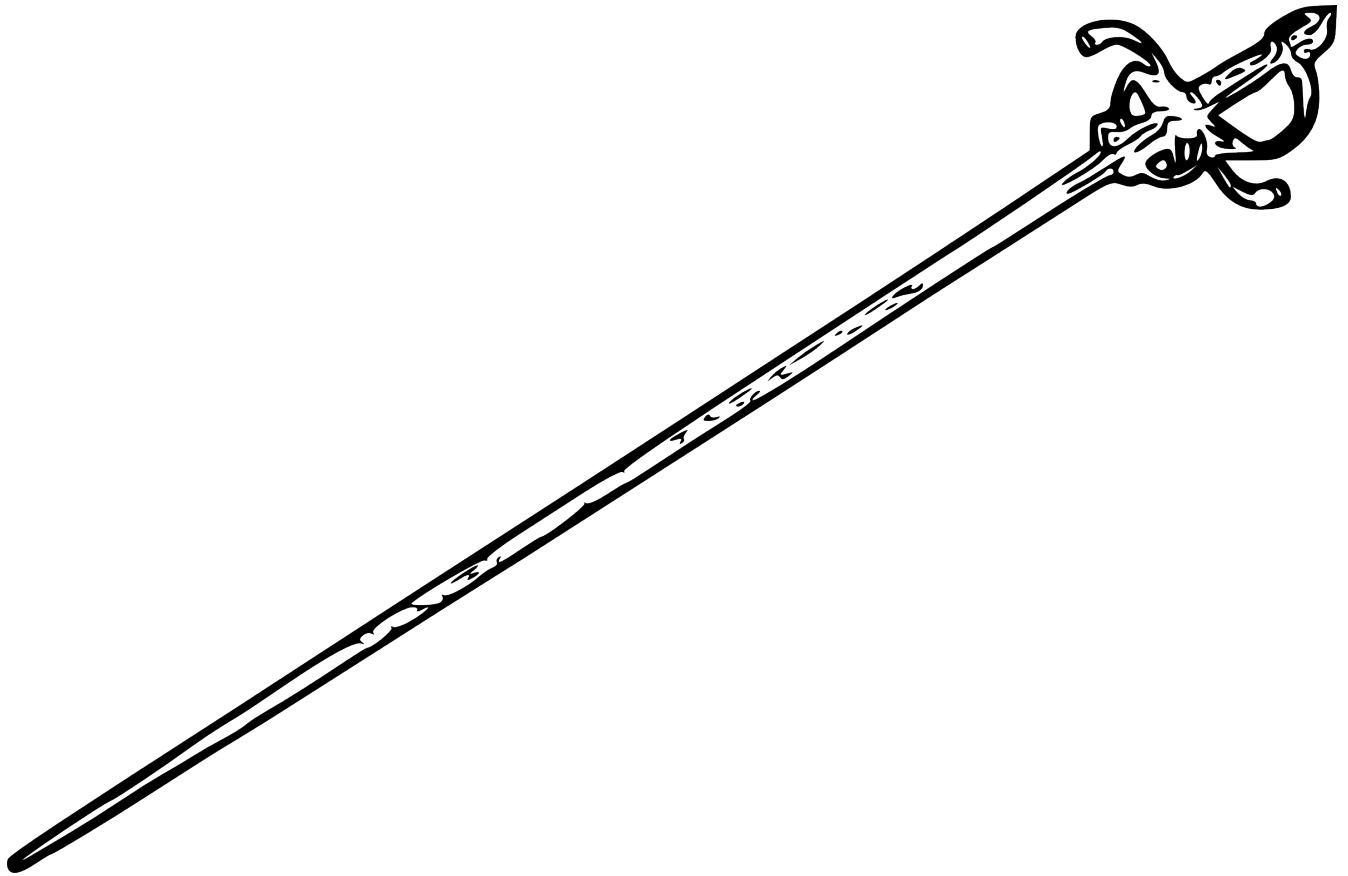


The Apocalypse Of Blythe

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The Apocalypse Of Blythe

The smell of vomit hardly bothered Blythe any more. Neither did having to clean the gooey half dried mead and ale from the rickety tables after all the drinkers had gone. She could ignore the majority of the lewd shouting and coarse language. She didn't mind ending every night smelling like the customers' pipe smoke and sweat. The only thing Blythe really hated about working in her father's tavern was Garron, and tonight she'd had enough of the lecherous dog.

