

**Goblin Blade**  
*By Alexander Saxton*

**Part One.**

Twilight down at the Drill Barn Mews, with the factories silent & the sky a fading shade of azure behind the red brick dreamscape, and the strange geometry of dying sunlight tracing curves & asymptotes all red-and-gold-and-unexpected through the narrow paths & passageways, the glassless upper windows and blackbroken teeth of glass among the derelicts.

Vivian walked alone.

Maybe she knew she wasn't supposed to, in a part of town like this; and maybe she'd been raised to think it improper for a Young Lady to go unaccompanied in any part of town, no matter how respectable. But she went alone. She loved to feel the cool of the spring breeze coming off the rain-damp bricks. She loved to feel the hard echo of her boots in those silent, godless galleries.

One night, she came across a Goblin.

Strange to say. Just past sunset, when the blades of gold & violet light had scythed one another leaving the world turned, she found the echo of a campfire flickering against a clerestory window's arch, angled down on the bowels of some forsaken mill.

Of course she knew better than to go and look. After all, no person living in the Drill Barn Mews could be anything but dangerous and desperate. Yet curiosity got the better of her, and she crept closer to that old building, to its disused & violated lower wooden shutters, where cracks of gold winked out into the twilight. She could feel the tapping of her heart like a small brass hammer, and for someone who had lived so much of her life all swaddled in lace and smothered-up in black bombazine the excitement was like cool air. She bent her head to one of the golden cracks. Its pale slash fell across her eye, but she couldn't find a good angle to see inside. Crept further along the wall of rusted bricks and found a door not-fully-shut. She rested her hand against it. Rough touch of splinters on the softness of her fingertips. Then let the weight of her breath carry it slightly, slowly open.

Within, a strange neglected temple was revealed. Old machines bent like prostrated giants to worship at an empty altar. Firelight casted itself like garlands on the upper vaults. A low voice muttering amongst those empty spaces. And as she leaned precarious through that rust-hinged door, she saw the speaker. Hunched in the midst of all that immensity: low figure framed in profile against a fire built from burning dross.

A Goblin. She knew right away that it was a goblin, for all that such things only lived in children's books. The green hunching shoulders of waxy skin lit lurid by the reddish light. The bald head and pointed ears. The great nose, the black and yellow-slitted eyes, the peglike, fishlike spikes

of tooth within his blackish gums. Yet he was not quite from a fairy tale. For one thing he looked frighteningly strong. The long arms heavy with working muscle, the hands like mauls where they rested on his ragged knees. Not as tall as a man, but stronger than one, like a bull chimpanzee she'd seen at the Zoological gardens.

He was cooking some sort of stew. An iron pot suspended by an iron triangle at the fire. A heavy curved sword lay on the flaking cement beside him. It appeared to have been cold-forged out of varied shapes and types of metal. Heterogenous and jagged: its grip a mouldy strop of rawhide, half-unwound.

What exactly he was muttering to himself, she couldn't catch. Only vehement scraps spat out here and there with the force of teeth. The language appalling even to she, who'd long since left Silkwater Arc Society for a garret flat in Leadshaw Court.

Suddenly, though she'd made no sound, his head snapped around in her direction. Some instinct had drawn his yellow gaze toward her darkened end of the foundry, and his lips drew back. He hissed like a reptile, and then he was abruptly on his feet, the blade in hand, his flat hard footsteps thundering toward her.

She turned and fled. Vivian Airelight, footsteps light as glass as she sprinted down the empty laneways, corridors, and cuts and malls of Drill Barn Mews. And the moon was rising white.

Yet for all her lightness the heavy buildings of the Mews drew in on every side. She quickly found herself lost and out-of-breath. The buildings purple-black this time of night, and all landmarks blurred as fear and pounding breath narrowed her vision. The sound of hard footsteps growing louder behind her; she darted down an alley, and found herself faced with high walls on all three sides. Trapped. Her heart withered; for a second she gave herself up as lost. And then a voice came from above; a short cough to draw attention, and she looked up to see a dark figure leaning dangerously from an upper-storey window to offer down a hand. She bounded forward; vaulted onto the battered lid of a rusted hopper and leaped.

