

## WHAT ARE MONSTERS?

The tavern is bustling with people, throbbing with sound and warmth. Voices overlapped, half-drunken songs slurred together, boots thumped against the warped floorboards in some semblance of a dance. The stink of sweat, ale, and roasted meat curled in the air, clinging to every surface like an old, familiar sickness.

Then the door groaned open.

A gust of cold night air slithered in before the figure did, slipping through the gaps in the wooden walls. A man stepped inside, dragging the cold with him. The brown cloak clung damply to his frame, its edges dirtied from the road. The hood stayed up, shadowing his face.

He didn't pause, didn't check the room the way most newcomers did, weighing friend from foe, pleasure from danger. He simply walked – steady, unhurried – to the far end of the tavern, where the firelight barely touched. Settled himself down at an empty table. When the barmaid came by, he murmured his order – mulled wine, nothing more – and placed a single coin on the wood, the kind of payment that said no questions.

But this wasn't the sort of place where silence went unnoticed.

It took less than a minute before someone got curious.

A man, broad in the shoulders, belly thick with years of drink, sauntered over. His tunic was stained, his breath reeked of ale, and a knife sat at

his hip — not drawn, not yet, but close enough to remind others that he knew how to use it.

"Strange thing," the man mused, voice rough with age and arrogance. "A place like this, full of life, full of voices, and here you are — silent as the grave. Makes a man wonder."

The hooded man didn't answer right away. He lifted his cup, took a slow, deliberate sip of wine. Set it down with the same care, as if the weight of his movements mattered. Then he spoke — low, calm, meant only for the one who stood before him.

"I like to sit alone if that's no problem to you."

The tavern hadn't gone silent, not fully. The songs still carried, the laughter still broke against the walls. But near this table, near this moment, the air had changed. A pause, just long enough to be felt. The unspoken weight of men knowing when to step closer and when to step back.

The broad man exhaled sharply through his nose, something close to amusement but edged with something harder. He pulled out a chair across from the cloaked figure, the wood groaning under his weight. Sat down without asking.

"Traveler, are you?" His fingers drummed against the table. "Plenty of travelers come through here, most of 'em merchants, peddlers, men with something to sell. You don't look like a merchant."

The hooded man shifted slightly, just enough for the lanternlight to catch the curve of his jaw beneath the shadowed hood. His expression was unreadable, his presence quiet in a way that unsettled rather than reassured.

"I don't sell," he said. "I write."

That earned him a raised brow. "Write?"

"I go where the road takes me," the traveler continued, tone measured, unhurried. "I see what the world offers, and I put it to ink. The curious, the strange, the forgotten. Anything that lingers in the mind." He tapped a single finger against his temple as he spoke, a slow, thoughtful gesture. "Anything worth remembering."

The broad man scoffed, shaking his head, about to say something, but another voice cut through.

"You ever write about monsters?"

The tavern's hum dipped, just a notch. The shift was subtle, but it was there. A thinning in the noise, a hesitation in the air.

The voice belonged to a younger man sitting at a table nearby, his face drawn tight, his knuckles pale where they gripped his half-empty tankard. He wasn't drunk — his eyes were too sharp for that.

"Monsters?" the traveler repeated, lifting his cup to his lips. The liquid inside rippled as he took a slow sip, unbothered by the weight of the question.

"Aye," the younger man said. His gaze didn't waver. "My friend, Jimmy... was killed by one not a week past. Ripped to pieces outside town, nothing left but scraps of him."

The broad man — so eager to pry before — fell silent. Others within earshot shifted, some suddenly finding interest in their drinks, others stealing cautious glances at the speaker.

The traveler leaned back slightly, rolling the cup between his fingers. The firelight flickered over his knuckles, casting shifting shadows across the table.

"I'm no expert," he murmured, voice calm, deliberate. "I write my thoughts on things when they linger too long in my mind. Sometimes that means the ruins of forgotten places. Sometimes it means..." He paused, exhaling softly. "Monsters."

A silence settled over the nearby tables. The kind of silence that stretched, that pulled people in, that made them lean closer without realizing it. Someone in the back coughed, another shifted on his stool. But no one spoke. Not yet.

The broad man from before, the one who had been so eager to pry, said nothing now. He only watched, his fingers curled loosely around his own drink. It was the younger man, the one who had lost his friend, who finally broke the hush.

"Then tell us." His voice was low, edged with something sharp. "Tell us what you've seen."

The traveler sighed, as if weighing the request, as if deciding whether these men deserved the things he carried in his head. Then he set his cup down, the soft clink of wood meeting wood the only sound in the room.

The traveler exhaled slowly, eyes hooded, fingers absently tracing the rim of his cup. The fire crackled in the hearth, but it felt distant now, its warmth unable to reach the hushed space that had settled around the table. Every ear in the tavern was turned to him, every breath drawn just a little quieter.

"You ask what I've seen," he murmured, his voice even, steady. "What I've written. What I know."

His fingers stilled. He lifted his gaze.

"Then listen."

He leaned forward, just slightly, his tone dropping to something low, something weighty, as if the words themselves carried a curse.

The traveler exhaled, his fingers tracing the rim of his cup. The fire crackled, but its warmth felt distant now, swallowed by the weight of his words.

“There are things on the roads,” he murmured. “Drowners, rotfiends, wrags moving in packs, dragging the unwary into the dark. They do not kill cleanly. They tear, thrash, feast.” His voice dropped lower. “And when the bodies are left behind, the true filth comes – ghouls, alghouls, hags that pick the bones clean without a care.”

