

Episode 2 — The Butcher of River Market



Part One: The Hall of Blood

The butcher's hall smelled like what it was—a place where animals had been killed and processed for three generations.

Marcus did not notice this. Marcus did not notice anything anymore, because Marcus had been dead for three months, and what wore his shape had moved beyond such concerns.

The thing that looked like Marcus stood among the hanging carcasses in the gray light of early morning. Pigs, mostly. Some cattle. A deer, its head still on, its dark eyes fixed and glassy. The meat was good meat, properly hung, properly aged. The smell of iron and salt and flesh at various stages of decomposition was, to the thing that wore Marcus's shape, as pleasant as anything could be.

It had been waiting for the woman for nearly six hours.

The woman's name had been Cathrina. She was, or had been, a fishmonger. She had come into the butcher's hall just after dawn, when the markets were still slow, when most of the district was still dark and the river was still brown and cold.

She had come to buy meat for a client—someone important, someone with money, someone who expected quality.

The thing that wore Marcus's shape had been waiting.

What happened had happened quickly. Cathrina was efficient, businesslike. She selected her cuts, made her transactions, and began to leave. The thing had moved with a speed that was wrong, that did not match the sluggish way Marcus used to move before his death.

The cleaver had come from nowhere.

The wound had been deep, had been fatal, and what mattered most—what mattered to the thing—was that the blood had spilled on the stone floor of the butcher's hall. Gallons of it. Pumping out in the rhythm of a dying heart, spreading across the ancient flagstones, seeping into cracks that had drunk blood for a hundred years.

Where it spilled, the thing had grown stronger.

It had taken Cathrina's body to the back room and arranged it among the hanging meat, and then it had waited. It always waited. After feeding, it needed to return to the butcher's hall, to stand among the hanging carcasses, to let the ancient stone drink the blood that was already congealing on the floor.

The thing did not know it was a Blood Revenant. It did not know that its resurrection in Marcus's stolen shape was tied to this place, to the ritual of blood spilled on blood-soaked stone. It knew only hunger and waiting and the peculiar satisfaction of feeding.

By morning light, the body of Cathrina had begun to stiffen among the meat.

The thing that wore Marcus's shape stood motionless, its black eyes fixed on nothing, its breath coming in the wrong rhythm—fast, then slow, then stopping for long stretches before starting again.

The butcher's hall was exactly where it needed to be.

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Part Two: The Market

The River Market was a maze of stalls and small structures built along the bank of the Kasten River, which ran brown and cold from the mountains down toward the bay. The market district had existed for nearly two hundred years, gradually expanding, gradually accumulating the weight of commerce and slaughter and the ordinary brutal business of keeping a city fed.

The morning was gray and cold. The cobblestones were wet from the river mist and the small rain that fell during the night. The smell was a complex thing—fresh fish, fish that was less fresh, salt, drying nets, smoke from the vendor fires, and underneath it all, the meat-smell from the butcher's hall.

Ace moved through the market without drawing attention.

She was small enough to be overlooked by the vendors setting up their stalls. Small enough that the security men who occasionally patrolled the market barely registered her presence. She wore the kind of clothes that suggested she belonged—practical, worn, the clothes of someone who worked with

their hands.

Only her eyes were wrong. Violet eyes in a city where violet eyes were not.

But people did not look at eyes unless you forced them to.

The information had come via the same network that had alerted her to Kestrel's Hollow. A report of deaths, of something that did not make sense. Four people dead over three months. All in the River Market district. All with the same quality of strangeness to the deaths.

The last body had been found only two days ago.

A woman named Cathrina, a fishmonger. Found in the butcher's hall, arranged among the hanging meat as if she were part of the inventory. Dead for perhaps half a day by the time discovery happened. The wound that killed her was consistent with a cleaver. The butcher's cleaver, in fact, though the butcher was dead himself, had been dead for three months.

That detail was the one that had drawn Ace's attention.

She reached the butcher's hall as the morning was fully arriving. The structure was a long, single-story building with a stone facade that had been worn by decades of use. The door was open. Inside, she could see the racks, the hanging meat, the particular ugliness of industrial slaughter made visible.

No one was inside.

She entered.

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Part Three: The Investigation

The butcher's hall was exactly as described. The hanging meat filled the space with its weight and smell. Pigs, cattle, one deer. All at different stages of decomposition. The floor was stone, ancient and stained with decades of blood. Some of that blood was old, ground into the cracks, permanent as architecture. Some of it was fresh.

Ace knelt and examined the fresh blood.

It was spread in an arc across perhaps three meters of floor space. Heavy bleeding—the kind that came from major vessels. The pattern suggested the victim had been standing when wounded, had perhaps stumbled, had certainly died quickly. There were no drag marks. No attempt to move the body across the floor.