Blythe dumped the ale in his lap and slammed the mug on the table.

Garron scrambled with both hands, trying in vain to brush the liquid from his lap.

His friends broke out in one of their boisterous laughs. They'd probably never seen Garron treated this way, especially by a tavern wench.

Garron's nostrils flared and he looked up at the raven haired beauty that had embarrassed him.

Blythe didn't wait for the pig's response. Her hand leaped up and slapped him full across the face.

Garron was too shocked to do anything. The fool wasn't used to women putting up any real struggle. He usually had his way with anyone.

His fat friends, of course, laughed all the harder.

A wave of satisfaction rolled through Blythe's body. *Serves him right.* She spun around, stormed back across the tavern floor, and stepped behind the bar.

Her father grabbed her arm and leaned in to her ear. "What are you thinking? His family could have us crushed."

She jerked her arm free. "He needs someone to teach him a lesson."

It dug at her heart. Not even her own father cared enough to protect her from a brigand like Garron. *Just because his family's rich.* She set back off to her work, never looking directly at her father or Garron's table.

That must have just made Garron all the more furious.

Every time she passed by with drinks for another table, he'd make a scene.

"Hey, wench!" Garron would pound his empty mug on the table. "More ale! Another round!"

Blythe would just clench her jaw and walk on by.

Garron was a bully and a pig, even when compared to the rough and rude group that worked in the pit. On her the fifth trip by him, Garron tried something new.

He reached out and slapped her butt. "Ale! My friends are dying of thirst!"

Blythe felt the anger well up inside of her. *What friends? You don't have friends, just people that lower themselves to be around you in the hope you'll spend your dirty money on them.* She desperately wanted to slap him again. Slap that stupid, lecherous grin right off his face. She didn't try, though. She knew by now the pig would have thought up some kind of response for a slap other than sit there and look like a shocked fool. So she did her best to ignore it, walk on by, and deliver the drinks she was carrying.

On her way back, she tried to brace herself for another smack.

It never came, though.

Instead, Garron's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist.

Blythe's stomach dropped. She tugged back, but it was no use. His grip was strong for someone who never did any work.

Garron smirked up at her. "I'm tired of you acting like you're better than me. Apologize now."

Blythe shook. *What's he going to do?* Her heart pounded and her lungs refused to draw in a deep breath. She had pushed the animal too far, and now she feared the consequence.

She opened up her mouth and stammered a "Sorry."

Garron's eyes widened and he dropped her wrist. "I don't believe it. But you will be sorry."

Freed from his grasp, she spun around and tried to lose herself in the commotion of the tavern.

A few minutes later she glanced back at Garron's table. He wasn't there.

Could it be that he left? No, she wasn't that lucky. Not by a long shot. A quick look around revealed where he had gone.

He was standing at the far end of the counter talking to her father. Her father was nodding and Garron handed over several coins.

A knot twisted in her stomach. *This is trouble.*

Garron turned and made his way to the door.

Blythe's imagination went wild. *What did he just pay for? That was too many coins for his drinks tonight. He's going to try something. I just know it.*

Garron opened the door, looked back with a nasty smirk, and winked at her.

Her nostrils flared and she sucked in an unsteady breath. A shiver crawled up her spine.

He stepped out into the night.

The door closed, and Blythe went back to work. She cleaned more vomit, served more drinks, and did her best to keep the rowdy customers happy. She was almost able to forget the feeling of dread Garron had given her.

A few minutes later, her father came over. "Garron ordered a small cask to be delivered to his family's house. He paid extra to have it delivered tonight."

Blythe put her hands on her hips. "So go deliver it."

"You know I can't leave while the tavern is so full. I need you to deliver it. Now."

