

## The Lady of the Lowlands

Part of the Bloodstone Bestiary

*Author's Note: The following story is not safe for work and contains content that might be triggering to some readers.*

“Dark things begat by dark deeds haunt the lowlands, and it is best that you stay away from them lest you be caught up in their troubles, children...”

There was no fairy tale rhyme to ward children away from the lowlands. Rather the warning was painted in black and white for them. Travel from the village and stay in the lowlands after dark, and you would never return. The town would never find your body because they would never seek it out. It was too dangerous. It wasn't just children that didn't return from this place. Others who wandered into the morass found themselves lost. Those up to no good would venture close enough to dispose of evidence, knowing that the dark things beyond would destroy any signs of the atrocity they had committed.

Here in the muck lay one such case, half-buried in the cold, wet mud of the lowlands. She was alone. While she lived, it was clear that there was not much soul left in her. Her face was bruised and torn, and her body fared little better. Her open wounds would fester in the mud, tattered remnants of her clothes offering scant protection from the things unseen that would twist and poison her blood. Yet, as the sun set beyond the horizon, she began to stir. Little by little, she summoned the strength to endure. She crawled in the muck at first, dragging her body towards the distant setting light.

As the evening grew dim, she raised to her knees, finding a tree to help pull her form up and out of the mud. She trudged towards higher ground, knowing that her time was short. She was determined, unwavering. If she stayed in this place, she knew she would die. Perhaps more importantly, she would be forgotten, and crimes committed against her would never be known. She was too weak to make good headway, though. Her legs pushed her as far as they could before dark. Each step dragged muck with her, the very ground holding her as if trying to pull her back and under the darkened and damp earth of the lowlands. Her blood loss made her sluggish. She had little energy, and her will could not overcome that simple physical truth.

She heard movement. The wet footfalls of something following her. She tried to pick up her speed as those wet thuds came closer and closer. They grew louder and louder. Soon, it moved from one pair of closing footfalls to two, and then three. She heard the noises begin between her and her distant goal of the border of the lowlands. She attempted to adjust her direction. Twisting to one side and going where the sounds were the quietest. Still, they persisted. They grew closer and closer.

Ravenous snarls were soon enough finding her ears. Whatever harried her had found her scent through all this muck and grime. It had no trouble tracking every change in direction she made. She knew that if she stopped, she would be overtaken. Her only option was to keep moving,

to keep stumbling through the mud and the dark. She fought through the pain and weakness to keep herself going. If she failed, she would be killed - but she wasn't faster than her hunters.

After a few moments, as the noises grew loud and close, there was a scent. It was the putrid scent of decay, the very essence of death itself. It forewarned of their arrival, and despite her desire to gag and cough, she kept from it. Any extra noise would have helped them hone in on her, and that was something she could not have. Every extra second counted. If only she could buy a little more time, she might be able to make it to the edge. She might be able to escape.

A dark figure leaped from the shadows near her. It was a blur to her, but she responded quickly enough to avoid its pounce. For a second, she believed that had been her doing, but that thought was quickly and irrevocably quashed when a second appeared in front of her.

There stood what was once a man, nearly six feet tall. His body was decayed, broken, and torn skin pulled tight against the body. His jaw hung helplessly open and she felt a cold chill break upon her with the mere view of the creature. There was a glow within it, a dim and sickly green that seemed to leak out from thinner patches of skin and muscle. It existed behind its eyes, and as it made a guttural growl towards her, the lights within flared brighter.

She had tried to keep running. She tried to pass it by. With one arm outstretched, it caught her as if she was nothing. Tips of its boney fingers bore into her naked flesh, the tips raking skin and muscle away as its grip tightened around her arm. It pulled hard. Its strength was impossible. It pulled her by her arm and yet was powerful enough to tear her off her feet, and as it did, there was an incredible pain in her shoulder and a deafening pop from inside her arm. Then, she smashed to the ground with the creature atop her. It pressed her hard into the muck and sought to hold her there.

It wasn't just the one. Another grabbed her and its claws tore into her flesh to hold her down. Yet another found her leg, and she felt teeth sink into her skin and flesh, and the ripping pain of her flesh being torn from the bone. There was a moment of realization, of loss, as the creatures worked to tear her apart. She felt a wave of anger she had never known for those moments. She was unfinished, unwilling to die here, to die now. She wouldn't. She would get her justice. She would get her chance to see things were made right, that this happened to no one else. She let out a wail; all of her pain made manifest in a single piercing sound that rose through the night.

It was enough. The creatures paused, and they broke away from her. The lights within them flared brightly and they backed away. She had summoned something more dangerous than them, something they feared. She saw him as they parted.

There stood a man in a cloak and a mask. Behind the eyes of the mask was a burning green light where his eyes should have been. His skin was pale, but he was living. She saw him take a breath. She saw his chest rise and fall. In his hand was a gnarled staff of twisted, petrified wood and bone. He stepped closer to her, and the beasts parted and released her. They snarled at him, and with a wave of his hand, they moved further back and away from her. The masked man knelt in the mud next to her, and he offered her a hand.

