

Bleeding

Iron

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This is an original shorty story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

Publishers
2007

New York

Rose tripped over a shape hidden by the drought-slain underbrush, agitating the torn flesh of her wounded groin. Catching herself by grabbing hold of Finn's shirt, she spent a few moments bent over in pain as her friend stared. Regaining her composure, she took a closer look at the brown lump in the grass. A body.

Unaware of the limp figure, Finn regarded his shredded tunic and groaned.

"Damn, Rose, you tore my shirt! Since when are you ever so clumsy, even with a groin wound?"

The garment had already been a ragged mess long before her stumble, and Rose ignored the red-haired giant's complaint as she wondered if the person was dead or only unconscious. Reaching down, she turned the body over. She'd steeled herself for the worst, but was relieved nonetheless to find the hefty tan-skinned man breathing. It'd been fortunate that Rose had literally stumbled upon him; otherwise, he'd soon have drowned in the rainwater. It was pouring, though too late for most of the shriveled vegetation on these bleak plains.

Very lightly, she slapped him on the cheek hoping he would wake. He didn't, despite his lack of visible injuries, and she lifted him in her thick arms. "Let's get him out of the rain. It's hard to check on someone with all this water blowing into your face."

Having finally realized the man's presence, Finn asked, "Where are we going to find shelter here on the plains? I suppose we'll have to set up the tent early. I'll hold on to him for you."

She wasn't going to be tricked into wrestling with the uncooperative old shelter that easily. "He's too heavy, and with your hands all slippery I'm afraid you might drop him. You put up your own old trash-heap of a tent, and maybe you'll finally agree to buy a new one when we get home."

Finn gave no reply, but set it up with a bit of a struggle, and Rose carried the portly man inside. The roof was leaking, but not too badly. Only now did Rose take in how strongly he smelled of perfume. Looking him over more closely, they found a bump on his head, but it did not seem too serious. They waited a few minutes before Finn remembered his smelling salts. After taking a whiff, the man began to stir. His eyes

opened, then widened further in shock. "What?! These are my virgins? There's only two of you, you're awfully big, and only one of you's a woman! And why is there blood over your crotch?"

"V-virgins? What?" Rose stammered self-consciously. She was rather large by women's standards, six feet tall and well over two hundred pounds, though Finn still dwarfed her by over half a foot and a hundred pounds. Looking at him, she could see he was equally flustered. "Why would you want us to both be virgin women? I got stabbed there, that's why there's blood. And listen, I may be big, but if I wasn't, I'm sure I'd be dead, so . . ."

"Heaven's not what it's cracked up to be," the man sighed.

Understanding crept into the warriors' minds. "You're not in heaven," Finn explained. "We saved you from drowning in the rain, so we're not obliged to serve whatever sexual rewards you're supposed to get in death. So how'd you end up knocked out in the field, anyway?"

"You forgot to ask his name," Rose quickly added. "Who are you?"

"I am Amir, a traveling merchant. I don't normally travel this far from home, but I came to make a special delivery. You see, Lord Randall of Flait offered to pay a rather lavish sum for a special pet I was to provide him, so I came all the way here to give it to him. But I found him dead and his army gone, so I tried to return home with my cargo still in tow. Unfortunately, I had a little accident along the way and the creature escaped."

Randall! He had been the warlord terrorizing the southern frontier of Masel, who Rose and Finn had just defeated. It'd been a tough fight, and Rose had the open wounds to prove it. Still, it'd been a worthwhile venture; they'd gotten rid of one menace to the region's innocent settlers, and also taken a good sum of treasure from their enemy's treasury. Rose wondered what kind of pet the brutish man had desired, but before she could speak Finn asked, "So, what are you going to pay us for saving you?"

Rose didn't care much for that covetous thought, she and Finn already well weighed down with gold. Tough carrying all that loot and gear while wounded. Raising a hand, she interrupted, "First, let's hear about this pet. Anything especially danger-

ous?"