For a moment hung on the air and began to fall.

But then a hand caught hers in midair, iron-strong around her wrist, and swung her in toward the wall. She kicked up off rough bricks, grey scarf blowing silver in the murrey night, and ascended like a nightlark, disappearing through the darkness of an upper window. Firm arms pulled her aside, and both she and her rescuer watched with bated breath at the alley below.

For thudding heartbeats they saw nothing. Then the Goblin slowly surfaced from shadow into moonlight, panting and muttering curses, that strange sword dragging at his ankles so it growled up sparks of melon-coloured light. He came to a halt at the dead end. Then, with a low snarl, swept his black-and-yellow gaze across the moonwashed walls, lingering a moment at their empty upper window. Then he muttered and turned, dragging his blade away behind him into the catacombs of Drill Barn Mews.

Vivian's rescuer relaxed slowly, letting the young woman slip from her arms. Only now that danger had passed did Vivian recognize the smell: of sour sweat, old urine, rotting teeth and stale liquor. Stepping back, she thought for a moment she was looking at an old woman. Then as her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the upper floor she realized the woman who had pulled her to safety was no more than a few years older than she, if even that. She was square-framed, with forearms shaped by labour in some discarded mill, and with hands like cracked pumice and veins like black wire. Her jaw-length, wavy hair cracked by the elements, her teeth embarrassed by their lack of quorum, her eyewhites red and pupils yellow-green from longterm Katjahn use. Yet a kind of well-built beauty still lingered underneath the world's ravages.

"I saw you running, from above." The rescuer jerked her chin across the open rooftops, voice raw, sounding painful-to-the-touch. "I know my way through the catwalks, so I followed you."

"Thank... thank you." Vivian's heart still trembled like a bird's. "I'm Vivian, I..."

"Wren," said the other woman. "I used to work here in the mills. Now I just come here for—"

"The light."

Vivian finished the sentence for her, and as she did the full moon rolled into the frame of the open window, and they both *felt* that light pooling on their skin, and they could feel the reflected warmth & pressure of the faroff sun, and they could feel it on *each others'* skin though they stood separated by unbreachable divides.

And then they could feel that same warm pressure falling on the leaves of raw weeds that spiralled up amongst the crumbling wreckage of the Mews. They could feel it refracted in the crystal of last night's rainwater still trailing dewdrops through corroded eaves. They could feel the night wind divided by its slow, warm, slanting beams. And as they stood together their eyes slowly lifted as one to the window, where the pregnant moon now stood framed the size of worlds against the sky. Their hands crept together in wonder, fear at this epiphany, and one hour lasted forty years as they stood watching slow erosions wear across the drill-barn mews: an entropy invincible but not despairing; an entropy of joy profound, and inexpressible relief.

Then the moon rolled past the window frame. Sempiternal time gave way to time mundane, and they remembered themselves, and released one another's hands with little noises of embarrassment.

Yet when they dared glance up their eyes met & they knew they shared a secret knowledge which was at the crux of them both. And though Vivian fled in silence that night she returned in the weeks to come, and found Wren waiting in the silence & moonlight of that altar at the dead-end alley with the rusted hopper and the scratchmarks of the Goblin-Blade.

In time their silent meditations gave way to an easy intimacy. One night in yellow moonlight and dry-blown leaves, the summer wind filled them up like dandelion clocks, and their feathers blew away from naked, kneeling bones to mingle over the rooftops of that desolated, vibrant quarter of the city.

When the sun came back and restored their flesh, it was entangled underneath that window. And each looked away from the other in mingled fear, regret and shame, not knowing what the congress had made of them.

