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presents

Unnatural Aptitude

By

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The world was a blur of rooftops, a slow-motion rush of fire escapes and hard brick angles. In his ears, the rasping of his breath competed with his heartbeat for the only sound. It had become the pursuit. Keeping the death-grip on his sidearm, he hurtled another low wall, straining himself into the thick, late-night darkness. And of course it was starting to rain.

Then, another fractured glimpse of the shadow ahead of him, moving. He couldn't stop, not for backup, not for the ache that felt like fire in his lungs and in his legs. If he let himself there would only be another crime scene, just like the one he could still feel behind him, refusing to recede. The roofing sounded like gravel under his feet and he pushed faster, fighting the shrouded obstacle course of vent turrets and sagging pigeon wire. No one had been this close before.

Fayette hadn't been first on the scene this time, not like the initial call, but he'd recognized the look on Webster's face. He'd felt the mask of it himself and he'd seen it gaping back at him from windows under the garish strobing of the police lights. It was strange how those lights always had the power to drain away color, along with the last touch of reality in an unreal scene. The third time around, two bodies this time – a mother and her toddler child. Blood sprays and jagged throats, but no pooling, there was never enough to pool. The torn Bible and the child's clothes looked so poignant in the glittering wreckage of the bedroom. Fayette had stepped outside. That's when he'd seen the tall man standing in the street and looking interested.

"Who are you? What are you doing out here?"

The man gave him the slightest smile and Officer Fayette had felt the intensity with a sudden tightness like nothing he could name.

"Tell me what you –"

And the man was gone, the simple speed of it as startling as a shout. There was time to blink – a specific impression that the man wasn't really even fleeing – then every instinct had set Fayette moving, racing in pursuit. A broken door, a staircase, and now the rooftops. Fayette felt alone in all the city. Just he and his shadow.

A sound as soft as a touch jarred him to a stop. Frozen, he fought to listen over the noises of his own exerted body. The sound came again, beside him, close. There was a flimsy wall of wood and he backed against it, edging toward the corner, moving to his left with his gun in the wrong hand. Pausing at the edge, he held his breath then whirled around into an explosion of white wings and feathers in his face that threw him ducking backward. He almost cried out. Wings behind wire. Someone's racing pigeons, disturbed in the night. Good God, he was jumpy.

At least he hadn't fired this time. Like when he'd come out of that first stairwell and the shadow had been right on top of him. It had just come from nowhere and the shot was as reflexive as a gasp. The muzzle flash had shown him a pair of wild, flaring eyes, then nothing. He'd be hearing about that round when he made his report. Especially since, somehow, he'd missed.

A gray hint of something grabbed at the corner of his eye and he straightened to watch the shadow glide out of hiding, somewhere close, and dart away. With the heartbeat he was in pursuit again, running hard after the movement more than the shape. And abruptly the shadow was in flight between buildings, leaping the alley-wide gap with the silence of a dream and nothing of the grace. What was showing now to remind Fayette of the tall man in the street? But the brutish leap carried the gap and Fayette knew he was going to follow. He was too close to stop, or at least not to try. One running step – the drop came up too quickly in the rainy darkness – and he almost missed his last, desperate push. Then he was in the air, four stories up in the middle of jump he never would have tried on any other night.

He landed hard, slamming with a loud bang onto a metal lock box atop the second, slightly lower roof. A rush of relief, then at the same instant the helpless, heart-stopping sensation of his feet slipping ahead of him, out from under while the black alley pulled at his back. It took a second of eternity, reeling and flailing, before the momentum

of the jump caught up to push him forward, stumbling off the box and onto the roof. That was what it had to be, because there was no way he felt a hand plant itself in his back and push.

It was quiet around him. Holding the pistol in that never-questioning grip, he pointed it ahead of him like a flashlight and half wished it were a flashlight as he looked around. He knew this was the old Heller building, and he knew it was the last in its row before Jefferson Street cut a broad valley between it and the low-rises beyond the pavement. Nothing was going to be jumping that.

But if the other rooftops had been obstacle courses, this one was a maze. From where he stood he saw two stairwells jutting up into angles, both of them well boarded off against more than one city code. Scattered about, he checked off discarded crates and ratty deck chairs, not to mention a multitude of high metal boxes like the first, all meant to lock away air conditioning equipment, access panels, and God knew what. Looking for a shadow, he saw more than he could count.

Threading into the accidental corridors, he took up the search, stepping carefully as he held an unconscious crouch, always following his gun. Somewhere. The killer was still here.

