ABERRATIONS

THE BEAST AWAKENS

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Canal
Lancaster
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Irish sea
Lancaster castle
Crafty's House
River Wyre
Preston Centre
Orphanage
Preston
Winckley Square
River Ribble
Shole Covered Area



1
The Cellar

Crafty was listening to the whispering from his brothers' graves.

He sat at the three-legged table, watching the shadows slither slowly towards him and staring at the far wall of the darkening cellar. Leaning against that far wall was a tall, decrepit, narrow cupboard, which without the wall's support would long ago have collapsed. Once it had been well stocked with food. Now the cupboard was bare.

Crafty had checked it every hour or so, but whenever he'd carefully pulled back the wooden doors, groaning in agony upon their rusty hinges, it was empty. He'd left the cupboard doors open now to save himself the trouble of checking, but he was sure it would never fill itself again. The magic controlling it – a porter spell that instantly sent objects over long distances – had finally faded and died. Benign

Fey magic never lasted long here within the Shole; here, it was malevolent magic that ruled.

Crafty shuddered just to think of what lay outside the cellar walls, and then hunger made his stomach rumble. At least there was a fire to keep him warm and fend off a little of the cold and damp. All that remained now were glowing embers, the last of the wood from the beds of his dead brothers.

Taking his eyes off the cupboard for a moment, he glanced round at the large wooden bookcase on the other wall. One of the shelves was sagging under the weight of the books that were so precious to him. He'd read them over and over again to keep at bay the tedium of life in the cellar. Although many were gone now, fed to the fire to keep it burning, there were some he couldn't bear to sacrifice. These were the gardening books that had belonged to his mother.

A lump came to his throat as he thought of her. She'd been dead for almost a year now, but the pain of her loss was still there. He missed her badly, and the happy home she'd made for him and his brothers. But now he had to leave everything behind. He had to leave this refuge. He had to leave it or starve.

Crafty didn't want to go. He wanted to stay here, with the memories of his mother and his two dead brothers.

Brock and Ben had been twins, two years older than him. They had been good to him; looked after him – so it didn't scare him when they whispered to him. Sometimes he would kneel on the earthen floor and place his left ear

close to their gravestones, listening carefully, trying to hear what they said. Sometimes he heard them calling his name.

'*Crafty! Crafty! Crafty!*' they whispered.

Other times they'd weep and, feeling full of pity, he was tempted to raise the stones and release them. But Father had told him never to go too near the graves – Crafty wasn't sure why; he didn't know about the whispering. He'd told Crafty that he was thirteen now, and must be brave, calm and dutiful – just like his brothers. They had lived their lives, and now they were resting in the cold earth. Crafty should leave them be.

And maybe, he thought, it might not be too bad down there. At least they weren't hungry. They didn't need to leave the safety of the cellar and face the dangers outside it alone.

Crafty's thoughts turned back to his father.

I have to go away again, he had said, wrapping his black woollen scarf tightly about his thick neck, buttoning up his greatcoat and tugging on his big boots. Courier Benson had been summoned to the castle once more and had no choice but to obey; couriers, Crafty knew, were valued members of the Castle Corpus. *Be brave, Crafty . . . let's hope you're still here when I return.*

His father had said it with a smile, as if he was joking. Whenever there was danger, he usually joked about it.

Crafty was still here, and still waiting, but he feared that this time his father wouldn't return in time to save him. His

father should have returned long before now. Something must have gone wrong.

There was a tiny breeze in the cellar, and Crafty could smell warm candlewax. He'd always liked that smell, but now it worried him. Something worse than hunger would force him out of the cellar; something more insistent than his empty grumbling belly.

The cellar was only safe when it was lit by the magical candles his father had left. There were three of them positioned to form a triangle, each impaled on a spike on its own heavy metal stand. The huge candles had burned brightly with barely a flicker, but his father had been away too long and their benign magic was almost depleted. One by one they had been going out. Now there was only one still alight, and it had burned very low. If Crafty didn't leave soon, he'd hardly be able to find his way to the door. And once the final candle guttered out, the cellar would no longer be safe.

In the fading light Crafty took a look around the cellar for the last time. It had been home to him, a mostly comfortable refuge, for almost a year. It was time to go.

He headed towards the silver-alloy stairs that led up from the cellar to the door; beyond that was another staircase that led to the kitchen. Those silver stairs were another protective ward his father had provided for the cellar.

Just as he reached the bottom step, there was a sudden noise behind Crafty that halted him in his tracks.

It was not the whispering of his dead brothers. It was not the clamour of their cries.

It was the sound of something thrusting upwards through the earthen floor.

I was so close . . . Crafty thought as his heart thumped against his ribs.

The final candle guttered out, plunging him into total darkness.



2
The Bog Queen

Crafty held his breath and kept perfectly still. Perhaps the thing that was emerging from the earth wouldn't notice him.

Thud! Thud! Thud! went his heart. How fast could it beat without bursting out of his chest?

He knew exactly what was happening. During the past week the cellar had come under attack several times – the worst occurring just after the second candle had gone out. It had begun with thumping and banging in the rooms above. It had sounded like something big striding back and forth, bumping massive shoulders into doors and walls and trying to destroy the house.

That had distracted Crafty from the main attack. While he was gazing fearfully at the ceiling, something had risen into the cellar through the floor. Long, thin, bony fingers had twisted upwards through the soft earth in search of prey.

Those fingers had been green, covered with brown warts and tipped with razor-sharp nails that were encrusted with dried blood.

