
Children of the Carnival, Part

2

Mira Grant

From set *Duskmourn: House of Horror*

23. 08. 2024

Dawn ran, and the carnival that was the only home she had ever known burned behind her, creatures and monsters cavorting in the flames, survivors scattering as they ran for their lives. She had been among the first to run, thanks to meeting City and the others on the way back from their scavenging mission; Duskmourn's monsters had still been getting themselves into position. She fled, and the survivors who ran after her died screaming, picked off by nightmares or entwined by lurking wickerfolk who had been smart enough to let her pass in favor of the richer pickings yet to come.

She ran, and every time a scream was cut short behind her, she felt a little worse about running. She should have seen the signs of danger sooner than she did, should have realized something was wrong when they came back early, and by the sometimes-unpredictable rose path, not through the more stable route behind the kiddy wheel. There had been so many signs, and she'd missed them all, and now her home was burning.

Lungs aching like she'd been punched in the chest, Dawn stopped and looked back at the fire, at the shapes fleeing before it, and at the larger shapes capering in the destruction. She tried to commit the moment to memory, to write it bold and permanent across her thoughts. She knew the details would fade, but she could at least try.

Breath caught, she turned to resume her escape, and screamed as City loomed out of the woods in front of her, face twisted into a rictus of a smile, teeth too white and eyes too bright, hands reaching out to grab her.

"The Devouring Father is still hungry," he said, and there was no place left for her to run, nowhere left for her to go—

Dawn woke up screaming, kicking off the thin blanket—really a strip of scavenged curtain—that she had been using to shield herself against the attic chill. The guards on duty at the trapdoor down to the next floor turned to look at her with irritated disinterest.

"Shh," said one, while the other only shook his head and turned back to his watch.

Cringing with embarrassment, Dawn gestured apology and rose, folding her curtain blanket neatly off to the side. Someone else would sleep there now that she was up, and whoever it was would probably appreciate the consideration. There was a certain indefinable comfort in unfolding a blanket to sleep under, as if that small act of destruction made the slumber all the sweeter.

This accomplished, she grabbed her single change of clothes and shuffled off toward the changing room.

Finding an unguarded tunnel to the attic encampment had been sheer luck, a one in a million chance that should never have panned out. She'd arrived bruised and scraped from her headlong flight into the forest, but otherwise uninjured, and had been able to warn the camp leads of what had happened to the carnival before the monsters started hammering on the attic door.

If not for the fact that the attack had come from the opposite side of the room from Dawn's arrival, she would have suspected herself of leading Duskmourn's forces straight to them. As it was, while she had been offered shelter, most of the survivors her own age treated her with suspicion. Her escape from the carnival had been too convenient, especially given the timing of the attack that followed.

Almost everyone in the attic had lost someone in one of those two attacks. The House had never been a safe place to live, but it had suddenly turned hostile even by its own horrifying standards. Every settlement and gathering place they still had contact with had been attacked in the last weeks; several had vanished entirely. It was like the House, after years of treating their lives like a resource to be carefully hoarded, had suddenly figured out that they weren't needed after all. And it was terrifying.

Living in Duskmourn—not that any of them had a choice in the matter, not that any of them would have chosen to stay if they'd had a choice in the matter—had never been an easy thing. The House was a predatory landscape filled with monsters, and it would slaughter the unwary in the time it took to draw a breath and scream. Still, it had been *their* predatory landscape until recently, and now that it was no longer giving them time to catch their breath between assaults, it was unclear in the extreme how much longer any of them would be able to endure.

Dawn stepped into the empty changing room, lighting a lantern, and swinging it around to check the shadows before she began to change clothing. Traditionally, the House hadn't attacked up here. But its nightmares and cellarspawn could come from anywhere, even the attic walls, and "tradition" was a word that was rapidly collapsing under the weight of reality.

Nothing lunged out to claim her. Dawn pulled her hair into a rough ponytail and exited the room, back into the dim, largely silent attic. Night and day were concepts she only knew from books and old stories; sometimes rooms were brighter or darker, but there was no grand cycle, no predictable pattern to the House's whims. Still, there were times when the House was active. It was best to scavenge right after a major attack, when the monsters would be satiated and sleeping, and to sleep after that, while guards stood watch against anything that might not have found a big enough meal earlier.

Dawn nodded to the guards as she moved past them again, this time heading for a door in the far wall. A quick peek showed that her workshop was still on the other side, not yet shuttled away by the House, and so she slipped through and sat down at the workbench she had scavenged for herself from broken boards and pieces of mismatched furniture, reaching for her current project.