What do I do when I catch it?

The thought hit him like a blow, sudden and alien, as if it came from someone else. What did he do? Well, what did he always do on the job? It wasn't like he'd never seen the dogwatch hours before. It was going to be a pleasure taking this guy down.

But he rounded the first stairwell and a solid wave of stench slammed him so hard he threw his arm up against it and reeled backward. It was that lost body reek, turned up behind a dumpster in August, only so thick he could feel it on his skin. Coughing from deep in his lungs, he knew it wasn't like the crime scene where he'd thought he'd caught a whiff of it – those bodies were far too fresh. This wasn't any stress reaction. Doubling over, he backed away, fighting not to gag, and when he finally caught his breath and found he could straighten up, the tall man from the street was standing in front of him, watching on with some interest.

"Fortunately for us," the man said, "the aroma is highly localized."

Fayette snapped the pistol at his head. "Don't move! You're under arrest!"

"We should talk first."

"Stay where you are."

The man smiled that smile again and Fayette, still battling the spasms in his throat, kept his eyes locked on him. Then the man directed his gaze to the left and Fayette found he had to look that way. When he looked back the man was gone.

The strangling sensation dropping to clench around his heart, Fayette whirled. The man was beside him now and he leveled an arm to take Fayette's wrist in his hand with a grip that set the gun in stone. That was all the movement it took. Fayette struggled, but the man simply held him and before he gave away everything he might have, Fayette stopped trying and met the man's eyes.

"Tonight," the man told him, "upon this rooftop, your gun is not going to help you."

And then Fayette found he could move. Not *being* moved, he was able to bring his arm down and his pistol to its holster, that was all. When the gun was seated and strapped into place, the man let go.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Hoch." There was a touch of German thickness, but the main of the man's accent was elusive.

"What were you doing at my crime scene?"

"Questions, Officer Fayette. Curiosity."

"What did you do to those people?" The words boiled out of him through some direct connection.

Hoch lifted a brow. "Inhuman murder, the claiming of blood – tell me, officer, what did you think you were chasing?"

The scenes flashed in Fayette's mind and he growled out nothing like a reply. His hand twitched, wanting the gun.

"Curiosity," Hoch said again and disappeared into the darkness.

Fayette jerked around, swiveling every direction. It wasn't just the speed, it was the certainty, as if the darkness meant nothing. Then there was a sudden noise behind the stairwell, sharp like a struggle, and the shadow came hurtling out, erratic this time with the signs of fear or injury. Changing directions twice, it vanished farther along the rooftop. Appearing quietly, Hoch stepped out after it was gone and turned to the policeman.

"Did you get a good look?"

There had been a blur, maybe something a bit more anthropomorphic within it this time, something to go along with those eyes, little more. Fayette said nothing, bringing a nod from the man.

"Your friends down in the streets, your brothers under arms – they won't say it either. But you possess an awareness they lack. That's why you're the one who's up here tonight."

The fear that rose inside him was sudden and unspeakable, like nothing since he'd been a child haunted by ghosts. The power of it shook him and that made him angry. "So you fight among yourselves," he snapped, understanding nothing.

Hoch showed surprise. "Really, officer, do I look like that creature to you?"

"I was –"

"Yes, but as we were both on the trail of the same miscreant, does it really matter which one of us you pursued?" He thought for a moment. "You've been close before, you know."

Fayette was confused.

"Oh yes, quite close. The killings five nights ago, when you did your neighborhood search, you came within arm's length of it. If it hadn't been for that particularly fetid alleyway, I'm certain you would have noticed."

"The killer."

"The vampire, Officer Fayette. The vampire. But, sadly, I lost my opportunity that night. My window, you might say." He lifted a hand to cut off some outburst. "The subsequent guilt is mine. I bear that alone."

Fayette looked more closely at him, wondering if he meant it.

"You intrigued me, you see," Hoch continued shortly. "You passed quite close to me, as well, and I took to studying you. You have good instincts for cutting through the clutter. Call it aptitude. Enough of it can be a dangerous thing."

Fayette shook his head, knowing his thoughts had to be foggy no matter how sharp they felt. It didn't help. "He's going to get away."

"No, 'he' isn't. Not from us." Facing the direction of its retreat, he motioned Fayette alongside. "The darkest corners, officer, the foulest hole. You are chasing instinct, not intellect. That's why it runs."

It made sense, Fayette thought. "My grandfather used to say never catch anything you're going to need help letting go."

"Still, it fled from you. The animal instinct is to run when pursued."

"And to pursue a runner."

