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# Children of the Carnival, Part

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From set *Duskmourn: House of Horror*

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No one knew where the wind came from. It shouldn't have been blowing anymore: the House walls were tall and strong, without cracks or crannies through which a wayward wind could slip. The windows were locked. Every few years, some group of cocky young harvesters would decide that everyone before them had been doing it wrong somehow and take up bricks, and hoes, and whatever else they could find, making the long journey to the nearest plate glass window, intending to smash it and set the world free.

When Duskmourn was feeling charitable, their bodies would be found. When the House was feeling hungry—much more common an occurrence—there would be nothing, not even bones, to show where they had gone. Their names would be added to the cautionary tale of why it's a bad idea to go around smashing windows, and their parents would cry in private, trying not to let the younger children see.

The younger children saw, of course. The children always saw.

The children saw how many people left the safe zones and didn't come back again. More every year. The once dependable paths through Duskmourn's body were becoming more and more dangerous; some of them had family that had moved to other safe zones after spilling promises across the table like jewels. "I'll always come back to visit you." "This will always be my home." "How could anyone trade a carnival for a Benefactory without regrets?"

And some of the promises had been the truth, and some of them had been pretty polished lies, and so many of them came down to the same thing in the end, when the ones who made them never came back again. Dawn sat on the rough stone wall that marked the border between the carnival's safety and the treacherous roses to the west, throwing chips of stone at the roses to watch them snap and snarl.

She knew better than to get close enough for them to sink their thorns into her. That was the thing about safe zones: you could learn their borders, but so could everything else. Travel outside the safe zones was all the more treacherous because the greatest concentration of the House's monsters could be found just over the border. They lurked there, waiting for someone to step over the temporary boundaries that had formed between the safe places and the rest of the House, waiting for the unwary to make themselves into targets.

Dawn pulled back and hurled a particularly large stone chip at a yellow rose, which snapped it out of the air and swallowed, stem bulging as the rock traveled toward its root ball. If you could feed a bush enough rocks, you might clog the roots and kill the thing, although you could also turn the whole bush into a sort of slingshot, with the roses spitting projectiles at anyone in range. The elders disapproved of feeding the roses.

Dawn really didn't care. She wasn't going to live in the carnival her whole life. Even if her inventions were never enough to catch the attention of the Benefactors, there were other safe zones in the House—her brother had gone to an attic settlement, and one of her cousins was in the hedge maze region—and none of them would have the local elders watching her every move. Oh, they'd have their own elders, but those elders would know her as the adult she was, not the child she'd been. *These* elders would forever see her as something to protect, to contain, to control, and she was well tired of it.

But she wasn't going to need to deal with any of that, because she was going to build the best traps, the best warning systems, and the Benefactors were going to claim her to join them and help them fight against the House. It was all she'd ever wanted.

Motion from the safe trail past the garden. Dawn stood, feet planted firmly on the wall, and strained to see who was coming. Delight washed through her and she jumped down—on the protected side, not into the disappointed roses—to run toward the break in the fence where the path would deliver the walkers to the carnival bawn.

The wind whipped through her hair as she ran, carrying the familiar scent of popcorn and frying dough. The carnival was a safe zone, but the House still replenished its lures, the delicious smells that had drawn the first survivors to the patched and leaning tents. Everything else had to be gathered, wandering the safe zone to gather crops or sending foraging parties into other rooms. Some of the dining halls and kitchens replenished themselves on a regular basis, setting their own lures out to trap survivors.

It was best when they didn't need to forage, of course. Dawn could name half a dozen people—strong, clever people—who'd gone on foraging trips and never come back. Every trip into the House was a trip you might not survive. So, she ran toward the fence, legs pumping and heart pounding, to see the foragers returned.

All three of them had made it back. Rill had a nasty gash down one arm, straight through the fabric of her canvas-and-wallpaper coat, but the flesh Dawn could see through the hole was still pink and healthy looking, not riddled with splinters or decorated with fishhooks. Sunset was walking like his left ankle hurt him, leaning on City and wincing every time he put his foot down.

City, of course, looked perfectly fine. City always did. He was the fastest and strongest of their current foragers, too clever for the harvest by far; he'd been making runs into the body of the House since the day he was declared of age, taking greater risks than any of the others, and always coming back. All of them were named for things that had existed in the world outside, fading dreams of freedom and comfort passed down, long after they had lost all meaning—Dawn was fairly sure her name and Sunset's meant the same thing, and that a Rill was something to do with water, but she'd never experienced those things for herself. Neither had her parents, or her grandparents, or anyone she'd ever met.

Before the House, many of them had lived in a city. It had been the place where they made their homes and built their wonderful creations, where they wove their magic and spent their lives in comfort and plenty. Nothing like the lives they eked out now, scrounging for the House's scraps, running from the House's monsters.

City was the best and most powerful name they had, and it only made sense for the one who carried it to be the best of them all. City was going to lead them one day, Dawn knew it, and when he did, he would find a way to put a stop to the slow erosion of the safe routes between settlements. He would make their world steady and stable again.

A happy life could be lived surrounded by monsters, if you knew where to throw your stones and set your feet.

Dawn knew both those things. Just like she knew that it wasn't right for two members of a raiding team to come back injured when the third looked completely fine. She shot City an uneasy look as she moved to support Sunset, helping him take the weight off his foot.

"What happened?"

"Ambush while we were cleaning out a cold room," said Rill. "You should have seen it—more wheels of cheese than you ever get in one place. And jam! Actual jam, in jars!"