He turned away and started pouring drinks again.

That was it, he had spoken, and her father's word was final. It was true, if he left the tavern, goods would be stolen and almost certainly a fight would start. That's what happened every time he left the room. The other serving girl was practically worthless, and couldn't be trusted with the responsibility of a night time delivery. Blythe was the only one that could deliver it. *Still, it would be nice for him to*

act like he might be considering my feelings every once in a while.

Her shoulders dropped and she shuffled into the storage room.

The room smelled like old dust and ale. There was no lantern in the storage room, so the only light that entered was let in by the ragged open door. Blythe had to stand in the doorway for a minute before her eyes accustomed to the dimness. It was stacked floor to ceiling with casks of varying size.

Blythe found a small rope and tied up her long black hair.

The carrying strap was hung on its nail. She tied it to the ends of a smaller cask and grunted as she slung it on her back.

On her way through the tavern she had to endure a round of "Isn't that too heavy for a scrawny little girl?"s and "A pretty thing like you shouldn't have to work so hard."s. Still, not one of the patrons offered to help carry the load or even get the door for her. Blythe suspected they never would. She was just another work animal to them.

The night air was cool and refreshing. A slight breeze blew for a moment and washed away the stench of the pit workers' bodies.

Blythe marched down the street. It didn't take long before the din of the tavern was nothing more than a whisper around a corner.

Normally the silence of the streets was a welcome relief. This time it just made her nervous. She knew Garron was up to something and it frightened her not to know what.

She began to imagine horrible things in the shadows. The echo of her footsteps on the road stones sounded like a pursuer.

Blythe had left the tavern with neither lantern nor sword. She was unprotected, alone, and afraid. There was nothing to distract her from it. Only her imagination to make it worse. Every

time she passed an alley she was certain Garron or something worse would tear into her defenseless body.

The walk wasn't too long, but the cask was heavy and the darkness seemed alive. Blythe could feel her heartbeat all the way down in her arms.

By the time she reached the house of Garron's family, she was exhausted.

Blythe slipped off the straps and lowered the cask to the ground. It felt good to stretch her back. At least now she could run if she had to.

The look Garron had given her as he left the tavern was not a pleasant one. It had been full of anger, full of malice.

Blythe shuddered to consider what he was planning. She stared at the thick wooden door for several minutes. She did her best to build up some courage. *I'll just step way back, and as soon as the door opens, I can run. It'll be fine, I hope.* She raised her trembling hand to knock. *I hope.*

The knock echoed in the brooding house. Blythe slinked a few steps back. She stared with wide eyes at the darkened door. Any moment now, her doom would leap from the doorway.

The darkness in the street squeezed around her.

Blythe wanted to run, but her feet refused to move. Her fear had grown too strong.

The door still didn't move.

That was it, she was done waiting. If the cask was stolen in the night, she wouldn't care. She just had to build up the courage to start moving.

A noise in the night. Was it the door? Or something behind her?

The closed her dark eyes and forced a deep breath. *It's nothing to be worried about, just a cat or something.*

Another noise. This one clearly behind her. And close.

She gasped and turned. *Go!*

A shadowy figure sprinted straight at her.

Blythe's feet started to move, but it was too late.

The figure dove at her and wrapped its arms around her.

Her scream finally burst from her lips.

The arms tightened and pinched off the scream. "Quiet, wench."

The voice was easily recognizable. *Garron!* Blythe threw her head back and pushed against the steely grip.

Garron muscled her back a step or two. His breath reeked of ale.

A sliver of light broke the dark of the street. The door to Garron's house was ajar.

"Help!"

The face of a servant appeared in the doorway. The boy couldn't have been much older than twelve, but he looked like he had experienced a lifetime's worth of pain. His clothes were tattered and his face was bruised. He looked out at the struggle.

Blythe worked an arm free and reached out. "Please..."

Tears welled up in the boy's eyes and he shook his head.

A gruff laugh rumbled from Garron's lips.

Blythe kept reaching "Please..."

The boy stooped over and dragged the cask inside the house.

"Please."

The door slammed shut.