The blood had been allowed to fall exactly where the body stood.

She noted the walls. No marks, no signs of struggle beyond the blood. Whatever had happened had been quick and efficient. The butcher's cleaver hung in its proper place on the wall—Ace recognized the tool by its wear pattern, the curve of the blade worn by years of use.

She took it down and examined it.

The blade was clean. Recently cleaned, recently washed. But not recently used to kill—the cleaning was too thorough, the water smell overlaid with soap. Whoever had wielded this cleaver had not done so recently enough for the blood to have stayed.

A trap.

Or a distraction.

She moved deeper into the hall, examining the hanging meat. One of the bodies—the deer—had something wrong with it. The positioning was off. The deer's body was not hanging quite as naturally as the others. She approached it slowly, her hand moving to the hilt of one katana.

The deer's head turned.

It was subtle—just a rotation of the skull—but it was movement that a dead animal could not make. The dark eyes, which should have been glassy and fixed, had a faint glimmer of awareness.

Ace stepped back and drew both blades.

The meat on the hooks stirred. Not swaying—that would be natural, would be understandable. It stirred with purpose, with intention. The hanging carcasses began to shift on their chains, began to orient themselves toward where she stood.

Then the thing that wore Marcus's shape emerged from the back room.

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Part Four: The Revenant

It had been a man once. Perhaps it still was, in some technical sense. The thing that walked out from the back room had Marcus's face, Marcus's build, Marcus's clothes—the same leather apron he had been wearing when he died three months ago. But the proportions were wrong. The limbs moved in sequences that did not quite match human anatomy. The head tilted at angles that would have broken a living man's neck.

And the eyes.

The eyes were entirely black. Not pupils dilated in darkness, but completely black—as if someone had poured ink into the skull and it had filled everything behind the eyes with absolute darkness.

“You killed Cathrina,” Ace said. It was not a question.

The thing that wore Marcus's shape did not respond. Its head turned toward her with that terrible fluid motion, and its mouth opened. When it spoke, the voice came in layers—Marcus's own voice underneath, but layers of other voices beneath that, other men who had died here, other people whose blood had soaked into the stone.

“The hall,” the revenant said, and its voice sounded like wind across still water. “Blood. Feed.”

It moved toward her.

The movement was fast in the way things that do not follow natural laws can be fast. It covered distance with limbs that seemed to bend at joints that should not exist, and Ace was already moving, already rolling to the side, already understanding the mechanics of what she was facing.

The cleaver hit the stone floor where she had stood, and the impact cracked the ancient flagstone. Where the blood had been spread, the revenant seemed to move faster, seemed to have better control. Where the stone was older, less soaked with recent death, its movement was more erratic.

The floor was its anchor. The blood was its strength.

Ace came up and struck.

Both blades moved in a sequence that would have been elegant if it had not been born from pure survival instinct. The emerald light of her katanas flared as they cut through the space where the revenant's torso occupied. She felt resistance—not the soft give of flesh but something harder, something that was not quite physical.

The revenant convulsed and made a sound that was not quite screaming. It stumbled backward, and blood began to pour from where her blades had passed through it. But there was something wrong with the blood. It was too dark, too thick. Where it fell on the stone floor, it did not spread. It contracted, pulled inward, and the revenant's movement immediately became more fluid, more controlled.

The thing was feeding on its own blood.

“You have to move it,” Ace thought, and even as the thought formed, she was acting.

She moved toward the revenant again, her blades moving in sequences of strikes and evasions, pressing it backward, away from the densest concentration of blood on the floor. The revenant fought with the cleaver and with its own impossible body, moving in ways that would have been lethal if Ace had been anyone else.

But Ace was not anyone else.

She was faster. She was more controlled. She did not make mistakes.

The revenant's blood spilled across the floor as she cut it, and where the blood fell on the older stones—stones that were less fresh, less saturated with recent killing—it did not rejuvenate as quickly. The thing was slowing. Its movements were becoming more erratic.

Then it understood what she was doing, and it fought with a desperate hunger to get back to the places where the stone was freshly soaked.

Ace pressed it toward the door.

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Part Five: The Breaking

The morning outside the butcher's hall was bright and cold. The cobblestones were wet. The river was brown and indifferent, flowing past the market district as it had flowed for two hundred years.

The revenant made its final stand on the edge of the butcher's hall, half in the doorway, fighting to press back inside where the stone was saturated with blood that would make it strong again.

Ace did not give it the choice.

She moved in with both blades extended, not aiming for the body but for the legs, for the connection between the thing and the floor of the hall behind it. The revenant tried to counter, but its movements had become sluggish. The blood it had spilled on less-soaked stone had not replenished it the way the fresh pools inside had.

