

BLOOD RUSH

Hello, and thanks for having a look at my Pubslush project. If you'd like to know more about this western fantasy, check out www.bengalley.com, or follow me on Twitter [@BenGalley](https://twitter.com/BenGalley).

Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben Galley", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

A PRELUDE

There are many places in this world where we humans are not welcome.

Antarcticus, for example, has slain explorer after explorer with its wolves and winds so cold and fierce they can cut a man in half. Or the Sandara, plaguing travellers for millennia with its fanged dunes and sandstorms. Or what about the high seas, and the Cape of Black Souls? Where the waves swallow ships whole, and never spit them back out.

But there are darker places on this earth. Much, much darker places.

These are places that time has forgotten. That *we* have forgotten, now that we've turned our attention to industry, to business, and to science. Our steam and our clockwork may have conquered the globe, but we have built our cities on old and borrowed ground, a ground that knew many creatures and empires before it felt the kiss of our own feet. These were the ages that spawned fairytale and folklore. Dreams and nightmares. The world that we trampled in our march for progress, burying it beneath cobble and railroad.

But stubbornness is a trait of victors, so they say. The vestiges of this old world are still clinging on, hiding in the dark places, lost in the shadows, glaring at us from behind their magic. Oh, they are very much alive, friends. Hiding in the cracks of reality; the spaces between your blinks. And woe betide anybody that dares to go hunting for them.

You would have better luck in the Sandara.

Of course, you have known this all along. If you have ever felt the hot rush of fear in your stomach when a twig snaps in the twilight woods, then you have known it. If you have ever felt that chill run up your spine every time you cross the old bridge, you have known it.

We humans remember the darkness very well, and how its monsters prowled the edges of our campfires and snatched us into the night. We simply refuse to acknowledge it is anything other than irrational fear. Ghost stories. Boogeymen. Old wives' tales. Nonsense, though we secretly know the truth. So much so that when we read in the newspapers that a man was ripped to shreds by a mysterious assailant in the old dockyards last Thursday, we do not think psychopath, we think *werewolf*.

Maybe we would be right.

There are dark things in the shadows, and they are far from fond of us humans.

CHAPTER I

April 18th - 1867

'To the lost.' The surgeon raised his tiny glass with a gloved and rather bony hand.

Tonmerion Hark did the same, though he could only summon the wherewithal to raise it halfway. He let it hover just beneath his chin, as if he were cradling it to his chest. The liquor smelled like cloves. Sickening.

However he tried, he couldn't tear his gaze away from the pistol. That sharp-edged contraption of humourless steel and stained oak, lounging in an impossibly-clean metal tray at the elbow of his father's body.

'The lost,' he murmured in reply, and flicked the glass as if swatting at a bothersome bluebottle.

A pair of wet slapping sounds broke the sterile, white-tiled silence as the liquor painted a muddy-orange streak on the milky vinyl floor. So that was that. What precious little ceremony was over. Lord Karrigan Bastion Hark, the Bulldog of London, the Prime Lord of The Empire of Britannia, the Master of the Emerald Benches and widower of the inimitable Lady Hark, had been pronounced dead.

As a doornail.

Tonmerion could have told them that from the start, but such was tradition. His gaze inched from the gun to his father's pallid skin, bruised as it was with the blood settling. Or the surgeon had told him, as he had worked. Tonmerion had decided he did not like surgeons. They were rude; being so bold as to poke around in the visceral depths of other people. Of boys' dead fathers.

His gaze moved to the neatly sewn-up hole in his father's chest, directly above his heart. The oozing had finally stopped. The puckered and rippled edges of white skin around the black thread were clean. Not a single drop of corpse-blood seeping through. Not surprising, thought Tonmerion, seeing as so much of it had been left on the steps of Harker Sheer's western garden.

For a brief moment, the boy's eyes flicked to the closed lids of his father's. He thanked the Almighty those sharp sapphire eyes were hidden away, and not bathing him with disappointment, as was their custom. But even then, in the grip of cold death, Tonmerion could almost feel their gaze piercing those grey eyelids and jabbing him. His own eyes quickly slunk away.