Garron renewed his efforts, jerking and dragging Blythe step by step toward an alley across the street. "The boy knows not to fight. The sooner you learn your lesson the better."

Blythe swung her free elbow back into the side of Garron's face.

Garron grunted with the impact and his grip loosened.

Blythe doubled her strain. *I'm so close...*

Garron spun his weight to the side and jerked her clean off her feet.

Blythe's legs swept out from underneath her.

Garron released.

Blythe extended her hands to soften the fall.

The cobblestone road dug into her knees and hands.

She pushed up again.

Garron's heavy open hand slammed down on the back of her head and clenched some hair. "Teach you.... treat me with respect."

She stumbled to her feet and took a clumsy swing at his arm.

Garron walked fast, keeping her off balance and moving forward.

Like he'd done it a dozen times.

Blythe screamed again.

"Shut up, wench." He jerked her head and walked her through the entrance to the narrow alley. When they got close to the back of the alley, he let go of her hair.

She fell to her knees again.

There was nowhere to run.

He grabbed the back of her blouse and pulled up.

Blythe was beaten, and she knew it. The bastard would have his way with her, and...

"You there!"

Garron let go of the cloth and turned to the sound. "There's no problem here..."

Blythe turned her head.

Lantern light spilled down the narrow alley.

The voice called out again. "What's going on back there?"

Blythe pulled herself to her feet and looked past Garron.

Two men wearing the colors of the town guard stood at the opening to the alley.

Garron put on a smile. "You boys are a little slow. You're lucky I was here to save her from that heathen before it was too late. He ran off."

Blythe was shocked. Certainly no one could possibly believe a lie like that.

One of the guards looked at Blythe, and then cast a suspicious eye at Garron. "Yeah, good thing you were here."

Garron strutted out of the alley.

Blythe stood dumbstruck for a moment. They were going to let him go? How could they?

One of the guards motioned to Blythe. "Would you like us to walk you home?"

It was all she could do to make herself nod and scurry out of the alley. She had been so frightened, so alone. Garron was a villain of the worst kind. And now the town guard, who were supposed to protect her, were going to let the pig go. Didn't they care at all?

The younger guard frowned. "You're the tavern owner's daughter, right?"

Blythe stammered out a yes.

Garron slapped the older guard on the back. "I'll go back with you. I left something there anyway."

The group made it's way down the winding street.

Garron looked at the older guard. "I thought you would have finished your rounds by now."

He shrugged. "We had a problem down at the market."

Blythe began to shake. The way they spoke, it was almost like they had an arrangement. She slowed a little and whispered to the younger guard.

"Its a lie. Garron dragged me into that alley and he was going to..."

The guard held up a hand. "It was dark. I'm sure a lot could have happened that you didn't see."

She shook her head. "You don't think I know who attacked me?"

She hadn't meant to say it so loud.

The older guard scowled back at her. "A lot can happen in the dark. I'd wager you got confused."

Blythe's stomach dropped. The guard hadn't believed Garron. He had chosen to take Garron's side. *How could a man be so weak?* Her small hands clenched into fists.

The older guard and Garron chatted the rest of the walk.

The younger guard cast an occasional sorrowful glance at Blythe.

Blythe just fumed. Every step made her more angry. If only she had a knife, a sword, or something... she could make it right. She just knew she could. The thought consumed her until the group made it to the tavern.

The casual patrons had mostly left by the time Blythe stormed through the door. That left only the heavy drinkers. They might stick around another couple of hours, but things would be slow for the rest of the night.

Her father finished filling a mug. "What took you so long?"

Blythe took a deep breath. She was ready to lay it all out.

The older guard rushed past her before she could start on her tirade.

"Your daughter had a little problem. Garron was there and chased away her attacker."

More Lies.

Her father looked around the room and back at Blythe. "Well, I'm glad you're safe now."

She walked up to her father. "That's not what happened. Garron tried to..."

"It was dark and your daughter got confused, but she's all right now."

"Father..."

"Quiet, Blythe. Now is not the time. And what happened to your carrying strap?"

