

DEMONGROUND

Reflections of a Darker Future

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TERROR !

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"One-two-three!" screamed the furious crowd of Scottish villagers, and the crude battering ram surged forward once more. With the sound of splintering wood the huge doors blocking the entrance to the abandoned coal mine crashed apart, splinters exploding into the night air heading towards the moon.

"For God and King!" bellowed a red-faced dollymop, brandishing an executioner's axe.

Shouting in victory, the mob of highlanders dropped the old weathered caber and started to charge in through the ruined barrier, the local constable and grimy navies waving their wooden staves and blunderbusses.

In the lead of the angry throng was a lean whippet of man sporting a soft brim hat, swallow tails coat, tight breeches and fine Chase & Adams boots, dapper gentleman's clothes from across the Atlantic. The big Yank looked a toff, but tucked firmly into his black leather belt was a shiny silver badge bearing the Great Seal of the President of the United States, and grasped in his big calloused hands were a brace of ornate Collier pistols, the long tapering .72 barrels of the new style breechloaders gleaming like polished justice in the rosy dimness of predawn.

The name he gave the locals was J.P. Withers, and he was the very first Federal Agent of the brand new organization of American police designed to deal with supernatural criminals. Hopefully. Cocking both of the curved hammers, Withers double-checked to make sure the copper percussion caps were firmly in place. Now was no time for a deadly misfire. As a duly empowered agent of Bureau 13, it was his task to see that the inhuman beast who had plagued Manhattan, and now this peaceful Scottish valley, must never be allowed to kill man, woman, child, or even somebody from France! Hopefully, the silver and wood balls in his primed guns would send the beast to hell, or maybe somewhere even worse.

Although lead by resolute Withers, the brave British posse stopped dead in their tracks as the flickering light of the torches clearly illuminated the interior. The ceiling of the mining tunnel was completely covered with fat chattering bats, thousands of the noisy beasts flapping their leathery wings and foam dripping from their cruel mouths. And the hard stone ground was solid with a living carpet of snarling rats. Millions of beady eyes stared at the humans and the villagers could feel the tangible cloud of their living hate and hunger. Even the one barrister in the crowd felt faint.

Suddenly, a cold wind blew from deep within the old coal shaft, carrying with it a smell of newly turned earth, death and mint leaves. Withers frowned. As always before, that was when the torches sputtered out. But now, bits of hot oakum were used to ignite dozens of whale oil bullseye lanterns, the glass flumes protecting the delicate flames within and brilliant white cones of light brightly illuminated the rocky passage.



The beams bobbed about in frantic search and soon converged on the source of the wind. At the rear of the mine, a dimly seen figure smirked at them and stuck out its long forked tongue. Standing brazen at the rear of the mine entrance, protected by the slaving army of night hunters, was a humanoid creature dressed in a double-breasted Duke Street coat, ruffled shirt, Beau Brummel breeches, roll top boots, and wrapped in a long flowing Spitfields silk cape. Very nice, indeed. However, his skin was deathly pale, his eyes glowing red and his teeth a dentist's nightmare.

"So the colonial thief-catcher and you silly kilt-wearing fools actually did manage to find me," hissed the vampire, exposing every inch of his long white fangs. "Amazing. Bloody incredible."

Incensed, the tartan-clad Scots cursed in anger and started forward, but the bats and rats hissed in dire unison stopping the invasion faster than it had begun. With the entire population of the remote village outnumbered thousands to one, even the alcoholic mayor and the junkyard dog wondered if it was time to try diplomacy? Immediately, the secret band of Freemasons in the group started writing a petition.

"Its a rum deal, my culleys," sneered the inhuman beast in a really bad Rookery accent. "Enter, and my servants will tear you to shreds! Oh, some may live to combat me, but will there be enough?" A truly devilish eyebrow raised in contempt and, self-consciously, he tucked the medical marvel of the recently invented Pierre Fuachard toothbrush deeper into a vest pocket. His personal hygiene was none of their damn business.

"I'm ready for battle!" it panted breathlessly. "Are you?"

Not exactly sure what a lot of that meant, Withers felt sure it was mostly insulting. In reply, the Bureau 13 agent fired both of his Colliers, the silver ball smacking the vampire directly in the chest to no effect, but the wooden ball exploding into splinters from an overload of gunpowder. Damn!

However, his blazing weapons triggered a barrage of blunderbusses, four-barreled 'duck foot' fowlers, horse pistols and muzzleloading rifles from the attending crowd, the strident discharges filled the mine with thunder and flame and boiling clouds of acrid black powder smoke. Wasting no time in a reload, J.P. Withers dropped his spent Colliers, and pulled two squat .66 Newarks from the voluminous pockets of his great coat and fired again. This time cold-iron balls. Then he dropped those and drew from his boots a matched pair of double-barreled Manton conversions. Deadly little barkers, indeed. Withers fired simple lead this time, but only used one pistol to hold the other for reserve. Even he could only carry so many weapons and still be able to walk.

The Scottish mob gave another volley from their blunderbusses and muskets. The assorted fusillade of rounds wildly ricocheted off the back wall and blasted the expensive cloth-

ing of the vampire to pieces.

Contemptuously, the man-beast brushed some imaginary lint off a riddled lapel, took a bit of snuff from his gold Nathaniel Mills box, sneezed and smiled toothily at them.

"Ouch," he chuckled.

The angry crowd made some more angry crowd noises, but much less sure of themselves this time. His flowing white beard bristling in fury, a determined piper doffed his tam o'shanter and started playing the bagpipes at full volume, but even that vicious attack seemed to have no dilatory effect on the man-demon. Deciding this was the appropriate moment to act, the barrister promptly took a huge swig of pure quill laudanum and fainted dead away. The priest began a lengthy exorcism.

