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## Tired of Death

**A Comedy of Terrors.**

**Neil Hartley.**

**Dedicated to my Parents. Thanks for everything M&D.**

Thanks also to Billy Isbell and Crunchy for proofreading and critiquing.

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**Dungeon.**

Theodore the White swung his sword mightily, cleaving the zombie in two. It disintegrated in a dry explosion of dust and bone, choking him. Another of the monsters reached for him from behind, forcing him to reverse a short way and use his elbow barbs to fend it off. He felt the spike pierce rotten flesh, and heard the sickly sound of trapped air escaping from the zombies' gut. It fell away, dropping to the floor as its un-life drained away.

There was a brief respite as the creatures regrouped, and the fighter took the opportunity to wipe his brow, breathing hard. His armor, shined to a silver gleam just the other day, was now dented in several places and covered with grime and goo. He had lost his helmet a short while ago, knocked off even as it had protected him from a lucky blow by a club-wielding skeleton, and his blond hair was tousled, sticking out randomly.

He glanced about. He was still in the same corridor he had wandered into earlier, though further along. The walls were made from smooth dark gray stone, bereft of any significant marks. The floor was also made of stone, though a little darker. The passage was narrow, leaving little room to maneuver, and this was limiting his ability to swing his sword effectively. However, it also hindered the zombies that were once more moving forward, reaching for him with yellowing claws outstretched. He shouted a short battle cry and thrust at a gap-toothed, grinning face in front of him, splintering the skull and tearing the head away from the neck.

A hand grasped his leg and he stamped on it hard, snapping the bone with a gruesome crack as he drove his weapon into another body, tearing a gaping hole in the side. He panted, his breath emerging in loud gasps that echoed through the passage as he pounded at the zombies. His attackers made no noise other than a windy wheezing.

He blocked another lunge, lamenting once again the impulse to do a little exploring on his own, away from the safety of his fellow adventurers. Too late for regrets now of course, though how could he have known that slab would drop and block his exit? Redthorne has insisted this area was safe. He wouldn't trust wizards any more, that was for sure.

He grabbed a cold arm that tried to wrap itself around his neck and twisted, wrenching it clean off at the shoulder. He swung the dismembered limb like another weapon, becoming desperate now. It smashed against the side of an undead thing with a half-staved-in head, doing nothing much in the way of damage.

There was a hissing from behind, indicating more zombies were approaching. With strength borne from desperation he hacked at the two still in front of him. Gray skin split and yellow ribs splintered as they fell aside under his onslaught. He pushed past, careening blindly down the tunnel, outrunning his pursuers, who moaned with rage at his escape.

Two ancient doors, dark with age, lay ahead. One blocked the corridor; the other was set into the wall on the left. He slammed into the first one, hoping to break through. Instead he bounced off with a dull thud, dropping his sword on the floor with a metallic clang.

Regaining his balance, he looked around. Without the wizard to replenish his magical illumination it was becoming difficult to see.

He could hear the zombies closing on his position, and frantically pushed on the second door. To his immense relief it swung open with a loud creak. Slipping inside, he slammed it shut behind him. Off to the side he could just make out a broken crossbeam leaning haphazardly against the wall. He reached for it, and used it to brace the door, before slumping against it himself.

There was a loud thump as the zombies slammed against the other side, trying to gain entry. Their dead hands scratching the wood in a futile attempt to reach their prey.

"Ssssecure issss it?" a dry voice whispered next to his ear.

He jerked and reached for his sword, only then remembering it was still on the floor where he had dropped it, on the other side of the door.

"That wassss carelessss of you," came the voice. "I bet you won't do that twicccce."

A cold hand caressed his hair. "Welcome to my lair mortal."

Theodore the White turned and looked into a face, a wrinkled and ancient face, skin pulled tight over the skull. A hint of red twinkled within the depths of otherwise dead black eyes.

Thin lips pulled back to reveal long yellowing teeth. A breath of cold, as if from a tomb, washed over him. He screamed as chill fingers wrapped around his neck, and tried pulling at a wrist that should have snapped off in his grasp, yet the hand remained firmly where it was, and squeezed.

Theodore's vision began to dim as his air supply was cut off. He tried to shout as he felt two sharp fingers pierce his eyeballs, but his body refused to co-operate. Pain ran through his head as his ocular orbs burst like ripe grapes, spilling blood down his cheeks. His body spasmed as he was lifted off the floor and pinned against the wall.