"The most!" the merchant said with disturbing enthusiasm. "A monstrous wolf the size of a pony, the kind only found in the far north. Luckily, it should still be in its cage. It was when I last saw it, before I was hit in the head by something and fell faint off my wagon. I wonder where it is--oh, there were so many valuable goods there!"

"We'll find your wagon for you," Finn volunteered. "We can take our reward from there."

Cringing at the thought of moving with any haste, Rose whispered,

"My groin . . ."

"What are you mumbling about? You're a tough girl, and it's just a little pinprick, right? I know you'd beat yourself up if this wolf gets loose and eats some poor kid, when you had a chance to stop it. Let's go get the man's wagon back for him so he doesn't go broke. Even if we run into trouble, what's a stupid wolf? I remember you killing a bear with your bare hands!"

As used to Finn's arguments as Rose was, it didn't make them any less persuasive. He was good at appealing at once to her pride and her compassion. Thus forced to go along with his desire for more adventure, she settled for warning him, "If it comes to a fight, you're doing the heavy stuff. I don't want to reopen my groin." Amir gaped and Finn chuckled at her choice of words. Her face reddening, Rose lay down to await the storm's end. Tired as she was, even her embarrassment could not hold her mind for long.

Unfortunately, her excited friend wasn't about to allow her the much-needed rest. "What are you doing? This is no time to take a nap! A minute wasted is a minute for the wolf to escape, so let's get moving." Dragging herself up with a wince, Rose thought she saw a look of sympathy on Amir's pudgy brown face. But the merchant said nothing as she stood and followed Finn into the pouring rain.

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It didn't take long for the trio to come upon Amir's lost wagon and its lifeless rob-

ber, his throat torn out, but there was no sign of the deadly wolf. The brigand still clutched the sling that had felled Amir; it had done him no good this time. The horses were also gone, likely scared off by the beast. The merchant stared at the vehicle as if pondering what to do about everything inside. Already Rose scowled with growing frustration, the torrential rain contributing to her annoyance.

"What now?"

Amir exhaled sharply. "No doubt it'll look for vulnerable people to attack. I've heard these things love the taste of man. Do you know what's around here?"

Rose shrugged. "Traveled through here, didn't bother to look around."

Finn nodded, then suggested, "You think it would stalk the outskirts of a town, waiting for a chance? I heard there's a small village around here . . . somewhere. Luckily, we do have a map."

"It's as good an idea as any I have. Let's find the town."

"Would it be too much to ask you to help me pull this wagon?" Amir asked in a meek voice. "It'd be too much of a waste to leave all this stuff." Rose declined adamantly, but Finn offered to do the task for a fee. The big woman watched happily as the men struggled with the load, thankfully slowed to match her own ginger pace.

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They had barely made it halfway to town before they spotted a middle-aged peasant woman sitting pale and wide-eyed in the road. "Are you alright?" Rose asked.

"What happened here?"

"A monster," the scrawny woman replied, her voice shaking. "I'm fine, but my husband . . . He fought the wolf until both of them disappeared from view. I hope he's okay."

"Which way did they go?" Rose asked, already dreading what they would find.

The woman pointed to a clump of trees, and the warriors couldn't stop her from

following to look. Amir decided to wait alone on the road. Rose and Finn saw the corpse first, and Rose covered the widow's eyes before she could see. The gesture told the woman what had happened, and she fell to her knees and began to weep. "George! My beloved George, how will we live now?!"

Rose started to kneel, thinking to comfort the woman, when piercing screams cut through the air. It had come from the direction of the road. The warriors arrived just in time to see an enormous white wolf straddling Amir, its jaws clamped around his forearm as he tried desperately to protect his throat and face. "You stupid animal," Finn yelled then, "I see even you know not to cross your betters. Well, I'm here now-- come and taste my mace!"

As if it understood, the huge canine turned to face him, eyes smothering with rage, and leapt through the air like a pouncing tiger. Its snout met Rose's fist in midair with a sharp crack, and the force of the impact dropped it like a stone. "Well, that wasn't hard," she said as it lay still.

"Show off," Finn muttered.

Clutching his shredded forearm, Amir cried from his position on the ground, "You didn't kill it, did you?"

