts... stilled his breathing, listening hard. A soft sound, to his left, from the shadows under the tram overpass. Gun drawn, he ran.

There, under the tramway, a figure bent over someone on the ground. If it was the Beast, Auden thought as he skidded to a halt in the firing position, it was probably too late for the woman.

"Freeze!" he shouted, "City Guard!"

The figure straightened up and shifted back slightly, which moved its upper body into the light of the streetlamp. It was a big man, not bulky, but built like an athlete. Nondescript workman's clothing. Bald, with some sort of mark on his forehead. Aside from the mark, the face wasn't overtly grotesque or disfigured, but something about it just looked wrong, unnatural. Auden couldn't say why or what, perhaps the man was a mutant, but at the sight of that face, he was mortally certain this was indeed the Beast.

"On your knees, hands behind your head!" the Tracker yelled. He started to move towards the man again, more slowly now, keeping him covered. "Do it NOW!"

The Beast just smiled. Started to turn away from Auden, reaching down toward the body on the pavement. Auden fired. His first two shots only staggered the man, but the third one put him down.

Could it possibly have been that easy? Had he just killed the Beast? The Tracker raced to within a couple of yards, and then slowed, keeping his weapon focused on the fallen man. No

movement. There was blood, lots of blood, but he couldn't tell what might be the Beast's, and what was the victim's. He glanced at the other body laying in the shadow of the tramway. It was the woman he had rescued from the vigilantes only moments ago, a certainty she was dead. Auden cursed aloud. And the gun was ripped from his hands, and sent spinning into the night.

Rainer Auden was shocked. He knew he had scored three good hits on this monster, but here he was, up and grinning, disarming the Guardsman, moving faster than any living being ought to be able to move, despite having been shot. Body armor, maybe, or some sort of stimulant drugs? Auden's training took over, and even as he heard the metallic clatter of his gun hitting the pavement many yards away, his exhausted body had assumed his fighting stance. Before the echoes of that sound had faded, he was moving forward, feinting with his left, and then delivering a right front kick. The Beast simply danced back, with that unnatural speed, and laughed. Then it turned and fled.

Auden fumbled out his communicator, and hit "send".

"10-54, 187, it's our multiple perp, tracker in pursuit!"

The communicator would automatically identify Auden to Central, and transmit his coordinates on the City Grid as long as he left it on. Auden snatched out his ankle piece and followed the Beast. Adrenaline was now all that allowed the Tracker to keep going. He knew it was madness, chasing this demon in his condition; he knew it was irresponsible to let the harlot's body lie under the tramway, his unattended service weapon yards away where anyone might pick it up. But he was in sight of the killer; the fucker was right there ahead of him, now racing along the line of the elevated tramway, now dodging into a side street, just a little too far for an accurate shot with the .22; it would need a head shot if the fucker was armored, there was a stitch in Auden's side, and he almost stumbled.

Legs pumping, heart pounding, breath now like a steam engine, Auden kept on, never gaining on the man, but not losing ground either. He wondered, with the speed the Beast had shown just moments ago, why the killer hadn't left the Tracker far behind already. As if the creature had read his mind, as if he had been playing with Auden, just waiting for this realization to sink in, it suddenly redoubled its speed and vanished down the next street like a bird soaring

into the sky to leave a lumbering earthbound predator far behind. Auden stumbled again, and fell hard to the street. On hands and knees. Sucking air. Copper in his mouth. Pulse hammering in his ears. Grit and gravel embedded in his left palm, and the heel of his right hand, which still clasped the .22.

Auden fell on his side and rolled over onto his back. Stared up at the column of night sky visible between the buildings, the dark clouds reflecting a faint orange glow from the city's lights.

Rainer Auden sat up, his entire body protesting. There was no part of him that didn't hurt. In the distance, he could hear a couple of voices, probably approaching Guardsmen summoned by his signal. He knew what they would find under the Tram line. Above or beside the body of the woman, would be a design painted in her blood, a mark all the Guard were far too familiar with. Three vertical slashes, an oval shape below them, like the footprint of a clawed animal. The mark that had accompanied every killing so far. The mark he had seen on the perpetrator's forehead. The mark of the Beast.

2. Wolf

Out in the Zones, we pretty much are the law - what's left of us. Kind of ironic, for an Order that was founded primarily to deal with the psychic and occult chaos that followed on the heels of the Great Crash. When the Police and the Guard retreated to the cities, we did what we had always done, riding herd on the chaos, only now more often than not, the chaos was mundane and physical and human in origin. Not that I remember any of that personally. That all happened several generations ago, it's Railwalker Lore now.