As he breathed a strangled death rattle, Theodore the White felt those ancient digits pierce his skull and rip into his very brain...

~ \* ~

"It's not fair, you always get them. All we get is cut to pieces."

Dreth looked up at the zombie, who was holding his detached arm in his left hand. He chewed on a piece of fresh brain, taken from the newly killed fighter, as he spoke. "That's what zombies do. They're just the warm up. Anyway, you had that wizard a little while back didn't you?"

"That was two centuries ago!" the zombie retorted. "And he was a scrawny one too."

"Well, that's life," said Dreth, shrugging.

"Ha! If only. Well, I better scrape up the remains of Arnold I suppose. Cut his skull clean in half your dinner did, and I'm all out of bone glue too." The zombie shuffled out.

Dreth shook his head as the undead closed the door to his crypt. He looked down at the latest catch and then dragged him over to the side of the room. Another death. How many was that over the years? A hundred? A

thousand? He had stopped counting.

Sure, it had been fun being undead, or whatever he was, when he was first posted here. Ripping the eyeballs out of adventurers still living skulls, tearing off limbs and generally finding horrible ways to kill and torture. After so long though, he'd begun to think of the future, and let's face it, eternity is a pretty long time.

He did a fair imitation of a sigh, and gazed around his chamber. The room was a reasonable size, due deference to his status, with another small chamber off to one side. Standard dungeon design, the walls were made of dark stone blocks, as was the floor, which was cluttered with loot. Most of the gear was armor and weapons taken from his many victims, but a couple of chests near the back were stuffed with gold. The coins and jewels were a kind of torture in themselves. It wasn't as if there was anything he could buy around here. The other room held piles of bones, the remains of adventurers foolish or unlucky enough to cross his path.

It was his own fault, he admitted to himself. He'd made his own tomb, now he had to lie in it. When the mysterious wizard had offered a naïve young adventurer immortality, in return for acting as a guard for a while, he should really have read the small print for the definition of 'a while'.

Still, what were his choices, really? He could search for the wizard, but he knew the odds were slim that he was still alive after all this time. Then again, he could remain as he was. Sure, one day someone powerful enough to beat him for good may come through his door, but that could be a thousand years hence.

He sat down on his chair made of bones and thought about that. A thousand years. Ten centuries stuck in this place. No, it was no good. He couldn't take it, there had to be a way out.

Maybe the treasure the dungeon guarded was the answer. It was supposed to include some sort of super magical artifact, and *that* might have the power to free him. Reaching it wouldn't be easy though. He was a pretty ferocious guardian, but there were supposed to be worse elsewhere in the dungeon.

He sat back, picked a goblet of flesh off the corpse of the unfortunate Theodore the White, and considered his options...

~ \* ~

Crug the Barbarian growled, his muscled body gleaming in the dull light. "Sure trap?" He gestured forward with his overlarge sword.

"Of course I'm sure. Some sort of trip mechanism I think," Littlehorn replied, annoyed at having his expertise challenged.

The Halfling thief was clad in black leather, with a short bow and quiver slung over his shoulder. Several daggers were strapped to his chest, and he carried a small pack on his back. It was all standard dungeon exploring issue. Sighing, he turned and examined the ground just ahead of them once more. The corridor looked the same as the others they had been wandering around in for the past several hours. This area of the dungeon was obviously designed to confuse, and it did a good job of it. The section here was straight, sloping down slightly. He'd stopped because one of the cobbles ahead looked a lighter gray than the others, and seemed to be slightly higher.

He glanced over his shoulder at his three colleagues, who were standing a little way behind him. A faint breeze came out of the gloom to the rear, as if trying to push them onwards.

The barbarian looked bored. He swung his huge sword idly in one hand, and ran his fingers through long dark hair with the other. He wore only a loin cloth and a pair of sandals. Standing next to the large man was the

wizard, Redthorne. Dressed in long red robes, he was scowling and leaning on his staff. His beard tumbled halfway down his chest, and the traditional pointy hat sat jammed down over his ears. It had fallen off in a scuffle with some Orcs earlier, and was now slightly bent near the tip.

"You'd better move forward and see to it," the wizard ordered. "One of us would just blunder into it if we went together."

"Why do you not cast a detection spell?" the final member of the group asked. The cleric, Nom the Noble, was standing and trying to peer into the darkness through the eye slits of his helmet, which covered the upper half of his face. His armor was colored white, and he held a matching shield with a circular emblem painted on it, the symbol of his god. By his side, a wicked looking mace was attached to a wide leather belt.

