

The Orphan Shreds  
By Wirewolf

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## The Orphan Shreds

I'd heard about the interview, of course. The media station broadcasting it had been pushing it hard for a week. I wasn't sure I wanted to see it. There was this cold dread sitting in the pit of my stomach telling me it would be the start of more riots. That was the last thing we needed.

I was still undecided when the show started, so I scrolled through channel after channel looking for something else to hold my attention. I wallowed my way through countless splatters of color and noise, searching for something with any meaning. Pointless as always, but that's never stopped me from looking.

Then, there it was. Ten minutes into the show, the host was still setting the scene with hints about how The Orphan Shreds started as a band. I noticed that MSB had chosen Melenda McIntyre as the interviewer. They had kept the name of their primetime news anchor out of the commercials, trying to build suspense and interest in the show. But I had suspected she would be the one chosen. She's done some of the toughest interviews I've ever seen and always kept her cool.

His name dropped from her dark lips and I found myself holding my breath. He was coming onto the set now. For real. He hadn't snubbed her after all. Morphs at work had taken bets on it.

I unconsciously closed my eyes as the camera panned left to where he would appear. I was worried about how he would be dressed. I was worried that he might not \*be\* dressed. The studio audience gave it's approval with polite applause. A hundred or so humans, I assumed, who seldom listened to genemorph music and didn't particularly want to see him humiliated in public. Must have been a long search to find so many.

As the lukewarm clapping died down, I knew I'd have to look. Would he flaunt his position by showing up in only his fur? Would he wear one of those Orphan Shreds concert shirts that read 'monkeyslayer' on the front? Or would he do the unthinkable and cover his body in one of those tailor-made genemorph-specific three-piece suits his fame could now pay for?

I peeked. Then I blinked. Then I could breathe easier. And wonder what he was planning.

Tobhus "Leeth" Mogimbal was standing there, waving graciously to the audience, clothed in ordinary street legal shorts and a vest. He almost looked like any typical African spotted hyena you might see out for a stroll. I squinted at the screen, looking at his ears. You could make out the light coming through the many piercing holes he'd left empty. He had three rings along the edge of each ear, one silver, one gold, and one platinum. The miniature human skulls dangling on chains from the tip of his ears, made famous at the first concert, were gone. So were the copper 'bullets' that normally filled the half dozen other holes in the cups of his ears.

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Tobhus shook his host's hand briefly, then took the seat across from her, his stub of a tail easily fitting through the open back of the 'morph-friendly' chair they'd provided for him. Melenda opened with simple greetings and some mild praise to her unique guest. Then she gave her trademark signal for starting the interview. "Let's get to it, shall we?" Tobhus merely nodded.

"Before we begin, I'd like to know how you prefer to be addressed. Do you usually go by your name or your band's moniker for you?"

The first words he spoke were as calm and non-threatening as a 220 pound genemorphic hyena can make them, but the man's underlying power came through his voice anyway. He purr/growled in a normal tone of voice, "My given name is Tobhus. Leeth is a stage name I took to promote our band."

Melenda nodded and asked mildly, "And Leeth is short for..."

"Lethal." I cringed a bit when Melenda brought that out so soon, but she seemed to be going somewhere with it, and in a hurry."

"Who's idea was it? Yours?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Her dark eyes sparkled in the studio lights and I suddenly feared she was going to become one of those sleazy mudslinging, ratings grabbing fools who disregarded consequence.

"Because I am."

"According to the genemorph-based media polls that track your music?"

I blinked. What the hell? Why did she sound like this was all rehearsed?

There was more growl in Tobhus' voice as he answered, "According to the design specs of the United African Army's genetics program which spawned me."

Melenda turned to the camera, which suddenly tightened to show only her. She addressed the camera and her audience in professional tones. "A man born to be a soldier, raised to be a revolutionary, and who taught himself to live as a feared minority in a human's world. When we come back, we'll explore the world this man has been forced to live in."

MSB cut to a commercial and I wondered where this thing was going. Would it be a serious, professional interview of an influential celebrity who had 'something to say?' Or was it scripted drivel intended to sooth worried humans about the morphs living among them?