Yeah, I wear the tats of a Railwalker.

Got the long coat with the crow patch on it, too, but I don't wear it much anymore. The eye tat pretty much says it all. There's no laws against copying the tats and impersonating a Railwalker, but it never seems to happen. Funny how that works. Or maybe not funny.

Call me Wolf. I've had other names before, and will probably get tagged with something else down the road, but like the Old Texts say, that river will have its own bridge. Right now, Wolf is what most people call me, so that should do for our purposes. We all take new names when we enter the Order anyway, and lots of us pick up other tags along the way. I'm named for my Animal Ally; Morgan's named for the crow goddess who was the mother of Brick, the first Railwalker. Rok... I never knew if that was one of those building material names many of the

Railwalkers took, like Stone or Mortar, or whether he meant to name himself for the legendary bird. Rok likes to talk, but not about himself. The three of us have been partners for years, walking the rails as a team, but all I know about Rok's past I learned from Morgan, who doesn't know all that much either. We don't pry; at least I don't. Maybe in bed at night Morgie tries to wheedle tales of Rok's past out of him, but I don't think so. I think she looks at it the same way I do. The man I know today is one I would trust with my life. I don't need to know where – or who – he was before.

Wireless signals get pretty spotty in the Zones, but the closer to the cities, generally, the better luck you have with them. It happened the other day that we were in Apache Run, a little Zone town less than a hundred miles from Bay City, so we had a good connection when Morgan picked up a couple of messages

One was from the Elder Raven of the Railwalker Order, informing us of services being held for Wiley and the Boar, two of our order brothers who had been killed last month. We didn't get many details, but there were supposedly no survivors on either side of what was being called the Hick Junction Massacre. It seemed strange enough that a ratpack of ravagers could stand up against combined forces from the City guards of Santa Brita and Monteague, along with a couple of Railwalkers. It was even stranger that there would be no survivors on either side. I was betting at least one ravager, or maybe a turncoat guard, had hightailed it into the Zones.

The other message was an inquiry from the Boss of Bay City, Micah Roth, asking our whereabouts. Morgan signaled back our twenty and Roth's comm guy said to meet an ornithopter at Maricopa Flats as soon as we could get there. City bosses think they own everybody's time, like any obligations we had in the Zones wouldn't mean anything. Fortunately, we were done with the urgent business in Apache Run, so we didn't have to get into that.

Of course, the locals weren't going to be happy about us leaving just then. They were expecting us to stay for Summersend Night. We'd just put paid to a gang of would-be ravagers, local tough boys who thought they could make a career of pillaging and looting. There were six of them to begin with, but a couple of local ranchers had accounted for two of them when they

made an unsuccessful raid on a co-op ranch, so by the time we arrived, they were four. The Consensus Council of Apache Run had asked our help, so we drove out to the canyon where the boys were holed up. And boys they were. Sad, really. We'd have preferred to bring them back for trial, but they thought they were anti-heroes from some DV show, and came out of that canyon with guns a-blazing.

I hope they felt they went out in a blaze of glory, since that seemed to be what they were after. Can't say it really looked that way to me. But then, I've seen violent death a time or two and I've never found it particularly glorious. When it was over, all I could see was a bunch of boys bleeding out into the desert, dead before their time. Depressing. They had been Takers who gave nothing back, so we didn't bury the bodies, but left them for the vultures and coyotes. We did chant the Farewell to the Dead, though, and used the Fallen Adversary version, for whatever that's worth.

Back in town, we performed Ceremony for three who had been killed by the would-be ravagers, and visited the granary to disperse the shade of one who had been killed there. Summersend was just a couple of days away, and the town had been trying hard to get into an appropriately festive mood, with Corn Dollies hung about the streets and wheat wreaths on the doors. The news that the gang had been killed helped, though there was still a melancholy undertone to the air of celebration. They'd built a big old Corn Guy, one of the biggest I'd seen in a while. Most small towns out in the Zones content themselves with a life-sized Guy, stuffing some old clothes with straw and cornstalks, adding a stuffed bag for a head, and tossing it onto a bonfire. Apache Run had built a Corn Guy nearly twelve feet tall, all cornstalks bound together on a bamboo frame.

Ivan Rowley, the Second Chair for the Council, walked up to where we were packing the jeep, getting ready to head for Maricopa Flats. He was staring down the street at the Guy as he spoke.