It had started as some sort of kitchen implement, boxy and rectangular, with two slots in the top and a heating coil inside. Dawn couldn't imagine what it would have been used for, or how it was supposed to function, but the coil was still an excellent conductor, and by wiring it to a battery, she was sure she could make something that would deliver a nasty shock to anything that it touched.

She didn't have friends in the attic encampment, not really. She didn't know their patterns or their traditions, and they didn't trust her enough to let her go on scavenging expeditions. Although they brought back the things she asked for—grudgingly, but reliably enough that she'd been able to resume the one thing that brought her true and genuine joy, the one thing the House couldn't take away, no matter how many times it attacked.

She was back to work.

Under her tools and clever fingers, bits of scrap and waste were transformed into traps for glitch ghosts, snares that could slow—not stop, but still, a few seconds could be the difference between life and death—a charging razorkin, even fire-spitters that would stop a wickerfolk in their tracks. Her little devices were barely more than toys, and yet. Sometimes toys were all you had.

The attic had access to different raw materials than the carnival had, in both good and bad ways. There were fewer nuts and bolts to be had here, but more copper piping; not as many nails, more pieces of unbroken glass. She was adapting. Prying the bottom off her metal rectangle, which she was already beginning to think of as a shock box, she felt around for the slot where she'd be seating the battery.

Batteries were rare and getting rarer every season. They were artifacts from the fabled days before Duskmourn became the world, products of the lost city created during that era of impossible peace and plenty. They could be recharged by people with the magical talent to channel energy into metal, or by hanging them in a place frequented by glitch ghosts, although batteries hung in that manner weren't always recovered.

The battery slot was up against one side of the box, easy to overlook, but vital. Dawn fumbled for the battery with her free hand, sliding it into place, and pushed it home with a click that seemed to reverberate all the way to her elbow. Replacing the lid, she pressed down the switch that would—she hoped—activate her latest creation.

It began to hum, and the small wooden “prod” she'd attached to one end with a rope of braided copper crackled, broadcasting the fact that it was now dangerous to the touch. Dawn grinned to herself, thinking about how *impressed* Rill would be when she saw that one of the shockers had finally come together, that Dawn had given them a new weapon, even if it was one that required being a lot closer to the enemy than most of them preferred.

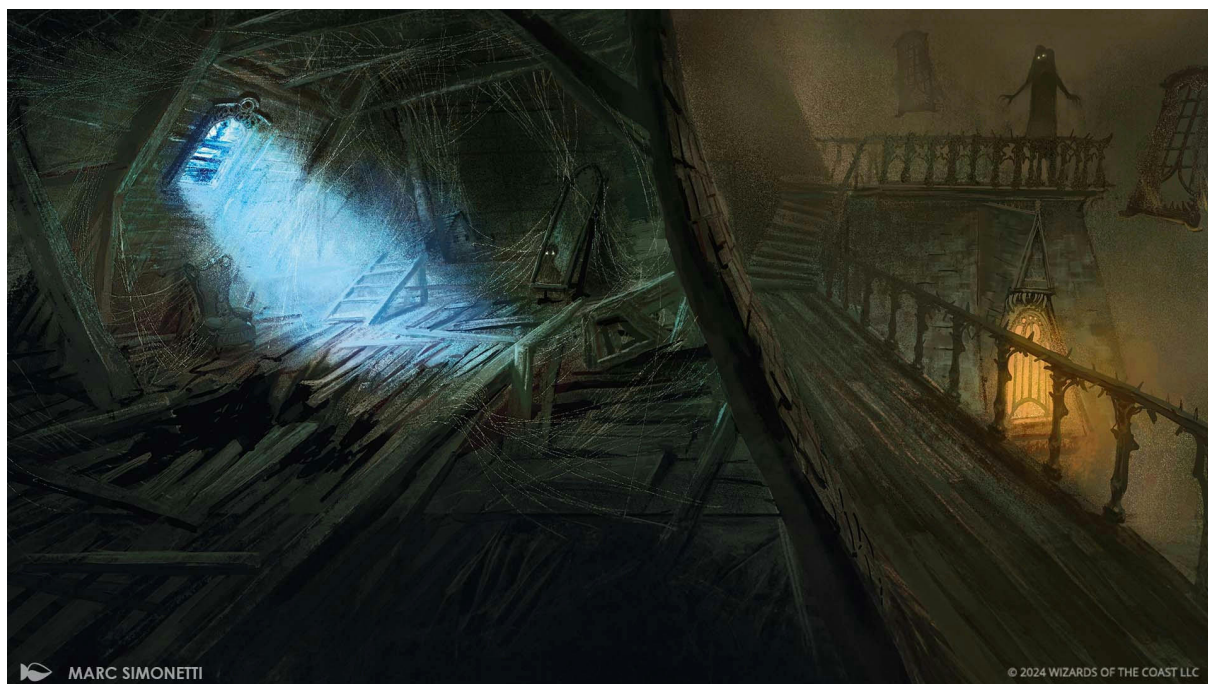
Her smile faded. Rill was never going to see. Rill was dead if she was lucky, and alive but taken if she was not, transformed by the House into one of its many horrors. Sweet, serious Rill. The image of her ripped apart by cellarspawn was almost preferable to the thought that she might have become trapped inside the woven skin of one of the wickerfolk, silent and unfeeling forever—

