

Women in Men's Waistcoats

Fog as thick as wool blew in off the ocean and filled the alleys of New Albion. The heels of Peggy's boots clattered loudly as she ran. She knew the streets well, she had been working them for the last ten years, but every time she thought she had lost him the man was there, strolling slowly, his polished cane tapping lightly on the stone street. *Tap, tap, tap.*

"Leave me alone!" she screamed. She tripped over rubbish left for the sweepers and sprawled onto the filthy street in a pile of skirts. *Tap, tap, tap.* Peggy opened her eyes and saw the elegantly dressed man standing over her.

"Are you well madam? It seems you have had a fall." He offered her a white gloved hand. "May I assist you?"

"You stay away!" Peggy pulled out a small pistol from her garter. The gentleman pulled back his hand, his smile turning cold and sharp.

It was eight o'clock in the morning when Sister Ruth knocked on the entrance to the Brides of Michael. She sniffed with disapproval at the heavily carved doors depicting the Archangel slaying a dragon. She asked the Lord's forgiveness for the mistrusting thoughts that filled her head. The Brides were after all a branch of the Sisters of Mercy, albeit a highly secretive branch.

The heavy doors opened with a short burst of steam and she came face to face with Mother Superior Agnes Broadshield. Sister Ruth had heard rumours of the Mother Superior and her mechanical left arm but she had never lain eyes on the tall woman with cold eyes.

"Good morning Sister."

"Good morning Mother Superior I have an invitation for you to attend Mother Ignatius for tea after the Terce prayers," said Sister Ruth, trying to keep her nerve. The Mother Superior and the constant hiss of her mechanical arm was making her more uncomfortable by the second.

"Did she say why she wanted to have tea with me?"

"I'm not fortunate enough to be in Mother Ignatius's confidence, Mother Superior. I was only instructed to bring the message."

"Then tell Mother Ignatius I shall see her at tea."

"Good day to you," Sister Ruth bobbed her head with respect and after one fleeting glance at the hissing arm she hurried away as fast as was polite.

To say that Mother Ignatius was a formidable woman would have been an understatement. To the poor, the unfortunate and those needing firm guidance she was pleasant and understanding. Towards the Brides of Michael and especially Agnes Broadshield she had a very suspicious disposition thinly veiled by a mask of pleasantries. Still, Agnes did her best to get along with the older woman even if she longed at times to knock some sense into her with her mechanical arm. If Mother Ignatius was summoning her something must have been wrong in the city of New Albion.

"Mother Agnes, so kind of you to take time out of your busy day to have tea with me," Mother Ignatius said. The slightly patronizing tone that she used when speaking to Agnes irked her no end.

"It's no trouble at all Mother Ignatius, you know how I enjoy the conversations we have about doing the Lord's work."

“Indeed. I see that you are still wearing your red habits,” Mother Ignatius frowned at the deep burgundy of the cloth.

“And I always shall. It is the colour that the Brides of Michael are called to wear.”

“I suppose it does match the line of...” her nose screwed up in distaste, “*work* that you do.”

“Yes and it does have the advantage of not showing blood stains.”

Agnes smiled sweetly at the older woman and calmly sipped her tea. Mother Ignatius’s thin lips pressed tightly together but she didn’t react. Agnes wondered why she even tolerated the sour woman.

Back in the Frozen North the name of Agnes Broadshield struck fear into the hearts of grown men and children alike. *Skjaldbreidur*, The Broadshield, they had called her in the Norseman language. Tales of her exploits would have the strongest running in fear. But New Albion was not the Frozen North and the old woman in front of her made her want to rant to Saint Michael for sending her into such exile. If it wasn’t for the fact the Archangel had appeared to her in a dream telling her to go she certainly wouldn’t have been in this strange and steaming....

“Agnes!” Mother Ignatius’s voice was a whip cracked through her thoughts.

“What? I’m sorry. It’s been a long night.”

“So you’ve heard the news already then?” Mother Ignatius asked irritably.

“What news?”

“The murder of that unfortunate last night of course.” Mother Ignatius thrust the morning paper at her. There was a small printed article detailing the murder of a prostitute named Margaret Childer.

“According to the coroner she was de-sanguinated. It’s not the first body found like this either. I thought this was something you were meant to prevent from happening.”

“Even I cannot be everywhere at once.”

“The last thing we need is for this sort of killer to cause a panic. I suggest you serve your purpose.”

“Believe me Ignatius, I will,” Agnes said as she got to her feet, the newspaper crumpling in her hand.

“Remember Agnes, be discreet. I suggest you don’t take that native girl with you.”

Agnes stopped in her tracks and turned around sharply.

“You mean Sister Rose, the poor Aboriginal girl we took in because her mother, a village wise woman, was raped by a group of soldiers and a New Albion priest last summer. Would that be the native girl to whom you were referring?”

Mother Ignatius flushed red with anger and embarrassment. Agnes didn't wait for a reply as she slammed the door behind her.

When Agnes crashed through the doors of the Brides quarters the few girls that were lingering in the halls disappeared. She ripped off the stifling veil and tossed it into a far corner before running her hands through her black hair.