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The break was only 30 seconds, and the camera angle had both Tobhus and Melenda in the shot when they returned. They sat at ease, neither seeming to be concerned about the potential for disaster.

“I’m sitting next to Tobhus Mogimbal, the lead singer of one of the most popular genemorphic bands to get media play,” she said to the camera. Then she turned and addressed her guest again. “New York must seem a long way from the seaside town of Port Elizabeth, South Africa.”

Tobhus nodded. “A long way, yes, but not so different.”

“Really? The huge metropolis of New York has similarities to a provincial town like Port Elizabeth?” Melenda sounded interested, not skeptical. I hoped that was a good sign.

Tobhus shrugged slowly. “I’ve found attitudes toward genemorphs to be nearly universal.”

Melenda wasn’t satisfied and pressed for more. “Good or bad?”

“Both,” he conceded. “Almost the same as any minority.”

She let it go at that and switched to his personal history.

“You grew up in very poor conditions; substandard government housing, little education, random harassment from local police, no real health care. How did these conditions influence you as a child?”

The hyena’s ears flicked, making the empty holes more conspicuous. “It was difficult, as it would be for anyone. But I did have one advantage.”

“Music?” I was surprised Melenda had jumped the gun like that. But she said it as if she expected to be corrected. I wondered again about the possibility of this being a scripted conversation.

“No,” he said gently. “The Madrid Conference.”

“Ah,” she sighed, as if she herself were a benefactor of that historic meeting.

“Because of that landmark decision, and the treaty that followed, I was allowed to grow up free in poverty instead of well fed in the United African Army’s ranks.” Tobhus reached up and spread the perforated cups of his rounded ears. “I have no UAA tattoos in my ears, and that makes me much more fortunate than my great grandparents.”

Melenda nodded knowingly and consulted the notes in her lap.

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“You were raised by your birth mother until you were seven, when she was killed during the New Apartheid Uprising. Tell us a little about her.”

Tobhus said nothing for a moment, but his bright, golden eyes lost their focus as if he were lost in thought. Presently he said, “My first mother was a fighter. She was a member of Clawstrike and saw herself as a revolutionary, fighting for the rights and freedoms of morphs worldwide.” He directed his piercing gaze at his host, his expression solemn. “She tried to teach me to hate humans. Even gave me a stuffed Jhon doll to play with as a kid.”

“Jhon being the first genemorph put to death by the South African legal system,” Melenda said for the benefit of the audience.

“No,” her guest declared. “Jhon was the first genemorph to focus human attention to the oppression of morphs in South Africa by killing a human.”

She seemed taken slightly aback, but she collected herself quickly. “Well, viewpoints on that moment in history aside, your birth mother raised you to hate humans. When she was tragically killed in the civil unrest that scarred Port Elizabeth twenty years ago, the courts handed you over to a human family. What was that like?”

“It was very hard at first. The first two weeks were hell for them. I didn’t trust them. Tried to run away. It took a long time, but they were patient. They got me turned around. They earned my trust.” Tobhus’ lips lifted in a slight grin. A hint of sharp white teeth glinted in the bright overhead lights. “That’s when my real education began.” He said nothing more, and I knew he was baiting her. For the sake of the interview, Melenda had little choice but to drop that particular thread of conversation, or take his cue to prod him for more.

“The Mogimbal family enrolled you in public school, where you found tolerance was possible between humans and morphs.”

“Yes,” he casually acknowledged. “But they taught me something much more valuable than grammar and math.” He grinned wider, waiting to see if his host would keep playing his game.

Melenda did not become MSB’s top anchor by following other people’s lead. She simply stared at him, her patience far from being tested. Several moments of dead air were bounced off the satellites until Tobhus said, “They taught me that my first mother was a fool. They taught me that if I was going to fight the injustice morphs were forced to live with, I needed to do it from inside the system. Not from outside. That was my first mother’s mistake.”

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I have to believe Mrs. McIntyre was forced by time to let that topic go. Her eyes darted to something off screen before she went back to her notes. There was something in her eyes, though, that said she wouldn't let it go entirely.

