

Grayson Adams

Incurable

Hooves beat upon the damp earth at a slow, cautious pace. A dense fog covered the rolling, grassy moor, so thick and all-consuming he thought he might lose his way.

Unsurprisingly, he couldn't remember fog of this nature hanging about the area. When he was still only a child, his family moved away from this place. The only memories he kept of Noctham Moor were a hazy few about playing by the side of the pond with his beloved mother before she contracted the "illness". Returning to his childhood home was no mere jaunt—he was here to confront a primitive evil.

Elliott Taylor spent most of his time caring for his mother, who always seemed to be on the brink of insanity ever since his father made the decision to move away. They hoped she would return to normal after moving from the moor, where many others had also contracted the illness, but her condition only continued to deteriorate. What started as acute fatigue, dizziness, and pallid skin developed into all those things, plus madness. Most of the time, she was no longer herself and even tried to sink her teeth into the flesh of others. For only a precious few hours each day, she would return to the mother he loved— kind, soft, affectionate.

The doctors in the new city advised moving her to a place for the mentally ill. Still, Elliott and his father refused after hearing the horrors taking place behind closed doors in those institutions, knowing it would likely be hell for her.

Despite her illness, Elliott did his best to care for her for 25 years and continued even after his father passed away from consumption. To avoid her violent outbreaks, he purchased a straitjacket for her, which worked well for several years until, in a terrifying display of strength, his mother broke out of her straitjacket and attacked him. For the first time, she succeeded in

biting him on the forearm hard enough to draw blood. A neighbor, hearing the commotion, broke in to help tear the feral woman off him, and together, they restrained her by tying her to a chair. That was the last time he saw his mother alive.

In the fading sunlight, he urged his horse to walk faster, knowing if night fell, there would be no navigating his way out of the swirling, foggy blackness. Little by little, the horse made its way down the path and, in a stroke of luck, came across a signpost pointing toward the small town of Noctham. It wasn't long until the looming shapes of houses appeared out of the fog like shards of broken glass, dilapidated to the point that habitation was no longer possible. He followed signs pointing the way to the town center, where he was sure to find some townsfolk.

Upon entering the town square, he found all the businesses and homes deserted. Did no one other than Madame De Sang still live here? Only one woman living in a ghost town? If he made this journey when he was younger, Elliott would have seen this as a red flag and turned away, but he wasn't that person anymore. Because of the last moments with his mother, he no longer feared for his life.

After a few more minutes of traveling on the main road, he could make out a light shining through the fog. With confidence, he followed it, knowing it must be Madame De Sang's house.

Two months ago, he hadn't even known the elderly woman, but he received an unexpected letter from her asking how his mother fared. He replied, telling her she passed away years ago. Their final correspondence requested that he come to her house in Noctham Moor. Madame De Sang claimed to have an item she always wanted to give his mother but never did.

Within a short while, he arrived at Madame De Sang's massive front door. The weatherworn Victorian mansion she lived in was massive— so large that he couldn't even see its entirety in the fog, and he didn't have to see it all to know it was the biggest in the entire abandoned town. Elliott tied his horse to a post outside, then used the heavy iron knocker to knock on the door. The sound faded quickly into the fog outside, but he could hear it echo through the mansion. Only a couple of moments passed before Madame De Sang opened the heavy walnut door, standing before him with her ivory cane and a crooked smile.

“Ah, welcome, young Elliott. Such a handsome man like you is a sight for these sore old eyes!” She grinned; her skin stretched over her bulbous head so tight he could see the thin, purplish veins underneath.

“The pleasure is all mine, Madame De Sang.” Elliott gave a stiff bow and took off his trifold hat. With sharp emerald eyes, he scanned her, finding nothing too out of the ordinary— only a hunched old woman with sunken brown eyes.

“Oh, polite *and* handsome! Please come in. It's such a delight to meet the son of my dear friend Florence,” she motioned Elliott inside with her cane. His eyes narrowed when she called his mother “Florence”. Anyone who knew his mother, even in the slightest capacity, called her Flora. From the very beginning of a meeting, she would insist on it.