“Meetin' went well then?” a girl of about sixteen was standing to one side watching her. She wore large heavy boots, men's trousers cut off at her knees and a corset under an evening shirt. Her hair was pinned up lazily and a spot of grease had been smeared up the side of her nose. She had a screwdriver in one hand and was casually fixing screws into a small metal box.

“The meeting went as well as to be expected, Constance.”

“Bin' a murder?” Constance didn't even look up from the contraption in her hand.

“I'm afraid so.”

“Ya know Rosie has been talkin' to herself again. Maybe you should check on her.”

“Thank you Constance that sounds like an excellent idea.”

“I 'ave those all the time and yet everyone seems surprised,” she said before turning around and wandering back towards her workshop. “Come by later. Got something to show ya.”

The 'native girl' as Ignatius had so racistly called her was outside in the gardens sitting under a tree. They had convinced her to wear a light cotton dress but she still wouldn't cover her head or her feet. Her brown toes were dug into the grass and she was humming to herself.

“Good morning Rose,” Agnes said as she sat down on the grass beside her, “How are you today?”

“Good, sun's out.” She smiled big and white at the sky.

“Constance says that you have been troubled. Everything alright?”

“Didn't mean to make little Cog worry. Been having bad dreams at night. Bad noise on the air.”

“You know we talked about how the air ships won’t hurt you. They just carry people like boats on the water.”

“This not those ships. This is bad voice. Man voice. It whispers things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Just bad things. Talks about blood. Like it’s something real important. I get feelings from it. Like flashes of this colour,” Rose pulled on the sleeve of Agnes’s habit.

“There has been murders in the city, Rose. Will you come and tell me if you hear the voice again? No matter what time, day or night?”

“I hope you can stop it. I can’t hear the stars singing over it.”

“Well we certainly can’t have that.”

Leaving the girl to her musings Agnes made her way to the plan room and pulled a small lever by the door. A high pitched bell sounded and within moments the women that made up the Brides of Michael began arriving. Lily, the housekeeper, arrived soon after with a tray of tea that she handed out to the still yawning women. Their duty was usually performed at night so anything before midday was an early rising.

“What’s this all about Skjaldbreiður?” Bryndis asked as she took her tea. Bryndis, or simply Bryn, was Agnes’s second in command and was the only one that had come with her from the Frozen North. Like most of the women there she wore a variation of men and women’s garments. Skirts and bustles were far too cumbersome for most of the activity they were involved in. The nun’s habits were merely for show.

“We have a job. Ignatius showed me the papers today and there has been multiple murders in the city,” Agnes’s voice cut out all chatter within the room. “While this is nothing new these bodies have been de-sanguinated.”

“*Vampir*,” Bryndis muttered, her grey eyes growing cold.

“I know we’ve seen some weird stuff but a vampire? I didn’t think they even existed!” interrupted Julianna.

“They exist. The few that Bryn and I discovered here on our arrival scattered or were killed. This one is different though. He’s hunting within the city where as the others were just savages on the outskirts.”

“Apart from the blood missing how do we know that’s what we are up against?” Susan asked as she pushed her glasses up her nose.

“Do any of you ladies, besides Bryn, know what a Renfield is?” the room was silent except the hissing of her arm so Agnes continued, “A Renfield is a person that is usually psychic or an extreme sensitive. When a vampire of considerable power takes residence in a city a Renfield is the first to know. Vampires project their feelings and intentions through a different wave length. It’s how they can communicate with each other over long distances. Usually if the vampire is aware of a Renfield they try and turn them, make them a human servant or kill them. We know that we are dealing with a powerful, ancient vampire because of Rosie. She is a Renfield.”

“Does she know that?” Bryndis asked.

“She knows she can hear it when no one else can and that is enough. She doesn’t need to be frightened any more. While she’s within the walls of the convent she will be fine. It’s hallowed ground. Maggie, I want you to find records of all new ships that have arrived in New Albion in the past month, that includes passenger lists. Julianna and Sarah I want you to investigate the latest murder. Find her pimp if she had one. Constance, there are some new weapons that we are going to need. Susan I want you to go to the coroners and get the files of all the murders,” Agnes instructed, “We are running out of time with this. Once he knows we are onto him he will leave town without a trace. I know you all hate working days but that is the time we are at the advantage in this particular case. Get what you can today and if anyone is going to hinder us we will just break into their offices tonight. Either way we need to get the information. You all know what you need to be doing so get on with it.”

They all filed out without complaining until Bryndis was the only one left. She pulled a cigarette out of a silver case and lit it. Unlike the other women who made the effort to look like proper ladies when they went out Bryndis refused to wear any kind of dress. She still wore her grey trousers, high boots and a loose long sleeved shirt that laced up the front. She was like looking at the North; a combination of grey

blues, pale skin and long hair the colour of snow. She was Agnes's best friend, confidant and the only person she truly trusted.

"You know if we are dealing with an Ancient these children will be vampire fodder," Bryndis said as she blew out a silvery line of smoke.

