

HOUSE OF THE BRIDE

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter One, "Life!"

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"Raise the lantern, Jasper, that's a good chap."

Jasper – whose bug eyes betrayed every bit of fear in him – turned his gaze from the marshes south to Murray, his companion. Murray was approaching the old fort immediately south of Creutzfeldt Castle. Jasper could see the castle's spires stretching above the squat fort, which was partially a ruin – one of its towers had collapsed in a powerful storm ages ago.

"That light, if you please," Murray said, more forcefully this time.

Jasper raised the lantern. Its beam illuminated an old, sturdy door set into the stone of the fort. Murray smiled and rubbed his hands together.

"They say old Creutzfeldt buried his treasure in the foundations of the fort," he said.

"They also say it's haunted," Jasper said.

Murray frowned and turned to his companion. He towered over Jasper. Jasper was short and wide while Murray was tall and thin.

"Don't you start talking like the old busy-bodies at the inn," Murray said.

"It's true," Jasper insisted. "This whole place is haunted. The castle, the fort and the swamp." He looked nervously back at the swamp before turning his attention to Murray once more.

Murray pointed north, past the fort and the castle. "Do they say that the mountains are haunted, as well? And the blooming trees?!" He shook his head and sighed. "There's no hope for you, lad. Come on, I think I can break this lock."

They had reached the door and Murray retrieved a few tools from the bag he had slung over his shoulder. Somewhere to the south, hidden in the marsh, a wolf howled. Jasper looked back in fear, his eyes wider than ever.

A heavy fog drifted out of the swamp and crept towards them. To Jasper, it looked like an army of ghosts approaching.

"Murray," he said.

But Murray was lost in his work, his deft hands manipulating the old lock. He cursed and kept

working, ignoring his companion.

The fog crept steadily closer, crawling across the marsh malevolently towards them. Jasper began to tap Murray on the shoulder.

“Murray, there's a –”

“Will you be quiet?!” Murray said, interrupting him. “You're distracting me, you fool!”

“Something's coming.”

“It's your imagination – that's all.”

Murray shook his head. Neither man was looking at each other – Murray was engrossed in the task in front of him while Jasper's attention was on the eerie fog bank.

Somewhere – it seemed closer now – the wolf howled once again. Jasper shook with fear. His teeth rattled and his hands shook. The lantern light jittered and Murray paused in his business and sighed again. “Will you keep still, Jasper?” A fierce whisper this time.

But Jasper barely heard him. He was convinced that there was a figure in the approaching fog. A ghostly figure standing in the marsh, the fog swirling about him.

“Murray,” Jasper said, his voice cracking, “there's someone out there.”

Yet another sigh from Murray. The tall, thin man finally turned, first to his companion, then to the south. “There's nothing there, I tell you. It's just your im–”

He shut up as he looked into the fog. For a moment, he was still. Finally, he looked at his companion. “Do you see what I'm seeing, Jasper?”

Jasper nodded, no longer daring to speak. His gaze was fixed on the ghostly figure – the apparition in the fog. As he watched, the ghost took a step towards the still-locked door of the old fort.

There came a crazed, malevolent laugh from the ghost and Jasper dropped the lantern. It lodged between a rock and a piece of old study driftwood. Its light was cockeyed now, somehow making everything worse.

The ghost came running at them. Its form pushed aside the enveloping fog but Jasper could see splashes in the swamp where it stepped. Whatever it was, it had a physical form; it could hurt them.

The crazed laughter returned, louder now. Jasper and Murray fled, heading west as fast as their feet could carry them.

Jasper could hear the ghost's hideous laughter echoing through the darkness of the marsh as the two of them ran. He would not sleep well for months – the sound of that awful laugh would not leave his mind.

Many miles away, on the same night, something stirred in the ruins of another old structure, this one almost completely leveled some time earlier. It had once been a watchtower near the village of Frankenstein. Now it was little more than rubble.

As some of the stones and dirt shifted at what was once the base of the watchtower, a great storm raged in the night sky above. Thunder crashed as a large clump of dirt was dislodged from the pile and a bandaged hand emerged, reaching for the heavens.

It was the hand of a woman, curling into a claw and reaching for purchase, digging at the earth.

Soon a figure emerged, pushing away the old, hard-packed dirt with her free hand. It was a second birth and just as strange as her first.

The Bride – for she had no other name – emerged from the ruins of the old watchtower and crawled out of a long sleep and into the waking world. Her first life had been short, only a few moments, and her memories were fragmentary at best. She remembered that she had two fathers and that there was a creature – a Monster – that claimed her as his own. She didn't want that, wanted to stay with her fathers, or one of them at least.

The Monster had thrown a switch and the watchtower had been destroyed. One of her fathers had escaped, the other perished in the destruction.

But she had lived. Why? How?

She didn't know so she concentrated on the strange and alarming world ahead of her. It was all rocks and dirt. The Bride stood on unsure feet and took a moment to steady herself, leaning against a shelf of craggy rock. The shroud she had been wearing had torn away in her second birth, leaving behind only the wrappings of her first.

Another crash of thunder scared her and she stumbled back from the large rock she was leaning against. Sloping south, the hill that the watchtower had stood on was dotted with dead trees before disappearing into low mountains.

When she looked back at the shelf of rock she had been leaning against, she was in for another shock – a shape emerged from the other side of the rock, a tall, misshapen creature, one that she recognized.

It was The Monster. Undying, just like her.

She uttered a startled scream and backed away from The Monster. The big creature untangled himself from behind the rock and lurched towards her. He reached out for her with long arms.