She looked at her father's eyes. They were empty and hard. He was just as afraid as the rest of them. Worthless. It bit at her soul to know her own father was too weak to do what was right. She spun around and looked at the door.

Garron was gone.

"You! Guard!"

The older guard stopped at the entrance and turned his head. "What now?"

"Where did Garron go?"

"He grabbed the sword he had left here and left to walk Mala home."

Mala was the other girl that worked in the tavern.

Blythe's heart sank. It was going to happen again.

"Does your patrol take you that way?"

He turned and started to leave. "No, but don't worry. Garron's got her. He'll take care of her."

Blythe knew that, and she knew how. She started toward the door.

Her father grabbed her arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

Blythe only wanted to spit in his face. She jerked her arm free. "I'm going to get the strap I dropped."

She strode through the mess of tables, stools, and half-drunk meads.

A drunkard called out to her dad. "You gonna let your girl talk like that at you?"

Blythe grabbed one of the swords from the rack by the door that held the patrons' weapons. She didn't care whose it was. She didn't care what it would cost her.

She walked again out into the night. *Someone has to save Mala.*

The younger guard was waiting outside the door. "Hold up there."

Blythe narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"Where are you going?"

"Have you ever considered perhaps doing your job?"

"It's not that simple. I have a family."

"Well, I don't. Good night."

Blythe threw her shoulder for maximum effect and stormed off.

Lame excuses echoed in the night somewhere behind her.

He's weak. Just like the rest of them.

Hungry shadows reached out from every side. Darkened buildings glared at her every move.

Blythe just sneered at it all. She was too angry to be afraid.

He must have been moving fast.

She glanced down every side street and alley that she passed.

No Garron.

He must take everyone to that same alley across the street from his house.

A frightened scream pierced the night's silence.

Blythe broke into a run. *That's got to be her!*

The houses and shops around her stayed locked up. No one lit a lamp, came out side, or even opened a window to see what the screaming was about. No one cared anymore.

No one except me.

At last Blythe rounded the corner to the alley and saw them.

A lamp sat next to one of the buildings. Its tiny flickering was the only light, but it was enough to see what was happening.

Garron was a shirtless, sweaty mass. It was clear he had a fair amount of muscle under a layer of fat. In his hand was a torn piece of fabric.

Below him lay Mala in a heap on the cobblestone. She was sobbing. Her shirt was torn, and she tugged at its remains in an effort to keep herself covered.

"Get away from her!"

Garron spun around, and his eyes opened wide. "You?"

Blythe's hatred grew with every step. *No one has ever made the bastard pay. Well, tonight's the night.*

Garron dropped the cloth and dove for a pile wedged in the corner.

Blythe was almost on top of him. She raised the sword across her body, then brought it crashing down.

Garron yanked his sword free from the pile and brought it up.

The swords met with a clang.

The force of the impact almost tore the sword from Blythe's grasp. She stumbled backwards off balance.

Garron straightened and held up his sword. "This is even better than I expected. A fight and two serving wenches."

Blythe was too angry to speak. She rushed in and swung wildly for his head.

A flick of the wrist and Garron deflected the unfocused attack. He countered with a quick downward motion.

The tip of his sword bit into the cloth of her skirt.

She yelped and hopped back.

Garron laughed. "Did you really think you'd be able to stop me? I've been trained in swordplay since I could walk."

Blythe sucked in a breath through her nostrils.

He was a disgusting waste of a man. He was mean spirited and evil. He fed off the fear that his father's power engendered. He abused and took advantage of anyone he wanted. He had no boundaries and received no punishment. He had always just done whatever filthy thing his sick mind could come up with next. No one ever got in his way.

Blythe had seen it and experienced it. She loathed everything about him, from his greasy attitude to his lusty smirk to his fetid smell. She wouldn't let him win again. She just couldn't.

Garron lunged forward.

Blythe stepped sideways and made an awkward attempt at parrying the strike.

Garron snapped back into his ready position.

Again and again Blythe swung and stabbed at him.

Each time her blow was met with a skillful parry or a swift sidestep.

Garron would stop laughing only to mock her poor form.