"I know but what can I do? With any luck they will be able to track it down then you and I will dispose of it. Bastard of a thing. I'm going to have to permanently keep my eyes on the ports now."

"You can't be responsible for everything, Skjaldbreiður. This is a new settlement with little structure or scrutiny. It's perfect for a vampire and other creatures because they are not a threat that these people understand. You heard Julianna. They don't even believe they exist. Back in Europa these girls would have been shown as children to read the signs for vampires. It is no wonder this filth is risking the long voyage to get here."

"You are right of course. I just hate it that Ignatius was the one to point out the murders to me like I am some kind of amateur."

"In the North that bitch would have had her tongue ripped out of her head long ago. I do not know why you suffer her. You are Skjaldbreiður! Pull that cow into line. She hides behind a god she doesn't believe in and does not know the meaning of true worship."

"Do you regret following me here, Ulfhednar? To this hot place in the service of a god you don't believe in either?" Agnes asked.

Bryndis touched her chest lightly where she had runic symbols tattooed. Before Michael had appeared Agnes had been Agneta and a part of Odin's elite shamanic warriors, the Ulfhednar. Bryndis had followed her when the rest refused to leave the Frozen North where the All-Father roamed.

"I don't believe in this new god but I believe in you Skjaldbreiður and that is enough for me. If you say this angel visited you and told you to come to this place, I believe it. You are no liar. At least this angel is a warrior and understands our ways. If you would've come to me trying to win me over with love and forgiveness I would have killed you."

"I knew better than to try. I will always be grateful for you coming though. This new Australia is just as harsh as the Frozen North. I am glad that the toughest came with me."

"So am I because otherwise you would be against this creature yourself."

“Very true. Come on then, let’s go and see what Constance has been up to.”

“I haven’t heard any explosions from there in a while so I’m thinking whatever it is she has moved on from dynamite.”

“One can only hope.”

Constance or Little Cog as the girls sometimes called her, had been found by Agnes five years earlier. She was caught stealing parts from a clock makers shop and when questioned she explained she needed the parts for her flying machine. Agnes had been sceptical until the girl had shown her a miniature dirigible that young Constance planned on flying away in. Looking at her now Agnes realised that she was still the grease stained street urchin despite a sharp mind and a good education. The only thing that had really changed was that Constance now turned her agile mind into weapons manufacturing.

“So Constance what is it that you wanted to show me?” Agnes asked.

“Well for starters I made you this handy little modified crossbow if you would like to give it a try,” she said and passed the weapon over. It was the size of pistol but it had four draw backs on it that revolved to the next one once a bolt was released. Agnes aimed it an abused straw dummy and fired off a few.

“I’m surprised that it revolves so smoothly.”

“What’s the point of making something that’s going to take forever to roll ‘round?” Constance asked. “Also I thought this would interest you; seeing how we are dealing with a vampire and all. Something I came up a little while ago when I was readin’ up on different creatures.” She pulled out what appeared to be a large bullet casing but was actually a thin silver stake.

“Why is it hollow?” Bryndis asked as she turned it over in her hands.

“Because that’s where you stick this.” Constance pulled out a thin homemade stick of dynamite and slid it into the shaft. “Special recipe. Has wood splinters in it and silver fragments. You put it in the casing, light it, jam it into a vampire and it doesn’t matter if you don’t get its heart because the dynamite explodes and puts silver and wood all through their body.”

“And you made this for fun one day after reading a story about a vampire?” Agnes questioned.

“I think it may ‘ave been a werewolf actually but I’ve been ‘round longer than the other girls so I have gotten to the stage where I’m open to believin’ anything.”

“Where did you get the silver?” Bryndis asked. “It’s pure.”

“Yeah...well...let’s just say the Sisters of Mercy may discover some of their silver chalices missin’.”

“Still the thief.”

“You ain’t no saint beggin’ your pardon,” Constance sniffed.

Bryndis smiled as she casually flipped the stake over in her hand, testing the weight. She caught it mid-air and threw it at the dummy, skewering it right between the eyes.

“Perhaps this one might not end up as vampire fodder after all.”

“Got no intention of any of us being a cozy drink, that’s why I made this,” Constance held up the metal box Agnes had seen her working on earlier.

“What is it?” It looked like a metal jewellery box but she could see small cogs ticking round like a clock.

“I haven’t had the chance to test it yet so don’t get too excited. Basically it’s a clockwork bomb. You set the timer by the small levers on the side and you run like buggery. I can fill it with anything to use as a projectile so in this case I will fill it with some of these.” She held up short silver tipped wood stakes. “Bomb goes off and these get exploded in a million directions. I wasn’t really sure if you needed holy wood or not but um...if the Sisters mention something about missin’ crosses just ignore them. Also I have refitted some of these,” she indicated to a pile of waistcoats. “I know the girl’s love a bit of cross dressin’ when they go out but these will protect them a little better.”

Agnes lifted one for inspection. “These are heavy; what did you do to them?”

“I stitched some plates into them. They should slow a bullet or turn a knife, especially if they remember to wear their steal corsets underneath.”

“Constance, you are dangerously close to being brilliant,” Agnes smiled.