"True enough," Hoch appeared to smile at that and they began to move across the rooftop, Fayette picking his way carefully into the lead. Soon enough, his gun was in his hand again and Hoch made no comment.

"Where is it?" It seemed natural to whisper.

"It could be anywhere."

The darkness seemed to thicken and Fayette stopped to look around carefully, considering. What Hoch had told him, what he was doing – no, his job was to deliver them, not figure them out. "By the crates," he said after a moment, making it something just short of a question.

The tall man only shrugged his eyebrows.

Taking it up again, Fayette moved more slowly, intent on the spot and the ramshackle collection of slatted boxes. "I don't trust you, you know," he said abstractedly.

"I know."

"So what, exactly, is this guy trying to be?" he went on in the same voice, hearing a hollow, grasping sound. "I mean, at what point do we all say recess is over and it's time to get back to work?"

Hoch had seemed ready to respond, but as Fayette finished he went quiet, allowing nothing to show. Then they were at the crates and Fayette bent his arm, bringing the gun up and ready. His heart was accelerating again as if the chase were still on, and each touch of rain on his face felt like a cold, stinging slap. Backing flat again, once more edging his way, he worked to the corner, getting ready to burst around when another whiff of the stench caressed him. It was too soon.

the foulest hole

"Wait –"

And the shadow was on him, over the top and crushing him to the roof. Too fast. Too strong. Shaken, thrown and slammed, he felt like a child in a tempest, futilely striking back with all his strength, his gun only a weight, as sickening as a toy in his hand. Fingers like claws, white fish-dead eyes and that horrible smell – then a double row of blackening, jagged teeth coming for his throat and nothing he could do to stop it. He felt the creature pulled away from him, heard it land somewhere, heavy and scrambling, then Hoch was above him, extending a hand and pulling him to his feet before his head was nearly ready for it.

"And always look up."

"God," Fayette swallowed, fighting the crawling of his skin. He bent to brush at his uniform, trying to feel the gesture as well as make it and for the first time that night he was grateful for the rain. Finished, he glanced up and found Hoch looking intent.

"One of those things – just one of them – took out half the town where I was born. You would call it a village. Of course, we were quaint back then." He said the last with a sharp smile that quickly vanished. "And we were too afraid to fight it. It took a long winter and too many screaming nights before one of us finally got too angry to be afraid anymore."

A moment, and Fayette found himself nodding, finally coming up against something he could understand. "So, what do you call yourself?"

"I told you my name."

"That's not what I mean."

"A hunter, then. A stalker. Anything you like, said with a flourish."

"I thought it was you. I thought you were the –" He put his gun away and locked it in as he used the word for the first time. "The vampire."

"Your confusion is historical. We exist in proximity to one another, much like tonight. People are frightened and, inevitably over the years, we are seen." He straightened himself as if before a mirror. "Where do you think its pretty legend comes from?"

Fayette felt the idea tighten across his face.

"An intriguing legacy," Hoch went on. "And, really, given his choice what handsome actor wants to portray rotting meat?"

"So you're not the only one."

"I would have to be the only one who had ever gotten angry." He paused a moment as Fayette remembered being driven across the rooftops. "I'm merely someone much like you, officer. Just a bit older."

But Fayette couldn't keep the rebellion from rising inside him. "Should I carry a crucifix, then?" he snapped aloud.

"That would be up to you."

"It didn't help those people."

"It didn't hurt them. Their fear did that, and their ignorance. It made them helpless."

Fayette stepped in, tight to the tall man's face. "That thing is what hurt them. That *thing* killed them. Maybe you forgot that part, being so old and all. Only you don't look that old to me."

Hoch took the words and the tone, unmoving, but something in his own, serious manner seemed to grow heavier. Fayette felt the concentration closing in on him like the isolation of evening, and he stepped right into it. *I'm a cop, God-damn it!*

"I want to know what these things are – exactly."

"They are vampires. Feeders on blood. Animate corpses with a lineage as ancient as humanity."

"If they're dead how do they –"

"Believe your senses, Officer Fayette. The vampire is another part of the greater order. And it is not the chief problem you face."

Fayette was shaking his head, hardly hearing. "How do I stop it?"

"*Listen* to me!" Hoch blurred away again, stepping into motion and disappearing so fast Fayette had no time to whirl before he was spun around and taken by the upper arms in a grip like winter steel, the tall man boring in on him.

"The power that drives them is not of their making. And it is the power, not the creature that is immortal." Hoch paused, though his intensity never wavered. "Do you understand me?"

