Three guesses what Arcana Studios’ graphic novel HARBOR MOON is about:

Nope—it’s not night fishing.

Nope—it’s not waterfront romancing.

Give you a hint: The next town over is named Vampire Village. Pod People Parish is on the neighboring side.

We’re in werewolf territory here, people—which isn’t so much a spoiler as it is a tongue-in-cheek wink at the reader. At least, one hopes so. For a colony of lycanthropes attempting to live a peaceful life under mankind’s radar, naming their town after the catalyst for their own kind’s transformation seems a bit, well, on the snout. Castle Rock must have already been taken. Gentle ribbing aside, though, HARBOR MOON (written by Ryan Colucci and Dikran Ornekian) heralds a new crop of indie-comics craftsmen who deserve the plaudits likely heading their way.

Timothy Vance has recently returned from a third tour-of-duty tête-à-tête with the Taliban, coming home a war hero after preternaturally rescuing his platoon from a surprise ambush. “I just heard ‘em coming,” he says, which should clue the reader into the possibility that there may be something a wee bit abnormal about Vance’s abilities. Not that he knows it yet. A phone call

from a long-forgotten father lures Vance all the way out to Harbor Moon, Maine, a mysterious locale that probably doesn’t pop up on too many tourist pamphlets. The welcoming committee tends not to be so warm with its salutations, receiving Vance with fisticuffs. And claws. Turns out the residents of Harbor Moon have a secret they don’t mind sharing with unwelcome guests once the moon is full.

Inking with a murkiness reminiscent of Dave McKean’s graphic novel game-changer ARKHAM ASYLUM: A SERIOUS HOUSE ON SERIOUS EARTH, artist Pawel Sambor (with Nikodem Cabala receiving a supporting artist credit) has dragged his panels deep into the shadows, letting the darkness do most of his dirty work. There’s a fun interplay between what’s actually on the page and what the reader’s imagination projects upon them, filling in those unfathomably black panels with rendings of flesh as townsfolk transform into werewolves.

Not that it works all the time. Particular panels lose their perspective, occasionally stranding the reader’s eye inside those same shadows. In addition, several characters tend to possess the same lantern-jawed features, making it difficult to tell one major player from the next. But when the claws finally come out and the flesh gets shredded, a beacon of bleeding light mercifully pours forth from this book. Colors take on a palpable presence here, and the pages glisten with viscera, pulpy enough to drench every panel. Blood splatters with such vivid intensity, one might feel the impulse to take a tissue and sop up the excess dribble. You’ll need a mop to flip the page.

Fans of Steve Niles and Ben Templesmith’s 30 DAYS OF NIGHT, take note: HARBOR MOON shares an aesthetic kinship with its comic cousins in Barrow, Alaska. These graphic novels possess such a similar gloom-hued visual sensibility, one can easily imagine a comic-book mashup of the two. That was the fantasy that slipped through this reviewer’s brain while flipping through HARBOR MOON, at least. Reading them back to back makes for a rather satisfying pairing. Think of them together as a TWILIGHT SAGA for gorehounds.

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