"Don't seem fair," he said. "We were all looking forward to having you folks do the Blessing of the Harvest for us."

"Communication said it was urgent," I said, "We got a responsibility to City folks, too."

“They got all kinds of Priests and officials in the City to do their Blessings for them.”

“It’s not about Summersend.” I said.

“No it ain’t.” said a woman’s voice. “It’s about killing.” Christine Rollins, First Chair for Apache Run Council, was precise and clipped behind her glasses. “You’ve heard the rumors, same as me,” she said to Rowley. “Killings in the streets of Bay City.”

“Those killed won’t be any more or any less dead after Summersend.” said Rowley.

“But others may die before then.”

“Folks,” I said, raising a hand, “I know City Boss Roth a little, and I don’t believe he’d call a situation urgent if it wasn’t. Truth is, it really doesn’t matter anyway. Our presence has been formally requested, and we’re going. End of story. I’m sorry we won’t be here for Summersend.”

“Hey,” said Rok, leaning out from the other side of the jeep, “Size of that Corn Guy, at least we’ll be able to see the flames all the way to Bay City.” Everyone laughed, or at least chuckled. “We’ll think on you.” Rok said.

We’d been to Maricopa Flats earlier this season, a supply town on the edge of the Zones. There were a handful of stores and warehouses, another handful of dwellings for those who worked the stores and warehouses, a couple of restaurants, a bar, a motel, and not much else. We pulled up to the Zoner’s Rest Hotel, and shut off the jeep. It had been a long ride, and the sun was low in the western sky, lighting up the clouds with a red glow. At the end of the street, we could see the ornithopter sitting on the landing pad, if you want to dignify it with that name - it was really nothing but a clear space where the town ended and the desert started. There was a single guardsman leaning against the ‘thopter’s nose. Rok got out and headed into the hotel to drop the keys to the jeep with Bob Carson, who ran the place. I grabbed my satchel, and headed over to the ‘thopter, Morgan following. As we got near, the guardsman, a fellow of average build with just a suggestion of a growing gut, stood up straight. There was a grim look on his round face, and as we got close, he held up a hand.

“No, no, no.” he said. “Not for hire. Buzz off.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“See the badge, pal?” he jerked a thumb toward the silver shield pinned to his tunic, his other hand resting on his gun. “Bay City Guard. This is an official BC ‘thopter, not for hire to Zone rats. We’re here on Roth’s orders to pick up a Railwalker team. Find yourselves a ride somewhere else.”

Morgan and I looked at each other. She rolled her eyes.

“Can I clock him?” she asked.

“I’d rather you didn’t.” I said, and turned to the guardsman. “Wolf am I, walker of the rails between worlds. Twenty-three blessings, guardsman. We’re the Railwalkers you were sent to meet.” I stuck out my hand.

He looked at us incredulously for a moment, peered at our faces, taking in the tats. His face grew red. “Sorry, Railwalker.” he shook my hand. His was damp, and soft. “Patrol Guardsman Geary. Don’t see Railwalkers around BC much these days. And besides, I was told there were three of you.” His eyes drifted toward the town, and I glanced over to see Rok approaching.

“There are.” I said.

We loaded our satchels and ourselves into the ‘thopter, and Geary fired up the engine. There was a brief shudder as the propellers caught at the air, and the wings shifted into flight position, and then we lifted off, swinging around to head north by northwest. Geary said nothing further, but his grim demeanor suggested Roth hadn’t been kidding about the urgency. I had met Roth a few years back, and as city bosses go, he seemed hard, but fair. I wondered if Roth summoned us because he knew me, or because we’re one of the last full teams.

Used to be a Railwalker team was composed of three partners; in our case, Morgan’s our Prof, she handles networking and communications, whether it’s sending a message to the next town by drum relay or hacking the net in a cyberrig. Rok is our Bear – he’s the martial arts and physical resources man. Me, I’m the shaman, the Brick of the crew, and technically in charge. Of course, we’re all trained in all of those areas, and quite a few of the Railwalkers work alone these days, covering all three bases themselves out of necessity. As a full team, we’re getting to be pretty much an anachronism.

All three of us are in the regulation coats tonight. Yeah, they're a little dusty and wrinkled, what do you want from three Walkers out for weeks in the Zones? Except for Rok's. To look at him in work clothes or fighting leathers, you'd think he was just a big dumb woodchuck who didn't care about how he looks. But tonight, of the three of us, Rok's regulation Crow coat is the one that looks like it just came from the dry cleaners. Damn if I could tell you how he manages that.

