

THE UNDYING LEGION

Crown & Key Book 2

Excerpt

By Clay and Susan Griffith

CHAPTER ONE

Malcolm MacFarlane let the frigid London night swallow him. A cold hard rain had begun to fall. His thick, wool coat had soaked up so much water that it felt like he carried an additional load of ammunition on his broad shoulders. He wiped the excess water from his face, brushing it back over his coal-black hair, which was pulled and tied with a strap of leather. Tonight, he would do what he did best. Hunt. He had spent the last few months tracking down the stragglers from Gretta Aldfather's werewolf pack and putting silver bullets in their animal brains.

Malcolm had hunted the wild places of the Highlands and beyond all his life, studying the spore of monsters until it was his art form. Here in this city, however, he found it was not so easy.

The maze of filthy hovels and wash of humanity made such skills almost worthless. So he had created makeshift ways to track quarry here. He found that the poor and wretched were founts of information. Like water holes or game trails, he learned to go where unfortunates huddled to sniff out hints of monsters.

Malcolm liked to believe it was the prospect of information and not the warm glow and promise of a dry place that led him to the soup kitchen in St. Giles. He was surprised to see it open since it was well past midnight. He had made a habit of haunting the poorhouses and soup kitchens because the people of the street heard and saw a great many things. They were the first to know when something was amiss, or a beast was stirring. This place would make the third one this evening. He stepped inside and the frigid cold lifted. Unlike the other hovels that made him despair over the condition of man, this one made him feel safe and contented.

His eyes found, at the far side of the dingy hall, a mouselike woman who was cleaning up after serving late supper to the unfortunates. Her bonneted head and her small hands focused on gathering dirty utensils and used plates. She was dressed in plain clothes and wore small, round spectacles. When her gaze lifted briefly to Malcolm, it fell again toward the pile of dishes in front of her. Next to her were baskets of extra clothing, and odds and ends for those in need. The woman left her place behind the table and snatched a wool scarf from the basket. She held it out to Malcolm as she approached.

"We have finished serving for the evening," she said with a smile, "but I can find a bowl of soup for you if you'll wait."

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry." Malcolm dripped water from his sleeve to the floor. Drops glistened on his dark hair and thick eyelashes. "And I am not in need of your scarf."

"Please." Her voice had the timbre of a frightened rabbit. "I made it myself, and you will have need of it before this night is through. I can't have you falling into an ague from the damp."

He stared at her homely features. "I've seen worse weather in Scotland, and me in nothing but a kilt." She blushed but still she wrapped the soft grey wool around his neck.

She had seemed so unassuming that her sudden boldness took Malcolm aback. He wasn't one to accept charity, but he wouldn't offend the young woman. Perhaps he looked like a

bedraggled vagrant after so many nights on the streets. He would give the scarf to someone more in need than he but let the woman think she had helped his poor soul.

“Tell me then, miss, have you seen anything strange about? Anything out of the ordinary?”

“Aside from yourself?” she asked, obviously judging his accent. “You are far from home, I hear.”

“Aye, that’s for sure.” Malcolm let a little extra lonely brogue pepper his words to stir the tender heart of this woman. “But I’m here to do a job. And it would help me if you could say if you’ve heard talk of unusual events about.”

The woman sized up Malcolm and took on a look of sadness that actually disturbed him a bit. She whispered, “I take your appearance as something of a sign then. Because some of the people here have been sorely frightened.”

“Tell me.”

“Tonight, a man said he saw figures robed in red with a young woman in white.”

Malcolm exhaled in disappointment at the story. Clearly not a sign of Gretta’s old pack.

“Is that some local haint?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir. He seemed quite disturbed by it. If you’re here indeed to help, you might look into it.”

“Where was this weird visitation?”

“St. George’s Bloomsbury, sir.” The young woman swallowed hard as if gulping down her terror now that she had spoken it aloud.

“I thank you for your information.”

“Bless you, sir.”

Malcolm opened the frightened woman’s hand and placed coins into her palm. “For the poor.”