Helpless in the grip, Fayette felt as if his feet were dangling in the air, simply because they so easily could be. Inside him, the understanding that was growing held him in a grip almost as tight. "What – what do you mean?"

"The power has to go somewhere."

Dropping him, Hoch wheeled away and from the dimness startlingly close by dragged the struggling vampire into view. "Look at it," he ordered, pinning it and holding it by the neck like a poisonous snake. Horrified, Fayette couldn't look away as it snarled at him, raging without a sound.

"It's gorged now, like a leech, on blood. That's why you could get close and why you're still alive."

It didn't look sluggish to him; he couldn't help remembering the power of its hands. Moving closer, Fayette stared at it. It really was a corpse, and in its eyes he recognized something he'd seen frozen in the eyes of corpses before: knowledge of its own death.

Turning suddenly, Hoch took the vampire by the shoulders and slammed it hard into the wall of the second stairwell, bringing a rattle from the heavy chain on the door. Stunned, the creature sagged against the bricks and Hoch held it there with one arm while he bent to pick up a length of wood, something like a picket stake or broken slat and raised it before him.

"You need something large, much more than a bullet. The point is to damage it enough to let the air inside and allow the pernicious rot to take more than just the outer layers of skin." He turned the wood as if expecting it to glint like a diamond. "A length of pipe works well. But I'm such a traditionalist. If I ever saw a werewolf I would surely shoot him with a silver bullet."

With that he plunged the stake into the vampire's chest. Fayette heard a horrible sound like a scream in some distant corner of a city and the thing collapsed, writhing. There was a blast of charnel stench, but Fayette couldn't recoil. Fascinated, repulsed, he saw the body change shape as it bloated then emptied, spreading into a still pile of withered skin that glistened wetly without the help of the rain. By the time that rain stopped Fayette knew there wouldn't be much beyond a stray bone fragment to mark the spot where everything had changed.

Throughout, Hoch had maintained his grip upon the stake as if to twist it like a torturer in his victim's agony. Now, abruptly, there came a flash along the length of it, some color Fayette had never seen, and a sharp crack like a halo of static electricity around Hoch's hand. Briefly, Hoch closed his eyes, then he rose to his feet. That was all.

Fayette could see it in him as the tall man turned to him, a renewed spring of strength when he straightened and snapped the stake as if it were a matchstick.

"Energy. Heightened sensitivities." He paused just long enough for it to matter. "Extended life span." Then, "Everything but the taste for blood."

"How –" Fayette stopped himself from making a stammering sound. "How long?"

"You can imagine our surprise when we discovered our inheritance." Hoch sampled the words as if they had a remote, bitter taste. "I watched Shakespeare piss in the gutter."

"Then you're dead. Like it."

"I couldn't say. It hardly matters."

Hoch strode away and Fayette followed him, sensing something irrefutable in the act.

"So this is the greater order?"

The tall man laughed lightly. "Once the hunt begins you find you can't pass too long a time between these nights or you slip back toward the mortal world, becoming its prey again. Predators chasing predators chasing predators. You'll have to answer your own questions, good sir."

"Why did you come up here? I mean, why did you talk to me?"

Placing one foot on the low wall that ran the perimeter, Hoch stopped at the street edge of the roof and looked back.

"I've done what I came to do. I came to tell you to beware."

Fayette was nodding again, understanding before he spoke. "I will be. Now I know. Now I know what to do."

But Hoch shook his head and there was no remnant of the smile, only the flatness of centuries emptied across a human face. "No. Beware your first kill."

And he stepped off the roof into the four-story darkness. The quiet finality of it kept Fayette from moving for a beat, but when he did step up there was only a moment of dark pavement before he saw the figure stroll across Jefferson Street then through and beyond the glow of one last street lamp.

It was empty atop the Heller building. Fayette returned to the remnants of the vampire and prodded with a toe, watching it fade into the rain. There were sounds growing in the alley, fellow officers converging, looking for him; he noticed his radio was crackling.

In the darkness he could swear he heard that somewhere in the city scream repeated. But perhaps it was a whistle, or the wind. It didn't matter. He could feel the night stretching out around him now and his heart responded to the call, resuming its familiar racing. Smiling, he took a long, controlling breath.

It was a big town and getting bigger. It didn't have to be tonight.

The End

About the Author

John Kirkpatrick has published short fiction and has seen his plays produced on stage. A few years back he bounced around the atmosphere of the scriptwriting world and now he's back where he belongs, fighting the freelance fiction wars from the American Midwest.