

Blood runs Thicker

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Prologue

It was getting closer, and he knew it. Every time he tripped, every time he fumbled or hit a dead end and had to run out of a shadowed alleyway, it was getting closer. He had already wasted two shots of his pistol on it, but the thing -- for that was all he could think to describe it as -- just kept coming. He dropped his rapier already, tripping on a drain gutter and losing his chance of safety as it clattered away into the darkness. He was running out of options, just as his life was running out on him. The crash of barrels behind the frantic man made him pick up the pace, sprinting down the dreary streets as the rain pounded on him and the never-tiring predator behind him. He couldn't go on much longer. His lungs were on fire, his legs ached, and his heart felt as if it would simply explode like a powder keg soon.

Another dead end. The man turned to flee further, but fell back and whimpered helplessly for mercy.

There, silhouetted by the dim lamplight of the house behind it, was a large, snarling humanoid figure. Stepping ever closer to the small, fleeing creature it had finally cornered. He'd barely started screaming before the beast pounced, using large claws to rip hungrily at its' prey.

The cracking fire of muskets made the creature howl and spin around, leaving its' dying prisoner on the ground.

Two men blocked the way into the alley: one reloading his musket as the other, larger man drew a long slender sword.

A thin soldier came in behind them, holding up a lantern and crying out: "The beast is 'ere! 'Elp!"

Snarling, the creature leapt up against one of the old brick walls, scrambling up the side of the city building and vaulting out onto the shingled rooftops, disappearing into the darkness. The larger soldier cursed and jammed his rapier back into its sheath to help the wounded citizen lying in the alley, his blood mingling with the rain that still fell.

Though his wounds hadn't been made deep yet, the man was already dead. The cloaked, kneeling soldier surmised that the chase and fright had probably contributed to the poor man's death.

"Bring him back to the station and see if we can identify him. When you do, add his name to the list and call it a night," he said gruffly, and added under his breath, "another failure of a night."

"Aye, sir. It'll be done."

The beast will remain free for tonight. Free to wreck more havoc, take more lives. The problem however, was not ending there. The problem was spreading, as was its' curse.

Chapter I

The room was quiet, save for the scratch of Dawn's quill as she tried to write her newest piece. The midmorning light danced through the window, and would have added a sort of serenity to the scene, if it weren't for the young woman's look of frustration crossing her otherwise calm features as she crumpled the scrap of parchment and tossed it to a pile growing beside her.

Such blocks of imagination didn't come often to her, but when they did, they tended to stick around for days to even weeks.

Sighing, she got up from her desk and walked over to a small oak table, her emerald hued dress flitting behind her.

Tea tended to make Dawn feel better. Or, it would have, were it not cold now.

"Of course." Dawn muttered, picking up the wrought-iron pot and bringing it out with her down the staircase.

Dawn glanced out the windows as she walked, looking wistfully at the horizon. Her bright green eyes searching for some glance of the distant ocean she'd grown up by. Back then; the crash of the waves would lull her to sleep at night, just as the seagulls would wake her at dawn. The salty smells and harbour noise had been her world back then, before the war. After that, she had married a soldier and moved back to his home country.

She pursed her lips and tried to push her former island home from her mind, to focus on the present. Which, presently, was getting herself tea so she could keep writing.

It wasn't that she didn't love William. She loved him dearly (when he wasn't out gambling of course, or out working deep and late into the night, as he had been doing more and more with all the recent attacks). She just missed home.

"We should plan another trip out of the city" she said to herself resolutely "It'd do Will some good I think."

Reaching the bottom, Dawn continued to the kitchen and poured the pot back into the kettle, and set about making a fire in the woodstove to heat it.

Dawn jumped and nearly dropped the match she was holding when a voice spoke out behind her: "Morning."

Dawn lit the fire and pulled a wisp of her dark blonde hair behind her ear before looking angrily at her husband.

William was a large man, squarely built. He had broad shoulders and dark blue eyes that reminded Dawn of the ocean she grew up with.

William sat at the dining table staring back at Dawn, silence hanging in the air between them. Sighing, William relented and replied to what he knew Dawn was about to ask and ran his fingers through his ink-black hair.

"Ok, so I was out late again."

"Gambling, I presume?" Dawn asked harshly, getting a fresh cup for herself.

“Work, actually” William stood to get one for himself as well, continuing to speak “another death, unfortunately. Brings the list to five...”

The kettle began to whistle loudly, calling for Dawn to retrieve it. She did, and promptly poured herself and William a cup.

“Almost had it last night. We’re starting to see its’ movements.”

“Its?” Dawn asked, sipping the sweet tea.

“Well, it sure as hell ain’t human.” William grunted, taking a drink of his own. Dawn rubbed her forehead awkwardly. It didn’t sound like they would be going anywhere soon then.

William stood and headed for the door, grabbing his grey military cloak on the way and calling over his shoulder: “I’ll be back in awhile, I have something to check at the station.”

Sighing, Dawn took the teapot and headed back up the stairs to take up her quill once more.

It was around noon when Dawn finally stood up and stretched, looking somewhat like a tired cat.

“Maybe a walk would help,” she mumbled, glancing down at the dusky parchment, which had barely been touched, “it certainly couldn’t hurt...”

Dawn pulled on a midnight black coat and headed down the stairs, slipping a few coins into her pocket as she left.

The streets were chilly and crowded as Dawn walked down the steps and joined the throng of people and horses going up and down the way.