"We're not far in," replied the wizard. "I don't want to waste magic now. The thief is up to this, aren't you?"

Littlehorn nodded. "Wait here," he said, and moved off carefully, scanning the ground intently.

Behind him he heard Nom speak again. "I feel death nearby."

Littlehorn rolled his eyes as he inched forward, and replied without looking back. "We're in the most dangerous and ancient tomb this side of the Very Black Mountains. Of course there's death nearby. It's all around us."

"Probably Theodore," grunted Crug, as the thief dropped down to slide forward on his belly.

"Yes, I told him not to wander off on his own," Redthorne said.

"Shhh!" hissed Littlehorn, as he detected a small wire ahead. "There's something...  
**Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!**"

With a crash that echoed off the walls, a stone slab slammed down behind him, cutting him off from the rest of the group. Simultaneously a spike shot up out of the ground, piercing his leather armor and stabbing into his leg. His magic light went out, leaving him in total darkness.

He rolled over, pulling his leg off the barb with a wet squelching sound. Clutching at his thigh he tried to staunch the bleeding. He could dimly hear the pounding and shouts of the rest of the group from the other side of the new wall.

"Damn!" he moaned. "Damn damn damn!" Reaching around, he groped about in his pack for a bandage.

There was a noise nearby. A grinding, as if part of the wall was moving.

"Is that you Crug?" he whispered.

There was no reply. Littlehorn squinted into the dark, but even with his night vision he could see nothing. His hand located the bandage and he drew it out of the bag, trying to move without making a sound.

There was an echo of a whisper. He froze, even as a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. His heart thumped in his chest and his breathing sped up.

Silence.

He started, very slowly, to move again when the bandage was torn from his hand. A cold breeze sprang up,

chilling him to the bone. Littlehorn dragged himself to one side and pulled out his dagger. A sound in front of him! He swung the blade blindly.

Something, his bandage he quickly realized, was thrown around his neck, and he was yanked back. Cold fingers pulled the knife from his hand whilst something held his legs. The Halfling groped desperately at the cloth, trying to free himself.

There was the chill kiss of metal along his midsection, cutting through the leather armor, slicing neatly up from pelvis to chest.

"Aaahhhhhh!" His breath felt icy in his throat.

A hand, cold as death, reached into the slit in his stomach, pulling at his insides even as he thrashed about futilely, sobbing and gagging on bile.

A low hiss in his ear. "Trouble breathing? Let me help." The hand pushed up under his ribcage, an alien intrusion in his guts, and squeezed.

"AAaaaaaargggggmmmmmmfffff!" Littlehorn gagged as his insides were brutally thrust upwards, forcing themselves up his throat, distending it obscenely, and vomiting them out of his mouth in a mash of tissue and blood.

~ \* ~

"Hmmm. I love Halfling!" The zombie threw away a femur and sat back with a smile on his face.

"Yars, thmmfks frrr hemmfing us," said his friend, mouth full of liver.

"Think nothing of it," replied Dreth, sitting in his chair and watching the two undead gorge. He waited. The zombies were typical of their kind. Both were clad in dirty rags, with rents in the cloth revealing yellow rotting skin underneath, pot-marked with boils, lesions and sores. Their teeth were brown and yellow, and both had wispy gray hair that barely covered the flaking skin on their skulls.

"Wait a minute!" the first one frowned. His name was Cuthbert, and he was unusually bright for a zombie.

*Here it comes*, thought Dreth.

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"Why are you being so **nice** all of a sudden?" he asked. "I mean, I've been down here hundreds of years, and you've never helped us before. Why now?"

"Ythhs, why now?" echoed his friend, who was called Percy.

Dreth tapped the arm of his chair, which was made of arm. "I have come to a recent decision. I've decided that I've had enough of this 'life'."

"Oh, I see." Percy lost interest, and bit back into the still steaming organs of the Halfling.

Cuthbert though, who was brighter, or at least fresher, looked at Dreth. "Call me old fashioned, which I am, but I get the feeling that you aren't doing this as a goodbye present. Anyway, isn't it against the rules to abandon your post? I mean, you're a **Guardian**! There are probably things they can do to stop you wandering off you know."

"Like what?" Dreth said. "Give me a letter of bad conduct? Dishonorable discharge? I don't think so. Hand me that hand will you?"

Cuthbert picked up the pale appendage and passed it to Dreth. "No, I mean, you know... *Guardians*." He tried to wink knowingly, but only succeeded in looking like a bewildered, and very unhealthy, owl.