## **Part Two.**

Another awful party: Ashwind Hall. Its yawning, gothic spaces gaudied-up with bulbs, dyspeptic gaslights & headache-coloured blister-lamps of glowing neon. The music grinding & dysphonic: all captured, measured & extracted from the captive brains of starched-up dollar-slave musicians. And underneath that strangled din the fractal cacophonies of georgette dresses' rustle-and-swish, of knee-high leather boots a-creak, and dinner-jackets slicing velvet-silent, velvet smooth amongst the chitter of the crowd. See forced smiles & obligate laughter everywhere, all-reflected in the ubiquitous mirrors: backscattered, splintered & repeated over every shoulder in endless depths of appearance; never letting someone simply *be* without reflexive modes of panoptic re-observance. The chuckle of champagne down into breast-shaped coupes; the clattered shake of burning liquors mingled up with bitter wormwood in some shining steel casket; the slop and clap of hybrid fluids birthing forth through metal teeth and down into their cutglass graves.

Vivian Airelight, swaying alone and listless in some vague corner of the room.

"And who is this? And who is this?" A harsh voice assailed her, as someone's cold hand pressed champagne into hers. "Someone's 'dark-haired daughter with the eyes as long and black as night?'"

Caroline Slingers; her uncle's latest: beautiful yet jagged, and only so much older than Vivian herself.

"We haven't seen you darling, haven't seen you in so *long*. So *glad* you decided to make it."

"You did threaten to drag me here, Caroline."

"All the way from Leadshaw Court? And you *believed* me?" Caroline showed her teeth. "*Clever of you*. Now drink up now, won't you? It's so much better when you're fun."

In her less-than-subtle way she steered Vivian to the frenzy on the floor.

"Somebody I've been meaning to make you meet my dear, since well before your self-imposed exile made you scarce. The son of an old friend-of-your-uncle's, and not so hard to look at either

with his bright green eyes. Thomas Frostmain, here she is, you handsome man, the girl I was telling you about. Yes, this is Colton Airelight's niece, the *elusive* Vivian—“

“Who,” Vivian interrupted. “Is not interested in being set up right now. Thank you Caroline. A pleasure, Thomas, I’m sure.”

Frostmain, whose eyes corresponded with the cool green violence of his dinner-coat, took the slight in stride and backed away, shrugging with a slight mocking bow.

“Now *really*, Vivian, *where* was the use in all that?” Caroline pursued her off the dancefloor, hounding, needling all the way back into a quiet corner. “I put myself *out* there for you, you know.” And when that didn’t work she tried, “And I suppose you’re just embarrassed by us all, by your own family, is that it?” And when Vivian deflected that line of attack, Caroline’s eyes narrowed shrewdly and she said. “Unless you’ve got some *beau* of yours already?”

“Nothing of the sort,” said Vivian. But her breezy voice stank with an undercurrent of confusion and regret as she remembered returning home and finding the smell of Wren’s sweat on her skin, the green residue of Katjahn-spittle in the bathroom mirror. And Caroline Slingers was a social animal red in tooth-and-claw. She always scented weakness.

“You *do*, don’t you?” Her scandalized whisper practically a shriek. “Who *is* he then, who *is* he? Some scruffy *brute* from Tinjaw Heights or Synful Round? Perhaps a shaggy-headed butcher’s boy from Stockyard Grange or Slaughter Gardens? Hm?”

Her interest was keen, vicarious, prurient.

“There is no man,” said Vivian. But Slingers laughed and licked thin lips.

“We’ll have it from you soon enough my girl, I promise you. Now tell me, if there *was* a man, where *would* you have met, and *hypothetically*, how long would it have been before he put his--”

But before Caroline could illustrate her hypothetical, something in the crowd made her tongue clap to the roof of her mouth and fall silent.

*Oh no*, thought Vivian. *Here’s trouble*.

For it was her uncle who had appeared in the crowd, which parted around him like deer around a stalking tiger. The police commissioner ambled at his heels like a rumped jackal, grandly ignored as he whinged about some concern or other. But the Trouble walked at his other side, resting a light hand on his sleeve: a woman much younger than Caroline and softer-skinned, filling the curves of her satin dress like summer wind.

“Calton. *Calton*, over here.”