“Friend,” he croaked.

But unlike when he uttered the word during her brief first life when it was filled with longing, this

time it was spoken in rage. The Bride was angry now instead of scared and she hissed at The Monster and took a swipe at him.

He struck back, knocking her down to the earth. She rolled down the hill and managed to get up. When she was on her feet again, she didn't take anymore chances and ran down the hill towards the trees and the mountains.

The Monster chased her and soon the two of them were among the trees as thunder crashed above them. The Bride headed for the mountains, the gnarled, dead trees passing her by. Her pursuer was close – mere feet away.

Above, clouds converged, blocking out the moon. Lightning flashed, illuminating the entire area.

The Bride was lithe, fast, while The Monster stumbled several times. After a moment, he almost fell and had to steady himself against one of the dead trees, the tallest one along the hill. The moment his hand grasped the trunk, the clouds erupted overhead and an incredible shaft of lightning cascaded down from the heavens and struck the tree.

The Monster lit up with electricity, shocking his system. Lightning may have given him – and The Bride – life, may have amplified the great ray of life as her father had said, but this was an overload. It was too much for The Monster and he collapsed to the ground, alive but unmoving.

The Bride stopped, turning to regard her fallen pursuer. There was another crash of thunder and the clouds let loose a torrent of rain, drenching the entire hill. The sensation of rain on her face was a new, exhilarating feeling for The Bride and she looked up at the clouds.

Spreading her arms wide as water cascaded down her body, The Bride let the rains cleanse her. A small smile played across her lips. She stayed where she was for a moment before dropping her arms to her side, turning and heading for the mountains once again.

Some weeks later, a young girl chased a rabbit near the base of the mountain. It was a bright, sunny afternoon and the young girl – Eva, her name was – had wandered away from her family's camp.

She laughed as she went after the hare, deftly making her way through the rocks in that casually competent way that children run. She was fast but the hare was faster. Eva could see that it was heading steadily up hill. In that direction, Eva saw the entrance to a cave. The rabbit seemed to be going that way.

Eva had almost caught up to the hare when it reached the shadowed threshold of the cave. It leaped over a rock and into the darkness of the cave where Eva could see it no longer. The young girl was

about to enter the cave when she heard the animal cry out in shock and pain.

Eva stopped immediately. She was struck with fear and looked from the spot where the rabbit had disappeared and up – for she could just discern a shape in the darkness of the threshold, a tall shape, the size of an adult. The shape was eating something and Eva suspected what it was.

She felt bad for the hare but her family had killed and eaten any number of rabbits while traveling on the road. The difference was that her family cooked the animals before eating them.

Whoever it was who was in the darkened cave ate the rabbit quickly and tossed it aside, deeper into the cavern. For a moment, the shape stood still. Eva knew that she had been seen.

The shape leaned forward and a hand emerged from the darkness and into the light. It was a woman's hand and it was wrapped in dirty bandages. Soon a face joined the hand – a face that was both beautiful and terrible. It had fine features as well as surgical scars.

“Eva!”

“Eva, where have you got to?!”

It was her father and her elder brother, coming to find her. Eva turned, looked and saw them coming up the hill. She was looking into the face of her father when he spotted the woman in the cave – saw the fear in his face as he set eyes on the strange woman.

Her brother spotted the woman a moment later. He had a rifle slung over one shoulder which he now grabbed. Taking quick aim, he squeezed the trigger.

“Stop!” came a strong voice from further down the hill. It came just as Eva's brother fired and it was strong enough to spook him. His shot missed, hitting the rock just above the strange woman's hand.

They all looked down the hill to find Kezia the fortune teller coming towards them. She was ancient, an old crone, older and more gnarled than the trees that dotted the hill.

“Don't you harm that woman,” Kezia said. “Any of you! She has the mark of destiny on her.”

The old crone walked with a cane topped with an elaborate silver handle. Her white hair was long and braided and swayed as she walked. “Put down your rifle, Andreas. Franz, step away. You, too, Eva.”

Everyone did as they were told, though Andreas in particular seemed weary. Kezia pushed past them all, hitting Andreas with her cane as she did. She addressed the woman in the shadow of the cave directly. “Come into the light, my child.”

For a moment, The Bride stayed where she was. She looked up at the sky, wincing, as if the bright light was painful. But come she did, stepping out of the shadows.

Franz and Andreas gasped at the sight of her but Eva and Kezia made no such proclamations. They were not shocked by The Bride's appearance.

The Bride hissed at them, clawed at the air between them. But she seemed unsure of herself.

Eva, sensing this on some instinctual level, took a step towards her. Kezia also took a step forward.
“Eva!”

“It's alright, grandmother,” the girl said. “She won't hurt me.” She looked at The Bride. Smiled wide.
“Will you?”

The Bride took a step back from the girl. She held her head in the her hands, as if in pain.

“It's alright,” Eva repeated. “I'm your friend.”

The Bride let go of her head and looked intently at the girl, as if the word was important to her. Eva took another step closer. Held out her hand. The Bride frowned, then appeared confused. She put her hand out but snatched it away before reaching Eva's grasp.

“Eva,” Franz said, cautiously.

“Grandmother says it's alright,” Eva said.

She kept her hand out all the while, never faltering. The Bride reached out again and, this time, did take the girl's hand.

Slowly, pushing past the others, Eva led The Bride out and away from the cave, towards the road. Kezia gave the two men a look each before following the strange woman and Eva down the hill.

To Be Continued...

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