“When you came of age, you took a job at the port, working on the docks. From there you managed to get a berth on a Scandinavian freighter headed for the States. What drew you here?”

“For all its flaws, America is the oldest working democracy in the world. I wasn't sure what I wanted at the time, but I knew I had a better chance of finding it in America than in Africa.”

“And what did you find when you got here?”

Tobhus shrugged. “Racism. Speciesism. All the problems I'd left. But I also saw morphs who were doctors and mayors and such. I saw morphs who were \*respected\* by humans.”

Melenda consulted her notes again, reading off a brief history of his first years in his new country. “You successfully petitioned for temporary sanctuary under the fairly new ‘Williams’ law. You applied for citizenship, and two years later you passed the test.” She looked up from the notes in her lap. “And during that time, you met your band mates.”

“Vander Seth and Jergen Waller. They were sharing a rental house and needed a third to help cover the rent.”

“They were trying to start a band at the time, and asked you if you were interested. And you said...”

“I said ‘no.’” The hyena shrugged. “I couldn't sing, couldn't play any instruments, and didn't care.”

“What changed your mind?”

Tobhus grinned rather nastily. “They were lame. They didn't have a singer, they couldn't write songs to save their lives. And worst of all, they wanted to get play on human media channels. I watched them screwing around for a while, then finally got sick of their whining.”

“You took over the group.” Damn if that didn't sound like an accusation.

“They needed an alpha, and I wasn't doing anything else.”

“You even renamed the group. How did you come up with the name ‘The Orphan Shreds?’”

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The caniform shifted in his chair. “Well, that should be fairly obvious, I would think.” When Melenda didn’t respond immediately, he said, “All three of us were orphaned in both the literal and metaphorical sense. We lost our families, our countries, our identities. We’d come from places where our very lives were worth practically nothing.” His voice deepened, and a growl rose up for a second. He blinked, settled, and continued. “We were chewed up and spat out, shredded.”

Melenda gave her guest a moment to calm down. “Did you ever think you would become famous while you wrote the Shreds’ first song?”

Tobhus became indignant. “Fame??” His ears crimped themselves over the shortly trimmed fur of his head. “Fame is for people with weak egos.”

The picture went dark and Melenda’s voiceover was accompanied by stock footage of a concert The Orphan Shreds had done a few months ago. “When we come back, the hard questions about accusations of promoting hate between humans and genemorphs being leveled at Mr. Mogimbal and his band.”

Not too bad so far, I thought. The make-or-break was coming, though. Humans and morphs had both been speculating for months whether or not Tobhus and the Shreds were trying to provoke fighting between the two sides. Now Melenda would ask for the answer. I wasn’t certain what Tobhus would tell her.

I stayed by the telecomp during the commercials, not wanting to miss anything. When they came back to the program, Tobhus was still sitting at ease, but I noticed that his host was leaning forward in her chair. I thought I could see a hunger in her eyes, and it worried me. She’s going to really go after him, I realized. I felt almost sick at the thought.

“We’re back with Tobhus Mogimbal, lead singer of The Orphan Shreds. Tobhus…” Melenda seemed to search for a way to put what she wanted to say. Playing up to the camera, I was sure. “You were raised to hate humans until you were placed with a family that taught you tolerance was possible.”

“And necessary,” the hyena added.

“And necessary,” Melenda agreed. “You left the oppression of Africa and came to America, which you say is nearly as oppressive but balanced by opportunity.”

“Yeah.”

“You joined a band you originally had no interest in, became it’s leader.”

Tobhus merely blinked and flicked his ears.

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“And now your songs are influencing young people, humans and genemorphs alike. Can you answer me this question?”

Here it comes, I thought.

“You grew up living with the corrosive effects of hatred, you’ve seen what it does to both sides. You’ve seen that it can be fought and beaten.” Melenda edged forward until she was sitting, literally, on the edge of her seat. “Why are your songs filled with hatred directed against humans?”

The studio was silent. The camera switched to show Tobhus in a close up. His tongue snaked out and slowly washed the black leather of his nose. I could now see the empty holes where his nose rings would normally be. The camera backed off a bit, perhaps some director’s discomfort with the image.