"Guardians to Guard the Guardians? Who Guards them? Who Guards the Guardian Guardians?" Dreth picked a ring off a finger and stuffed the hand into a pack.

"Stop saying Guardians. You know what I mean." Cuthbert picked up a foot from the pile and nibbled on a toe. "Look, as a favor the lads and me would be willing to come in and cut you up real good. Eat you if we have to. That would kill you wouldn't it? Release you from damnation and all that. I could look after your maggot collection, if that's what's worrying you."

Dreth sighed, which was particularly impressive in a wheezy sort of way. He put his pack down and turned to face the undead. "Look, I don't want to die okay? At least not without seeing some of the world anyway. You know how old I was when I... I became like *this*?"

"No," said the zombie, spitting out a toenail.

"Well," Dreth looked around the room. "Truth is I can't remember, but probably not very old. The point is, even if you cut me up into little cubes, I *wouldn't die*! I would just be little-cube shaped, and very uncomfortable."

"Oh. I see."

"Cuthbert, how long have you been down here?"

Cuthbert shrugged, a rather one sided gesture as his left arm was over on the table. "A couple of hundred years maybe."

"Why don't you leave?" Dreth picked up his sack again and peered inside.

"Well, it's a job you know? I was never very good at being alive, truth be told." Cuthbert looked uncomfortable for a moment. He took another bite of foot and masticated noisily. "Anyway, ten minutes out there and I'd be hacked apart by some over-zealous Cleric or something."

Dreth tied his pack off and looked at the undead munching on the remains of the thief. "Why don't you come with me? It'll be an adventure."

"No, thanks, I was never the adventurous type. Anyway, I'm okay here. It's not that bad really."

"When I said, 'why don't you come along?' I wasn't really asking." Dreth examined a variety of swords and other weapons he had saved from his many victims.

"Bastard. Everyone always picks on us Zombies, we're the scum of the undead world, isn't that right Percy?" He nudged the other zombie, who was sucking an eyeball out of the skull with a slurping sound.

"Eh? You what now?"

Cuthbert made a tutting noise and attempted to take a deep breath, though this was not altogether successful as his lungs were quite rotten.

One sword that seemed to throb with black energy caught Dreth's eye. The hilt was silver and gold, inlaid with various red gems. White runes were engraved up the length of the blade. He picked it up and swung it about, testing the balance.

"Hey! Watch where you're waving that thing! Nearly had my arm off! My other one I mean."

"Sorry," Dreth said, not very sincerely. He found a suitable scabbard and strapped the sword on around his robes. "How do I look?"

"Like a dead man walking."

"Haha. Very funny. Now, finish your adventurer. There's one more thing I need your help with."

Cuthbert tucked the foot into his belt and stood up. "Now what?"

"There's a group coming through the tunnels. This one," he pointed to the now mostly eaten thief, "and that stupid fighter who pulled your arm off were members of their party."

"So?"

"I want to take one with us."

"You what?" Cuthbert gawked at him, spitting out several teeth. "Are you mad? Oh wait, you mean as a snack."

"Nope, I mean whole and upright. Sometimes the fully alive can get past things that we... not quite living can't."

"Why just one then? Why not take the group? There are still three left."

Dreth rubbed at his forehead. The trouble with zombies was that their brains were mostly rotten, they weren't too great on thinking. "There's a wizard, a Cleric and a barbarian. All of them together may be a bit hard to control out of our little area. One though, one would be manageable."

"Well, I'm not taking the Cleric, that's for sure." Percy folded his arms. "They give me the creeps. Have you ever been turned? Not nice I can tell you. A friend of mine was turned a while ago, he's been off his game ever since. Hardly even bothers to shuffle along properly any more." He shook his head sadly.

"The Barbarian would be the easiest," said Cuthbert, getting back on topic.

"Perhaps so, but the wizard would probably be the most useful," Dreth said.

"Dangerous those mages," Percy countered. "The current record holder for the Pit of Doom was a mage. The Giant Spiders were cleaning up for months."

"Still, something to be said for a good spellcaster." Dreth kicked the Halflings' mutilated head across the room, bouncing it off the wall so it came to rest against a pile of skulls.

"Good shot," said Cuthbert.

~ \* ~



"Crug no like," Crug said in his most eloquent tones. "Crug think trap."

"I concur with our brawny friend," the Cleric interjected. "My instincts say we should pay heed."