At the sound of Caroline's voice, that summer wind dissipated back into the crowd, and Calton Airelight wheeled his cool green with just a trace of wry smile. Not a few young men in the crowd had eyes just like his.

--The *squatters*," the Commissioner was saying, as the women approached.

"Of course there will always *be* squatters, Needler." Calton gave a middling approximation of being happy to see Caroline. With his silver hair, square-cut jaw, and rakish once-broken nose, Vivian could see why she might choose to believe he *was* happy. "But I'm sure your men are used to things like that, by now."

"No, no, there's nothing *new* to it," said Needler, with his slanting grin. A man whose uniform never seemed to fit his body, no matter how expensively tailored. "Not our first time tramping the boards of *that* particular stage. But what about the Press? They'll have a field day."

"Let me worry about the Press, Needler. Ah, Caroline! You've never looked more beautiful. And Vivian! What a pleasant surprise." His expression, on seeing his niece, was that of a cat-lover greeting someone's not-unpleasant dog. Needler, by contrast, was immediately in her personal space, cloying & obsequious with his doffed cap and smoothed-over greasy hair.

"But what of *you*, Miss Airelight?" She could smell the crushed cumin-seeds on his breath. "I am told you may have first-hand *reconnaissance* to share with us?"

She took a half step back, wearing a brittle smile.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Commissioner."

"He's talking about the Drill Barn Mews," said Calton, ignoring Caroline as she tried to whisper seductively in his ear. "I'm buying it."

The blood clotted in Vivian's heart.

"To do what with it?"

"Make money, of course," said Calton. "What, you thought I was going to put up an orphanage?"

"But the problem," said Needler, sliding back into the conversation and Vivian's space. "Is that there's a community of squatters who've moved in and think they own the place. A whole tent city down by the Sumps."

"A public blight," said Calton. "We can't be having it."

"Oh yes, wretched. Dangerous." Needler shook his head violently, briefly unplastering his comb-over with a squelch. "Do you know it?"

"I'm... familiar," said Vivian. "I often walk through Drill Barn Mews."

"Unaccompanied?" Needler's thin eyebrows shot up.

"I wouldn't be so sure," muttered Caroline into her glass.

"Good God, Vivian, I didn't realize you were living quite so rough as that," said Calton, looking down his nose. "*Drill Barn Mews*? We have to get you out of there, last week."

"I actually happen to like it." Vivian pointed her pointed chin at him. "Better than Silkwater Arc, anyway."

"Why. For aesthetic reasons?" Calton's gift was for making people feel stupid. "What do you actually like down there? The poverty? Garbage? Of course not. What you like is the feeling that you're not beholden to our 'bourgeois' way of life. Am I wrong? Well it's childish, Vivian. Cover yourself in dirt all you like, but Ashwind Hall is still your home."

"My home," countered Vivian. "Is an attic flat in Leadshaw Court."

"For now, while you insist upon it." He shrugged. "But you'll tire soon enough and learn what the poor who you think are your friends already know: it's better to be rich."

He spread his arms at the opulence around him. At the food, the lovely clothes, the bright mirrors and songbirds in their hidden gilded cages .

"After all, you're here now aren't you? You eat my food and drink my drink."

Vivian couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound petty. Calton Airelight looked down at her with a thin smile, and then glanced to his shoulder to share that smile with Caroline. Needler, unfortunately, was the one who came to her rescue by changing the subject.

"But about these *squatters*, Vivian." He wriggled himself into her silence. "Perhaps we could go on a *scouting* expedition together, you and I, to see the way the landscape lies. Then afterward perhaps, we—"

"Oh, give it a rest, Craddock," By now Slingers' voice was a little slurry from drink. "She isn't going to punch your ticket so leave the wretched girl alone."

"Now Caroline," Calton's voice was mild. "That isn't any way to treat our friend."

But the barb was sunk, and red-faced, the Commissioner excused himself. Calton, sensing an out, professed that he had to go smooth things over and disappeared into the crowd in search of summer wind. Before long, Caroline had grown heavy and gin-flavoured at Vivian's shoulder,

and the younger woman had to help her not-quite-climb the winding stairs, and then had to not-quite-haul her down the hall to bed.