Instead, he looked to the surgeon, and was somewhat startled to find the man staring directly back at him, arms folded and waiting patiently.

‘And what now?’ Tonmerion piped up, his young voice cracking after the silence.

‘The constable will be here in a moment, I’m sure.’

‘Is he late?’ asked Tonmerion, biting the inside of his lip. *The body was so grey...*

The surgeon looked a smidgeon confused. He pushed the wire-frame rims of his round glasses up the slope of his nose. ‘I beg your pardon, Master Hark?’

Tonmerion huffed. ‘I said, is he late?’

The surgeon looked almost confused. ‘No, young master. Simply finishing the paperwork.’

Tonmerion went to scratch his neck as he tried to think up something clever, and commanding. Gruff words echoed through his mind. *Get your chin up. Stand straight. Look them straight in their beady little eyes...* Words from dead lips.

‘Then he must have been late earlier in the day. Why else would he not be here, on time, when I am ready to leave. Instead I am forced to stand here, stuck looking at this... this...’ His words failed him miserably. His tongue sat fat and useless behind his teeth. He waved his hand irritably. ‘This... *carcass.*’

For that was what it was. *Carcass.* So callous in its truth. Tonmerion could see it in the surgeon’s face. That condemning curl in that hairless, sweat-beaded top lip of his.

The surgeon took a sharp breath. ‘Of course, lordling. I shall fetch him for you.’ And with that he turned on his heel, making to leave. The leather of his shoe made a little squeak on the white vinyl, but before he could take a step, the sound of heavy boots was heard on the stairs. ‘Ah,’ the surgeon said, turning back with another squeak. ‘Here he comes now. You shall have your escape, young Master Hark.’

‘Yes, well,’ was all Tonmerion’s tongue could muster. He folded his arms and watched the barrel of a constable emerge from the stairwell. His bright blue coat strained at the seams, pinning all its hopes on the polished buttons that glinted in the sterile light of the room. *Now here was a man who had seen too much of a desk and not enough of the cobbles,* his father would have intoned. Tonmerion almost felt like turning and shushing his dead father.

‘Master Hark,’ boomed the constable, as he shuffled to a halt at the foot of the table. His eyes were fixed on Tonmerion’s, but it was easy to see they itched to pull right, yearning to gaze at the body of his father. Tonmerion didn’t blame him one inch. It wasn’t every day you got to meet a Prime Lord. Especially a freshly murdered one.

‘My apologies for...’ he began, but Tonmerion cut him off.

‘Apology accepted, Constable Pagget,’ he replied. ‘Have you captured my father’s murderer yet?’

Pagget shook his head solemnly ‘Not yet, I’m afraid...’

‘Well, what is being done about it?’

‘Everything that can be done, Master Hark.’

‘Well that’s not...’ Tonmerion began, but it was his turn to be cut off.

‘Please, young sir, it’s about your father’s will.’

Tonmerion threw him a frown. 'What about my father's will? What and where must I sign?'

There was a moment of hesitation, during which the constable's mouth fell slowly open, the ample fat beneath his chin gently cushioning the fall. Not a single sound came forth for quite a while.

'What ever is the matter?' demanded Tonmerion, impatiently.

Constable Pagget summoned the wherewithal to shut his mouth, and soon after he found his voice too. 'It's your father's last wishes, Master Hark, they concern you directly,' he said, eyes flashing to the surgeon for the briefest of moments.

Tonmerion huffed. 'Well of course they do! I'm the only Hark left. The estate will be left to me,' he replied, trying to ignore the truth of his own words. They frightened him a little too much.

'Not... exactly,' Pagget croaked. 'That is to say... not yet.'

'Yet? What do you mean, *yet*?'

The constable took a step back and waved a couple of fat fingers at the stairs. 'You'd better step into my office, I think, young Master Hark. We apparently have much to discuss.'

