

You found the bodies tucked away in the tiny alleyways between pastel-coloured buildings, behind sun-bleached barrels in the courtyards, under the brick arches of stairways. Their flesh was shrivelled and translucent like candle wax. Their limbs were folded against their bodies. Their heads were always bent back, with open mouths and desiccated lips receding from the teeth, like they were screaming at the sky.

If outsiders stopped in the village – refugees, gangs, predatory irregulars – they were taken. But otherwise it was the locals. Nobody went out after dark. People slept with knives or chisels or hammers under their pillow. It didn't save them.

Word got out, but no one expected help. The dictatorship in Draugma Skeu was unravelling into civil war. It had forgotten the village. Times like these, everyone had their own problems to deal with.

But help did arrive.

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The hero:

She came from the scrubby, rust-red plains to the south on a grey horse, with a dustcoat billowing out behind her and a wide-brimmed hat shadowing her face. Her posture showed off a studied weariness and a radiant nobility. It said: *We both know who's important here, don't we?* It said: *Go on. Try me. I dare you.* Look up at the right moment, and the sunlight gave her an aura, foregrounded her against the mundane.

Just outside the village, the spell shattered. The sight of a windmill caught her. She stopped her horse and stared at it, mesmerised by the blades turning slowly and endlessly like the Fyrmist cycle of reincarnation. Her jaw quivered. The spectacle became the audience.

Some time passed before she dragged herself away and rode into the village. She left her horse in the stable and paid with a drawstring bag of orotund, then went to sit alone in the tavern's empty courtyard, basking in the sun.

The villagers stared without shame or subtlety. It wasn't the usual parochial prying outsiders attracted. *She'll be taken tonight, poor thing. Such a tragedy. Better her than me, though.*

Having eaten and lounged in the sun for an hour, she summoned the tavern owner to her table and asked him something. Then she stood, took off her hat, pinned back her hair with a wooden comb, and left. A few of the villagers went to talk to the tavern owner. Most followed the newcomer. She walked with her back straight, her head held high, giving off a self-assurance that seemed out of place, as if transplanted from another world.

The village hall, with its pink adobe walls, looked like every other building in the village apart from the door, which was topped by a carved wooden frieze of some swordsmen heroically ganging up on a giant worm. She knocked.

The door opened.

Before speaking, she turned and looked over her shoulder at her audience to acknowledge them. Loud enough for everyone, she said, "I hear you have a problem with a demon. Want me to fix that for you?"

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In the little room, Rose leant back and put her feet up on the corner of the table. She ruffled her hair and shook it out.

"The scourge of the Faceless has afflicted us for more than a year now," said the mayor. He was short, shiny-faced, slouching. His linen shirt was damp with sweat at the back.

Minor functionaries or friends of the mayor (it wasn't clear if there was a distinction) floated around the room uselessly. In the corner, a gawky young woman with curly hair and the mayor's receding chin watched Rose with wide eyes. The mayor's daughter or niece – something like that.

"Faceless'," said Rose. "The bodies?"

"All fluids drained. Withered, as the stories say they are."

"A noppera, then," said Rose.

“Can you ... help us, then?” said the mayor. “Really?”

Rose looked up at him. He seemed a man who had learned with difficulty that his powers of action in the world were circumscribed by greater brutality and force than he could muster. The light in his eyes was desperation, not hope.

“It's what I do,” she said.

The mayor had a quick whispered discussion with one of his associates. Rose caught the eye of the woman in the corner and gave her a tiny smile.

“You haven't given us a price,” said the mayor. “We can't afford the services of mercenaries.”

“Put together whatever you think is a decent thank-you for stopping this noppera and give it to me tomorrow morning if I'm still alive,” said Rose. “That'll do.”

The mayor glanced at the man he'd just been talking to, then said, “We can do that.”

“Good. It's a deal then.” Rose reached into her back, rooted around for a bit, and took out a box of bullets. Sitting forward, she began replacing the ones in her revolver.

Her audience watched intently. “Are those ... anti-Faceless bullets?” the mayor asked.

“You could say that,” she said.

“Silver,” someone murmured.

“Not quite,” said Rose, sliding the last hollow-point into place.

“So long as it kills the beast,” said the mayor.

“About that,” said Rose, loading the second revolver. “The noppera is one of your people.”

“A demon wearing the skin of a human.”

“No. A person.” She stopped to look at him. “When a noppera transforms, it can lose its memory. Guided by thirst and hunting instincts, it drinks from humans because it has nothing else. During the night, this one is probably confused and scared. During the day, as a human, they might not even know they're infected. But you can change that.”