“Vivian...” Half-asleep, Caroline’s voice was a rising mumble from the white pillows. Vivian was still catching her breath by the door, but already the older woman had writhed herself into a tangle of sheets in the moonlight of the open window. “I’m sad these days. So sad, so sad. And I don’t know why.”

For a moment, Vivian lingered at the door, wanting to help.

But she had no answers Caroline Slingers would remember, much less want to hear.

And so she turned and vanished into the darkness of the upper floor.

On her way back down the veering, night-dimmed Prussian halls, she encountered her uncle standing chest-on chest within the door-frame of a guest room with the young curved woman in her satin dress. They were muttering and whispering together; his lips were inches from her ear.

A younger Vivian’s instinct would have been to duck her head aside and pass by, pretending she’d seen nothing. But something had changed inside her: this time, she turned and interrupted.

“*Uncle Calton*. Before I go...”

His face turned up in surprise, eyes wide and a little stern. Satin Dress looked up as well, sparing Vivian a look of contempt, her tender hands wrapped vinelike round Calton’s collar.

“About the Drill Barn Mews. I know the place well. It isn’t worth it. Put your money somewhere else.”

At this, a sneer condensed about the coldly shaven jaw.

“Well thank you for your *concern*, Vivian. I’ll make sure to pass your *insights* to the Board.”

At this Vivian stared him in the eyes, then shrugged, then turned aside and strode down the hall with fists clenched cold and a sudden, acid hatred in her throat.

She never returned to Ashwind Hall after that.

Except for once.

**Part Three.**



By now it was Vivian's and Wren's wont to roam together through the derelicts & tailing ponds. To watch wild ducks land & nest in the tainted pools of the Drill Barn Mews: waters just now, at last, beginning to run clear from their mystery sources in the red-brick mountaintops. Their wont to watch sunset carve surreal angles through unreal landscapes. To trespass shaky buildings and tread rope-bridges twixt secret patches of the sky..

From time to time they saw the Goblin. Lighting small explosions, or building elaborate channel systems off the Sump so he could funnel frogspawn into a shallow pool on the cobblestones, and then stamp them into red slurry and lap the pulp on all fours like a dog. Or else throwing rocks through old windows with his powerful arm, or dragging a whole beef carcass bloody through the streets from whatever suburban stockyard he had busted the locks of. The streets of Drill Barn Mews would echo from time to time with the distant eruption of his inept stills. Sometimes he would take an unwashed smelting vat and use it to ferment vast quantities of pondscum and beef blood and poison berries, creating a wretched mead which he would drink until he shat torrents of black fluid which would congeal on the factory floors into an impervious, stinking lacquer, or until he vomited fistfuls of red, bristling worms, which burrowed into the bricks and died there. Other times he would just sit on the roofs as they did, watching geese crawl across the sky, or watching the mundane comings-and-goings of the Sumpside squatters' camp, or moaning sad songs at the wind.

His existence was one of solitude, but a kind of grandeur. Vivian found solace in the sight of his wretchedness, and inspiration from the indomitability of his example.

All through autumn they lived like this. Vivian's other friends, other lives, other hopes all left in limbo. She worked her job as the typist at a paper-mill, and then spent her evenings and days-off wandering the summer-jungle that sprouted up amidst the widening cracks of Drill Barn Mews.

Wren was not always with her. No matter what closenesses they shared, a distance always lingered between them even when they walked hand-in-hand at sunset. They never spoke about what they were to each other: whether it was friendship or love or perverse attraction that held them in un-easy bond, despite all repelling forces. And Wren never gave up using Katjhan: those great red crystals which cut the insides of your mouth with their edges, filling you with the taste of chemicals and cinnamon and blood, even as they dissolved.