'This is highly irregular,' Tonmerion began, his father's favourite phrase, spilling out of his mouth. He bit his lip and said no more. Fixing a frown onto his face, the young Hark raised his chin and went to take a step forward that said everything his traitorous mouth could not. A confident step that said he was inconvenienced. Displeased. That he deserved respect. That he was in command here, and not at all crumbling with worry and fear and disgust and all those other things that lords and generals and heroes don't feel.

Sadly, Tonmerion's step forward was quite the opposite. It was a step so lacking in grace and dignity that Tonmerion would forever shiver at the very thought of it.

As his foot hit the floor with a wet slap, not a squeak, Tonmerion realised his mistake.

The liquor.

His foot slid away from him, betraying him so casually. His leg, and the rest of him, for that matter, were powerless to resist. Tonmerion performed an ungraceful wobble and grabbed the nearest thing his flailing arms could touch... his father's dead arm.

A small wheeze of relief escaped his tight lips as he found himself upright, safe. A similar sound came forth when he realised what exactly it was that had saved him from the most embarrassing fall, though this time it was strangled by horror, and disgust. Tonmerion's gaze slowly tumbled down his arm, from the expensive cloth to his ice-white knuckles, to the dead, bruised, slate-coloured flesh that his fingers were squeezing so tightly. Tonmerion gurgled something and quickly righted himself, red in the face and wide in the eyes. He quickly began to smooth the front of his shirt, but then stopped hurriedly when it dawned that he had just touched a dead body. He held his hands out in the air instead, neither up nor down, close nor far.

'A cloth,' he murmured. The surgeon obliged him, leaning over to pass him a startlingly-white cloth from beneath the bench. Tonmerion dragged it over his knuckles and fingertips, and nodded to the constable. 'Lead the way.'

Pagget had not yet decided whether to stifle a laugh or to share the boy's revulsion. He simply looked on with one eye squinting awkwardly, his face stuck halfway between the two expressions.

'Jimothy?' the surgeon said, and Pagget came to.

'Right! Yes. This way, if you please.' He only barely managed to keep from adding, 'Mind your step.'

Tonmerion followed him without a word.



'America,' Tonmerion gave the man a flat stare that spoke a whole world of disbelief. Witchazel was his name, like the slender shrub, and it was a name that suited him to the very core. He was more stick than man, loosely draped in an ill-fitting suit of the Prussian style, charcoal striped with purple. His hair was thin and jet-black, and smeared across his scalp and forehead like an oleaginous paste. Tonmerion had never like the look of the lawyer. *One with power should dress accordingly.* His father's words, once more.

Witchazel shuffled the wad of papers in his leather-gloved hands and coughed. It meant nothing except a resounding yes. Tonmerion looked to Constable Pagget, but found him idly thumbing the dust from the shelves of his ornate bookcase. Tonmerion looked instead to his knees, and the woven carpet just beyond them. He tugged at his collar. The constable's office was stifling, heavy with curtains, mahogany, and leather. The news did not help matters. Not one bit.

'And this aunt...' he asked.

'Lilain Rennevie,' filled in Witchazel.

'Lives *where* exactly?'

Witchazel's face took on an enthusiastic curve. A look of excitement and wonder, one that had been well-practised in the bedroom mirror, or so it seemed to Tonmerion. 'A charming place, right on the cusp of civilisation, Master Hark,' he said. 'A frontier town, don't you know, going by the bucolic name of Fell Falls. A brand new settlement founded by the rail-road teams and the Serped Railroad Company. They're aiming for the west coast, you see, blazing a trail right across the country in search of gold and riches and the Lost Sea. An exciting place, if I may say so, sir. I'm almost envious!' Witchazel grinned.

'Almost,' Tonmerion replied drily.

Witchazel forced his grin to stay and turned to look at the constable, hoping he would chime in. All Pagget could do was smile and nod.

Witchazel produced a map from the papers in his hand and slid it across the desk towards the boy. 'Here we are.'

Tonmerion leaned forward and eyed the shapes and lines. 'It looks small.'

Witchazel templed his fingers and hid behind them. 'Yes, but it has so much potential to grow,' he offered.

