

A TALE FROM THE
BADLANDS

THE
BLACK
AMULET

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*For everyone who loved the first book.
Thank you!*

‘An apprentice must never approach a Vampire without his Master because magic is the most effective means of despatching them. But even a Badlander who has Commenced must be confident of creating a *fengnett*.’

‘While ‘Vampire’ is the most commonly used name, apprentices should be aware that more traditionally minded Badlanders, and indeed older publications, may refer to these creatures by their Anglo-Saxon names, *hreremus* (bat) and *blóðgeótend* (shedder of blood).’

EXTRACTS FROM

The Badlander Bestiary

Pocket Book Version

‘Scrying is the preserve of great Badlanders, and those who use scrying as a means of transportation are greater still. How then to define the very few who have ever scryed through time itself?’

EXTRACT FROM

Scrying, Just Spying?

by Thomas Merricoates

 ONE 

It was easy enough to spot the Vampire at the far end of the alleyway. As she peered round the corner of the last building in the street, Ruby spied the creature standing inside a yellow cone of light thrown down by the single street lamp, staring into a shop window.

She tiptoed round the corner, keeping close to the wall, and slid into a deep dark doorway to hide. As she moved closer to the Vampire, the old-fashioned revolver Ruby was holding tutted, then swore quietly for good measure. To be fair, the gun had been grumbling for the last ten minutes, making sure Ruby knew exactly how it felt about her hunting such a dangerous creature, urging her to turn back. A speaking gun, let alone one that could curse so well, would have scrambled the brains of most people – as would seeing a Vampire in a small market town in the middle of the night – but to Ruby none of it seemed exceptional now.

Up until a few months ago, she'd been living a regular life. But she lived in the Badlands now, a place on the fringes of the everyday world that most ordinary people

knew nothing about. Not only was magic possible there, but the Badlands was also inhabited by strange and vicious monsters, making it very dangerous. But, in spite of all the extraordinary creatures that could be found there, Ruby was by far the strangest living thing of all because she was the only girl.

As far as she knew, the Badlands had only ever been a place where men and their boy apprentices had worked, tackling monsters and other nasties to keep ordinary people safe. Ruby always glowed with pride whenever she remembered she was the first girl Badlander. Even if it was still a secret for now.

‘Keep it down, will you?’ she hissed as the gun tutted again, before stringing together another collection of rather fruity-sounding words that would have embarrassed anyone who knew what they meant.

‘Ruby, for the last time, go home,’ it whispered. ‘You might be brave, but you’re too stubborn for your own good. You’re out of your depth with this one.’

‘I know what I’m doing.’

‘Tackling a Vampire is almost impossible without magic. Why you’ve insisted on hunting it down is beyond me.’

‘Why do you think?’ hissed Ruby. ‘All Victor Brynn makes me do is read books. It’s like being back at school. We never go hunting like proper Badlanders.’

‘That’s because you’ve got a lot to learn under the circumstances.’

‘You mean because I’m a girl.’

'I *mean* because you can't do magic given how your Commencement went so wrong.'

This time it was Ruby's turn to tut before peering out of the doorway and checking down the alleyway.

The Vampire was still there, under the street lamp, staring into the shop window. The white wooden sign hanging above the door had 'Hewitt's Butcher's Shop' painted on it in crisp black letters. Ruby guessed the smell of old blood must have drawn the creature there. The Vampire looked pale and gaunt in the gloomy orange light. A dark tangle of hair rested on the narrow shoulders of its black suit jacket. Ruby could see the glint of long, sharp fingernails. Despite being old, perhaps even centuries, there was an obvious strength in its lean frame, like the unseen energy trapped in a coiled spring. It was a powerful creature.

Ruby hadn't known she was hunting a Vampire at first. She'd discovered the telltale signs of something living in the cellar of a disused warehouse in the closest town to where she lived, and had spent the past few nights tracking it when she was supposed to be asleep. Victor Brynn, her mentor, hadn't suspected a thing. When she'd realized she had a Vampire in her sights, Ruby couldn't contain her excitement. This was exactly the type of dangerous creature she'd been looking for to convince Victor Brynn she should be allowed out hunting like a normal Badlander, not studying with her nose in a book all the time.

So here she was, ready and prepared like any Badlander should be to kill this monster.