“Oh I know it.”

It was dusk when Julianna and Sarah walked the back alleys of Queens Warf in search of anyone who knew the late Margaret Childer. To keep appearances, they had arrayed themselves in dresses, though not too lavishly. This part of New Albion wasn't a place that well to do ladies were seen.

Air ships, dirigibles and water crafts could be seen in the distance at the docks waiting for repairs. The pair stood for a while watching the sun fade on the water and the ships in the air moving steadily out over the city. Once it was full dark the streets began to stir and fill with undesirables, streetwalkers, illegal drinking taverns with two up and dice players on street corners.

"Let's get to work," Sarah said, "You know Broadshield didn't want us out too late. This one has got her worried."

"Yeah but a vampire Sarah? I find the whole thing a bit farfetched."

"Keep your voice down. These people will be scared enough with a serial killer on the loose. I understand your speculation but you have only been a part of the order for six months. Trust me on this, if Broadshield and Bryndis say it's a vampire then it is one. Don't question it or them because it will get you killed."

"Bryndis scares me a bit," Julianna admitted.

"She scares everyone Jules. Get focussed because we don't have much time."

After an hour of subtly questioning (and sometimes paying) prostitutes they found out that Peggy Childer had been under the wing of a pimp named Alfie Winton. Alfie was found on Albert Street, smoking a cigarette and drinking a pint in a seedy sailor's tavern, *The Ships Wheel*.

"Are you Alfie Winton?" Julianna approached.

"Depends who's asking," the man replied. He fit the description that Connie-May, a walker from Bligh Street, had given them. A man of solid build, not exactly fat but big. He was balding at the front and had a scar on his neck, the result of an exploding piston accident that had occurred while he worked on an airship.

"If you are Alfie than the next round is on me," Sarah said and smiled. She was a pretty girl with glossy brown hair and she knew how to charm even the toughest of men when she had to.

"If you'll be helping keep me company than I'll happily tell you I am in fact the one and only Alfred Winton." Four drinks later Sarah finally approached the subject of Peggy.

“I heard you used to help her out. You know, if she had any trouble with rough blokes not paying,” she commented, “That’s a brave thing. Standing up for us poor defenceless women. This world is a dark and terrible place, it’s lucky we still have men like you around.” Sarah shivered to emphasise her point.

“I do my best like any man should. There are some terrible men in this town and it’s not the ones you would think. Most of the lads in this place are honest hardworking folk who love a drink and a bit of pussy to ease their troubles. It’s those toffs up town you really need to watch out for. They think they’re better than us in their fancy motorised coaches.”

“Did Peggy start to hang out with chaps like that?” Julianna asked breathily, as if Alfie’s words were solid advice that she should heed.

“Peggy was a good girl but she didn’t have a lick of sense at times. She knew enough to charge the richer men double her going rate though. We both benefitted when those dandies who came down to dance with the ladies of the night. Some of these rich blokes have peculiar tastes when it comes to bedroom games. Peggy learnt that the hard way.”

“What do you mean?” Sarah asked as she bought him another drink, “I’m new to this profession and I’d rather hear the worst from someone I can trust. I can trust you can’t I Alfie?”

“Course you can love. I picked you for an amateur. Mistress of a rich place turn you out when the Master got a bit too fresh eh? Oh don’t look so surprised girl. Happens to a lot of pretty maids. You speak like a proper lady you do. I used to work on the airship liners so my speaking is a lot more proper than most of the blokes down this end of town. Nice talking will get you far with the fancy to do fellows.”

“You are a clever man Alfie to pick up on that but do tell us about Peggy. I don’t want to end up killed in the street because I didn’t know how to spot the queer ones.” Alfie sipped his stout and wiped the foam off his mouth with the back of his hand.

“A week or so leading up to Peggy dying this motor carriage turned up in Windmill Street asking about girls. The man was just a steward out to collect a girl for his boss. But the boss was very particular in his tastes. She needed to be pale, the steward said, with black hair and blue eyes. Young Peggy fit that

description to a tee so I told him about her. Peggy was a good girl, who kept herself clean and knew how to handle men and their appetites.”

“Then what happened?” Julianna asked, gripping Alfie’s sleeve in distress. Obviously pleased with the contact and his rapt audience Alfie continued.

“Well Peggy comes back at the end of the night, shaken up like, really pale too. She had been given food and wine by the steward and had met his boss. She said that she remembered him being very handsome but after that everything got hazy. She blamed the fancy wine they gave her. Went straight to her head. She was a bit ill but nothing too serious. Besides she had made triple her night’s wages so what was there to worry about? Two days later the carriage rolls in and asks for Peggy again. Needing the money she obliged. This went on for about a week. Every time she came back she was tired but like I said these rich boys have odd tastes. Who knows what he made her do!”

“What about the night she died. Did the black carriage come for her?”

“Matter of fact it did but Peggy wouldn’t go. She was a complete fright when I knocked on her lodging door. Told her she needed to make money for us to live but she wouldn’t listen to me. Crazy she was. I don’t know if she got a brain fever or what. Kept ranting about what happens in the darkness and the voices talking to her in her head. Took off into the night and the next time I saw her she was lying in a pile of rubbish, stone dead without a single mark on her.”