Regardless, he stepped inside, moving to place his hat on the bronze hat stand but finding it so filled with dusty men's hats that he was forced to put it on a banister of the grand staircase before them. “Goodness, my apologies! I haven't had company for quite some time. You can store your coat here as well, and — Oh! The tea! When you have finished, please meet me in the sitting room. It's straight through that doorway.” She pointed to one of the doors connected to the foyer before hobbling away to the kitchen.

“As you say, Madame.” Elliott nodded, taking his time as he looked around. The place was dusty but grand, with gold oil lamps, carved marble tables, and delicate paintings on the walls. Dark red velvet curtains hung from the windows, tied open with golden silk tassels. By far, this opulent home was the nicest he’d ever been in. He took off his topcoat and slung it over the banister by his hat, then wandered into the elegant sitting room.

An ornate bone china tea set sat atop a carved walnut table in a room chock-full of gold curiosities. Madame De Sang sat in a matching chair, awaiting him with her crooked grin.

“Please sit, my dear. I’m sure the tea will warm your bones after such a long journey.” she cooed, and Elliott bowed again.

“Thank you for your consideration, Madame. Truly, your kindness is overwhelming to a commoner like me,” he said before taking a seat.

The elderly woman chuckled and shook her head. “You don’t have to thank me, dear. That you came to see an old woman like me is more than enough. It’s been far too long since I’ve had company.” As she spoke, she poured the tea, offering milk and sugar.

Elliott drank deeply, letting the tea warm him before asking, “Where are all the townsfolk? I knew there wouldn’t be many left, but I never thought you would be the only one left in Noctham.”

Sipping her tea, Madame De Sang sighed. “They all moved away when the illness came about. First, the middle class followed by the working class, who moved because they could no longer find work here. It’s quite a shame — this was once such a delightful little town.”

“And you never caught the illness, I presume? Why didn’t you move away like everyone else?” He hitched an eyebrow, listening to her story with uncommon intensity.

The old woman sighed again, a wistful look in her eyes. "I have no other home. These people were my family. There's nowhere else for me to go, so I stayed here even through the illness. I was one of the lucky ones who never caught it. I'm sorry your mother struggled so much before she passed away. She was such a lovely woman." She frowned, and for a moment, her sadness appeared genuine.

Elliott almost felt sorry for her, but he stopped himself. He knew better. "I see..." his voice trailed off, unsure what to say.

The two engaged in idle conversation for a short while. She asked about his life, and he gave her quick, shallow answers, no longer wanting to beat around the bush.

"So... What was it you wanted to give me?" Elliott asked, becoming impatient. He was only here for one reason.

Madame De Sang's tired form perked up, and she sat completely straight, her brown eyes piercing and excited.

"You young people can't wait for anything. I would've liked to have talked to you a bit longer — you're such a charming young man. Oh, well..." she sighed at first, but soon a laugh broke through her facade.

For a second, she glanced down at her tea, and when she looked up again, her eyes had changed from brown to a deep blood red. Now, she cackled openly. "You fool. How cute you are, trying to act all brave in the presence of the one who caused the illness. Oh, but those idiots in town! They didn't even realize I was *feeding* on them!" As Madame De Sang's laughter resounded through the mansion, Elliott snuck a silver-plated knife under the table. Suddenly, her focus shifted to him. "But you — you're no better. Coming out here thinking you'd be meeting an

old woman in the middle of an abandoned town? You may be handsome, but you sure are stupid. That's fine — I like the stupid ones better. Oh, my poor lonely boy, don't look so down. You'll be meeting your mother tonight!

In the blink of an eye, she climbed onto the table to lunge for Elliott, causing the fine china to fall and break on the floor. Just in time, he dodged, and Madame De Sang missed him by fractions of an inch. With momentum carrying her forward, she tumbled off the table and crashed into the wall. While she sped past, Elliott slashed her with the knife he stole from the cutlery. Taking advantage of the fraction of a second she sat stunned, he bolted from his chair to the door. He glanced back only to see an enraged, deformed version of the elderly woman.

Her eyes flashed an enraged crimson above her gaping mouth, where her razor-sharp canines had grown to extraordinary lengths. Dreadful, elongated claws appeared on the ends of her knotty fingers, blackened and twisted. He saw the knife fall from her side harmlessly, the wound already healing. He'd have to kill her another way.