The three surviving adventurers were huddled in another passageway. Having failed to open the slab that had trapped Littlehorn, they had backtracked and taken another route in the hopes of finding their friend. They hadn't found the thief, but they *had* narrowly avoided two spiked pits, one swinging axe, a fireball activated by a pressure pad, and three tripwires. They were still no nearer to finding their companion, and tempers were beginning to fray.

"Look, of *course* it's a trap. The whole place is one giant trap." Redthorne rubbed at his forehead in annoyance. "I admit I made a mistake hiring that worthless thief, or I should have at least hired two. Still, he's gone now, and I say we push ahead with our mission. Unless you are going to renege on your agreements?" The mage raised his staff in a threatening gesture.

"Nom does not break his sworn oath!" declared the Cleric.

"Renegade is what?" said the Barbarian.

"Just move forward," sighed Redthorne. "Slowly!"

The three set off down the corridor, which had a number of shadowy alcoves along the walls, containing nothing they could detect. They traversed the tunnel with no mishaps, much to their relief, and emerged into a large dark cavern, the use of which was not apparent.

There was a slight noise, though it wasn't possible to identify where it originated from, as the whole place seemed to echo. The three stepped into defensive formation, with Crug in front, his enormous sword raised high. Nom clutched the Orb of his god, Grom, and muttered a blessing, whilst Redthorne held his staff and readied magic.

A skittering noise came from the left. Crug swung round as a large black spider appeared out of the dark and lunged towards him. Two more of the creatures materialized from the right and Redthorne turned to face those, staff blazing white in his hands. More movement could be made out in the shadows.

Behind them, from the tunnel they had just emerged from, came another sound. Nom turned to see a zombie, arms outstretched, lurching towards them.

"Undead to the rear!" he cried, raising his orb.

"Deal with them then! We'll take the arachnids," the wizard commanded, throwing white fire at a giant Black Widow.

"I kill spider!" Crug said, covered in green gunk. The remains of a greater tarantula lay on the floor next to his feet.

Nom faced the zombie and raised his Orb. He cast his mind out to the Might of his god, and reached for the Power. The mighty deity Grom responded, sending the force of Good through his vassal and towards the undead in an invisible wave of energy. The creature made a hissing sound and staggered backwards as the magic impacted.

"My thanks to my Lord," muttered Nom and, taking his mace in hand, strode forward to finish the foul beast, which was now fleeing up the passage.

The wizard shouted something behind him, but Nom was intent on his prey, and ignored the warning. The zombie lurched around a corner into an alcove and cowered against the wall as the Cleric approached.

"Die creature of evil!" Nom raised his mace of Smiting and brought it down upon the creatures' skull.

Or tried to. Something restrained him. He looked up and saw a thin hand, pale skin barely covering the bone, gripping the shaft of his raised weapon.

A dry voice whispered next to his ear. "Perhapsss not." Nom straightened as sharp claws dug into his back, just below his armor. He screamed in pain as cold fingers wrapped around the base of his spine, severing all control to the lower part of his body. He pitched forward, to be caught by the zombie he'd so recently cornered.

"Time for the zombies to fight back Cleric," it hissed in his face, blowing fetid breath over him.

There was a wet sound, and Nom felt a cold sensation along his back as his spine was forcibly wrenched from his flesh. The restraints on his armor snapped and it fell to the floor with a dull clang. The tearing sound was loud in his ears now, and with the last moments of his life Nom saw his corpse fall forward, a long bloody hole where his backbone had been, terminating at a ragged tear where his head had been twisted away from the neck.

Blood spread outwards in a dark pool on the stone floor, and Nom's spirit ascended to join his god.

~ \* ~

"You cut it fine is all I'm saying," Cuthbert complained as they walked along. "Another second and I'd have just been a load of rotting breakfast."

"You were never in any danger. That medallion I gave you warded off the Cleric's power didn't it?"

"Maybe so," Cuthbert looked down at the dull black necklace hanging around his rotten neck. "But it still hurt."

"Well here then, you deserve this one." Dreth handed over the Cleric's head, now permanently etched into a look of horrified surprise. The still attached spinal column dripped blood and muscle tissue.

"Oh nice! I do like a good lollipop." Cuthbert took the remains and licked at the still dripping backbone. "Yummy."

They wandered back along the dark corridors to where Percy was waiting.

~ \* ~

"Where are they now then?" asked Percy, looking jealously at Cuthbert as he savored the tongue of the holy man.