Ruby ducked back into the doorway and took a deep breath. She felt around in one of the pockets of her old army camouflage jacket for what she needed. The problem with having limitless pockets, charmed to hold any number of useful objects, was that it required concentration to find what you wanted. But her mind was suddenly skittish and wouldn't focus clearly on what she needed. She wished she hadn't brought the gun along now. It had succeeded in putting the tiniest doubt in her mind that she could pull this off.

She took another breath and refocused, and her fingers closed round the object she was after. When she pulled out a small glass vial from her pocket, the golden liquid inside it was sparkling enough to light up her face.

'Jump 'em Juice!' groaned the gun. 'So that's your plan? Surprise the creature? Then what?' Ruby pointed to a small gold pin on her lapel.

'You'll need Vamp Venom for that.'

Ruby reached into her pocket again and brought out a small vial full of clear liquid.

'And you'll have to stake the creature right through the heart to kill it. Give it up, girl, while you've still got t—'

Ruby stuffed the gun in her waistband to shut it up.

She peered round the doorway. The Vampire was sniffing the air now, its head tipped back. When it swivelled and started walking in her direction, Ruby pulled back. The creature finally had her scent. All she had to do was get ready.

She unscrewed the cap from the vial and glugged the

Jump 'em Juice, wincing at the unexpected tartness, so citrusy and dry it made her gums tingle. Ruby expected to disappear instantly so when she didn't she started to panic, especially as there was no more juice left in the vial. She studied the instructions on the back. In black lettering was the promise:

Works Instantly
– Guaranteed –
Courtesy of Deschamps & Sons

When she heard a polite cough, she looked up into the bright green eyes of the Vampire, the pupils slit vertically like a cat's. There was nowhere for Ruby to go but further back into the deep dark doorway.

'Hullo thuu-rr, litt-ul guurl,' it said in a twangy American accent. 'Thought I smelt ya.'

Ruby plucked the gold pin from her lapel and it sprouted instantly into a golden spear. She jabbed at the creature, forcing it backwards. When the point nicked its hand, all the creature did was watch the cut heal.

'What can ah say? One of the puu-rks of beee-longing to the Undead.' It smiled and showed two white fangs. Then it cocked its head to one side and frowned. 'Ah guess you know what ah am. But what exactly uurr you? Yuur definitely not a yew-shual gu-rrl.'

Ruby was too busy trying to undo the vial of Vamp Venom. Her hands shook. She couldn't prise the top off.

‘Allow me, ma’am.’ The Vampire plucked it from her hands and dropped the vial onto the hard cobbles below.

When Ruby heard it smash, something inside her broke too.

‘Oops. Ape-ologies.’ The Vampire shook its head. ‘I am just so-oo clum—’

It stopped when Ruby, and the spear she was holding, vanished with a small **POP!**

The Vampire stared into the apparently empty doorway and hissed, then reached out both arms. A deep cut appeared along one of its palms and it pulled back its arm with a yelp as it felt a body pushing past, knocking it off balance. It recovered in time to hear the sound of boots clattering down the alley.

 TWO 

Ruby could see herself and the spear she was holding, but, judging by the Vampire's reaction back in the alley, she guessed she was invisible to the rest of the world. This was confirmed by every shop window and mirrored surface she ran past, in particular car wing mirrors; none of them showed her reflection.

But Ruby knew the smell of a frightened girl, the blood pumping hard round her body, would lay a trail for the Vampire to follow whether she was invisible or not.

She pulled the gun from her waistband as she ran.

'Jump 'em Juice and Slap Dust?' she asked it breathlessly.

'What about them?' the gun replied.

'I can't use them together, can I?'

'No. Well, not unless you want a nasty reaction. You'll have to wait for the Juice to wear off before using Slap Dust to get yourself home.'

'How long will that take?'

'No idea. You're the Badlander. I thought you'd have known that when you were planning all this,' it said,

sounding more than a little smug. Ruby huffed and puffed as she kept running. ‘So I’m guessing things aren’t going to plan then?’ the gun continued.

Ruby stuffed it back in her waistband and gritted her teeth as she clumped on down the street in her black boots, hoping for the Juice to wear off as quickly as possible so she could use her bottle of Slap Dust. The Dust was something Badlanders used all the time to vanish from one location and reappear in another at will and was therefore very useful in most situations that required a quick exit, especially life-threatening ones like the one Ruby found herself in now.