'Very small.'

'You have to start somewhere!'
'And forty miles from the nearest town.'
'Think of the peace and quiet. Away from the hustle and...'
'It's literally the end of the line.'
'Not for long, mark my words!
'And what does this say? Desert?'

Witchazel's temple collapsed and he spread his fingers out on the desk instead, wishing the green leather would magically transport him out of this office. What a fate, this boy had inherited. Whisked away to Almighty knows where. No mansion. No servants. No money... Witchazel almost felt sorry for him.

'Desert. Yes. It seems that the territory of Wyoming is somewhat, *wild*. Deserts and mountains and, oh, what was the word...' Witchazel clicked his gloved fingers, resulting in a leathery squeak. '*Prairies*, that was it. But surely that's exciting, isn't it?'

Tonmerion had crossed his arms. His eyes were back on the lawyer, trying with all his might to drill right into the man's pupils, to whither him, as he had seen his father do countless times. 'Do I have any say in the matter?'

Witchazel made a show of checking the papers again, even though he already knew the answer. 'I'm afraid the instructions are very specific. You are to remain in the care of your aunt. Until such time as you are of age to inherit. On your eighteenth birthday.'

Tonmerion let out a long sigh, ruffling the strands of sandy blonde hair that stubbornly insisted on hanging forward over his forehead, not lying to the sides with the rest of his combed mop. 'And what manner of woman is my aunt?' he asked. He had barely known of her existence until twenty minutes ago. Now he was staring down the barrel of a five-year exile, with her and her alone. He felt a lump in his throat. He tried to swallow it down but it held fast. 'Is she the mayor? A businesswoman?' he croaked.

Witchazel flipped through a few of his pages. 'She is a businesswoman indeed, you'll be pleased to hear.'

Tonmerion sagged a little in his chair.

Witchazel peered closely at one line in particular. 'It says here that she works as an undertaker.'

The boy came straight back up, stiff as a board.



It was a day for wanton staring, Tonmerion had decided. He may have escaped the body of his dead father in the surgeon's basement, but now he was trapped by the dried pool of blood on the steps of one of Harker Sheer's many vast patios. The stone beneath was a polished white marble, which made the blood, even now dried to a crumbling crust, all the more red. Tonmerion watched the way it had frozen in a thick crimson slick that dripped down the stairs, one by one, until it found a pool on the third.

When Tonmerion finally wrenched his gaze from his father's blood, he turned instead to the thin fold of paper he clutched so venomously in his left hand. He held the paper up to the cloud-masked sun and scowled. Tickets. For a boat. To a faraway land.

Tonmerion didn't know which to hate more; the blood or his looming fate.

'What have I done to deserve this?' he asked himself aloud. He couldn't bring himself to utter a response. He had none to offer, so he let the sound of the swaying elms and and whispering pines fill the silence.

Tonmerion had used the coach-ride home to ponder every avenue of escape. He had pondered both running and hiding, but neither had seemed too fortuitous, once his mind had drawn out all the possibilities, like wool spilling off a reel. He had no money save what he had taken from his father's desk. That would not last more than a week.

He had given complaining a little thought too, but had come to the decision he'd done enough of that in the constable's office. In truth, in horrid, clanging truth, Tonmerion was stuck.

He was bound for America, the New Kingdom.

That was the source of the hard, brutal lump wedged in his throat. He lifted a hand to massage it and tried to swallow. Neither helped. He took a gulp of air and felt immediately sick. The blood beckoned to him but Tonmerion waved a finger at it admonishingly. He was not keen to repeat the liquor episode.

Tonmerion remembered the water fountain at the bottom of the steps, and he let his shaky legs lead the way. He was positive he was whiter than a sheet of bleached parchment. The wobbling reflection in the pool of the hissing fountain confirmed that yes, he was indeed pale as a ghost. Tonmerion put both hands on the marble and dipped his head into the water and let the cold water sting his face. It was refreshing, and calming, and Tonmerion took in three deep gulps and felt the coldness slide down into his belly. He wiped his mouth and stared up at the pinnacles of the pines.