Crafty had leaped back in alarm. As if sensing the movement, those threatening fingers had lurched further upwards, revealing the hand almost as far as the wrist. But in doing so the fingers had passed out of the shadow cast by the table, to be bathed in the yellow light of the final candle.

The warts had burst like boils lanced with a hot needle, the skin had sizzled and burned; and from deep under the earth had come a scream – followed by a groan of anguish. The hand had been withdrawn and the danger had passed, much to Crafty's relief.

But now there was no magical candlelight to repulse the threat.

Swallowed by complete darkness, he now heard squishing, slithering, sucking sounds as something began to free itself from the soft, clinging earth. He could smell the loam. He turned, horrified, to see a brown glow emerging as a head came pushing up through the soil like a mushroom.

And then Crafty breathed out slowly, with some relief. There was no danger. He knew this creature, and she'd never hurt him before.

Her name was Bertha, and she was the only living friend Crafty had (if you didn't count his father). Throughout the time he'd been confined in the cellar she'd come visiting. For some reason the three candles hadn't been able to keep her away.

Now she sat cross-legged facing him, just behind the muddy hole she'd emerged from. The soft glow she gave off illuminated her whole body, revealing a slim, brown-skinned girl. Her eyes were large and green, and she appeared to be wearing no clothes, but that was because the garments that had once covered her had become fused with her skin, making it look like stretched brown leather, criss-crossed by lines, folds and creases. Her hair cascaded to her shoulders in gleaming black leathery coils, and atop her head was a slim golden crown with a single large green gem affixed to the front.

She was the Bog Queen.

She'd once been the warrior queen of the Segantii, a tribe who'd lived in Crafty's area in ancient times. Led by Bertha, they'd won many battles, but then they had finally come up against the Romans, with their daunting shield-walls and long spears.

The Roman invaders had proved such a formidable enemy that Bertha's priests thought they couldn't be defeated without divine help. So they had offered up Bertha's life to their gods. They'd sacrificed her, cutting her throat and then slicing off the forefinger of her right hand – though why they'd done that, Crafty couldn't imagine. Once dead and buried, she'd slowly sunk further into the bog and had lain there, silent and still within the slime, for a very long time. Then the Shole had engulfed her burial place, and had returned her to life. Those who slew her were long dead,

while she now lived again. Crafty often wondered if Bertha took any satisfaction from that.

Now she opened her mouth. The Bog Queen always spoke softly, and in a strange accent, and her meaning was sometimes hard to divine. So Crafty leaned forward and listened very carefully.

'I tickled your brothers' feet as I passed beneath them,' she said, widening her eyes. 'You should have heard them chuckle!'

'All I can hear is their whispering,' Crafty admitted sadly. 'I wish *I* could hear them laugh.'

'Don't be sad, Crafty. They're just resting. You know nothing that's dead here stays dead forever. It's the dying that's hard. That can hurt. But all that's behind them, and now they're just waiting till it's time to wake again.'

Crafty had once asked her when that would be, but Bertha had become stubbornly silent. Either she didn't know or she wasn't telling.

'It's been a long time since you last visited me,' he told her now. 'Have you brought bad news again?'

Earlier in the year, in the happier times when his brothers were still alive, Bertha used to visit them all in the cellar at least once a day; she would sit and talk for hours. Then, for the last seven months, ever since his father had taken Brock and Ben to the castle, returning only with their bodies to bury, Crafty had been alone. At first his loneliness had been terrible, and but for Bertha's frequent visits he would have

lost his mind. But now she rarely came to see him, and when she did she usually brought bad tidings.

Indeed, just now her face looked grim. 'Yes, the news is bad, Crafty, but it's always best to know when danger is approaching so that you can face it with your eyes wide open. I've come to warn you. Your father's on his way back.'

How could that be bad news? Crafty wondered in surprise.

'Good. I'm looking forward to his return,' he told her with a smile. 'I've been alone for far too long. He's never stayed away as long as this before. I hope he's bringing me another book to read.'

The Bog Queen did not reply immediately, and her face remained very serious. 'He's carrying a black hood, and a knife with a long sharp blade,' she told him.

Crafty's heart sank. Now he understood why this was bad news. Once before, his father had returned to the cellar with those items. On that occasion he'd taken Crafty's brothers back with him to the castle – supposedly to be tested by someone called the Chief Mancer for a job there. It was the Chief Mancer who coordinated the teams of people, the Castle Corpus, who tried to learn more about the Shole and perhaps halt its relentless advance northwards; an advance that was now threatening the castle itself.

Each brother had been hooded and, as they left, Father had gripped the knife so tightly that his knuckles had turned white.

Neither brother had returned alive, and Crafty's father had refused to discuss the matter. Crafty wondered if the

'test' they'd had to take was very dangerous. Was it his turn now? he wondered. Would he die too? At that thought his heart hammered in his chest again and his palms began to sweat.

There was a rumbling noise from somewhere on the upper floors which, although preferable to anywhere outside the house, weren't as safe as the cellar. Could it be another aberration? Crafty heard a door slam, and then big booted feet began walking down towards the cellar. It was his father.

'It's time for me to go, Crafty,' Bertha said. 'Goodbye.'

'Bye, Bertha,' he whispered, his throat dry.

She gave him a little wave with her right hand, the one without a forefinger, and with a sad smile slid into the hole, feet first. The last thing he saw was the top of her brown head with its pointy crown, and then the earth closed over her and she was lost to sight.