Dawn's eyes widened. Jam in jars was the best kind. After you swallowed the sweetness, you'd have glass left to use in making weapons, or traps, or even the most basic sort of scanners, the ones that would barely give you a few seconds' warning before a cellarspawn burst out of the wall and started trying to drag you away. Better scanners needed better material. A few months ago, one of the raiding parties had come back to the carnival with a whole box of silverware that she'd been able to melt down for wire.

"Your detectors," she said abruptly. "Didn't they go off?"

"It wasn't a cellarspawn," said Rill. Her voice was hollow. "We were deep in the Boilerbilges, nowhere near the Hauntwoods, but it wasn't a cellarspawn."

"Then what?" asked Dawn.

"Wickerfolk," said Sunset.

Dawn managed, barely, not to recoil, her eyes snapping around to the cut on Rill's arm.

"Did you clean the wound?" *Just one splinter, and she could be ...*

"This wasn't our first raid," said City, with uncharacteristic sharpness. "Don't act like you'd have done any better. Our detectors weren't keyed for wickerfolk. There wasn't any reason they should have been. So, we got caught off guard."

"But we still got some cheese," said Sunset, trying to sound upbeat. "It wasn't a total loss."

"I cleaned it," said Rill. "Nothing's lodged inside. I just wish I knew why they'd been hunting there. It was so close to the safe route ..."

"And nothing attacked you on safe ground?"

Rill shook her head. Dawn exhaled.

The safe paths through the House had been hard drawn, paid for in blood and brutality over the course of years. The House didn't want them to be safe anywhere, of course; it needed their fear, and a bed where nothing would try to snatch you out from beneath the covers went counter to everything it stood for. But people needed safety to stay *people*. They needed time to stop and breathe, before the stress stopped their hearts and left them rotting, no longer tempting sources of terror for the House to harvest.

So, bit by bit, they had established the treaties. Unwritten things, of course, things that could be forgotten or passed on incorrectly, so there was always the question of whether the path you were on was *really* safe, or just looked like it. Still, if you stayed on the paths and watched for the sigils, you should be able to move between zones without too much risk.

"We saw another of those groups of strangers," said Sunset. "They were wearing clothing like nothing I'd ever seen before, and wandering around like they had no idea they were in danger. And they all had their glimmers! Every one of them!"

“Huh,” said Dawn.

There had been a great shaking in the House a few harvest cycles back, knocking things off shelves and sending dust cascading down from the rafters. And then it had passed, and everything had been normal—until it wasn’t.

Strange doors had begun to appear outside the safe zones. Doors appearing and disappearing according to their own whim was nothing new, but not at the rate these seemed to crop up—more and more every week it seemed. Rill had seen one open, and the air that blew through the door had been fresh and sweet, so sweet it hurt the throat, like it was blowing from another world. More strangers had started showing up after that. Never many at the same time, but a steady enough stream that everyone knew by this point. People had been vanishing from the edges of the safe zones since the beginning. It wasn’t until the appearance of the doors that they’d started to vanish from the paths.

“Can’t you walk any faster?” demanded City.

Dawn frowned at him. “Sunset’s hurt. He’s going as fast as he can. You’re not carrying anything so urgent that we should have to hurry.”

“Sorry,” said City, slumping a bit. “I’m just ... tired.”

“We’re almost there.”

They reached the top of the low hill that split the carnival grounds in two, and there it was ahead of them: home. One of the few places Duskmourn had never been able to taint or tarnish, a safe zone from the beginning.

The tents were a riot of color, patched canvas walls rippling in the breeze and pennants snapping overhead. Magical lights wrapped around the tentpoles and stretched between the tents themselves, creating a web of promised sanctuary. The central bonfire was lit; someone was playing a fiddle tune that sounded like a full stomach and a warm bed. Dawn exhaled. Sometimes she chafed against the need to be a good member of the community, but she couldn’t deny the joy she felt at the sight of home.



Art by: Josu Solano

Rill and Sunset looked like they felt the same way. City, though ... City's face was cold and solemn, not a smile in sight. He pulled ahead as they walked down the hill toward the main tent.

"You know, Dawn," he said. "Your detectors kept us safe for years. Without you, we would have died a dozen times over. That's why we wanted you to keep harvesting and artifacting until the Benefactors came for you, not come with us on the foraging runs."

"I know," she said, bemused. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because things have changed."

Dawn stumbled.

City turned to look at her. *Had his eyes always been that blue, that bright? Or was it just a trick of the carnival lights?*

"Duskmourn gave us safety because we gave House what was needed more than anything: we gave Duskmourn the people to sustain it."

"I don't ..."

"But something shifted. Something outside. And now, Duskmourn can do what we've been doing all along. Now House can *hunt*." City looked genuinely regretful as he stopped walking and turned fully around, shrugging off his coat.

Beneath it he wore a tabard embroidered with the wings of a vast and colorful moth. He smiled as he spread his arms, and the smile was the smile of Duskmourn, and it was terrible to behold.

"Duskmourn doesn't need us anymore," he said, while Rill gasped in horror and Dawn and Sunset stared. "But there is a way to survive, if you're clever enough to see it. There's still a place for those of us who wish to serve the Devouring Father, among the Cult of Valgavoth. Join me, Dawn. Spread your wings and fly toward his light."

Rill and Sunset were injured. Dawn was the only one who stumbled back, away from the suddenly menacing shape of her friend. Behind her, something smashed. She looked over her shoulder. A massive razorkin was kicking down the fence, what looked like an entire army of Duskmourn's monsters following close behind.

She spun around and ran.

The time of truce was ended, but maybe, if she was lucky, she could find one of those mysterious doors. Maybe she could be the one who found out where the wind came from.

Dawn ran, and the carnival fell, screaming, behind her.