'By the roots, you're white.'

Upon hearing a voice speak out from the bushes, on an estate that was supposed to be emptier than a beggar's purse, any other person would have jumped, or perhaps even squeaked with surprise. But not Tonmerion. He didn't move a muscle, for this was nothing out of the ordinary for him.

'He's dead, Rhin,' he muttered, still staring up at the trees.

'Speak up.' The voice was small, and yet it still had all the depth and resonance of a man's voice.

'It's all going to change.'

'Have you seen a ghost?'

Tonmerion looked over to the blood, stark against the marble, and nodded.

There was a polite and nervous cough, and then: 'I'm sorry, Merion, for your father. I truly am.'

Merion's gaze turned to the marvellous little figure standing in the dirt, half his body still hidden by the shadow of the ornamental bush. No, not hidden, *fused* with the bush in some way. Merion did not bat an eyelid.

'It's all changed, just like that,' he clicked his fingers, and the figure stepped out of the shadows.

To say the small gentleman was a fairy would be doing him a great injustice. Contrary to popular belief, there is a great deal of difference between a fairy and a *faerie*. The former are small, silly creatures, more insect than human, and prone to mischief. The latter, however, are a proud and ancient race, the Fae. They are larger, smarter, and infinitely more dangerous than fairies, and bolder. For millennia they have lived unseen in the undergrowth and forgotten forests, just out of the reach of human eyes and fingers. They are now nought but folklore, wives' tales, rubbish for the ears of children. No man, in his right mind, would believe in such a thing as a *faerie*.

But here one stood. Bold and as bright as a summer's day.

Rhin stood just shy of twelve inches tall, big for Fae standards. He was long of limb, but not scrawny. Between the gaps in his pitch-black armour, it was easy to see that the muscles wrapped around his bony frame were like ripcords, tightly bunched.

Rhin's skin was a mottled bluish grey, though it was not uncommon to see him glowing faintly at night. His eyes were the only bright colour on his person, glowing purple even in the cloudy daylight. The thin metal plates of his Fae armour were jet-black, held in place by the brown rat-leather. His boots, rising to just below the knee, were also black.

And of course, there are the wings. Thin, translucent dragonfly wings that sprouted from the ridge of Rhin's shoulders and hung down his back, hugging the contours of his armour and body and glistening blue and gold. The Fae lost the power of flight centuries ago. Their wings are weaker now, but they still have their uses.

Four years had passed since Rhin had crawled out of the bushes and straight onto Merion's lap, bleeding and vomiting. He'd been just a boy, only nine at the time, and the sight of a strange grey creature with armour and dragonfly wings, sliding in and out of consciousness, would have frightened any child half to death. But not Merion.

Rhin crossed his arms, making the scales of his armour rattle. He tapped his claw-like nails on the metal. It was in need of a polish. 'It's not right, what was done to your father. Roots know I didn't know the man, but he didn't deserve this, and neither do you. Neither do we.' Rhin bowed his head. 'Like I said, I'm sorry, Merion.'

The lump in the young Hark's throat had returned, and this time with vengeance. Maybe it was the *faerie's* condolences, maybe it was the crimson streak in the corner of his eye, or perhaps it was the crumpled fist of papers by his side, Merion didn't know, but he knew his lip was wobbling. He knew it was all suddenly terribly real.

Real men cannot be seen to cry.

More of his father's parting words.

Merion swallowed hard, and tucked his lip under his top teeth, biting down. He nodded, and when he trusted himself to speak without his voice cracking, he said, 'Thank you.'

Rhin shuffled his feet and ran an absent hand through his short, wild hair. Jet black it was, and thick, slicked back and cropped short at the sides. 'Do they know who did it?' he asked quietly.

Merion stamped his foot and paced out a tight, angry circle. 'Pagget doesn't have a clue,' he grouched. 'Nobody has any idea.'

'That's...'

'An outrage. Yes I know. And guess what? That's not even the worst part.'

'Not the worst...? What could be worse than...' the faerie gestured wordlessly at the slick of blood on the marble steps. '...That?'