"Who cares?!" Rose demanded incredulously. "It killed people, this beast of yours! How can you still think of keeping it now?" "It's a lot of money," Finn said.

She began to respond, but was cut short as she felt sharp fangs clamp down on her neck from behind. Damn, how had she failed to hear it? How had all of them failed to see it? Finn rushed in and tried to pull it off her, but it was kicking and thrashing and her neck felt about to break. She reached behind her, grabbed the offending jaws, and pried them apart with a desperate burst of strength. Still holding on, she swung the wolf hard into a tree. The sound of snapping bones split the air. Dropping the limp body, Rose wiped at the blood flowing from her torn neck and hissed. "Stupid dog."

"Oh no! My precious creature! You killed it, why did you have to kill it?"

Rose grimaced as Finn inspected her injury. "It was biting my neck! Now shut up before I break your jaw, too!"

"Are you okay?" her friend asked as Amir sat in silence cradling his damaged

limb.

"I'm fine. For a girl who's taken an arrow through the neck before, a few teeth--" this time, she heard the shifting of the underbrush which heralded the wolf's second miraculous revival. But by the time she turned to look, it had already disappeared into the forest. "What's with this thing? It's like it was immortal."

"Maybe it just has your constitution."

Rose grunted. "Whatever the case, let's get the lady and our merchant friend to safety. Then, we can think about how to trap it."

"I am next!" Amir cried as they left the inn. "It wants vengeance on me! Oh great warriors, please protect me!"

After spending a night in town, Rose and her companions had awakened to learn that the peasant woman they'd met on the road had been found dead, her throat torn out. Now Amir had acquired the notion that this meant the wolf would soon be coming after him. Finn dismissed the idea. "There was no sign of forced entry into the house. I really doubt the woman would have opened the door for the wolf that killed her husband."

"What do think happened, then?!"

"She probably got murdered by someone she knew. The throat-ripping must be a coincidence."

Rose rubbed at the bandage on her neck. Her wound itched considerably, and she felt strangely cold. The morning sun stung her eyes. "It is a strange coincidence though, isn't it? So Amir, do you still want to keep the wolf?"

"No, kill it! I cannot stand the thought of it being out there, waiting for me!"

Finn sighed. "Why are you still with us, if you're so scared? We're going out to hunt the wolf."

"I'd rather be with you, than back in town with nobody to protect me. That wolf is a sneaky fiend!"

Rose wondered if Amir realized that as their companion, he might end up serving as bait. While the wolf might not have killed the widow, it would likely bear some primal grudge against its former captor. Oh, well. She would try her best to keep the merchant alive, and they were ready for the beast this time.

"Wow, the sun sure is bright today," she said.

Finn looked at her. "Did you get enough sleep last night, or are you hurt worse than I thought?"

"I'm fine."

They wandered around the outskirts of town for a few hours without any luck before Rose heard a rustling in the bushes. She tensed, turning and drawing her sword as Finn did the same with his mace. Amir crouched behind them, whimpering. "Who's there?" Finn demanded.

An arrow flew from the woods. This was not the wolf. Rose deflected the shaft with her shield and charged the archer's position. A slender form rose up, lashing out with a sword. She parried, and was surprised by the strength of the blow. The attacker was smaller than her, but seemed as strong as giant Finn himself. With a start, she recognized him.

"But you're dead!" she told Amir's wagon robber.

"And you're fat!" he shot back.

Rose hacked at his head. He dodged, quick as a cat, and retaliated with a low thrust. She tapped down with her shield, pushing his sword towards the ground. He punched her with his other hand, knocking her back a step, and followed up with a slash at her side. She stepped forward into his reach, shouldering him off balance, and clove him in half. She wondered what Finn was doing.

She turned to see the giant grappling on the ground with a man half his size, apparently getting the worse of it. The dead villager whose wife had just been killed, his shredded throat completely healed, had pinned Finn beneath himself and was trying to strangle him. Rose ran to help, but before she could reach the struggling pair Finn reached up, grabbed his opponent's head in both hands, and with a twist broke his neck.

