

## A Shadow of Reality

A thick fog crept along the cobbled streets. The air was heavy and every breath was an effort. Walking over to my car and rummaging through it, I found my flashlight and my revolver, the latter I hoped I wouldn't need. I was a police detective sent here to investigate a disappearance in the area. The only problem being that this coastal town was supposed to be deserted for years, so I was sent here alone as they claimed it was just an error in the paperwork. Something about that place made me feel otherwise.

The bitter cold snapped at my fingertips, I wrapped my scarf around my neck, savouring every bit of warmth I could. I flicked my flashlight on. A beam of light sprayed forth, catching on the rolling fog. The sun had not long set and I hadn't anywhere to sleep. I wanted to get out of that place as soon as possible, so I pressed on. Walking down the road, every footstep echoed off of the looming buildings either side of me.

"Hello?" I cried, knowing that I wouldn't get a response. "Anybody out there?" I walked over to one of the buildings which I could tell by the rotting signage was once a general store. I tried to push the door open but its hinges gave way and the door fell to the ground. I stepped over the door and onto the floorboards of the shop as my flashlight illuminated the corners of the room. The store was filled with shelves, some of which were laying on their sides or broken into splinters of rotting wood. I ran a finger along a dust covered shelf but stopped, noticing that there were several patches on the shelf where the dust didn't touch. Something was on this shelf until recently. Very recently.

This place should have been completely abandoned since 1914 when it's economy collapsed due to a lack of fish. I didn't want to think who or what had disturbed this shelf and what had lay there before. I brushed the dust off of my finger and continued towards the back door of the shop. Turning the handle, the door swung open on silent hinges. I looked out upon the cobbled roads that shone in the moonlight and headed down the road.

Just then, I heard something. A sound worse than death itself. The sound of something sharp, honed to a razor edge, scraping across the stone walls of the alley behind me. My hand darted to my side, to where the revolver lay, and I drew it with trembling hands. I walked over as silent as I could across the cobbles toward where the sound emanated from. The noise continued, and I darted around the corner, gun drawn. Nothing. As soon as I saw the lack of any terrifying creature and heard the noise fall silent without an echo, my blood froze. My revolver hung loosely from my hand before clattering to the ground and a wave of relief, tainted with fear washed over me. Either I was going insane... or something *horrible* was happening. I didn't like the sound of either.

I stood there frozen for another second before crouching to retrieve my revolver from the puddle it fell into. It was wet now and I wouldn't be able to use it until I had changed the ammunition. *Safe*. I mouthed the word to myself, over and over. Some part of me, failed to believe it. I wanted to run, to escape this damned place, but I was here to investigate and that is what I would do. Whatever was going on in this town, I needed to find out.

I put the revolver back into its holster and turned to the empty streets behind me. Clutching my flashlight, I crept down the road. I was almost calm again when something appeared over the hill that I was approaching. Something that evoked a primal sort of fear. The kind of fear that threatens to shred a man's mind. A figure, so vaguely humanoid, stood facing me. It had large, membranous wings. But its face... It had features like that of a terrible hound and eyes resembling orbs of obsidian. It walked with the legs of a wolf but stood upright as wisps of black, shadowy mist emanated from it like thick smoke from a smouldering fire.

It took one step towards me and I froze. Time froze. My mind was racing, trying to find some fragment of knowledge that could do anything to save me. *Think*. I filtered through useless information. Nothing could have prepared me for the horror that stood before me. My revolver was useless. The creature could surely have outrun, or *outflown* me if I were to run. Again, it drew closer. I noticed the long, claws that protruded from its fingers. I couldn't move.

It stepped towards me again. The claws on its toes scraped along the ground, the noise the same as the one that came from the alley before. Another step, this time towards an alley to its right... as if it was oblivious to my presence. Then one more. As it was approaching the alley, something loosened inside me. Before I could comprehend what I was doing, I was darting down the weathered streets and away from that abomination. As soon as my foot hit the ground, its ears pricked. It turned its head to face me and spread its wings, the moonlight shining through to illuminate each vein. My feet didn't stop moving and I couldn't think of a good reason to try to.

With a single beat of its wings it was airborne. It was an effort not to stop and stare at its fearsome majesty as it took to the skies. I couldn't stop running. It began to glide towards me on its bat-like wings as I took a sharp left. It was close now but it struggled to follow my movements. As I took cover in an alleyway, I heard it crash into the rooftop to my right. My heart was racing. All of my preconceived ideas about reality were starting to crumble. If such a monstrosity should exist, what other horrors crawl in the darkness?

I ran down the streets, passing a graveyard. Into the unholy night, all the time I could hear the skittering of razor-sharp claws against stone, slowing drawing closer. The fog felt thick, and I spied a pile of crates in a stack ahead. I darted behind them and threw them behind me just as that *thing* drew so close I could feel its breath against my neck. In that moment of triumph my foot caught a loose cobble and I fell tumbling to the ground.

The noise of splintering wood filled the air.

It was dark... and cold. I span around and saw the hole that I broke in the wooden wall as I fell moments ago. I could see the splinters of the crates and the feet of the creature through the break. It searched. I couldn't discern any details of the room I fell into. Only the dusty floorboards being illuminated by the moonlight through the hole. I heard it sniffing for me. I heard it clambering onto the rooftop. And then there was silence. That is when it hit me. The creature didn't see the hole I fell through. The creature didn't see anything. If I had not moved when it first appeared over the hill, it wouldn't have noticed me. Luckily the noise of me falling through the wall was masked by splintering crates.

I stood up. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I could make out the layout of the room, but the thing that drew my attention first was the corpse. Twisted and mangled, the body lay against the door of the room, clutching a note book. The book was covered in deep red leather and it had strange markings etched into it's cover. I took the book from it's hand, and the corpse tipped onto it's side. I saw it's face. It had eyes like orbs of obsidian... and large, membranous wings... and I realised what the creature that was chasing me really was. I fell backwards in terror, dropping the book which then laid open on the ground.

I got up, hoping that I didn't cause enough racket to draw the creature's attention. I went to pick up the notebook, but then I glimpsed the page that it lay open on. It was a journal. Filled with diagrams of strange rituals and sketches of creatures. Some were like *the thing* that chased me, and others

even more horrific than that. Before, I would have taken this as the scrawls of a madman. But I knew better. It's strange how seeing *one* thing can change what you think of as reality forever.

Everything was falling into place... the creature, the book, this town... the corpse. It all made sense... and it was terrible. A creature without a body was summoned into this world. A body was... *modified* to suit it's needs and it adopts the body to survive. It found a newer body and so it *upgraded*. Leaving behind a disfigured husk, like a snake sheds it's skin.

Maybe I would have had courage enough to fight it if I hadn't read the book. The book that showed horrors beyond imagination. The book that proves you aren't wrong to fear that bump in the night. That figure in the mist. I wouldn't let myself become that corpse in the corner of the abandoned town. That disfigured husk of a person. I emptied the bullets from my revolver and reloaded it. I heard the creature. It's claws scraping the roof. I lifted the revolver and whispered my goodbyes to this twisted world.

Then there was darkness.