He lifted his gaze. “Then there are those that do not take the flesh, but the soul – wraiths, specters, hymns. They do not hunt. They linger, whispering, rotting men from the inside, turning guilt into chains that bind them beyond death.”

His fingers curled. “And some hide among us. Vampires, bruxae – watching, waiting, slipping between us unnoticed. They do not strike often, but when they do... it is not just the victim who suffers.”

He leaned back, exhaling. “Yet the worst?” His voice was cold now.

“Fiends. Leshen. Fugas. They come as protectors, as guides, as unseen hands that shape fate. But in time, they take. They always take. Not gold, nor flesh, nor blood.” His eyes darkened. “No. They take what is most precious. A memory. A child. A love. And they do it so slowly, so gently, that you do not even realize it’s gone. Not until it is too late. Not until you are left staring at the hollow of your own life, wondering why it all feels so... empty.”

The traveler’s gaze darkened, his voice steady but heavy with something unspoken. He turned his cup slowly in his hands, the firelight flickering across his knuckles.

“There was a town once,” he began, his tone almost distant. “A place where men worked their land, where women kept their homes, and children laughed under the watchful eyes of their elders. It was peaceful, as such places rarely are for long. Life moved in simple rhythms.”

His fingers stilled. “The plague struck first, creeping through the streets like a shadow with no form, taking the weak, the old, the young. And when the town faltered, when its people could barely stand, they came. The creatures I spoke of, They smelled the rot, the fear. They tore through what remained, ripping flesh from bone, turning a place of warmth and life into a wasteland of silence and corpses.”

He exhaled. “Now, only ruin remains. No laughter, no warmth—just echoes, carried on the wind, and the things that still linger, waiting for more to fall.”

The tavern remained deathly silent. No man, no woman dared to speak, as if fearing their own voices might disturb the weight hanging over them. The fire crackled, the wind outside whispered against the wooden beams, but inside, not a soul stirred.

Then came the sound of boots—measured, deliberate. The heavy clack of steel against old wood. A man stepped forward from the crowd, clad in the armor of the king’s army. The insignia on his breastplate caught the dim firelight, glinting like a blade half-drawn. He was no common soldier. His stance, his presence, the silence that followed him—it all spoke of rank, of authority.

He did not waste time with pleasantries. “That town,” he said, his voice even, unreadable. “It was not monsters that destroyed it.”

The traveler did not react. He merely waited, his fingers resting lightly against the rim of his cup, his hood casting a long shadow over his face.

The officer took a step closer. "It was us," he continued. "The king's will, carried out by his royal guards." His words were steady, practiced, but something lingered beneath them. "The town was meant to serve the crown—to provide grain, labor, coin. But they had little left to give. They could not meet their levies, could not fill the king's coffers. And what use is a town that does not serve?"

A sharp exhale. His gaze flickered around the room, to the faces listening, judging. "First, we sent the landlords. Raised the taxes, tightened the chains. Told them to leave, to find new lands, to fall in line. But they stayed. Stubborn." His jaw clenched. "So we sent men instead. Not just soldiers. Others. Those willing to do what must be done. Bandits, mercenaries, cutthroats who had no love for law or crown, only for the weight of coin in their pockets. They burned what they could. Took what was left. Killed those who would not kneel. Some fled, the few that could. The rest?" A pause. "They are dust now. Ruins. Just as you said."

The words settled like lead in the room. A confession, raw and unshaken. The officer stood unmoving, his expression hard, unreadable, but there was something beneath it—something searching.

His gaze locked onto the traveler.

"You tell that story like a man who was there," he said. "So tell me, wanderer—what part did you play in it?"



The tavern was full, but not with common men. Not with weary farmers or tired travelers looking for warmth and ale. No, this place was filled with rot. The landlords who had bled the town dry. The officers who had given the order. The bandits who had done the killing, who had torched homes and split open men in the streets, who had left women screaming and children to the mercy of crows. A gathering of men who had destroyed lives without ever once fearing consequence.

Until now.

The hooded man exhaled, slow and measured. Then, he spoke.

"I am a hunter by trade," he said. His voice was calm. Steady. Unshaken. "I travel from place to place, doing what I was taught. Hunting monsters."

A fear that crept into the bones, that turned breath shallow and made fingers twitch toward weapons they suddenly weren't sure would save them.

The traveler stood. Slowly, deliberately. He reached up and pulled back his hood. His face was sharp, shadowed by the flickering firelight, his expression unreadable — but it was not his face that stole the breath from the room. It was the swords strapped across his back.

Not the weapons of a simple wanderer. Not the tools of a mere scribe, jotting down the tales of others. These were weapons carried with purpose, with skill, with intent.

The men inside stiffened. Hands hovered near hilts, eyes darted to exits.

A few moments later he exited the tavern the look on him says everything, the monsters have been dealt with.

The cold night air met him, crisp and sharp. The fire's glow faded behind him, swallowed by the dark. But he was not alone.

They were waiting.

The survivors. The ones who had fled when their home burned, who had watched their families slaughtered, who had spent their nights with nothing but grief and hunger and the hollow ache of loss. They stood in the cold, watching him, their faces worn, their eyes hard.

He did not take their money. He did not ask for payment. He knew what little they had was worth more to them than it ever could be to him.

Instead, he reached into his small bag, pulled out a single poster, and unrolled it. The parchment was worn, creased from travel, but the ink was clear. A symbol marked inside – one that carried weight, one that meant something in the right circles. And beneath it, a face.

His next hunt.

A man like him, who hunts for coin.

A very good one at that.

(A Story by Rathna).