Finn stood, rubbing his jaw, and Rose saw a large bruise forming below his eye.

And he wasn't a man who bruised easily. "What the hell is going on?" she asked.

Amir stared at the corpses, shaking. "Madness! The dead have risen! And they rise again!"

Rose stared, slowly realizing that the two corpses had begun to move again. Finn's villager was starting to sit up, his head lolling at a gruesome angle, while Rose's robber tried to rejoin the two halves of his body. How were they supposed to keep these things down? She stabbed the robber through the heart, but he kept struggling. Then Finn brought his mace down on the top of the villager's skull, obliterating it. The corpse flopped back to the ground and melted away into ash. Destroying the brain, maybe? Rose chopped hard, cleaving away the top half of the robber's head. He too disintegrated.

"Undead," she concluded unhappily.

"But how?"

Finn nudged Amir, whose gaze had dipped to the ground. He looked up at the two warriors, took a deep breath, and spoke. "I think . . . I might have brought a vampire to your country."

Rose stared. "A vampire?! But it's a wolf! And it was out in the sun!"

"They say vampires can take many forms, don't they? And the wolf came from the far north, where at times the sun shines all day. Perhaps vampires from there do not share all the weaknesses of the more common kind, or at least not to the same degree."

"Arctic vampires."

"Yes." Finn swallowed, and Rose noticed his gaze lingering on her neck. "You got bit . . ."

She fingered her bandage, and grimaced at the pain of the raw wound underneath. "I haven't changed yet, and the wound hasn't healed. Though I have been feeling weird."

"What are we going to do?"

"Well," Amir said, "they always say the way to save the infected is by killing the master vampire. I suppose you should continue the hunt for the wolf."

Rose noticed the merchant standing farther away now, keeping Finn between him-

self and her. She nodded, then said, "Wait! The widow--we have to go back to town! Before she changes, and infects others. How long do we have?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Let's hurry the hell back, then!"

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They hastened back to town, and quickly had the dead woman cremated. Luckily, her family had wanted her body burned anyway, though the funeral came earlier than anyone had expected. By the time it was done, night had fallen, and Rose and Finn returned to the inn to rest. Before going to bed, she asked him, "What are we going to do, if I begin to change? Will you . . . kill me?"

He shook his head. "I doubt I even could. You're as good as me without vampire abilities, and with increased strength . . ."

"You could, if you tied me up first. What if I turn in the night, and fall on you in your sleep?"

They were silent for a while. "You wouldn't do that," Finn finally said. "Fight it, Rose. We'll beat this together."

"I have never heard of anyone resisting a vampiric transformation once bitten. I don't want to die, but I'd rather be dead than the puppet of darkness."

Finn shrugged. "Before meeting you, I would've never thought anyone could survive a spear through the heart. You did. Believe in yourself. I'll be with you all the way." But as he climbed into bed and she went to shut the curtains, Rose knew no one could help her in the coming battle.

She awakened in a cold sweat at midnight, her heart seizing up as though an icy vise gripped it and was slowly squeezing her life away. Her body was growing numb, and though she felt no pain the increasing absence of sensation seemed far more terrifying. She heard a voice calling to her from somewhere outside, a whisper carried in the wind into the depths of her soul. The vampire was inside her, guiding her to damnation. Her body longed to give in, to die in order to achieve oneness with a greater being. She

fought it.

Rose gripped her sheets with the desperation of the condemned on their way to execution, helpless to banish the tendrils of cold piercing her heart but unwilling to release her life. She felt weaker and weaker as she sat there, too weak to even call to Finn who lay sleeping and unaware of her plight. He could not keep his promise to help her, and when the master took her he would be helpless to save even himself. Even now, she felt his will beginning to guide her body. She edged towards Finn's bed, though she did not wish it. Her hand gripped the hilt of her sword, and slowly slid it out of the scabbard.