It was weird to be headed into a city again, after so much time in the Zones. I hoped we hadn't grown arrogant from being final authorities for so long. In the city, we'd be the Pros from Dover, but not the final word. City Guard would treat us as respected colleagues, but generally kept themselves distant and not a little suspicious.

A Railwalker does not seek to grandify the self. A Railwalker seeks only to get the job done. A Railwalker seeks Soul-Are.

Interlude: Bricks and Crows

Although many, if not most, biographies claim Brick never received much formal schooling, did not attend or graduate from any school or academy, and many passages in the “Book of Brick” and “Arteology” seem to be expressed in an academically naive, if street-wise, voice, it should be noted that while aside from the rendering of certain contemporary slang or street phrases, most of the grammar in these passages is essentially sound, and that in places, simple words are mis-spelled, while more complex words are spelled accurately. This suggests a writer at least moderately well educated adopting an uneducated voice and tone. If we accept that the Red Raven himself penned the “Book” and “Arteology,” we must also accept that he was perhaps better educated than many sources have led us to believe. Some authorities, like Siblene James, argue for what is known as the “Amanuensis Theory”, which holds that some associate - perhaps even one of the First Five of Ravens - performed the actual writing, either recording Brick’s discourse from memory, or from actual dictation on which the Amanuensis consciously or unconsciously acted as a sort of copy-editor.

With regard to Brick’s parentage, we have nothing but three conflicting legends. The first, that he was the son of the beloved Pre-Crash spiritual leader and popular singer, Sariel Mamaji. Another tale relates that he was found floating in a basket in Manhattan’s East River, and yet a

third casts him as the son of the Crow Goddess, Morgana. Since the “baby in a Basket” story has no accompanying detail, the Mamaji story is the only one which can really be examined for any historical veracity. Unfortunately, while much of Mamaji’s life may be well documented, the period in question was one during which she traveled on the road, gigging and preaching her way across the then-united country. She worked with a variety of small bands, and record of this period is severely fragmented. (see Grafton’s “Life with Mamaji”, or Altran’s “MJ - A Biography of Sariel Mamaji”). There is no record of any child other than Christopher Johns, born during Mamaji’s Mexico trip, who grew up to take the reins of her Wheel of Life Church from Mamaji’s death until the time of the Crash. And Johns, however admirable a character in his own right, was clearly not Brick. Nevertheless, we can not rule out the possibility of another child born during Mamaji’s early “wild” period.

There are, of course, many “Brick Tales”, stories of various episodes in Brick’s life, which may take place before, during, or after the Crash. In the years following Brick’s death (or disappearance - see below), the Brick Tale entered the arena of popular culture, spawning many short stories, DVs, and comanga. The vast majority of these tales may be discarded as the compositions of imaginative authors, artists, and screenwriters. Within the Railwalker Order itself, orthodox dogma was clear on this point; these tales, even those of the Canonical Raven Texts, as well as the stories of Brick’s miraculous birth, were to be regarded as metaphor, and not literally true. The popularization of Soul-Are, and the rise of the Soul-Areism, has muddied the waters on this point considerably, since fundamentalist Soul-Areism tended to treat all of the Canonical Texts as received Truth, and literal history. But despite the Order’s emphasis on the metaphorical nature of the tales, most authorities today acknowledge the stories written by the First Ravens to be largely legitimate (although some believe that even these tales had historical incidents as their starting point only, and were overlaid with motifs from earlier mythologies).

As might be expected, the best documented years of Brick’s life are his last. As the Aftermath of the Great Crash settled down, and the Order of the Railwalkers became something like an established institution, finding their niche in the newly evolving society of mid-period Merica, the gradual rebirth of record-keeping and media technology provided for materials which

would allow scholars to build a larger and more detailed picture (for an extended treatment of this period, see M. E. Grant's "Red Raven Twilight").

Yet, after a few brief years of reliable records, the very last years of Brick's life are again poorly documented. After stepping down as Elder Raven, and seeing the installation of his foster-son Ryon in his place, Brick seems to have gone walkabout in the Zones. What he did there in those last three years is a complete mystery. It is known that he surfaced at the Nestudio in New Frisco once during the second year, and again toward the end of the third year, when he informed Elder Raven Ryon that he would not be returning again. One month after Brick left for the Zones that last time, Ryon called for the Chant for the Dead to be sung for Brick.

For more detailed treatments of Brick's life, and critical analysis of the historicity of various tales, see the bibliography.

- from the Preface to the Second Edition
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