Tears of frustration welled up in her eyes. If she failed, he would kill or rape her. And Mala.

In desperation, Blythe stabbed at his heart with all the force she could muster.

Garron shuffled back just out of range and brought his sword down on hers. The blow was too much. The sword leaped out of Blythe's grasp and clattered to the ground.

Garron dove back in and clapped his free hand on the back of her head. He grabbed her hair and jerked her head back.

He wasn't laughing anymore. Now there was a hungry look in his eyes.

"I win, little girl."

Blythe swung a weak punch at his kidney. She wasn't even sure he felt it.

Garron drove a knee into her stomach.

She felt the air rush through her lips and she dropped to her knees.

He spit on her and then looked over at Mala.

Mala had crawled her way further back in the alley. Her eyes were wide and she was shivering.

Blythe tried to suck in a breath but couldn't manage yet.

Garron turned back and slapped Blythe across the face. "Don't go anywhere."

He took the point of his sword and scratched it across the top of her thigh.

Pain shot up her leg and blood soaked into the cloth of her skirt. She tried to scream, but her stomach was still locked up from Garron's strike.

"There'll be more of that if you run, wench." He smirked and walked back toward Mala.

Blythe couldn't stand it. She had done all she could, but she was still not strong enough.

I hate him.

I hate him.

I hate him.

So what if he kills me?

She still was not afraid. What more was there to be afraid of? The only emotion left was hatred. She hated Garron enough she could taste it. It burned in her heart, her head, and her gut. Her whole body was consumed in fury. She was sure that if anyone looked, they'd be able to see the hatred coming off her like smoke.

She forced herself to suck in a breath.

Her arm stretched out and her fingers wrapped around the hilt of her fallen sword. *He will die, or I will.*

And then Blythe heard something. A voice, low but strong and coming from... *It can't be...* it felt like it was coming from her own sword.

~I am vengeance.~

What?

~I will destroy the maggot that would harm you.~

What is going on? Who are you?

It spoke words of terrible vengeance, words of torture and pain. The words did not echo aloud in the dark alley. They spoke directly in her mind. The tip of her sword began to glow faintly as if it had been left in a fire.

And then she understood.

The sword had awoken. It had a mind and a will of its own. It had become the violent anger in Blythe's heart.

~Kill him.~

She stood and cleared her throat.

Garron twisted back. "I thought I told you-"

"Not to run? Don't worry. I won't."

~Kill him.~

Garron raised his sword again. "Perhaps you just need a stronger lesson."

His braggadocio just infuriated her more. Blythe shook with anger.

"Perhaps you should just-"

~Up.~

Blythe felt the sword jerk upward in her hand. It clanged hard against Garron's blade.

Her eyes widened. It had moved by itself. She hadn't even consciously known Garron was making an attack.

But the sword knew.

Garron stepped back. He turned his head and stared at Blythe for a moment.

~Thrust.~

Blythe threw her weight forward. The sword aimed itself at his chest.

Garron dove backward and moved to parry.

The sword danced in Blythe's hand, twisting and adjusting aim.

Garron's sword missed and swung wide.

Blythe's sword sunk itself into Garron's thigh. It sizzled like meat in a hot pan.

Garron's mouth opened wide and he made an obvious effort to scream, but no sound came out.

~Delicious. Just taste the fool's pain and fear.~

The sword pulled itself free of his leg.

Very little blood seeped out the wound. The flesh had been seared, and it made a smell that was a cross between bacon and burning hair.

Garron attacked wide and hard like he would swing an ax.

The sword jerked again in Blythe's hand and stopped his wild strike. The clash was loud, but she barely felt the contact at all.

~He will suffer.~

Garron came at her again and again in a wild frenzy.

It did him no good. The sword knew where every attack would land. It knew the perfect counter for every strike. And it loved the taste of his blood and his pain.

Garron tired quickly. His shoulders dropped, his mouth hung wide and he limped on his right leg.