“Mother Mary,” Sarah whispered and crossed herself, “It’s just like a penny dreadful. Did Peggy have any family?”

“Not that I know of. The lady who runs the rooms is keeping her few things in case the family turns up to claim them. Good rooms if you need some. Discreet place if you have the coin to stay there.”

“Would you escort us?” Julianna asked sweetly, “All that frightening talk and a serial killer on the loose has scared me right through.”

“It would be my pleasure ladies,” Alfie said. Minutes later they were wandering through the docks when Alfie did something very stupid. Sarah saw the gleam of the knife as he pulled it from his jacket and pushed her roughly against a wall.

“Shh, shh,” he crooned at her, “Now you come here sweetie and stand next to your friend or I will cut her up good you hear?” Julianna bit her lip and hurried to do what he said. “Don’t get me wrong

ladies I don't want to hurt you but you are the most unconvincing tarts I've ever seen. Who are you? Coppers?"

"No sir we just wanted to have a good night is all," Sarah whimpered, her hand creeping back towards her bustle, "We are just two silly maids who wanted to say that we had walked at night where the serial killer hunted."

"Wanted a bit of a taste of the other side did ya? Well I'll give you more than a taste missy." Holding the knife in front of her face he started to lift her skirts with his spare hand, "Don't worry I will be gentle but ya gotta learn not to come to this end of town and act like a cock tease." As he dropped his trousers, Sarah's hand fastened around the butt of the pistol and within the blink of an eye it was pressed hard under Alfie Winton's chin.

"You had better drop that mister," Julianna suggested, "She can be a real unsteady when provoked."

The knife clattered to the ground and in the hazy lamplight Sarah saw the fury in his eyes. She smiled sweetly, "Now Alfred, I thought we were friends. Let me make something very clear to you sir, I don't like being threatened by dock yard trash so you are going to tell me where Peggy used to board and then you are going to turn, walk away and pray that I never see you again. If you try and follow us I will blow your head off. Understand?"

Susan pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose as she leaned closer over the autopsy files she had discreetly copied on the Watts copy press at the coroner's offices. Being located in New Albion's busiest hospital nobody had noticed the mousey girl that was calmly going through their filing system. The few who had asked were told she was a temporary assistant who had been asked to help with the busy workload and this excuse seemed sufficient.

"Oh my," Susan whispered as she studied the woman's profiles, "Isn't that interesting?"

"What is?"

Susan started with alarm as Agnes appeared behind her. Gone was the maroon nuns habit in place favour of black leather pants, high boots, a loose men's shirt and a firm fitting waistcoat. The mechanical arm that Cog had made and perfected for her was resting on her hip.

“These are the profiles for the murdered women,” Susan said and spread them out in front of them. “Each of these women were lower class ladies. Not all prostitutes, just women who seem to have hung around the rougher ends of the city.”

“That doesn’t seem so strange. The lower citizens wouldn’t have been noticed missing straight away,” Agnes replied as she scanned over the files. “What else?”

“The victims all had similar features. All of a pale complexion, hair black and eyes blue. This serial killer has a favourite and it could be how he is selecting his victims.” Susan turned to grab a handful of papers but when she straightened Agnes she was gone.

Agnes charged into one of studies where Maggie was going over shipping logs. “What have you discovered?”

“Nothing too suspicious yet.”

“Well keep looking! Night has fallen and the thing could be out there hunting already. Where are Sarah and Julianna?”

“They haven’t re-returned yet,” Maggie stammered. Agnes very rarely lost her temper even when provoked but she was getting a very bad feeling building in the base of her spine. She used to get the same feeling before a battle when she knew the Ulfhednar were vastly out numbered.

“Tell them to find me the minute they walk through the doors.” She left the girl searching with a new and nervous energy.

Julianna and Sarah caught a tram and headed back to the Brides head quarters at Monte Sant’ Angelo. In Sarah’s satchel were the few items they had bought off Peggy Chilton’s land lord. She had a handful of mad scrawled pages which indicated to them that Peggy had some kind of education before taking it up as a prostitute. There was a torn scrap of a coat of arms that they had found that Agnes or Bryndis might recognise.

Stepping off the tram at the bottom of Church Hill they began the last leg of their journey. Sarah had an uneasy feeling that they had been followed from Albert Street. Surely Alfie Winton wouldn’t be so stupid! She let Julianna talk, all the while holding on to the pistol in her satchel. Sarah slowed her pace as

a man appeared in the street in front of the gates of the Sisters of Mercy. He was tall and dressed neatly in a top hat and tailed suit. His shirt was a crisp white linen and he was leaning gently on a cane. Sarah's hand gripped her weapon tight as he turned towards them with a smile. Glossy black hair fell, in almost feminine waves to his waist and he had a neatly trimmed moustache. Green eyes sparkled at them when he smiled. Despite the friendliness of his smile Sarah felt a coldness building under her ribs.