Not wasting a moment longer, he ran into the entryway and up the grand flight of stairs, not daring to go outside. There was no way to fight a monster like this in the fog and win.

"You cannot run from me, boy! Come out and face your fate like a man!" she shrieked, still recovering from her tumble in the sitting room. Elliott swept his curly brown hair from his eyes and gazed helplessly at all the closed doors in the upper hallway. As he hesitated, not knowing which one to open, he heard Madame De Sang's wretched claws screeching across the marble entryway.

With a quick prayer to his mother, he sprinted to a random door and opened it, finding an enormous old library inside. As fast as he could, he wove through the dozens of bookcases,

hoping to lose the monster that De Sang had become. He didn't want to think about how his mother looked exactly like that on the night she bit him.

A loud clatter told him that the Madame was now in the library. Fleet of foot, he crept through the bookcases until he felt far enough from the entrance. Maybe if he caught her by surprise, he could kill her, but to do that, he would have to stay in his current position. Any noise at all would alert her to his presence.

To quiet his rapid breathing, he inhaled and exhaled through his nose. The room around him fell silent, aside from the occasional bookcase being knocked over. Elliott's eyes darted around in the dim light, knowing the victor would be determined by who saw the other first.

Another few awful moments crept by, and everything remained dreadfully quiet. As he turned to peer around the bookcase, he caught rapid motion in his peripheral vision. With a hideous scream, Madame De Sang descended from the top of a nearby bookcase, tackling him onto the hardwood floor with the force of a runaway carriage. Under such a force, he heard the sickening crack of his bones as they snapped like twigs. Elliott gasped as searing pain flared from several points in his body, then hissed out curses.

"It's over, you unbelievably stupid, *foolish* boy. You cannot win this battle as a mere human. You humans always think you know it all — hah! How wrong you are!" she scoffed, her terrible deep red eyes burning into his, "I wonder if your blood will taste as sweet as your mother's? Oh, I *do* hope so." As she considered it, she smiled her crooked smile, fangs gleaming in the low light of the oil lamps. He could smell hundreds of years of rot in her breath.

To her surprise, Elliott began to laugh underneath her deformed body. Using his remaining good arm, he displayed supernatural strength of his own by relocating his shoulder,

wincing as he did so. With caution, Madame De Sang watched his movements until he spoke. “It’s a good thing I came here to kill you, then, isn’t it?” he managed to say under his cracked ribs, his comment causing her eyes to go wide. “

From underneath her, Elliott flashed a smile to distract her as his hand crept to the hidden stake in his boot.

“What do you mean, fool?!” the monster demanded, claws digging deep into his chest yet somehow drawing no blood.

“What I mean is — *you’re* the one meeting my mother tonight.” he spat, grasping the stake and plunging it through her heart.

“How... How did you...?” she gasped before falling to the ground beside him, her skin wrinkling like a dried fruit and her hair falling out as she aged rapidly.

Elliott breathed a sigh of relief and stayed on the floor until he felt the rest of his bones snapping back into place. He was no mere human. Not anymore.

When he felt he could stand, he slung De Sang’s grotesque body over his shoulder and broke several gas lamps in the room to ensure the place would burn. With that done, he gathered his things and left the mansion, tying her body to his horse and riding the short distance to his childhood home. Naturally, thieves had plundered it after remaining vacant for such a long time, but the pond in the back remained the same as he remembered it. The old rowboat remained tied to the small dock his father crafted.

Before stepping into the boat himself, he tied a few stones to the monster’s body and tossed it into the boat. Then, leisurely, he rowed out to the center of the pond and threw it

overboard, watching it sink to the bottom. For the first time, he noticed the fog had cleared away because of the moon's beautiful reflection in the water.

Elliott closed his green eyes for a moment, hoping, *praying* to see his reflection, but when he opened them, he saw none. He knew it was only a matter of time until he became like De Sang. With a realization that felt like the twist of a blade in his heart, he understood no amount of monster corpses could cure the illness his mother passed on to him — no amount of hatred could change what he had become.

A vampire.