Carrying the golden spear made running slower and Ruby’s arm was starting to ache so she paused, tapped the point three times and the weapon quickly shrank back into the gold brooch it had been before. The spear was useless without the Vamp Venom, which was fatal to a Vampire if plunged into its heart, so there was no way of killing the creature now. Ruby’s plan had been ruined because of the slow effects of the Jump ’em Juice, but she couldn’t understand what had gone wrong.

Maybe the vial of Juice had passed its sell-by date?

Perhaps it was a low-strength version?

There was no obvious answer that she could think of.

As she hooked the golden brooch onto the lapel of her jacket, Ruby looked back up the street. There was no sign of the Vampire. But she did see something else: a trail of black bootprints glistening under the street lamps on the pavement she’d just run down, leading right to where she was standing.

Ruby lifted up one leg and saw the zigzag pattern of the sole of her boot on the ground. Little gears clicked and ticked in her head, and then she remembered something Victor Brynn had told her a few weeks before, when a Door Wurm she had tried to use to unlock a door had shrivelled up in her hand before she'd had time to insert it in the lock.

Clearly, some things that work for men and boys in the Badlands don't work as well for girls, Victor Brynn had said, inspecting the dead Wurm in her hand. *We need to be aware of this – record everything we learn.*

Ruby felt a small chill in the marrow of her bones. Maybe the Jump 'em Juice was something that didn't work properly for girls either, given its delayed reaction and now the strange side effect of the bootprints too. She kicked off her boots and then her socks for good measure: she couldn't risk leaving any more of a trail. The boots landed on the pavement with a loud *clump* and Ruby saw their vague reflection in the nearest shopfront, an antiques shop, as well as in a large, full-length mirror given pride of place in the window display.

It was then that the Vampire came walking briskly round the corner at the top of the street. As Ruby had feared, it was following the line of bootprints while sniffing the air. Ruby started running again in her bare feet. But it didn't take her long to notice she was now inking footprints on the pavement. She swallowed hard, and something heavy seemed to hit the pit of her stomach. Being a girl in the Badlands was full of surprises and, right now, they were not

good ones. She made a mental note that Jump 'em Juice was yet another thing not for girls.

For a moment, as the Vampire strode towards her, Ruby began to doubt herself, unable to see any way to escape. But, as the creature walked inexorably towards her, a glimmer of a plan came to Ruby.

Carefully, she began retracing her steps, planting her feet back into the marks they'd already made. She wobbled as she stepped backwards, and tried not to think of the Vampire coming closer. And closer.

When it passed by her, it sniffed the air hard and looked at the boots and socks discarded on the pavement, frowning as it tried to work out what had happened. It gave another sniff, looked around and then kept walking, following the footsteps down the lit street.

Ruby stood watching the creature, her heart beating so hard she was worried the Vampire might hear it. She knew there wasn't much time until it reached the end of the trail of footprints and realized it had been fooled. It was now or never.

She pulled out the gun and, before it could say anything sarcastic, she shot the glass of the shopfront, pulling the trigger again and again, careful not to hit the mirror behind it. The glass window fell in large triangles and then shattered into smaller ones. Ruby picked up her boots and smashed out the fangs of glass in her way.

She was already thinking about home as she clambered through. The soles of her feet prickled as the glass cut her,

despite her best efforts to tread lightly, and spots of blood appeared on the broken shards. Ruby kept focused on home, trusting in her scrying talent enough to know what would happen next. And then it was there in the large mirror that was part of the shop's display: her bedroom, dark and calm, as clear as a photograph. Reaching into her pocket, Ruby pulled out a tin of polish and popped off the lid. Taking a scoop of the polish, she smeared it over the glass and felt it start to give as she pressed on it, feeling her way through the mirror.

Suddenly, the Vampire was there at her shoulder, its breath hot in the whorl of her ear. It reached out wildly, floundering to grab hold of Ruby even though it couldn't see her, and, as she stepped through the mirror, it caught hold of her arm and yanked her back. The creature was strong. Ruby tottered back and the image of the bedroom in the mirror flickered and started to fade as she stopped thinking about it. The Vampire had found a pocket of her jacket now and was tugging hard, its fingernails hooked into the fabric. Its other hand flashed through the air as it tried to get hold of more of her.