"It's for the pain," Wren told her one evening, as they watched night's first twin stars fade in against the black shards of reeds, against the faint vapour of the Sump. Vivian had not asked. With their relationship so tenuous, so undefined Vivian felt she had no business trying to save Wren. Felt it would have been disrespectful to try. Though in her private heart she still recoiled sometimes at her lover's missing teeth, her smell & coarse touch, yet at other times a burning compassion filled her, animated by great regard, reciprocated understanding, and a great, she dared not think the word, love.

"You don't owe me an explanation for yourself," she said.

“All the same.”

Wren’s shirt was loose and shapeless. It had once belonged to a man much larger than her, and its buttons slipped easily from their shapeless eyes as she revealed the great scar, great crater on the left side of her chest which Vivian had sometimes seen outlined by the moonlight, but which she had also never presumed to ask about.

“When the machine fell, it pinned me here,” said Wren. “And sat on top of me for six minutes before they could raise the jack. Since then the pain has never stopped. There are other things that dull it, but Katjhan is the best.”

Left unsaid, the reason why: *it kills me slowest.*

Sometimes the pain would become terrible and Wren would sink for days into the red-rimmed, copper-tasting stupor of the Cube. She never let Vivian see her like this: told her friends in the shanty to turn her away if she came to call. But Vivian had seen the huddled forms in Synful Round: the beatific stare and crimson lips turning slowly black; the eyes rolled back and bubbling up with prophetic ruby foam. The sweat, the soiled clothes, the quiet sobs of those returned afterward to the wretched home of their bodies. She never tried to see Wren in this condition. She could not bring herself to do that to her.

“I’m sorry,” Wren said, when she returned one night with red crow’s feet at Summer’s end. It was the first time she had apologized.

“You haven’t done anything to me,” said Vivian.

“All the same.”

They walked for a while. Twilight, and the Drill Barn Mews transformed as always by the drone of dumbledores and clusterflies, the drift of pollen on the afterglow.

“I wish I could be someone else for you,” Wren suddenly exclaimed. “I wish I *had* something, I wish I *was* something, *I wish I didn’t smell like piss all the time.*”

The shame which crushed Vivian in that moment had the weight of a machine. That she could be disgusted by this person she loved, that she’d spent so long between commitment and withdrawal; between the Mews she loved and the Silkwater Arc she told herself she’d left behind.

“I don’t...” But she didn’t know what to say. She didn’t love Wren for the sake of what Wren would be like if she were different. She loved Wren for *herself*. All human life is death & sickness & decline: in death & sickness & decline we have to *matter*, otherwise none of us ever will. But she didn’t say this out loud. Only took Wren by the hand and linked their arms. Nobody likes to hear a speech.

"I'm here right now," was what she said.

Later, they found evidence of the first demolition teams. The scars of iron bars & ropes & dynamite, all chewing through the borders of the mews. Then after that the handbills of eviction.

'Drill Barn Mews is Private Property', they read. 'All trespassers subject to Arrest.'

Rough paper: cheap ink diluted grey. Plastered with flour glue round the crumbling walls like abjuration-marks. The name on those posters at the bottom: Airelight & Coppergreen Property Holdings.

"Airelight," said Wren. "That's your name."

A hollowness in Vivian's throat.

"I'm sorry, Wren."

But Wren only took Vivian by the hand and linked their arms.

"You haven't done anything to me," she said.

#### **Part Four.**

Then one morning Vivian woke to a feeling of dread.

She cleaned herself, threw on clothes and left her attic flat without drinking coffee. A grey, cold day, with the sun white between shifting billows of cloud, shifting curtains of sleet. The streets with their Sunday quiet, all but empty.

She arrived at the rusted-out fence of Drill Barn Mews and climbed through the bowels of old buildings. Through derelict stairs, high galleries, cellars broken-open to the chilly day. Among skeletons of vast machines, and the vast absences of their vanished bodies. That dread rotting her out as empty as the Mews themselves. No golden light to enliven old red stones today; no violet twilight to slice them up mysterious. Just an empty district of the city, crumbling, lifeless.

When she arrived at the shores of the Sump she found them empty. The shanty gone. No sign it had ever been there but for a few scraps of tarp upon a nail; a few chewed bones, a spot of blood upon the cobblestones.