The mayor regarded her with something approaching bewilderment.

“Once you know who it is, you can keep them tied down at night, Feed them with chickens or even broth. Talk to them – remind them of who they are. It'll be difficult, but it's better than the alternative.”

“This monster,” said the mayor, drawing himself up to his less than imposing full height, “has been killing our friends and family for over a year. We will not ... *look after it.*” He spoke the final words as if they were revolting.

Looked around the room to see all the functionaries agreed. She felt a wave of contempt for these ignorant, cowering peasants, living out in the middle of nowhere with their stupid folklore about the ‘Faceless’. The village, Girsu, was all human; most of them had probably never seen anyone who wasn’t. For a moment she was about to tell them all that. Instead she said:

“I’ll try and keep it alive. They you’ll see who it is. If you won’t take it, I will.”

“So long as you get rid of it,” said the mayor.

Rose went back to loading her gun.

“Thank you,” said the mayor, eager to paper over any hint of conflict with his saviour. “We will owe you a great debt if you succeed.”

After a brief conversation about making an announcement, the mayor and most of his functionaries excused themselves and shuffled out of the room, leaving Rose to finish preparing. She decided she’d want to carry her third gun, a pistol, on her for this, plus all her knives, just in case.

“Why are you doing this?” said the young woman in the corner. Only she and Rose remained in the room. Her voice was so soft it gave the question an air of intimacy.

Rose looked up at her sharply, caught off guard. “What do you mean?”

“If you’re not doing it for the money.”

“No.” Rose settled back and smiled at her. “I’m doing good in the world. Helping people who need it. That’s reason enough.” She ran a hand through her hair.

The young woman gave her a shy smile in return.

Too good for a backwater like this, and on the interested side of curious, thought Rose. *Perhaps ...*

The mayor came back into the room, still issuing orders: “Tomorrow morning. Joy Hour. Get a medal of some sort. Make sure the village square’s clear. But don’t announce anything yet, just in case she ...” He glanced at Rose, then shooed the functionary away. “Go on!”

He turned to address Rose properly. “We have some local wine. Aged well. One of our few treasures. We would be honoured if you would share some with us.”

An assistant came in carrying the bottle. But as he approached the table, he dropped it. The bottle shattered. Glass skittered under the table. A wave of red rolled outwards across the floor.

While the assistant scrambled to clean up, Rose caught the eye of the young woman in the corner and mouthed the word *oops*. The young woman responded with a suppressed laugh.

When Rose turned to look at the scene again, the assistant was picking up the larger shards of glass from the floor. His hands were filmed with red.

Rose's breath caught. The rest of the room seemed to pull back, muffled and out of focus. Her chest tightened. Nausea came in irregular waves. She gripped the edge of her chair. She remembered a little silk hat. The question ambushed her: *Why are you doing this? Why are you back here again in this blood-soaked cycle? Why, when you know –*

And there, she stifled the thoughts and dragged herself back to the present moment. She looked away from the spectacle of the broken bottle. The mayor was apologising to her. She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "It doesn't matter," she said. "It's just wine."

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By dusk the streets were already empty. Rose sat in the tavern's courtyard reading by candlelight as the glowing gold-red clouds faded to black.

She checked her revolvers, made sure her knives were all in easy reach, and started walking. Moonlight transformed the village into a silent silver sculpture. She could almost believe it was empty, outside of time – except for the regular creaking of the windmill, marking an endless retreat from the past.

Why are you doing this? In the softness of the night, the question seemed less threatening. Because, she had to admit, she was lonely.

Over and over again, in her idle moments, she caught herself imagining herself telling him what she had seen, what she had read. She rode across the red plains and thought about the laughter they shared, out of all proportion to the unfunny, bad taste joke she had made. In the early mornings, cold and alone in some tent or tiny inn, she curled up and imagined him inside her.

She didn't like to focus on the past. This gave her something to do.

After a few more minutes of wandering, she heard a few soft sounds. Hand on her revolver, she approached.

An androgynous figure stood on the far side of the road a few metres away facing the wall. It had dark hair and wore a linen nightshirt. It was hunched over, clutching its shoulders and sobbing softly.

Standard noppera hunting behaviour. See someone like that, alone and vulnerable in the middle of the night, you go to help. Or perhaps you misread the situation and think you see a victim. Either way, unjust or ironic, the end is the same.

Rose waited until she was sure the noppera knew she was there.

One hand still on her revolver, she said, "Hello! My name is Rose. I know you're scared. You're not sure what's happened to you. I can help, if you'll let me."