Merion turned and brandished the folded paper. '*This!* It's an abomination. A disgrace. An insult!'

Rhin looked worried. 'Yes, but what is it?'

Merion pinched the bridge of his nose and swallowed again. *Say it out loud, and who knows, it just might sound a little better*, he told himself. 'We have to move to America.'

No. No better.

Rhin's lavender eyes grew wide. 'The New Kingdom? Why?!'

'My father left instructions, Rhin. All of Harker Sheer, all of his other estates. All of his money. It's mine now. But not until I turn eighteen.' Merion aimed a kick at the base of the fountain. 'And in the meantime I, *we*, have to go live with my aunt, in Wyoming.'

'And where the hell is that?'

'In the western deserts of the America. The arse-end of nowhere, to put it plainly. Full of filthy rail workers, peasants, sand, and horses and cows no doubt.'

Rhin rubbed his chin. 'It sounds perfect,' he said. Merion was about to snort when he realised there hadn't been the faintest tremor of sarcasm in Rhin's words. He stared down at the faerie.

'You're serious?'

Rhin shrugged. 'It's the perfect escape.'

'Yes, for you maybe. I suspected you might like this god-awful fate of mine. Not all of us are runaways and outcasts, Rhin. I'm not in hiding. I have a future *here*, in London. I have a great responsibility to inherit, and a murderer to catch, for Almighty's sake! My father must have justice. The Hark name needs protecting...' Merion trailed off, flattened by the impossibility of it all. 'I can't just leave. I can't just let it fall to the dogs.'

'You're thirteen, boy.'

Merion flapped his hand. 'But I'm the only one left! It's my duty. And don't call me boy, you know I hate that.'

Rhin took a step forward, eyes still wide. 'You would have still had to wait until you were eighteen. Even if you father hadn't been killed.'

'Murdered, Rhin. *Murdered.*' The fountain received another kick. 'And no difference, you say? Hah! At least here I could have lived my life in comfort, in society, within reach of the capital. But no, he was *murdered*, and now we have to go live in a shack in some place called Fell Falls. No dinners, no balls, no trips on the rumbleground trains, no visits to the Emerald Benches. Nothing. Sod all.' It was at times like these that Merion wished he'd asked the kitchen staff to teach him more swearwords.

Rhin was not convinced. 'All I heard was no tedious ceremonies, no politics, and no father watching your every move, no offence. We can be *free* in America, Merion. Free to

do what we want, safe in the knowledge that you can come back to *this*, to a fortune and a life in high society.'

'In five bloody years!'

'More than enough time to turn you into a proper man. Not like one of these silk-clad dandies you idolise. A man with rough hands and bristle on his cheeks. Ladies would love that.' Rhin dared as much to wink. Merion pulled a face.

'Rubbish.'

'Trust me, I know. Listen to your elders.' Rhin was over two-hundred years old. He had a point.

Merion slumped in every possible way a person could slump. He crumpled to his knees and then to his backside, letting his shoulders hang like loose saddlebags and his hands splay across the marble. 'I just don't know. I can't put it into words. The world is upside down.'

Rhin walked forward to put a small hand on Merion's knee. 'It doesn't have to be a punishment, Merion. It could be an adventure. Something that could change you. Put some fire into your belly. Five years isn't that long a time.'

Merion snorted. 'Easy for you to say.'

'Are we in agreement. Adventure?' Rhin asked.

With great solemnity, Merion lifted his head and stared up at the roiling grey skies, not a patch or stray thread of blue anywhere to be seen. Merion was going to miss these skies. Their rain. The staple of the Empire. He let the cold breeze run its fingers across his neck and face, savouring that moment. He swallowed one last time, and found that the lump had disappeared. For now, at least.

'I'll let you know when we get there,' replied the young Hark.

To be continued...

Thanks very much for reading, and don't forget to connect on Twitter @BenGalley, or on Facebook at /BenGalleyAuthor. You can also now add Bloodrush on Goodreads by clicking [here](#).