“First of all, Mrs. McIntyre, I have to ask you something.” He was so calm, and his voice was just a quiet rumble. “Do you know the difference between anger and hatred?”

I suppose she saw that as a trap. Her professional training kept her from following his lead when he turned the question around on her. “Perhaps you should tell me.”

“Anger is what we all feel when we’ve been wronged, or seen a wrong that hurts us. It’s a normal feeling for people to have.” He stared at her, muzzle down and ears full up. “Hatred is prejudiced hostility. It doesn’t always come from being wronged, or from suffering injustice. It often feeds on itself and seldom follows reason.” He glanced up at the studio audience briefly, as though searching for something. “My songs aren’t about hatred. They aren’t meant to promote hatred.” He turned back to his host. “They’re meant to provoke anger.”

“Provoke anger?” She frowned, sounding puzzled. “How are people to distinguish the difference?” Shuffling through her notes she said, “I’d like to quote the lyrics to one of your recent songs, which has become wildly popular among the young listening public.” She looked up and pointed to the darkened monitor that sat between them. I hadn’t noticed it sitting there until then. “First, though, perhaps we should hear them the way you present them. This was recorded at your Seattle concert two months ago. The song is called, ‘Beautiful agony.’”

The picture switched to a hand held camera used by the Shreds’ own crew to record concert footage for videos and commercials. I doubted such video would help Tobhus’ case. Any human who had never seen The Orphan Shreds in concert would likely be shocked at the display.

On the screen, Tobhus was fully transformed into his stage persona, Leeth. All the ear adornments were in place, every body piercing was filled with its usual gold ring or silver stud. The clothes were gone, and so was some of his fur. At this concert, the last of the tour, he’d shaved most of his chest and stomach and gotten a huge temporary tattoo. The

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word ‘monkeyslayer’ arced across his chest in bright red letters. All the fur on his muzzle was gone, too. An image of jagged teeth and streaming blood had been dyed onto the skin of his lips. When he opened his mouth to sing, it looked as though another snout was forcing his open from inside. The spots in his remaining fur had been dyed bright red to stand out against his tawny pelt, making it look as though he were riddled with bloody bullet holes.

The sound quality was terrible, and I suddenly knew the reason Melenda had used the video. It wasn’t so people could hear the him sing the lyrics of ‘Beautiful agony.’ When Tobhus sings he doesn’t just sing. He screams, he shouts, he rages, he howls. Many of the humans who dislike the Shreds’ music say it’s partly because they can’t understand any of the words. The fans, however, say that those who listen, those who \*want\* to hear, manage just fine.

It was the image she wanted to show, though, that bothered me. She wanted people to see the performance, see the manic energy that fills Tobhus when he’s throwing himself around the stage. She wanted to show how frightening he can look. It was a cheap shot, and it pissed me off.

The video cut out and the camera returned to the two of them. Melenda read the lyrics, putting emphasis on words that she knew would offend or shock.

“Bloody child lies in the road,  
“bullet through the head  
“bloody child nailed to concrete  
“Father wants it dead

“Claw their eyes, bite their throats  
“taste their drying blood  
“make them see us as we are  
“or turn us back to mud.”

A murmur ran through the audience. Not everyone had heard the controversial lyrics in the Shreds’ recent hit song. Melenda glanced at the audience as though she sympathized with their concern. Turning back to Tobhus she said, “That sounds to me like you want genemorphs to go out and kill humans.”

She’d finally gotten to him, and it showed. He shot her an irritated look and said, “You do realize the bloody child symbolizes morphs and the Father represents the human race that genetically designed us, don’t you?”

““Claw their eyes, bite their throats, taste their drying blood,”” she repeated. “Do \*you\* realize that lyrics like this sound as though you want to provoke more than anger or hatred? It sounds like you want to provoke violence.”

Tobhus studied his host a moment, considering his reply. I held my breath.

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“Mrs. McIntyre, you’re a black woman.”

Melenda blinked, uncertain. The camera shook slightly as though something might be going on behind the scenes.

“Yes,” she said dryly. “So?”