The noppera kept crying.

"Just so we don't have any nasty surprises," said Rose, taking out her revolver, "if you attack me, I will defend myself. But I don't want to hurt you. We can deal with your hunger. And I can help you remember."

The noppera stopped crying. It bent over backward and put its hands on the ground. She could see its face now: No mouth, no eyes, no nose. A featureless expanse of skin, the face of an artist's mannequin. It scuttled towards her on all fours, bent backwards like that.

Rose swore and lifted her revolver. The noppera's limbs were moving so fast it took her almost a second to fire.

The noppera's elbow opened in an explosion of black slime. Its forearm flapped about, dragging on the ground, but it kept going on the three remaining limbs.

"Don't make me do this," Rose pleaded, backing up.

The noppera didn't respond. It had already closed half the distance.

Rose gave up on trying to disable it and fired again. The noppera's flesh bloomed. Slime patterned the ground.

By her fourth shot it had reached her. It reared up on two legs and collided with her. Its good elbow slammed into her ribs. Together they fell, with the noppera on top.

Inches from Rose's face, at the base of the noppera's skull, a mouth opened: A ring of fleshy mandibles like clawed fingers, to prise apart its victim's jaw in a predatory kiss. A fat, glistening proboscis emerged. Given the chance, it would slide down her throat, pierce the membranes of the stomach or lung, and drain the fluid.

Rose grabbed the proboscis and pulled it to the side, away from her face. Barbs in the edges cut into her palm. With her free hand, she grabbed another revolver from her coat, turned it upwards, and fired into the noppera's back several times.

She could feel the fight go out of it. The proboscis slackened in her hand. She rolled over with the noppera so she was on top, straddling it, and put the muzzle of her revolver amongst its mandibles.

"I'm ready to stop," she said, chest heaving. "And I think you are too." She released the proboscis. It slid back into the noppera's mouth. The mandibles trembled.

Rose let herself relax, but kept her revolver in place. She brushed her hair out of her face and looked down at the noppera's body. The bullets had ripped cavities out of its flesh. Oily black blood was everywhere, coating her forearms and hands. Noppera were tougher than humans, but this was a lot of damage.

The mandibles twitched.

"Come on," she said, putting her hand on its arm. "Hold in there. You just have to make it until sunrise." When the noppera changed back into its human form, its body would return to exactly the same state it was at the moment of infection. All the injuries would reset.

She waited with it for an hour, pointing a gun at it with one hand, trying to comfort it with the other.

The black blood on her arms dried and turned rubbery. The noppera's mandibles twitched, then twitched less, then stopped. Rose watched it for a few seconds, waiting for some motion. "Come on," she said, shaking its arm. "Give me something." It gave her nothing.

Keeping her revolver in place, on the chance this might be a trick, she shuffled back and leant down to put her ear against its back. It was a myth that noppera had no heartbeat.

Silence.

She closed her eyes and sighed, then got off the body.

"Why didn't you listen?" she asked it. She turned away, brought her hand up to her face, steadied her breathing. She turned back and kicked the body as hard as she could. It responded as any inanimate object would.

She walked a little way down the street, pulling rubbery strips of dried blood off herself and dropping them. The mayor and his coterie would be satisfied. Good for them.

Her palm stung. She took out a bottle of alcohol and put some on the cut, and let the pain distract her. She touched the spot on her ribs where the noppera had hit her.

Her breath caught.

She reached inside her coat and took out two splintered pieces of wood: Two halves of a broken wooden comb.

“Idiot,” she whispered. “Putting it there.”

That was the third. She only had one left.

She stood alone in the dark, her hands trembling, trying to stay calm. Her breath came out jagged and irregular. A glance back at the noppera pushed her past the threshold. This wasn't supposed to happen.

Clutching the remains of the comb, she fell to her knees, then leant forward to rest her forehead against the cold ground. In that supplicant's position, she cried.

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Just before daybreak, she took her horse out of the stables and tied it up under an orange tree, then dragged the noppera's body to the mayor's door and sat nearby.

When he opened his door, he stumbled back and nearly fell over before he realised the noppera was dead. Rose played as nice as she could and accepted his gushing gratitude with a few words.

There was a lot of commotion that morning, initially to set up the ceremony, and even more when nobody could find the mayor's daughter-or-niece.

Rose found it easy to slip away from the officials preparing for the ceremony. She took her reward from the mayor's office and left without telling anyone.

She burned the broken comb in her fire that night, while she wore the last one in her hair.