A loud bang from the other side of the door jerked her attention away from her workbench. Dawn looked around, box still in her hands, before she slowly, deliberately stood.

No one spent a lifetime in Duskmourn without learning the signs of danger. No one had screamed, no one was whimpering or wailing.

No one was breathing either.

There was a certain quality to the absolute silence that descended on a room whose occupants had been killed. Dawn backed away from the door, getting her shoulders up against the wall, and tried to think what she might have that she could use to defend herself. A few half-finished ghost traps, some snares, and her shock wand. That was all. Not nearly enough against something that could take out an entire encampment in one strike.



For a long while, the only sound was the pounding of her heart, the blood rushing in her ears, her breath rasping in her throat. Then, from the other side of the door, she heard footsteps.

They moved toward her workshop, but stopped before they reached it. And a familiar, once beloved voice said, calm and serene in a way that he had never been when they were together in the carnival,

“He let you go, you know. I asked him for your life, and he granted it to me, our Devouring Father doing a glorious favor for his most beloved new acolyte. But I don’t have any more favors to call in until I earn them, in blood and bone and terror. I don’t have a way to save you again. Come to us in the Valley of Serenity. Come with open hands and a willing heart, and we’ll lead you past the threshold into his peace, forever. Or stay as you are, unprotected and unchaperoned, and know that you’ll die like all the others. The choice is yours, Dawn. I only pray you choose rightly.”

City’s footsteps moved away after that, and the silence returned. Dawn slowly sank to the floor, her back remaining pressed against the wall the entire way, and looked at the device in her hands, willing it to remake itself into something that could change the world, that could make it so, when she opened the door, the attic encampment wouldn’t be lost.

Nothing changed.

Eventually, she stood on shaking legs and moved to open the attic door. The scene on the other side was as she had expected, and not, all at once. There were very few bodies. The ones that remained were missing pieces, skins mostly, but limbs as well; the razorkin had been here. Dawn stopped to pluck a machete from one of the slain as she walked to the trapdoor, shock wand still in hand.

She climbed down the stairs, and nothing attacked her. The shadows, for once, were entirely empty and stayed that way as she walked down the hall, moving from the uneasy echoes of the Mutemoors into the dripping cool of the Floodpits. She had heard rumors the Benefactors would be found there.

She had nowhere else to go.

She was walking along a portrait hall when a glitching, shuddering shape pulled itself out of a shard of glass and reached for her, a terrible void of color and eternal nothingness. She aimed her shock wand at it and pressed the button that should increase the voltage, and instead of a spark, a shimmering

beam of shattered light burst out, wrapping the glitch ghost in a lightning haze. Dawn staggered back, keeping the button pressed firmly down, and hoped the ghost would break before her battery died.

The two things happened at the same time, the ghost shattering into a million specks of light even as the battery crackled and expired. Suddenly defenseless except for her stolen machete, she blinked at the place where the ghost had been, then at the wand in her hand, like she had forgotten what it was.

Hands grasped her from behind, and she was yanked through a doorway before she could scream, into a dusty, disused theater, where a circle of survivors in meticulously patched clothes turned to look at her.

“Welcome to the Benefactors,” said the one who had pulled her into the dubious safety of their company. “We heard you’d been looking for us.”

Dawn laughed, starting to cry at the same time. The circle closed around her, and then hands were taking her shock wand, two people studying it before saying they had fresh batteries and asking whether she would mind if they installed them. She was safe here. *They* were safe here, or as safe as anyone could be with the House changing around them for no reason she could see.

And still City’s words echoed in her ears.

The choice was hers.

The deaths were, too.