“Before genemorphs were liberated from the military and allowed to live among the public, you were practically at the bottom of the ladder in this society.” The hyena’s eyes narrowed. “You’re a member of a racial minority that’s been oppressed in this country for hundreds of years. Your gender has been openly abused for \*thousands\* of years.” He stared at her, waiting.

Melenda’s voice was slightly subdued as she said, “Your point is?”

“Have blacks fought to rid themselves of oppression?” He turned to the audience again, which sat in tense silence. “Have women fought to stop the abuse they suffer?” He raised a hand and pointed a clawed finger at them. “Every one of you know that when a group of people are treated unfairly, those people will eventually fight back.” He put his hand down and leaned forward. “And none of you will deny that genemorphs have been treated unfairly by humans.”

I waited for someone in the audience to speak, but the silence held. Tobhus remained calm, but his voice was filled with passion.

“When I sing ‘Beautiful agony,’ I’m trying to get each and every listener to understand how it feels to be on \*my\* side of things. I need them to feel how angry I am, and to know \*why\* I’m angry.” He turned to Melenda again. “If I do it right, if I get my point across, then when I sing about wanting to ‘bite the throat’ of the people who are hurting me, the listener will think, ‘Hell, yeah! I would, too!’”

When Tobhus sat back in his chair, Melenda asked, “Would it be reasonable to say then that your songs are an attempt to justify the violence between humans and genemorphs?”

The hyena sighed and shook his head. “No. I’m not trying to justify anything. I’m trying to \*explain\*, to both sides, why morphs are willing to fight.”

Melenda McIntyre stared at her guest a moment. Then she made up for using the video footage of the concert by giving him the opening I was hoping she would. “Tobhus, music aside, if you could speak to the human race as a whole, what would you say?”

Tobhus took a deep breath, lowered his head a bit. He closed his eyes and swallowed. When he opened his eyes he looked right at the camera and softly said, “Don’t forsake us. You gave us intelligence. You gave us strength. You gave us compassion. We have all the gifts you gave us and you’ve taught us how to use them. All we want...” He

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paused, amended himself. “All \*I\* want is to stand by your side, peacefully. I am a child of the human race. I look different, sometimes I act different. But I want to live with those who created me. I don’t want to destroy them. And I don’t want them to destroy me.”

The studio was still for a long while. The camera focussed on Melenda, but she was still staring at her guest. I want to believe I saw admiration in her eyes. Then the clapping started. It was subdued at first, as though the audience wasn’t sure what to feel. Steadily it grew. Both host and guest looked out among them, and both looked pleased at the response. Eventually the applause drowned out everything, even Melenda’s shout that the broadcast would return after the last break.

I turned the telecomp off at that point. I didn’t need to see the last minute or so. I knew things would be alright. I wouldn’t need to watch the news feeds for signs that civil unrest had broken out. And I didn’t give a damn about what the critics thought. I just sat there in my darkened home and waited.

About an hour after the interview, the telecomp chimed an incoming call. I answered it, and was happy to see my adopted son’s face on the screen.

“Hello Tobhus.”

“Hi mom. Did you catch the show?”

I nodded. “Wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

“What’d you think?”

I smiled, feeling extraordinary pride in him. “You were marvelous. No one can call you an ‘illiterate screech’ now.”

He smiled back, a beautiful smile full of teeth I’ve never feared. “Thanks.”

“Your mother would have been very proud of you.”

Tobhus hesitated. “You think so?”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure. I know I am.”

His ears flicked back a bit, as close to a blush as any morph can come. A noise off screen distracted him. “Yeah, hang on,” he said quietly. “Gotta run, mom. Party.”

“O.k. Be careful.” He nodded. “And Tobhus...”

“Yeah?”

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“Put your bullets back in your ears. They look like furry sieves without them.”

He chuckled. “Sure thing. Later mom. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

After we disconnected, I lay back on the couch and thought about the interview, and all the events that had lead up to it. It had been a rough ride at times. But I wouldn't trade a single moment for all the money in the world.

Sometimes I feel more like a genemorph than a human myself. I watched my adopted son go through some real misery growing up. But I have to admit one thing. For all the mistakes the human race has made, it still managed to create some truly beautiful children. Even the orphaned ones.

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