

Bhargest

By Seb Naylor

The humid remains of a May Day lay buried in stone as Ben Sloane made his way through the claustrophobic snickelways of York. A lazy sweat made a course down the nape of his neck and a distant roll of thunder signalled the portent of a battle in the sky as he meandered along.

Sloane exhaled a deep breath of relief as he reached the exit and walked into the tourist trap of 'The Shambles'. Shopkeepers closing for the day were left unnoticed; he walked blindly past a poster advertising the beginning of Beltane amongst the pagan and gothic trinkets. His own, narrow-minded thoughts about the idiocy of maypoles and new age weirdos never crossed his mind. Ignored was the fact that the bells in the Minster did not chime and the ghost walk left without a chaperone. Sloane had drifted into thoughts of love and sex for the umpteenth time that day. He had only thoughts for Nicole, the most bizarre, intoxicating and complicated woman he had ever met.

The top-heavy buildings of The Shambles seemed to lean in and try to capture Sloane's ruminations. He switched his train of thought,

going back in time and reflecting on the time of Guido Fawkes, the city's most infamous son. Anything to purge his mind of *that* woman. A wry smile appeared on Sloane's lips as he imagined Fawkes as a drunken figure, staggering through the streets of York with a half-drunk bottle of Burgundy.

"I'm gonna blow up that fuckin' parliament" Fawkes would slur through his double vision, or certainly words to that effect.

Sloane let out a childish chuckle to his private joke, not that anyone listened or anyone cared. He was completely alone as the sun dipped below the rooftops. A strange, gaunt quiet held sway as he wandered aimless through the dusk and the empty streets.

Sloane's amusement faded quickly, he returned to Nicole and those killer legs. How they would feel wrapped around his back, kissing those luscious lips and moving into her. He needed to see her, tell her everything, and try to make sense of the maelstrom of feelings that swam through him. He would do it *now*.

As Sloane took the first step, the quiet that accompanied his thoughts of lust was shattered like a thousand shards of glass.

"Aargh!"

A shrill scream pierced the hot, heavy silence followed by the sound of scampering feet. Hundreds of tiny feet that tore along the concrete, an inexorable stampede that flowed like a black river.

Rats.

The word, short and harsh echoed through Sloane's brain as he turned his head. The scurrying, furry mass filled the breadth of the street, pushing and climbing over each other. With teeth bared and eyes glazed, a desperate tumult bore down. The woman who emitted the scream stood flat and frozen in a shop doorway at the top of the street as the torrent flew by. Sloane copied the actions of the woman, his terrified eyes lay fixed on the rats.

Momentarily, a lone rat glanced across and fixed Sloane's gaze. Their terrified eyes met, a communication barrier came crashing down and a terrible truth dawned on Ben Sloane. The rats were not hunting prey or inflicting malice.

The rats *were* the prey.

Sloane's legs shook; he watched the mass flow by. A deafening howl erupted in the street. The woman screamed in the doorway at the horrible apparition that swaggered into the street.

"*B-B-Barghest!*" the woman cried and stuttered, barely believing her own words.

The Barghest, a huge black demon dog, with blood red eyes that glowed like fire, ignored the cowering woman and made its way towards Sloane. A large mouth slavered, sharp yellow teeth glistened and awful, red eyes glowered. An unearthly howl bellowed from its

lungs as it began its pursuit.

"Run!" the woman screamed.

Sloane turned and followed the rats as they twisted and turned through the desolate streets. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, scarcely believing such a beast could exist. The rats headed downhill in a fraught stampede. In a split-second Sloane realised the sanctuary of their final destination.

The river.

Sloane watched the first rats reach the waterfront. A metal railing separated the pavement from a high drop into the river. In pure terror, the rats flung themselves underneath it and crashed into the river, their petrified shrieks echoed into the blackness. Sloane glanced back; the Barghest was eating up the distance between them. He turned right into another snickelway; he was now the front-runner, completely alone from his fellow prey.

The power of adrenaline began to fade, his heart thundered and overworked lungs seemed ready to burst. The hot, fetid breath of the Barghest burned into Sloane with every rapid step. The claustrophobia of the narrow street reached in and sucked more air from Sloane's lungs. He expected at any second for those dreadful fangs to bite and tear at his flesh.

"Help me!" Sloane screamed.

A darkened, hooded figure came into view as if to answer his call, Sloane headed inexorably towards them. The hood was pulled back to reveal the most hideous female face he had ever seen. Sloane stumbled and fell at the feet of the old crone, his terror left his body as a strangled scream.

The Barghest whined and fled, scampering with unnatural speed into the dusk. The old crone cackled and glared at Sloane. With unabated horror he realised who the crone was, how he had avoided her glare and fled from her grasp in a thousand nightmares.

"It's been a long time and you've avoided me too many times" She snarled through crooked lips.

Sloane felt his heart stop then restart with a thunderous, erratic beat. Sloane screamed and darkness fell...