

8-5-2023

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Recommended Citation

Dorman, S. (2023) "Demon and Dog-man," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2023: Iss. 45, Article 26.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2023/iss45/26>

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Additional Keywords

Mythic Circle, Mythopoeia, Dragons, Fantasy, Fiction, Poetry

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Demon and Dog-man

by S. Dorman

Demon got loose and was prowling through the woods looking for deer to harass and destroy. This worked best when other dogs got loose and joined in. Of course, Demon was top dog, and any other he encountered would, after the ritual sizing up, be invited on a prow by a mere glance over the shoulder. He was bristle-haired and black, with long white teeth in a grin accenting his almost slant eyes. With regard to ownership, Demon was a strange combination of Cindabilla's and her Uncle Ferddy.

But Cindabilla was nothing if not contrary to her uncle and soon had Demon eating out of her hand and answering her call before that of Uncle Ferddy—who had never been quite able to divest himself of the fear he had for the hybrid.

And Demon was the terror of the wooded neighborhood. Here's Demon on the scent of deer in the wooded hillside in the gleaming night above his house. He's alert and excited and already tasting the whole flesh of deer molecules lodged in his brain from the direct connection in his snout. Suddenly he's checked by another, stranger scent, one he has never encountered ... or has he?... It is either a man or a dog unfamiliar: a senseless commingling of smells making the hackles of Demon rise. He keeps trotting straight ahead, but now his ears turn this way and that, alert for any clue to the forthcoming encounter.

He sees it, four-legged, stepping through the moonlit crosshatching of trees, shadows, and light on the hillside, its own ears visibly cupping: and that face—the face of a man unperturbed by his presence.

Demon is not prepared. He slows his pace but advances, tail at a slightly uncertain angle, his ears as high as he can get them—not all that high at all. It is not a time for hostility but caution. The other dog—was it?—also advances but without checking itself first. Its tail is high and its neck arched. All this he recognizes for having experienced it in himself. But it is that other part put together with it, much as his own has been put together, hybrid that he is.

If he ever thought about such things, he would realize that he is rattled. He would recognize in himself the signs he has witnessed in the other dogs, the underdogs. Demon has never been afraid before. He is the dog that tried to attack Petey Prince right through the windshield of his pickup in subzero weather, the dog that sent him back to substance abuse counseling the night Alvin Robichaud froze to death in his own truck parked next to Petey's. If he has feared not man nor beast, why fear the combination? But there is something more here.

Demon must stop and let the other come. The stranger approaches, swift and stiff.

They are opposed, neck by neck, hackles raised. Ears low, Demon inquires, looking directly into the human face whose eyes are averted. Demon turns slightly away. Tentatively, he lowers his snout to sniff the other's groin and is frustrated by a sideways hop. The other's tail is high, and his strange head continues to be averted. His interest in Demon appears small.

Suddenly, at no apparent sign of aggression, the stranger knocks Demon's haunch with his own, casting him off balance for a moment. The wolf-hybrid's tail goes down, and he turns to watch his mangy superior swarm uphill through the barred shadows. The human face looks back once over his shoulder, and Demon follows, his tail—though a bit higher—still drooping.

Already Demon senses where they are headed, for he knows the lying down place of deer, he knows their trails and frequents and slaking pools in much the same way that you know where your

neighbors live and work. He has harried deer from these places before. He does not need to be an opportunist but can be. And he does not wonder that the new top dog knows where to go.

So up the side of the mountain and, rounding, down again they go, all its varied scents a temptation to the inquisitive canine companions of your walks but a dismissed distraction to that same one on the prowl without you. And there they are, a little ways up from a habitual drinking pool in a stream, resting and chewing their small cud. In a moment they are all gone off, but one.

The stance of the top dog checks the flight of the undisciplined Demon after them. A sudden, if remote, sound of a thousand growlings, coupled with an almost casual glance, is enough to enjoin Demon to stay. So he looks on one of the herd left behind, the white deer he has glimpsed once or twice before. It may be that this whiteness is an indication of illness. Not yet a yearling, it seems perhaps not so wise as the others who have scattered even as they tempted chase. And this may be a sign of injury.

See it standing there so brightly reflecting moonlight in the midst of a chill unleafed woodland season in Maine. Its shoulder twitches faintly, but otherwise the deer seems to have reverted to that trancelike protective feint of its early months. The white deer will be easy prey. Delicate and fine as enameled porcelain, it stands eying them, not ten feet away as they watch.

But it is not the instinctive eyeless trance of innocence. This is a true look—complete and unlike what Demon knows of young deer. Yet there is no actual expression beyond that which says, I am deer. Here is the language of a body completely without fear.

Demon glances at the dog-man, who moves to circle with lowered head, its chin leading as though a snout. Demon licks his chops, gulps, and starts to circle opposite.

The deer leaps up and moves away, the others in surprised pursuit.

Through thickets and stands gleaming with bars of heavenly light, the chase carries up and over the slopes of the mountain above Cindabilla's house. On and on the deer leads them, mile upon mile, and the dog-man's hundreds howling ... over deadfall and down ledge, up the sides of ravines. On and on the sheen of the white deer leads, on and on until they are passing together into the raining atmosphere of ash and black night, where its pure gleaming hide is almost extinguished, and still they pursue like a horde.

Comes a flickering break in the darkness, though the howling continues, as up ahead a new rumbling threatens to overcome it. This is the breaking and bursting and blowing; the roaring of the fire pots of the melting tires of northeast America, its hellish glow firing distantly through the fall of its up-sending fury.

Straight through dense black downpour the white deer leads them, still leaping over and through the grimy wreck of the forest as the splayed paws of the canines tear up the leaf mold in their panting pursuit. Demon knows no bounds, and he willingly adds his snarling and snapping to the invisible hordes of the dog-man even as the fire mushrooms before them.

From the top of a knoll, still scrambling, they see the fiery skirts of the billowing black crust, taste it in their nostrils as they follow furiously on. Down the white deer plunges toward the moving volcanic semblance, having not once overlooked his shoulder toward his pursuers: his white hocks, forearms and hooves working without stop. Leaping the dike installed by firemen to contain both runoff and the conflagration, straight into the fire he leaps.

Translucent, ethereal, it stands amid the heat, flames and thunder, only now stopping to look back upon the hounds of hell.

Demon stops in his descent of the hill, tumbling end over end in his already scorched and frantic withdrawal. With canine dexterity, he scrambles to his feet, drooping, quaking, now bristling, and finally swerving away.

The dog-man follows the white deer over the containment into the fire.

Demon is gone back through blistering heat, drenching oil, soot and drizzle, circling back the way he has come toward Cindabilla's. If he stayed to glance back from the hilltop and gaze upon the outpouring of hell below, he would see two tiny creatures, one of which is flaming, aglow in those furnaces. Igniting in the foreground and from deep within, around them explosions send jets blazing upward and outward, momentarily parting the dense black moving cloud. Had he stayed to listen, he would hear multitudes of men screaming, scorched and cursing, their filthy blasphemies rising in the toxins, not now distantly nor remotely, but pandemoniac loud. The cries are soon extinguished in a burst of flame and the dog-man is gone.

Only the deer remains in the fire and fulmination, testament to God's own spirit of repentance, purity, goodness, and grace.



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