“Good evening young ladies,” he greeted with a generous bow. His voice carried a heavy accent though his English was perfect.

“Evening sir, may we help you?” Sarah said as she edged towards the walls that sheltered the Brides of Michael. If only they could get to the gate they would be safe.

“I hope you can, lovely doves. I was wondering if this was the residence of Agnes Broadshield?”

“It is late sir, I am sure the Mother Superior would be at her rest,” Sarah said cautiously. She took Julianna's arm and manoeuvred her subtly behind her.

“Mother Superior?” The man started to laugh as if this revelation was the most hysterical thing he had ever heard. “Oh sweet children, let me tell you about your pious Mother Superior. In the Frozen North they call her Skjaldbreiður. She was the terror of the North. Odin was and always will be her only god. That woman has bathed in the hot blood of thousands. She is no nun or saint. She is a warrior; birthed in the fires of war and I have crossed the world for her. But it seems that killing normal *common* folk doesn't get her special attention anymore. So I am sorry little doves but you shall have to do.”

Shots from a pistol fired rapidly outside the walls of the convent. Agnes grabbed her broadsword and ran towards the sound. She could feel a cold sweat at the back of her neck and she put some force into her legs. She pulled back the gates and saw Sarah bloody and sobbing with something cradled in her hands.

“Sarah!” Agnes rushed out to her, her sword held high as she scanned the empty streets. Seeing them alone she hooked her hands under Sarah's arms and dragged her through the red dust into the grounds, slamming the heavy wooden doors behind them. “Sarah? What happened? Tell me!” Sarah looked up at her with true fear in her eyes.

“I shot...I shot at him and he...Julianna,” she sobbed and let go of what she had been holding to her chest. Agnes swallowed her fury as Julianna’s dismembered head rolled onto the dewy grass.

“Who did this?” Agnes snarled as she shook the girl hard by the shoulders.

“He said t-to say, ‘I found you.’”

As the day dawned Bryndis brought back what she could find of Julianna’s body; an arm and half her torso. Where the rest had gone was anyone’s guess. Agnes was particularly grim as they placed the pieces in a freshly dug grave in the convent’s small cemetery. Agnes and the others spoke over her and Bryndis, not really knowing what to say, sung a lament from the Frozen North. She had a strong singing voice and even though the other girls had no idea what she was saying the grief came across and the tears started to flow.

“I will allow until nightfall to grieve. No one is allowed to leave the grounds. Then the hunt for Julianna’s killer will be on.”

“But who is-” Maggie started.

“I will speak of it tonight,” Agnes said bluntly and they didn’t question her further. It wasn’t until Bryndis picked up a shovel and started to fill in the hole that Agnes finally spoke again.

“I will do it,” Agnes said and took the shovel from her.

“Skjaldbreiður, tell me.”

“It was *him*, Bryndis. He has found me,” she muttered as she dropped the first shovel of dirt on top of Julianna’s remains.

“Orczy? That piece of filth has nine lives,” Bryndis cursed.

“He has only one that happens to be immortal. I stabbed him in the heart Bryndis. I cut the damn thing from his chest even as he was tearing my arm off. How could the bastard have lived?”

“It doesn’t matter. He did. Now we will kill him together.”

At noon the door to the Brides of Michael was banged on heavily. Without caring who saw her out of her habit Agnes opened the heavy door.

“Can I help you Sister?”

The tight lipped young woman who had delivered an invitation to her the day before stood holding a long black box. A single red rose had been placed on top of it tied with a black satin bow.

“An autocarriage just delivered this for you Mother Superior,” the woman looked disapproving at Agnes’s black leather attire.

“Thank you,” Agnes said as she took the package, “Did you notice anything strange about the deliverer?”

“Should I have Mother Superior?”

“Thank you Sister.” Agnes shut the door and carried the package to Constance’s workshop.

“What am I looking for?” Constance said as she looked over the box.

“Anything; trip devices, evidence of traps you name it. I don’t want the thing exploding when I open it.”

“Who is it from?” Constance asked as she put her magnifying goggles on.

“Julianna’s murderer.”

“Right. Well it seems clean to me but I am going to step back as you open it, just in case.”

“Thank you very much,” Agnes said and opened the box before her nerve gave out.

“What is it?” Constance asked from the doorway.

“Get Bryndis,” Agnes said through her teeth. The blood was draining from her face and she didn’t want Constance to see what was in the box. Bryndis pushed open the door to Agnes’s rooms and found her drinking whiskey.

“What’s going on? Constance said to find you in her workshop but you were gone already. What’s in the box?”

“See for yourself,” Agnes muttered.

Bryndis opened it and saw what had undone her fierce leader so effectively. In the box was one long white arm, perfectly embalmed with a note in between its fingers. Nested in the heavy velvet beside it was a large vial of blood. Bryndis took the note and read it, “Drink of my blood, become my child and your body shall be whole once more.”

“Hundreds of years old and still doesn’t know how to write a decent love letter.” Agnes laughed but it was high pitched and slightly erratic. Bryndis took the whiskey from her and had a large mouthful.

“Did you think about drinking the blood?” she asked.