And then, suddenly, everything stopped. Ruby heard voices in the street and looked round to see a police car skidding to a halt in the road; one police officer was already out of the car and running towards the shop.

The Vampire was nowhere to be seen. It had vanished.

Ruby didn't need to think twice. She refocused on the mirror again and when her bedroom reappeared she stepped through it, the glass wobbling for a moment and then

pinging back to its normal rigid state and reflecting just the street again.

The only evidence that Ruby had been there at all was a whirl of black footprints on the pavement that led up to the mirror, some discarded socks, a pair of boots and a smashed shopfront. All the police officers could do was scratch their heads as they stared and tried to make sense of it all.

As for Ruby, she stood in her bedroom, waiting for her heart to calm down. The gun was muttering something, but she just threw it onto the bed.

She waited some time for the Jump 'em Juice to wear off, wary of leaving any black footprints for Victor Brynn to quiz her about in the morning. Then, after watching herself reappear in the bedroom mirror, she pulled a rug over the two footprints she'd made, picked the glass out of her feet and went downstairs, padding quietly past Victor Brynn's room so as not to wake him.

She hung up her jacket on the peg in the hallway and then went to the kitchen. She drank down two glasses of cool water filled from the tap and ate two slices of bread sprinkled with sugar to calm her nerves and cure the shock still tingling in her body. She sat slumped in a chair, inspecting the cuts on her feet again, thanking her lucky stars that the Vampire had decided to leave when the police arrived.

But if she had been in the hall, watching, then Ruby might not have been so relieved . . .

The flap of one of her pockets flipped up and over as a small bat emerged, clawing its way out until it was blinking,

working out where it was with its tiny green eyes. It fluttered up into the air and found a vantage point on another jacket.

When Ruby walked past and crept back up the stairs, the bat followed her, careful to stay high enough so as not to be seen.

A door opened along the landing as Ruby reached the top of the stairs, and the bat fluttered higher, looking for a hiding place, and found the ledge of a small dusty window so high up it would have needed a stepladder to clean it. It peered over the edge, watching the two people below. A man and the girl.

Victor Brynn stood on the landing in his nightshirt, looking at Ruby through weary eyes. He cleared his throat.

‘I couldn’t sleep either, too used to working at night, I suppose, or maybe it’s just my age. Anyway, I thought I’d wake you up to do some fieldwork, which I know you’ve been dying to do. Imagine my surprise when I found your bed empty.’

Victor Brynn raised the small piece of polished scrying glass hanging on the leather string around his neck. ‘I couldn’t see everything given it was so dark but it was interesting observing what I could.’ Ruby turned red at the edges when she realized he’d been watching her.

‘Perhaps it was no bad thing. Maybe you learnt more on your own than you ever would have done with me around.’

To Ruby it seemed as if he was waiting for an answer so she just nodded.

‘Good.’

Ruby breathed a silent sigh of relief as Victor Brynn turned back to his bedroom door, happy the lecture was over. But then something else occurred to him and he paused and looked round at her again.

‘I’m indebted to you, Ruby, for killing the Witch in Hampstead and saving my life. And that is why I agreed to take you on as my pupil to try and help you learn about being a Badlander, despite your obvious limitations with magic. I’m happy to accept that the *wyrd* has created this opportunity for both of us, that fate has worked in our favour to give us *both* a second chance at life. But I won’t continue with our arrangement if you don’t respect me or my wishes, even if you are brave and resourceful.

‘What we are doing is too dangerous for you to be reckless like this. I dread to think what the Order might do to you if they find out, or to me if they discover I’m teaching a girl. For that is what you are, Ruby, a girl in a world run by men. There’s no getting away from it, however much you want to be accepted as a Badlander. One day, I hope we might show them they’re wrong, but you’re going to have to do it according to my rules. You can’t change how the Order is run overnight. It’s been controlled the same way, by men, for centuries.’

Victor Brynn shut the door sharply behind him, to make a point. Ruby listened to him climbing into bed, the mattress springs creaking.

She heard something shuffling above her and, thinking it must be a bird or a mouse, ignored it. There was always some little creature moving about in the walls of the house.

Two green eyes watched as Ruby opened her bedroom door and clicked it shut behind her. Fluttering about, the bat eventually found a place to sleep, hanging from the latch of the little window, like a tiny black fruit, its wings folded round its body to keep warm.