She grasped Malcolm’s arm tightly and the gratitude in her eyes moved the hunter. “The Devil has great power.”

“Well I know it. Perhaps after I take a look, I’ll return for some of that soup.”

She bowed her bonneted head shyly. "It will be waiting when you need it, along with a friendly word."

Malcolm smiled at her, thinking that her face could have been pleasing if not tightened in some permanent grimace of penance. "One can't have too many friends, eh?"

"No."

"Thank you for the scarf." With that, he went back out into the cold, miserable night, where he was more at home.

The great white block of St. George's Bloomsbury looked serene in the misty lamp glow. Malcolm could barely make out the odd, pyramid-like steeple around which the haunting dark shapes of lions and unicorns clambered while King George I looked down disdainfully in his pagan Roman attire. The church squatted between two tall neighboring edifices, enhancing its resemblance to a classical temple.

In its shadow, Malcolm saw two dim figures lurking under the massive colonnades by the south doors. Not too surprising. The spiritual presence of the church called vagrants and the poor to its doors whether they were open or not. But when Malcolm went round the side, he saw three more shapes in the narrow space between the buildings. There was a flare of a cigar end as well as a faint trace of spicy smoke. Malcolm came closer.

These were no vagrants. They were well fed and muscular, all with beefy shoulders and ham-sized fists. Guards of some sort, apparently meant to make sure no one disturbed whatever was happening inside the church.

That wouldn't do. Not werewolves, but suspicious enough for Malcolm to work off a bit of frustration on. These men were probably paid off in a local pub for a couple hours' work. There was no need for the use of firearms. Malcolm stepped out of the shadows and strode up to the men. They started, as he was sure he looked like a wraith coming out of the mists in his black garb.

"Waiting for services?" he asked them in a friendly manner.

“None of yer business, Angus,” snarled the man with the cigar, noting Malcolm’s brogue. He was a big man with square shoulders with a noggin to match. “Best you head back where you come from.”

“Nothing interesting happening there.” Malcolm looked past him to the side door. “Seems like something interesting here though.”

The second man pulled a bludgeon from his ragged wool coat. “Does this make you change your mind? You’re no match for all of us.”

“You’re mistaken,” was Malcolm’s answer, flinging back his own black coat to show the twin Lancaster pistols.

Hellfire!” said the man as he pointed at the weapons with his measly club. “What are you hunting? Bear?”

The big fellow laughed. “All’s quiet here, Angus. Just move along.”

“Is it?” Malcolm asked. “Or is there something going on inside that church you don’t want me to see?”

“Folks need to stay out for a few hours. Why don’t you come back at dawn?” A third man drew a thin, wicked blade.

“Step aside.” Malcolm had to give them credit. Just the sight of his weapons was usually enough to cow most men, even a werewolf once or twice. These men were obviously paid very well for their bravado.

The two men who were armed came at Malcolm quickly, thinking they would catch him off guard before he could pull his weapon. They were wrong. The pistol rose in a blur and he shot one man, shattering his forearm, and the knife dropped with a scream. Twisting about, Malcolm slammed the gun across the face of the man who had raised his cudgel.

Malcolm rammed his shoulder into the big man's chest. So fast did the Scotsman move that the man could do little more than cry out in surprise. They went down in a tumble and he lost his grip on the pistol. Malcolm rolled away as a meaty fist drove into the ground where his neck would have been. He had to be quick and keep his opponents off balance. The big man was dangerous and needed to be disabled fast. Malcolm made it to his feet first.

Two new arrivals came running, and a red-bearded brute jumped into the fray. His chin lifted as he raised a wooden club. Malcolm swung a fast left jab into the man's jaw. Red Beard's head snapped around and Malcolm planted a right cross on the man's temple. He dropped.

As Malcolm whirled back to the big brute, Red Beard's partner grabbed him around the chest from behind. Malcolm used him as a brace and brought a boot into the brute's midsection. The man fell back with a grunt of pain. Then the Scotsman threw his head back and connected with the nose of the man holding him. Restraining arms dropped and Malcolm spun about with a wild look.