“Of course I did but the price is too high. Besides this mechanical arm is much stronger than my old one.”

“Are you going to tell the others about this?” Bryndis asked as she placed the note back into the box.

“I must. They have a right to know. Tonight we hunt the bastard down.”

“Listen to me, Skjaldbreiður. I know you have decided to follow this Archangel but the demon that we hunt is a creature of the old times. We must hunt it in the old way. We have its blood so we have a way to track it.”

“But we don’t have any mead and we have no time to distil it.”

“I saved some,” Bryndis admitted looking a little guilty. “It’s War Mead.”

“Then tonight old friend we shall be Ulfhednar once more.”

“I met Baron Kalman Tétény Orczy when I was twenty and on the third hunt with the women of the Ulfhednar,” Agnes began that afternoon. “He had been killing villagers and gypsies in Romania. We tracked him to the base of the Carpathian Mountains. It was winter and we were half frozen and starving. He used this to his advantage, picking off our team at night. He played mind games on us, tried to make us kill each other, make us walk off cliffs or wander out in the snow.”

“One night he came to the camp and kidnapped me. He took me to a cave high in the mountain passes. For three days he fed off me,” Agnes swallowed, momentarily overcome by the memories of that time. The faces in front of her were surprised. She had never shared very much about her life before she had saved or recruited them.

“On the fourth day, while he rested beneath the earth I managed to free myself from the ropes he had bound me with. There was no where I could go but into the freezing snow so I planned my attack. I search for anything sharp I could use for a weapon because he had thrown my weapons over the cliff. Vampires are more vulnerable when they first wake because they are slow and groggy from the death sleep.”

“This was my only chance so as the sun began to fade I hid close to where he was buried, waiting with the long sliver of rock I had found. He had only just dug himself out when I fell on him. I stabbed him over and over in his chest the both of us writhing on the floor covered in blood. He grabbed my arms to stop me but I was beyond fear or pain. I stabbed and clawed until my hand gripped his heart and I pulled it from his chest. He had torn my left arm off and he was still clutching it when I pushed his corpse off the cliff and tossed his heart after him.”

“How did you get back to the others without bleeding to death?” Susan asked, her almond eyes wide.

“With difficulty, but I did it. Orczy lived and I want to know how. He’s here to seek revenge on me so I offer you a choice tonight on whether you follow me or not. I won’t think any less of you if you don’t.”

“Agnes?” Rosie stumbled into the room, clutching her ears.

“Rosie what’s wrong?” Constance asked as she helped the girl to a chair.

“The noise. It’s so painful. Make the noise stop,” Rosie wept as Agnes crouched down in front of her. “He’s singing missus, terrible songs of pain and death and sadness. He wants you.” Rosie started to cry until she saw the polished black box then started to scream.

“Cog, get her out of here and into the chapel,” Agnes commanded before adding softly, “Give her milk of the poppy so she sleeps. I don’t want Orczy making her suffer or do tricks tonight.”

“What was the name of the place where you met him,” Maggie asked suddenly, “The mountain range.”

“It was a part of the Carpathian Mountains. Why?”

“I have to check something,” she said as she hurried from the room and returned a moment later with a heavy ledger. “An airship arrived from a port in Europa about four weeks ago. The name of the ships wasn’t ringing any bells until now. Look here, the 12th of March, a Phoenix Airship Model DK12 called *The Carpathian* docked in New Albion.”

“A DK12,” whistled Constance as she came back into the room, “That’s living in luxury. He would need at least seventy men just to crew it.”

“They would all be vampires or human servants,” Bryndis pointed out, “We should do the world a favour and blow it up.”

“If that’s your line of thinking I ‘ave just the thing,” Constance said as her smile grew wider.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Bryndis filled two horns with the War Mead that she had carried over thousands of miles.

Agnes held up the vial of Orczy’s blood. “I am sure.”

She unstopped the cork and using her thumb to limit the flow she tipped a few drops into each horn. She plugged the vial again carefully before putting her thumb to her mouth and rubbing the blood residue along her gums. Bryndis handed her a horn and said the old prayers over them. Agnes whispered the prayer of Saint Michael over them for extra luck.

The mead was warm and fizzy on her tongue. With her senses heightened by the vampire blood she could identify every ingredient in it. In her minds eye she could see the bees collecting the pollen from the summer flowers to make the honey that had been mixed into it.

“Agneta!” Bryndis’s voice pulled her back from getting lost in the sensations that were flooding her. The pupils of Bryndis’s eyes were so large only a sliver of grey could be seen around them.

“Let’s go,” Agnes said as she pulled on a leather coat to hide her weapons. “I hope I have not led them all to their deaths tonight.” They walked out of the safety of the convent and were headed towards the docks.

“They saw what happened to Julianna,” growled Bryndis. “They know what they are in for.”

Sarah glared at *The Carpathian* from the top of a warehouse in Queens Dock. The airship floated, grey and magnificent, the side of the ship branded with the Orczy coat of arms. Sarah fished out the scrap of paper she had found amongst Peggy’s belongings. It was the same insignia. Peggy had the answer all along. Sarah ground her teeth together.