Her left blade caught it across the right knee, and the revenant went down, its black eyes fixed on the open doorway behind Ace, fixed on the blood-soaked stone it could not reach.

“No,” the revenant said, and in that moment, it sounded like Marcus. “No, please, I need—the stone, the stone is calling, I need to go back, I need—”

Ace did not hesitate.

She drove both blades down with all her strength, and this time she did not aim for the body. She aimed for the point of contact between the revenant and the stone. The emerald light of her katanas flared bright enough to hurt, bright enough to cast sharp shadows across the wet cobblestones.

The revenant made a sound like glass breaking.

It convulsed once, and then the thing that wore Marcus's shape went still. The black eyes faded to gray, then to the normal dead color of any corpse. The impossible way it held itself—the wrong angles, the fluid movement—all of that ceased.

What remained was just Marcus. Old Marcus, three months dead, killed by his own resurrection.

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Part Six: The Fire

The butcher's hall burned differently than Ace expected.

She had prepared accelerants, oil-soaked cloth, the basic tools of purification. But as the fire caught and began to spread, she understood that the problem was not the building but the floor.

The ancient stone had been saturated with blood for so long that the fire seemed reluctant to touch it. She had to move from place to place, setting new fires, burning away the old deposits, burning away the ritual that had made the floor into an anchor.

The hanging meat caught fire. The wood beams that supported the roof caught fire. The fabric and leather, the tools and trade goods—all of it burned. But the stone floor was the last thing, the thing that mattered most.

By the time the butcher's hall was fully engulfed, the market around it was awake and alarmed. People were shouting, organizing water lines, trying to prevent the fire from spreading to the fish stalls and the other structures.

Ace moved away from the chaos. She found a place on the riverbank where she could see the hall burning without being part of the response. The flames consumed the roof, then collapsed inward, taking the walls with them. The stone floor remained, and the fire ran across it like something alive, burning away the stains, burning away the years of blood and ritual.

By the time it was finished, nothing remained but ash and blackened stone.

The meat market would recover. It would eventually rebuild. The stories would spread—fire, accident, old structure, dangerous conditions. No one would connect it to the deaths, or if they did, they would accept simple explanations. Bad luck. Coincidence. The natural entropy of a district built on slaughter.

No one would understand that something ancient had died in that fire.

Part Seven: The Aftermath

The morning after the fire, the market was already beginning to reset.

Vendors were setting up in different locations. The fishmongers had moved to the edge of the district, and they were already selling to the morning customers who needed their supplies. The city moved on, absorbed the chaos, and returned to the ordinary business of living.

Ace had spent the night outside the market, away from the crowds and the confusion. She had watched the fire burn down to embers, had watched the ash cool and settle.

Now, in the pale morning light, she walked one final time through the market.

A man stopped her as she passed one of the fish stalls.

"You was there," the man said. He was older, weathered, with hands that smelled of salt water. "When the hall caught fire. I saw you."

Ace did not respond.

"My daughter," the man continued, "she was supposed to get meat from the butcher's hall two days ago. She didn't go. Something about the place made her uncomfortable. She went to the other vendor instead." He looked at Ace with an expression that was difficult to read. "She came home alive. That's good."

He did not say anything else. He did not ask questions. He simply nodded and turned back to his work.

Ace continued on through the market.

By the time she reached the edge of the district where the river disappeared under the stone bridges that connected one side of the city to the other, she had already begun to forget the details. The faces of the living. The configuration of the butcher's hall. The way the revenant had called for the stone it could no longer touch.

These details were not part of her work.

Her work was only this: to find what fed on blood and fear and death, and to end it. The aftermath was silence, indifference, and the slow movement of the living forward into days that the dead no longer inhabited.

She crossed the bridge without looking back.

The river flowed beneath her, brown and cold and honest—carrying away refuse and offering no judgments, no answers, no redemption. Just the next moment, and then the next, and then the next after that, until eventually, for everyone, there was only the end.

Ace walked into the city, and the morning fog closed around her, and within hours there was no trace of her passage.

The butcher's hall remained as ash and blackened stone for a while longer, but eventually, someone would contract to have it cleared. The stone would be sold or broken up for roads. The blood that had

been burned away would be forgotten. New structures would be built in its place, and new people would conduct their ordinary transactions, unaware of what the ground beneath their feet had once meant.

That was always how it ended.

In silence.

In ordinary days following the extraordinary ones.

In the world continuing forward, carrying its weight of forgotten deaths and invisible monsters, until the next hunter came looking, the next report arrived, the next chapel or butcher's hall revealed itself through the gaps in normal understanding.

Ace disappeared into the city like water into stone, and the River Market closed its many eyes and forgot her almost instantly.

[ace](#), [demon-hunt-years](#)

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