

“Beasts”

by David A. Elsensohn

Now this happened a long time ago, long enough so that no one alive remembers. It is the story of what really happened to Cassandra Ribbon. You can find mention of her in the basements of libraries, where you can see tiny yellowed newspapers enlarged in a machine, but the papers only say that she was the daughter of a fabulously wealthy man, who was himself the son of fabulously wealthy counts and dukes and other nobles, and that she disappeared one October night from a town in Pennsylvania. You can see old daguerreotype photos of her and her father and mother, photos of the lake where the house used to be, several days of wonderment by the public when the child was not found, and many weeks of vicious rumors and unfortunate happenings.

There is something you should know, actually two somethings, before you discover what happened. Please keep an open mind. Firstly, every monster you ever feared when you were a child, every nightmare that terrorized you while you shivered beneath thin sheets of linen, actually existed. The red eyes that flashed from hallways, the unseen hand that would creak open the closet door after it had been closed, the thing that sat at the edge of the bed and pulled the blankets from

you while you slept, the voice that growled and breathed from the corner behind the toy box, all *were*. Most of them are still around, and they remember you.

Secondly, while they do not always get along with each other, they all belong to a special guild. This guild, the Order of Monstrous Brethren, has permission from Heaven to strike at the hearts and dreams of children so that they do not grow up as beasts. It does not always work, of course, for humans have always created their own evils, but imagine for a moment how the world would be if no one feared the dark. This arrangement falls under the same provisions under which Hell operates, but Hell and the guild have nothing to do with each other.

The story begins when there emerged a complaint from the New World Colony, Eastern Chapter. There was one child who was not succumbing to the fearful dreams and nightly maneuverings of those monsters assigned to her, and this was a serious problem, though not unheard of. You see, as the ancient manuals explain, when a child does not respond, there are but two reasons: either the child is traumatized by external forces, in which case the Order of Monstrous Brethren mercifully removes that child from its lists, or the child lacks a soul, in which case the child is assigned to Hell, where they handle such things and teach the child how to grow up without notice among the humans of the world. This is more common than you think, and there is one sitting within your view right now.

This was different. This child not only flaunted the efforts of the monsters, but actually fought back, which should not have been possible. I expect you already guess who this child is, and you would be right. Miss Ribbon was known as a spoiled, beastly girl who delighted in tormenting other children and ruling her father with her whims. There are plenty of those children in the world, but there was something special about this child.

Little Cassandra was herself a horror. The distant moaning of the apparition in her massive closets was silenced when she casually set fire to the closet and burned half of that wing of the house down (it was a huge house; you would call it a mansion). She then blamed the maid, and her dark eyes watched in silent fascination while the poor woman was whipped and dismissed.

The hairy-handed fiend under the bed tried to bring nightly screams from Cassandra, but she drove iron nails through her expensive shoes and stomped its grasping fingers bloody into the fine teak floor of her bedroom. She then carried it impaled to the furnace and tossed it atop the flames, laughing at the fiend's faint shrieks of agony as the fire and the touch of iron tore apart its monster's soul and burnt its hair into curling black dots.

One of the Men of Sticks tried to frighten her from behind a doorframe, hanging and clacking and chittering, but she threw a coverlet over his headless

torso and dragged him to the pond, where she went at the bundle with a hatchet, tied horseshoes to it and sent it to the bottom. She then brushed her straight black hair with his ribs that she had kept.

The Guild sent two hobgoblins, who are very good at what they do, to sit on her chest and leer at her and smother her while she slept, bringing those dreams where you almost die but not quite. Cassandra strung their fingers between the pearls of her necklace and hid it in a drawer, and the rest of them was never found.

The Guild placed her case on a higher level of urgency, and one of the older great Shadows of Spiderkind was dispatched to Cassandra's ceiling, where it began to weave visions of poison and despair that could bring strong men of war to their knees weeping. Cassandra brought forth a book she should not have had, bound in the leather of angel's skin and wrought with a terrible runic language that predated the First War in Heaven, and read a particular passage that ripped the poor spider's legs from her body and blinded her many eyes, and left her floating in the space between the waking world and the silent deeps.

The Inner Circle of the Order gathered and researched Cassandra Ribbon, and were dismayed. The child had a soul, but it was not hers. The soul was old, older than any of them, even Barnabas the Grim, who was waiting in the shadows when the first peoples dared to call caves home, and when the Order sent a

messenger to ask for guidance, both the Gates of Heaven and the Portcullis of Hell were shut and would not hear them.

The guild worried, and wrung their hands and claws and antennae and tentacles, and decided to call the Hag. The Hag was older even than Barnabas the Grim, and the Guild no longer called on her, for her ways were brutal. Hers was the presence that sparked the Russian tales of Baba Yaga, the bean sidhe of Ireland, the asasabonasam of Ghana, the vrykolakas of Greece, the Chiang-shih of China. The Hag emerged from her hut in the mountains with her bag of cats and walked invisibly among the cities of men, plants wilting and old men stricken as she passed. The Hag came to Cassandra's house and glared at it, and black water welled up from the ground beneath her bony feet. Cassandra saw her from her window, small black eyes meeting red, and did not move while the Hag stepped over the house and carefully placed her cats around herself, where they sat and stared balefully until the paint began to peel and the windows frosted over. The Hag began to cackle, and birds for a mile around flew away in terror or fell to the cold ground.

Cassandra put on her best velvet cloak and strode out into the chilling night air. She walked primly up to each cat and spoke a handful of words that would

break your ears to hear, then trapped it in a sack as it yowled and spat. She threw each sack into the pond and watched it boil as its occupant strove to escape.

The Hag shrieked, and a hundred babies in the world died as they were being born. A hundred maids went insane. A hundred holy men lost their faith. The moon shivered in its path. The house creaked as long cracks sped up to its roof. Cassandra looked up silently at the invisible face of the Hag, and responded, and the two of them began to wage a war.

The war did not take place in this world, for the town in Pennsylvania is still here and women can still bear children there. There is a small lake nearby that was not before, but no fish live in it and no animal will drink from it. Bad things happened for a year and a day afterward, and the story of Cassandra Ribbon was passed over for news of other horrible things. But a change took place, for neither the Hag nor the being who looked like a little girl called Cassandra Ribbon was heard from again. The monsters are far weaker than they were in those days, barely able to reach from the shadows, hinting and suggesting and almost existing, and it is much easier to comfort your children. You might be thankful for that, but then again, there are a lot of beasts walking around in this world.