The familiar city sounds of busy chatter and iron-shod hooves on the worn cobblestones filled her ears, as they had for the past ten years or so since she moved from her old country to this one.

Dawn followed her usual route, walking towards the market of the Merchant’s Square district of the city. She smiled as the market’s noises mingled with everything else. People calling their wares and the light music of street musicians around the square played in the air around the bustling citizens.

Picking her way through the crowd, Dawn made her way over to a shop standing at the south gate of the square. She happily pushed open the door, listening to the familiar chime of the bell and breathing in the warm smell of the bread being baked in the store’s kitchen.

A small man opened the door behind the counter, checking who had come in.

“Ah, Dawn my dear, I’ll be right with ya.” He said, heading back. After a few moments, he repapered from the kitchen with two trays of bread and pastries.

“So, what brings you to the market?” He asked, placing the food in baskets behind the counter.

“Writing’s giving me trouble again.” she replied, watching the small portly man as he busied himself back and forth around the shop.

“Oh, is it? Sorry to hear that.”

He looked like he was going to say something then turned around and continued arranging the baskets of baked goods, counting them and moving them around the shelves. Dawn cocked her head to the side and looked at the baker curiously.

“Jon, are you alright?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, why do you ask?” The man replied, already turning back to face the shelves.

“You’ve moved that same basket three times. To the same two places. And it’s empty...”

“Oh...” Jonathan trailed off. He took the small round glasses off his face and wiped some of the white powdered flour away before placing them back on his balding head and looking back at the concerned woman at the counter.

“Are you ok?”

“William... Have he and the military had any luck catching that murderer?” An odd tone began to creep into Jon’s voice and tense silence filled the air in the shop.

Dawn ignored the question, looking at Jon worriedly.

“Jon, what happened?” She thought about what Will had said earlier and her stomach felt heavy.

“I –” His voice caught in his throat and he stared at the till. For the first time, Dawn noticed the dark circles under his eyes. Jon looked back at Dawn, attempting a smile. “I’ll be fine, never mind. Just tell William I wish him luck.”

Dawn bought some bread and bid him goodbye, frowning as he shuffled back into the kitchens.

Dismal rain had begun to fall, pattering on the grey cobblestones around the square. Dawn sighed and pulled her hood up and made her way through the streets to her home, her breath frosting in the air as she pulled her coat closer around her.

Shivering, Dawn recalled a rhyme her grandfather had told her years ago. It’d held no meaning to her then, and still held little. But she now had an odd feeling about it. Like it was something her grandfather had told her for a reason.

“Spring advances, summer falls, autumn lies, and winter calls.”

The murmuring rain brought Dawn slowly back to reality. Blinking, she realized she had stopped walking, standing in the streets deep in thought.

She shook her head and brushed a lock of blonde hair back into her sable hood, pushing the strange rhyme from her mind.

The rain continued throughout the day, turning from a dismal grey drizzle to an unforgiving downpour.

Dawn rested her head against the cool glass panes as she listened to the rain repeat its drumming mantra on the window. The city life below continued unperturbed by the weather; as it always had. As it always would in the miser-ridden dreary wet city.

Will still wasn’t home.

“That work of his will kill him one day,” she sighed “or worse...”

She took a deep breath and lifted her head from the window, wiping off the condensation she had left on the thick glass. “I will have to talk with him tomorrow about all this,” Dawn looked down to the street again, where two young boys in uniforms were going around to all the tall oil-stained lanterns and lighting them for the night to come “perhaps bed would be good for now, though.”

Her grass-green eyes scanned the cobbled street once more for a sign of her husband. Seeing none, Dawn picked up her dying candle and left the room, the old floorboards creaking under her delicate steps.

“Tomorrow will be a better day, I’m sure of it.”

The night was black as pitch, save for the dim militaristic lantern that served to lead the soldier through the darkness, thin mist, and rain. The cold of Blackwald Forest clawed and clung to the man while he picked his way between the wiry dark trees to the rendezvous point.

With care, he placed the light down on a stump overgrown with weeds and climbing vines, and banged the butt of his rifle on the ground three times. Taking a deep breath, he did it again a little louder.

“What news from the city?”

The soldier jumped, pulling his rifle up and staring down the barrel to the quiet robed figure that had crept up behind him. The newcomer regarded the hostility with an unimpressed expression through his cracked and dirty spectacles.

“What, you’re going to shoot me?” He lifted a thin hand and pushed the barrel of the gun away. “Answer my question guardsman, my master’s patience runs thin with you, as does mine. I ask again; what news from the city?” The robed-figure’s rasping voice was colder than the night, and the man struggled to piece together an appropriate reply.

“The military has been called into action to deal with the attacks. Two of the targets have been afflicted, and another agent is currently dealing with the third.”

“This should have been done a week ago, warden. You are behind schedule and we have given you plenty of resources to finish the job,” the newcomer replied, death thickening his speech.

“I-I know sir, please believe me, there is only one master I serve!”

The darkly cloaked man strode past the soldier slowly, all the while staring at him with the same bored expression as he walked around the tiny clearing and back towards the terrified guard, deep in thought.

“It seems then,” he began quietly, rifling through his black and rust-red robes, “we must choose a new target for affliction.”

“Tell me the name, and I will see to it myself. I will not fail you, si-”. The thin man, with startling speed, jammed a syringe into the guardsman’s unprotected neck and injected a foul red substance.

His parched lips curled up into a dark smile as the officer doubled over in racking blood-flecked coughs.

“No, warden. You will not.”