

The Stranger  
by Roy Graham

The stranger didn't look the part of a fisherman. No rubber clodstompers, no bone charms making their dry chatter around his neck. Even the coat on him was a thin and silvery thing, minnow-like—not clothing to keep the cold and the mist from clinging to your bones. Bad gear to take out into those dark waters, for certain. Didn't have the right expression for a local either; no fear, no weariness, just a stare so cold it was like he brought the night in with him.

He wasn't from around here. That much was clear. But Arnold had a pretty good guess who this stranger might be.

"Drinking alone isn't good for the health," Arnold heard himself say. He had crossed the tavern to speak with the man, and now, closer, his suspicions were all but confirmed. Next to the stranger, a boxy object of some kind rested on the table. White body, black and jagged handle. A relic weapon, he thought. So the rumors were true.

"I never drink alone," said the stranger. He nodded, inexplicably, in the direction of the artifact. Arnold sat down.

"You're him, aren't you?"

"Depends who him is."

"The Purifier." Arnold lowered his voice. "The man who hunts the dead."

"And if I am?"

"Then maybe we have a chance, thank the gods."

The few murmuring conversations in the bar dropped off, leaving Arnold and the stranger with only the crackling of the hearth to fill the air between them.

"There's something out there," said Arnold. "In the woods. Something evil, and hungry. It's been preying on the people of this town. Pulling folks from the edges."

"Sounds like a wolf. Maybe a bear."

The barkeep, an older woman standing by the hearth, laughed bitterly. "This close to those unnameable islands, and he says it's a wolf. No, I've seen what wolves do to a person. They leave something to bury."

"It started a few months ago," said Arnold. "A young boy went out to grab a few things for supper. That was the last anyone saw of him."

The stranger was silent, for a moment. Contemplative. "How many victims so far?"

"Nine to the day."

"Only nine?"

"Only—!" started a big man near the door, standing up from his chair so quickly that it clattered to the floor. He took a step forward, before Arnold stopped him with a raised hand.

"What do you say, Purifier?" Arnold asked. "We're going out on another hunt tomorrow night. Will you join us?"

"You're hunting this thing?"

"Damned right we are. We're not going to be something's dinner without a fight. Haven't caught it yet, but we know it's still out there. Took Davon just last week," said Arnold, shaking his head.

"And you," the stranger gestured at him. "Organize these nightly pursuits?"

“He does,” said the big man, “and thank the gods for it. ‘Fore Arnold came to town, we weren’t much better than worms on the hook. Just waiting for something to snatch us up.”

The stranger turned back to Arnold, who tried not to squirm under that calculating gaze. Beads of sweat begin to dot his forehead. Had he made a mistake?

“Awfully brave,” said the stranger. “But you’re going about this wrong. You don’t fight creatures of the dark on their own turf.”

“We’re hardly experts. That’s why we need your—”

“What you want to do is plant down somewhere warm and well-lit. Somewhere full of people. Make the monsters come to you.” He leaned back in his chair, getting properly comfortable as if to illustrate his point. “Look. I know, even with a body of water between you and the Shadow Isles, it can feel like you’re practically neighbors.”

At the name of that cursed place, several men around the bar clutched at the bone charms around their necks, whispering muted prayers. The stranger didn’t seem to notice or care; his attention was now fixed, as if by a fastened knot, on Arnold. “It’s hard for the dearly departed to cross open water, though. Even harder for them to sustain themselves in corporeal form once they land on the other side. Those that can pull that off fall into two categories. You’ve got your rampaging killers, slaying anything they come across, and then you’ve got the sly ones. It’s them you really have to watch out for. They’re smart enough to wear a friendly face. Make their food supply last. Lure you out into the dark, where you’re easy prey.”

Arnold shifted on his stool. His eyes went to the silver weapon, about equidistant between him and the stranger.

“So, Arnold,” continued the Purifier. “The big guy says you’re new in town?”

With liquid, inhuman speed, Arnold reached for the gun. At the same time a light flashed from under the table, lancing through the stout wood and Arnold’s chest in one clean line. His face twisted and his mouth opened to scream, but what came out sounded more like some natural calamity than a cry of pain, a storm gale fit to tear roofs from homes. Luminous, pale mist started pouring from the wound, and Arnold’s limbs began to stretch and grow, his handsome features vanishing as teeth and eyes sprouted in unchecked excess across his tortured visage. The tavern-goers, watching in mute horror, got one clear look at the creature that had haunted their village before it dissolved altogether.

“Don’t touch that,” said Lucian, setting his second weapon down on the table. “Doesn’t belong to you.”