“Focus Sarah,” Susan said and shook her arm.

“Come on, we can grieve for Jules later. Let’s blow this sonnova bitch to Heaven!” Constance said as she fixed another bolt into the strange machine she was constructing.

“You are enjoying this far too much,” Sarah muttered as she passed her the metal tube that lay near her foot.

“Course I am. It’s not every day I get to blow up an airship and test a new toy at the same time.”

“Wait a minute! You don’t even know if it *works*?” Susan demanded as she cleaned her glasses furiously.

“Oh it’ll work,” Constance assured, “I just don’t know how big the explosion will be.”

On Phillip Street Agnes’s senses were burning up. She could smell dust, sewage, the sea and the nervous sweat on the back of her neck. She had forgotten how vampire blood made her feel; vibrantly strong, powerful and more alive than ever before. Bryndis held her gun up and didn’t care who saw it. Her eyes were studying the roof tops above them.

“How did you manage to find your way back to the Ulfhednar in the mountains?” she asked, “I was fighting in Greenland at that time.”

“I drank his blood,” Agnes admitted for the first time since it happened, “I stayed in the cave and licked his blood off the stones. I was covered in it so I sucked it from my clothes. I took my soaked shirt off and bound what was left of my arm with it. I passed out in pain soon after. When I woke it was all but healed.”

“And they never questioned you about it?”

“They knew what I had done as soon as they inspected my wounds. They never asked, they never had to. They kept the fevers down when the blood wore off. All of that and I still failed to kill Orczy.” Using their extra strength they scaled the wall of the Town Hall and positioned themselves on the roof.

“I hope Cog’s contraption works,” Bryndis said as she pulled out her revolving cross bow and loaded it with stakes.

“She has never failed me before.”

Agnes closed her eyes and tried to feel out Orczy. The blood was pumping through her but she couldn’t detect whether he was close to them or not. A massive explosion erupted near the docks and

Agnes opened her eyes in time to see a flaming projectile hit *the Carpathian*. The hydrogen ignited on impact, decimating the ship and making the building shake beneath them.

“Holy Odin,” Bryndis whispered, “I’m happy she’s on our side.” Agnes clutched her chest as the vampire blood in her pulsed rapidly.

“He wasn’t on there,” Bryndis shuddered as she gripped Agnes. “We just made him mad.”

“Indeed,” a voice said. Bryndis fired a stream of stakes towards the figure that stood at the end of the roof top. It screamed in agony as it pulled them from its arms and chest.

“Where is your master?” Agnes demanded, her pistol pointed at its head. He looked like Orczy but it was only an illusion.

“Everywhere,” it laughed before its head exploded.

“Cog’s special bullets?” Bryndis asked as she reloaded.

“What did he mean *everywhere*?”

“Oh I wonder,” said another vampire as it landed in the ash of the first one.

“I was pondering the same thing,” said another.

“As was I,” the chorus of voices sounded around them.

“This makes things far more interesting,” Agnes smiled.

Bryndis started to fire indiscriminately and Agnes followed her lead. Their enemies were fast but the vampire blood running in their veins helped even the odds. A female pounced on her and Agnes punched her in the face with her mechanical arm, shattering the bones beneath it. The creature’s cry of pain was cut short as a bullet fired into her heart.

Bryndis ducked and twirled out of the hands of her assailant before planting a loaded silver stake in its chest. Agnes leapt out of the way as it exploded, showering the roof top with chunks of smouldering gore. As soon as one fell another two appeared. Agnes was on her second set of pistols and running out of ammunition fast.

“Tick tock!” Bryndis shouted as she took the head off a vampire with her broadsword. Agnes lit a small stick of dynamite and tossed it into the squirming black and white mass of vampires. Most of them moved before the detonation but it gave Agnes enough time to set the levers on the small clockwork bomb.

“Ticking!” she yelled and slid the box along the slate roofing stones. Bryndis turned and ran towards Agnes, firing random shots behind her. Agnes grabbed her hand and they jumped as the roof of the Town Hall exploded in a rain of silver, wood and gunpowder.

Agnes and Bryndis almost collided with Susan, Constance and Sarah on the corner of Bridge Street.

“Did you see? Did you see?” Constance squealed. “I told you it would work!”

“The whole of New Albion saw. Very well done,” Agnes winced as she pulled a sliver of holy wood from her arm.

“Did you kill him?” Sarah demanded.

“I’m not sure. We were attacked by many look a likes so one could have been him.” Her head was pounding from the heavy landing and the wearing effects of the blood.

“He won’t back away from this fight if he lived,” Bryndis said gravely.

“If he survived he will be hiding in the city. He has no ship to escape on.”

Far above the city in a small luxury dirigible Baron Kalman Tétény Orczy lit a thin cigar and adjusted the sight of his telescope. He felt his blood in Agnes fading to the barest connection. The docks were burning from the wreckage of *The Carpathian* and the roof of the Town Hall would need replacing.

“Oh Agneta my love,” he smiled as he surveyed the wreckage, “This game is only beginning.”

END.