Unexpectedly a flurry of wooden arrows twanged across the mine entrance. The shafts impacted everywhere except into the half-naked body of the muscular monster. At the rear of the mob, a doddering old groundskeeper glared hostility at his impressed gang of apprentice archers. Britons who couldn't fire a long bow? What was the empire coming to? In return, the clerks, cooks and coopers looked incredibly embarrassed. Well, at least they hadn't shot themselves in the foot again.

Inside the mine shaft, the laughing vampire twirled the remains of a bedraggled Spitfield cape about himself and was gone from sight.

"Goodbye, Yank!" cackled the darkness, the words echoing strangely. "Within minutes I will be safely hidden within the endless natural catacombs beneath this mudhole of a city. A thousand men in a thousand years could never find me again!"

An elderly dairy farmer gave a juicy raspberry and the village tout shouted out a virulent oath that even made the blustering navies blanch at its raw vulgarity. Hot haggis, that was a good'un!

"And I will return to tap the claret of these fools," continued a whispery voice fading at every moment, the dire words invoking ghastly images of rivers of human blood. "Next year, on this very day, I shall come back to reap my revenge, for I will use the secret second sleep of a vampire. During the coming seasons I will rest, arising for but a single day one year from now. Three hundred and sixty five times stronger than I am now!"

Fading rapidly, the words repeated in snarling fury. "Three hundred and sixty five times stronger! How will you stop me then Yankee, and save these dirt-eating peasants? Seal the mine with iron plate, and I shall break free through the granite with my bare hands. Run, and I shall track you each down across the whole world!"

The bats and rats screamed in victory and the pale highlanders began retreating into the forest. Across the whole world? Even as unimaginably far away as Edinburgh?

Bloody hell! Maybe this hunt hadn't been such a swell idea after all.

Tucking away his last charged pistol, J.P. started reloading his dropped weapons quickly as possible. There was no manual for Bureau 13 agents yet, and the man was unsure of his next move. Read the beast the Riot Act? Call in the US Marines, or the Royal Northumberland Dragoons? Offer a stash of blunt as a bribe? Get royally pissed on a dog nose's at a dollyshop? Suddenly, the silver badge on his belt seemed to weigh a thousand tons and hindered his every step. What could he do against such an indomitable adversary?

"I win," whispered the cold wind in the rustling trees.

Sullenly and frightened, the villagers and the grim Bureau 13 agent shuffled along the king's road winding through the heather carpeted forest. Just then, the sun crested the western mountains, the golden glorious dawn only horribly counterpointing the humans listless retreat to their lonely vulnerable homes.

"See you real soon....aha-ha-ha-ha..." evilly murmured the disappearing shadows.

But with those words, the Washington DC lawman slowed and, ever so slightly, gave a sly smile like a 10 ball shooter facing an iron-clad leave on a billiard table. The vampire was wrong, he would not see them soon. The West End fop had truly missed the mark with that remark. Ever so thoughtfully, the young American fingered the loudly ticking Breguer watch in the pocket of his waistcoat. Time was on their side, and he had a full solar year in which to act. A fact which gave the new Bureau 13 agent a very dangerous idea that immensely appealed to his personal sense of justice.

Only...would the chancy scheme work?

* * *

Three hundred a sixty four days later, the people of the isolated Scottish town were busy erecting colorful booths, gay banners and great canvas circus tents. Fresh fragrant flowers adorned every house, every barn and inn, while great iron cooking vats bubbled merrily away in the campsites, filling the air with rich pungent fumes of meaty stews and fancy French soufflés and zesty sauces.

Lean and grim, J.P. Withers ignored the mountains of food and roamed the festivities like a panther, fresh pistols tucked into every pocket and boot, wooden knives hidden in his sleeves, a silver crucifix about his neck. There would be no mistakes this time. He hoped.

Everywhere around the Yank, squealing mudlarks happily dug in the ground seeking dropped coins, while rouged whores lifted their skirts for patrons behind every bush, and scarred pugilists pounded each other in glorious drunken stupor. Lounging about in false casualness, all six of the infamous Bow Street Runners of London, including the right honorable Sir Fielding himself, did nothing to stop any of it, even though prize fighting had been illegal since 1750. The

imperial lawmen merely sipped their blackjacks of hot gin and nutmeg, kept a close eye on their gold watches and ready hands on their loaded Collier and Manton pistols. But the leather-wrapped handles of sharp wooden daggers rose from their Hoby boots. Soon now, very soon.

During the daylight hours, dozens, hundreds, then literally thousands of people from London, Paris, Italy, Germany, and even distant Russia, had responded to the invitation and swarmed into the tiny highland village, adding to and augmenting the tantalizing cloud of cooking aromas with their own culinary contributions.

By twilight, a boisterous party was in full swing with four different bands playing, scores of dancers twirling, and a hundred whole oxen roasting in huge pits full of crackling logs, the juicy meat spewing endless volumes of tangy smoke towards the distant twinkling stars. The staggering array of beef personally donated to the endeavor by good Queen Caroline and President James Monroe of America. A very old King George having temporarily gone potty again, and currently believed himself to be an Etruscan vase full of live mice.

The feasting and festivities went on far into the night. The only disruption to the happy revelry occurring at exactly midnight when the dance music was momentarily interrupted by a small explosion from the direction of the old abandoned coal mine in the foothills, closely followed by a loud squeak of inhuman horror.

Seconds later, a barely noticed handful of dry ash blew across the joyous Scottish folk and lone Bureau 13 agent celebrating the first combined North American & British International Garlic Festival.

~ End ~

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