She instinctively tried to reach for the offered hand, but her main arm had been dislocated. She couldn't feel it, and she struggled even to bend forward just a bit.

He shushed her as she tried to move. He reached a hand across her and took her other hand. There was a moment of warmth that flowed through her as he gave her hand a small squeeze. He gave a smile, the wrinkles of it visible just beyond his mask. It made her calm. The pain was still there, but the wounds seemed less grievous to her. It had been shocking, unbearable. But now, it felt as if she could deal with it. She sat up slowly but surely, all the while, helped by his guiding hand. Soon enough, she stood with him. He gave her a nod and waited. He didn't say anything, but instead, he walked with her as she moved. She was cautious at first, slowly watching the shadow creatures that had attacked her. They seemed less interested now. She seemed safe.

With a deep breath, she began her trek back towards the edge of the lowlands. It took her a few minutes, but eventually, she realized that he was guiding her. Once he had discovered her destination, he took the lead. It was just a few steps ahead of her. Despite the time it took to walk through the lowlands that evening, she did not speak to him and he did not speak to her. He only walked in silence for what felt like an hour. She appreciated what he had done for her and despite the wounds that still plagued her, it felt that with him there she held the strength to go on.

Eventually, near the witching hour, they reached the edge of the lowlands. The gentle hills rose out of the muck and towards the forests and fields of her home village. The masked man's hand rose, and he pointed to a flickering light in the distance. Her eyes followed his point. Could she have been lucky enough that there was a camp nearby? She felt his hand drop hers. He turned to her and gave a single nod. She did not hesitate and quickly stepped up and out of the lowlands. When she looked back to thank him, he was not there. Nor were the things in the dark that had followed them. She was alone.

Cold, she wrapped her arm around herself and began to stumble up the hill. Her wounds still ached, but the hope of finding a way out of here and a second chance made her feel a surge of energy. So, with some speed, she made her way up the hill that night. The campfire came more into view and soon a lone tent and some figures too. She felt her heart swell with excitement and relief as she crested that hill to the camp.

Then it all stopped.

There was a woman, her face frightened and bloodied, her clothes torn. She couldn't hear her whimpers, but she could see the fear twisting her face and the stains left by her tears. It didn't take long for her to realize the two men in the camp. These were the same two that had tossed her in the morass just a few hours prior. They had just finished a drink, from the looks of it, and started back towards the woman. They had no intentions worth considering. She couldn't think of it. She had to stop them, to end this. She was injured, and there was not a lot left in her. Maybe, she thought, she could give the woman a chance to escape. That would be enough for her. With that in mind, she breached the edge of the camp.

She had wanted to yell stop at them, but when her mouth opened, no words came out. There was only a groan. She knew she was frightened and weak, but she had to take action. As they descended on the other woman, she felt that rage return. She would not let them destroy another life out here. Whatever bits of fear she had left her for a moment, and she took a deep breath to scream at them again. As she stepped forward, she let out what she could.

To her surprise, it wasn't a word. It was a wail. It was the same wail she had let out when attacked by those creatures.

The men were startled and jump up and away from the woman, turning to face this new threat. They reached for whatever weapons they had handy. One found a stick, and the other pulled a knife from his belt. Neither advanced, though. Both panicked and stumbled backward. As she stepped forward, they only moved faster and faster away from her. That rage still boiled. She didn't understand why they ran, but she wouldn't let them flee. She felt a surge of energy and rushed forward. One stumbled back and fell, and she raced to take advantage of that.

She saw the fear in his eyes as she was atop him. She let out a yell. Again, it came out a wail, and before her eyes, his body grew old and decayed. The skin on his face tightened, dried, and cracked open His panicked expression must have matched her own and was frozen in time as his breath slowed and stopped, but she did not have time to think about it. His friend launched at her and she raised her arm to defend herself. When his cudgel passed through her arm as if it were mist, everything clicked in her mind.

The realization made her panic.

She let out a terrified wail at his attack. The sound was loud enough, they say, to be heard in the distant village. As the wail faded, the man crumbled to the ground before her, lifeless. His flesh and life torn out of him and blown away like a fire snuffed out by a strong wind. All that remained was a desiccated corpse. Her vision was drawn to the young woman, who lay shaking on the ground, covering her head. She was beyond terrified.

The panicked banshee turned to run back towards the lowlands. Her sight caught a glimpse of the stranger in the mask, standing at the edge of the morass. His hand stretched out and pointed back beyond the camp as she ran towards him. She glanced back, torches from the village riding out to investigate the sound.

The woman would be found. She'd be safe - if scarred.

With the sun starting to peek over the distant horizon when she arrived next to the man, she saw that cracked smile crossed his face again. He offered her a hand as she approached. She hesitated, and after a moment, she took his hand. The sun rose, and she disappeared, only ever to return when dark deeds were dealt near her resting place.