For a moment she stood in that windy emptiness thinking it must be some kind of joke. A prank where if she waited just a moment longer, all the friends she'd made here would jump out and shout 'surprise'.

But she waited and waited. And after a long time murmured 'Wren', but had no answer.

Then she understood what had happened.

They had all been taken away.

To where or what end she didn't know. To the Iron Jubilation prison, or to some work camp on the border or out to sea and drowned all chained-together in the cold grey wash, she didn't *know*. But the dread in her heart came to cold completion as she realized how much time she'd wasted in her indecision.

Now she would never see Wren again.

And then, as loss & despair threaded grey fingers through her ribs, she heard the far-off ring of boots against the cobblestones, and dogs barking and the shouts & voices of men.

She was in terrible danger.

And she ran.

Air-light footsteps touching off floors of herringbone-brick, off creaking wooden steps and groaning boards that spanned the gaps of second-storey windows. Voices peaking behind her as the dogs caught her scent and the men gave chase. Down further flights of stairs, through factory floors once screaming, now silted pools of greyish light. Through doors she couldn't lock behind her, through alleyways which led, not back to Leadshaw Court or on to Sledge Green, but deeper through the winding whorl of the empty district.

*Slam*: through double doors & double doors & double doors, through factories and factories until, too late, she recognized the space she'd broken into last. The shattered door; cathedral emptiness, the ashen spiral on the floor.

Her skipping footsteps slowed. Echoed through the upper vaults a long slow moment after they had stopped.

A creature staring at her from the vacant floor, from beside its dry fire.

A goblin, strange to say.

His black eyes slitting yellow at her; his heavy arms green at rest across his ragged knees. Black lips snarling silent round his fishlike, yellowed teeth.

For a moment they stared at one another, silent, girl and goblin.

Then the creature rose with slow and easy strength to his feet. Muscles hard and vivid in the greyish light, the metal blade rasping as it pulled across the floor to settle in his horrid fist.

Then the doors burst open behind her, sending a wash of pallid light across the floor. A dozen men-in-uniform with two great dogs both straining at their leash.

The Goblin's pupils slitted down to filaments.

Then Vivian darted to one side and sprang up a flight of wooden steps.

The first shot came deafening. Unlike anything she'd ever heard: a world-breaking sound. She threw herself up the last few stairs, covering head with hands as she landed hard and sprawled on the dusty shopfloor of the second storey.

Then the true noise began. A yellow howl & pounding feet & guns cracking like thunder and the floor shaking & broken shards of windows shaking loose from their frames and the dogs baying and screaming, and heavy wet noises and a man shrieking and more men shrieking and the gunfire never ending, only rising in vile crescendo all the way to...

Silence.

She waited for some voice to call out. For some heavy footstep to sound upon the stair.

Nothing.

And after a long, long time she dared to rise, dripping blood from long dirty slivers in her forearm, and leaving an absence, a dust-angel on the floor.

With halting steps she dared descend the first half-flight of wooden stair.

Below, where a floor of grey cement had been now lapped the shores of a scarlet lake.

Here and there afloat atop the blood, like oil on water, a vibrant strand of vile green.

The men were dead or fled, but mainly dead. Hacked open by two-handed wounds, or ripped at the jugular by fishlike teeth. Parts spilling out of them from so deep that the parts had no names. One Alsatian had been split like a pine log, the other gutted like a market trout. And there in the midst of red wreckage, crawling on hands-and-knees, the Goblin.

Her Goblin.

His chest a bullet-pounded hash of mince, all belching forth a vivid blood like liquid malachite. Yet still alive: still gasping through ruined lungs; still trying to focus yellow-slitted eyes upon the

light. At the sight of her it collapsed forward into the blood: crawling, reaching, stretching to connect.