Blythe's beautiful hair twirled in the air as she danced around him. For the first time in her life, she was in total control. It felt good. No more being threatened or pushed around. Never again would she be simply the weak daughter of the

tavern owner. Never again would any man dare to take advantage. She was strong, and she was angry, and now with her sword, she was lethal.

Blythe stopped and stared a moment into Garron's eyes.

His eyes were wide and darted about like he was looking for a way out. Like he was terrified.

He had probably seen that same look in the eyes of his victims a dozen times, maybe more.

Blythe stood tall. "You are afraid. Perhaps you fear me like others have feared you."

~Retribution.~

She reached up and ran the fingers of her left hand through her hair. "But it is not enough."

~Retribution.~

A cold smile crossed her lips. She pointed the tip of her sword at his heart. "Justice demands more. "

~Retribution.~

Garron sucked in some air and swung again.

Blythe felt the sword lead her hand. It arced her parry downward and away.

The swords met.

Blythe's wrist gave a subtle twist and Garron's sword clattered to the ground.

Garron dropped to his knees and gasped. "Please."

"How many times have others begged you?"

"I promise. I won't."

"Don't lie to me."

~Make him suffer.~

The sword pulled toward Garron's face.

~Make him pay.~

Blythe took a step back. "No."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. *I can't torture anyone, even him.*

~He deserves this and more. Hurt him.~

But her burning anger was gone. She had won. She was in control.

Garron had lost, and he would always know it.

That's enough. I don't need to become a monster like-

~Kill him!~

Blythe lowered her sword and looked over at Mala huddled in the corner.

Mala's breathing was shallow. Her clothes were ripped, and she shook uncontrollably. She hadn't made a peep since the fighting began.

Blythe felt a ping of sorrow for the poor girl. *She's so weak. She'll never be able to defend herself against... Maybe he does need to-*

Garron let out a guttural yell.

Blythe spun.

He was diving through the air.

Blythe threw herself back. She wasn't fast enough.

But her sword was.

The greasy villain fell headlong onto the tip. His weight carried pushed the searing blade clean through.

His yell transformed into a gasp of pain.

Blythe twisted and threw her left shoulder against his crashing body. He held all the stronger to the hilt with her right hand and pushed back.

His feet landed in an uneasy stance.

Their faces were inches apart.

Blythe could almost taste the ale Garron had drunk as a thin breath slipped from his lips.

Garron mouthed a couple of words. His legs wobbled. His cruel eyes widened even more in the dim light.

Blythe pushed hard with her left arm.

Garron's weight tipped backwards. He made a feeble attempt to get his legs fully under him.

It was no use.

His torso leaned away, his body slid from the sword, and he collapsed in a heap onto the cold ground.

~Vengeance.~

Blythe stepped back.

Garron's body shook as he took his final wheezing breath.

It was over. He was gone.

A wave of guilt washed over Blythe. She had killed a man. A disgusting pig of a man, but he lay lifeless in an alley, and it was her doing.

To make things worse, no one had dared openly believe her when she told what he had done. Would they believe her when she declared it was self defense?

And what if his father...

The thought sent a shudder up her spine. His father controlled a lot of people. Would they imprison her for defending her life and virtue, as well as Mala's? Would they hang her? She hadn't considered what his father's response might be. And what would everyone else in town would do? Would they see her as a hero, or would they be furious that she upset the status quo?

~I have a solution, but you must act tonight, before they know. While his family sleeps, you just-~

A knot cinched up in her stomach and she dropped the sword.

The clank echoed in the silent alley.

That would be murder. I can't...

Blythe looked up again at Mala.

Mala's tiny frame continued to quiver, but she made no sound.

She's so tiny. And still so frightened.

Blythe made up her mind. She walked over to Garron's tossed-aside shirt, picked it up, and tossed it to Mala.

"Put this on. Go home and burn it. Then do your best to forget everything that's happened tonight."

Mala took a deep breath and nodded.

Blythe reached down and picked up her sword.

A stiff breeze whipped down the alley.

Mala fumbled with the stained shirt.

~Trust me.~

Blythe turned and ran off into the night.

Author's Note: If you enjoyed the story, feel free to pass it along to a friend.