His opponent gave a wicked swipe with a razor, but it caught in the folds of Malcolm's grey scarf instead of his jugular. He grabbed the man's arm and shoved his palm under the elbow and pushed up. The arm cracked, and the man flopped to the ground with shrieks of pain.

The big thug, shaking himself like a bear, rose from the ground. He plunged again at the man in black with fists flailing, and the hunter let him come, slipping under to land a power blow of his own. It crushed the man's lips and sent teeth flying. Malcolm's fist darted out again, but this time it merely glanced off as his opponent shifted his head. Malcolm stumbled a step beyond the big man. The brute took advantage of the off-balance Scotsman and landed a hard blow on Malcolm's ribs. It took the breath out of him.

Malcolm ducked just in time to avoid the thug's next bone-crushing blow. He felt the wind as it passed over his head. He also heard the splintering of the wooden planks along the wall. Spinning on his heel, Malcolm locked both his hands together and brought them down onto the big man's unprotected back. The behemoth shuddered and fell to his hands and knees.

Malcolm turned to face the thug with the cudgel, who had gotten up finally. The man came in swinging madly. Malcolm dodged under the first two swings, then stood up quickly, smashing his elbow under the brute's chin. The man's jaw shut hard and his head jerked back. He staggered and allowed Malcolm to deliver a hard right cross. This time the man went down and didn't move.

Malcolm didn't turn around fast enough before the behemoth struck him hard in the side of the face. The sheer impact rattled his bones to the core. Malcolm fell into the dirt, a cloud of

dust rising beneath him, his breath going with it. He struggled to stand and got a boot in his face for the effort. The world went black for a second, and when his vision returned, he found himself in the grip of the huge man. Iron arms were wrapped around his chest so tightly that breathing was no longer a possibility. Malcolm groaned with the agony that spread across his ribs.

He struggled to shake off the darkness and get his feet beneath him, but not before the big man whirled around, slamming the hunter against a wall. His right shoulder took the brunt of it and his arm erupted in agony. He didn't have much time. There was a roar in his ears. His numbing mind tried desperately to find a way out of the bear hold.

Malcolm pulled a pistol from across his hip. He couldn't lift the weapon up, but he could point it down. Praying the leg he was shooting wasn't his, he fired. The bullet blew through the big man's knee. The scream that came almost brought a smile to Malcolm's lips except that he was too busy trying to breathe and stay conscious.

The big man bellowed in agony and dropped Malcolm to clutch his shattered knee. Slumping to the ground, the Scotsman rolled to the side, sucking in a great lungful of sweet air. Letting go of his bleeding leg, the man came unsteadily at Malcolm once more. Malcolm slipped under a clumsy blow and brought his hand up, and with the heel of it caught the brute full in the face. Then a series of strikes forced the man's head side to side. They were short and quick, flicking in so fast they were just a blur of movement. The man's big frame shuddered before momentum carried him past Malcolm, thudding to his knees. He cried out in more agony, clutching his injured leg.

Malcolm's hand brushed across the blood dripping into his eye. His strength was rapidly running out. Amazingly, the lame man strained one more time to rise, fear in his eyes as Malcolm took one step toward him. Using his bloody left fist like a club now, and putting the weight of his whole body behind it, he struck the man on the neck below and behind the ear. It made a sickening, dull sound and the big brute's eyes rolled white. He slumped into the dirt with a groan and did not move again.

The sudden relief of victory swept through Malcolm. He stared down at his lame and bloody attackers. Not one of them was conscious. The hunter was straight and deadly and utterly still yet every line of him was eager and alive.

“Done, are ya?” he spat out anyway. “Because I can keep going.”

There was no answer so he limped back to the steps and shoved open the door of the church. Inside, a faint glow beckoned from the right. All else was cast into deep shadows. He stepped through the pews and saw, in a ring of light on the floor, a distant shape, as pale as the cold tile it lay upon. Malcolm’s jaw tightened. The splayed figure was female. Her chest was a bloody mess. She had been flayed open to expose the organs inside.

Malcolm was too late.

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