Wait. That was it. She realized then that in order for her to fall to the vampire's curse, his will had to override her own, absolutely. She was not his yet, but she would be once she did anything significant for him. Once she killed Finn. But how could she stop herself? She knew what she was doing but she could barely slow her body. The master vampire's hunger for Finn's blood was her own, her mouth filling with saliva. Rose watched her arms lift her sword over her head, over Finn's belly. The blow wasn't intended to kill him instantly, no. It would only render him helpless to fight off her thirsting jaws. She plunged the sword down.

The blade went down, down at Finn's gut, but just as the tip was about to pierce his belly Rose thrust her will into her arms, turning the blade around in her hands with a strength she knew the master vampire could not believe. For a moment, their mental war distracted them from anything happening in the physical realm, and without any controlling mind Rose's body slumped forward. Right onto her own sword.

Sudden agony exploded through her as the broadsword pierced her stomach and angled up into her chest, and Rose managed a bloody smile as she heard the vampire scream in anguish, sharing her pain as it did her body. Mortal pain. Liquid fire seemed to fill her up from inside. The vampire's consciousness shuddered in her mind, the agony crushing it, overwhelming it. Its presence fell away, bit by bit as though it had shattered into a million pieces.

"Hey, Finn," Rose said as she nudged his shoulder with a bloody hand, the sword still buried inside her body. Blood dripped from her gasping mouth onto him. He opened

his eyes and stared. "I beat it. Thanks for believing in me."

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Morning came. "So what happened?" Amir asked.

"She fell on her sword. The vampire couldn't have enjoyed that feeling."

Amir's voice grew small. "I'm so sorry."

Finn chuckled. "She's not dead. Didn't you hear her whining about the pain just now? I thought the whole inn would have heard it." But though he tried to make light of it, he knew he could not disguise the worry in his voice. Rose was injured very badly.

"So . . . is the vampire gone?"

Rose thinks so. But she'll be needing some drink for her hurts." He turned to the barkeep. "Give me a keg of Volcano. On second thought, make that two. I need some, too."

The balding bartender called to an assistant to fetch the kegs of the strongest spirits made in Kayland. Just then, Amir yelled, "Finn, look!"

He turned. A bat had just flown in through a window. Bat . . . vampire . . . Finn made the connection as the winged rodent veered towards the stairs. His blood seemed to boil with rage. He jumped between it and its goal, throwing his axe. The bat tried to dodge, but the axe was too fast and sheared through the membrane of a wing. It struggled to stay afloat, somehow fluttering weakly in the air for a moment. Then it pitched itself at Finn, twisting and growing into a gigantic wolf with a half-severed forelimb as it plummeted at him.

He reached up with his arms, catching the beast in midair. Finn staggered under the weight, but his fabled strength did not fail him, and he bent back slightly, lifting the wolf a bit higher. Then he roared and fell forward, slamming it down with all his strength and weight through the nearest chair. Men yelled and women shrieked as pieces of wood were sent flying across the room. Finn stood, and looked down at the wolf now impaled on two broken chair legs. Wood. One weakness arctic vampires apparently retained. Before his eyes, it began to change again, this time into the form of a tall,

powerfully built blonde man.

He spat on the dying vampire. "Stupid fiend, you should have met me in your true form with axe in hand. Maybe then, you would have stood a better chance."

The master vampire snarled, exposing wicked fangs. Then its flesh crumpled away, and it collapsed into a man-shaped pile of ash.

Finn took his two kegs of Volcano from the barkeep's assistant and turned towards the stairs, a smile on his face.

"That was amazing!" Amir said. "Weren't you afraid?"

"I am afraid of nothing! It was a foolish fiend not to think twice before crossing one of my friends." But he had felt an unusual rage over Rose's wounding, a stronger emotion than he felt for the sake of his other friends. Perhaps there was something more to them.

Rose half sat gingerly, smiling as Finn supported her with an arm around her back. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Better, now that I have this." She took a sip from her cup of Volcano. "But the sun still stings my eyes."

Finn laughed. "Lack of sleep and injury, that's all. Rest, Rose. You're going to be fine."

She closed her eyes, still smiling, and laid back down. Finn looked at her and sighed. She looked beautiful in the morning light. He almost said something, but realized then that she had fallen asleep.

He decided to go downstairs and pick a bar fight.

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