With any fear forgotten she ran to its side and threw herself down in the blood: clinging, lukewarm, seeping through her clothes to stain her skin. She took the creature's heavy body in her arms and rolled him over as best she could. Cradled the dying thing like a child. The yellow eyes staring up at her; the green-clawed hand reaching red and pointless for her cheek, leaving her smeared with dead men's blood. Black lips parted and the goblin tried to speak; but only a green flood welled up between his teeth.

A heavy cough: green spatter at the front of her dress; a rattled breath. Then it groped through the gore for its dropped blade. Too weak; its fingers couldn't close around the red-smeared hilt. So she reached out and took hold of it for him, and it was slick and disgusting to the touch, but she didn't notice as she pressed it into his grasp.

With the last of his strength he pressed it back into hers. Then, when he was sure she would not let the weapon fall, he released her, and with her his final hold on life.

Stillness. Silence in the Drill Barn mews, and she wept softly, rocking back and forth with the murdered creature in her arms.

Weeping because she'd loved him as she'd loved the wind, the crumbling brick, the sacral desuetude of the Mews. As she loved Wren, and Caroline Slingers, and even her own wretched self, and all such strange and ruined things that deserved their own place within the world to be.

At last she let the body slide from slippery arms into the blood.

And rose slowly with the fresh cold wind a-running through her. In her hand, the Goblin Blade: this trust, this artefact, this relic of a murdered world.

It hung as heavy as an obligation in her hand.

## **Part Five.**

Night in the old abandoned quarter of the Drill Barn Mews. All dark, all black with the fall of night, and only orange neon torches searing in the darkness as Craddock Needler's men combed through the bodies of their own, and wondered at the body of the thing that killed them.

The Commissioner himself stood huddled in the freezing wind outside, smoking bitter cigarettes. A tall man standing nearby, gazing up through the night toward the dark hill where Silkwater Arc sparkled at the crest. Ashwind Hall a gleaming jewel in its crown. He was silver-haired, a silver-threaded scarf around his neck.

"Well Craddock," Calton said, turning to face him at last. "What have you allowed to happen on my property?"

"Ten men dead, Mr. Airelight. And two dogs. The perpetrator too."

"A bloody scandal." Airelight shook his head. "Ten police? You know somebody will have to go down for this."

"I will-- I will find someone suitable to take the blame, Mr. Airelight."

"See to it. And see, Craddock, that they're high-ranking enough to satisfy the Press."

"Of-of course, Mr. Airelight."

"Now about these footprints."

"Footprints?"

"In the blood, your men said. A girl's."

"Ah. Yes. Well, they lead out back toward the Leadshaw Court, we think."

"Bring her in, Craddock, whoever she is. Destroy her. Send a message now, before they get ideas up in Synful Round. That was a one-off. Alright? Find her and destroy her fast. *Nothing* like this happens ever again."

For once, Needler drew breath to offer a sharp answer. Bring her in, just like that? With no leads and nothing to charge her with other than being at the scene of a crime?

But he stopped himself. Not because he thought better of it, but because something over his employer's shoulder distracted him. A brightening light on the skyline. A red gem glowing on the crown of Silkwater Arc; casting beams of red-gold twilight down across the deadened sky, to fall in curves and asymptotes across the drill barn mews.

"What is it, Craddock?" Calton snapped.

But Needler only smiled.

"Nothing sir. Just the thought of a little girl, dragging around that Goblin Blade."

Calton Airelight gave him a withering look and strode past.

"There are no such things as Goblins, Craddock."

“Not at all, Mr. Airelight. Not at all.”

And as his backer vanished behind him, Needler stood at the heart of an empty district and looked up into the distances. And watched, with a strange lightness in his heart while Ashwind Hall was burning in the night.

And up on the hill, in the home where she was raised, Vivian Airelight was walking hall to hall, her goblin blade afreshly reddened with the blood of the policeman at the door. A burning brand was in her other hand, alighting every tapestry upon the wall, and cracking every mirror's pane of glass. The goblin blade arose and fell, and smashed the little locks of cages on the walls. And one by one the burning songbirds flowed, bringing twilight out through Ashwind's broken windows, and spread the fire from hall to hall to hall to hall.