"The spiders pushed them back, they're resting just outside the Troll caverns." Dreth arranged his cloak about him so that it looked the most ominous. "We still need to separate them before they leave our territory completely."

"Why not just rush them?" Cuthbert asked, waving Nom's jawbone about. "Oooh! A gold tooth! I always wanted a gold tooth!" He wrestled with the jaw, pulling at the item in question.

"I suppose we could," Dreth considered it. "We should be able to take them easily enough now the Cleric's out of the way. We need to act quickly though, if they wander into the trolls we'll have a hard time getting the mage alive."

"I dunno," said Percy. "That wizard seems to be pretty powerful. I think we should push them into the goblins. Then we can take the wizard whilst the Barbarian is fighting them. We know the tunnels in that area, and the goblins are scared of you."

Dreth looked up in surprise at this unusually bright idea from Percy. "Not a bad choice, though we aren't on the best terms with the Goblin King if you remember."

"Pah! Goblins. I can't be held responsible if I accidentally eat one of them can I?" Percy looked disgusted.

"Maybe so, but you could have checked that it wasn't their princess first," Dreth said.

"Look at me! I have a gold tooth!" Cuthbert danced around grinning, his new denture forced into a gap in his gums.

"Just concentrate on the problem at hand please, or I'll give your lollipop to Percy."

"Bah, you were never fun," the zombie cradled the Clerics' head and sat down. "Why don't we get the spiders to attack them, and take the wizard in the confusion? Worked for this one," he patted his toy.

"How would we get them back into the spider's lair?" said Dreth. "They know it's there now. Besides, the spiders lost quite a few of their kind in the fight, I doubt they would go for it."

"We could offer the Barbarian to them," suggested Cuthbert, trying to see his reflection in an old helmet.

"No fair! You got the Cleric!" protested Percy. "The Barbarian is mine!"

Cuthbert grinned a gold tinted grin and held the noggin close. Dreth shook his head and considered the options. "We may have to go with the goblins, I'd prefer to lure them into the troll caverns, but I can't think of any way to do that." He sat down on his chair and then jumped slightly as a piece of parchment slid under the door.

"What's that then?" asked Percy.

"How should I know? I've never had anyone slip anything under the door before." Dreth thought a moment. "Well, except for a thief one time. Anyway, give it too me." He waggled his fingers.

"Yes your highness," Cuthbert said sarcastically, picking up the paper and handing it to Dreth, who was silent for a minute as he read the spidery script.

"So?" Asked the zombies in unison, when he finally put the parchment down. Dreth passed it back to Cuthbert, who squinted at it in the gloom.

"What's it say?" said Percy, who had forgotten how to read. He peered over Cuthbert's shoulder as his friend read the notice out loud, tracing the text with a finger.

### ***Deceased and Desist Order.***

*It is come to our notice that 'Dreth', subsection 3b, area 4 (undead), designation: Undead Way Guardian*

*(advanced level); henceforth referred to as 'The Resident', has been engaged in un-authorized activities. To wit: Venturing outside allotted dungeon domain (undead).*

*Furthermore: It has come to our attention that the Resident's lair has been left unattended for unacceptable periods of time, and that the Resident has engaged and distracted several zombies, designation: Guardians (Fodder level), from their assigned patrol areas.*

*Such activity is in direct breach of agreed protocols and directly contravenes the contractual duties of the Resident.*

*This order is the first and only warning, as specified in sub-section 4,509, paragraph 52, lines 309-466, for the Resident to return to Dungeon Guardian (advanced level) duties. Failure to abide by the terms of the contract will result in disciplinary agents being dispatched.*

*Thank-you for your attention. Have a nice day.*

DM.

"Fodder level is it?" muttered Percy. "Cheeky buggers. I'm a professional I am. That's downright degrading."

"Who's DM?" asked Cuthbert, passing the note back to Dreth.

Dreth shrugged. "No idea, don't care." He scrunched the notice into a ball and threw it on the floor.

"Do you still have this contract?" Cuthbert said, as Percy wandered off grumbling to himself.

Dreth scratched his head. "I don't think so. I signed it before... before I became like this. After the wizard changed me I didn't really think about it."

"So you're going to stay here now then?" inquired Percy, who had started rummaging through a pile of old equipment in the corner. "Hey! Look! I found a wand!" He held up a long stick.

"Let me see that," Dreth said. He examined the artifact closely for a moment. "Hmmm, a wand of illusion, still a couple of charges left." He rubbed his chin. "I think I have an idea..."

~ \* ~

"Are you listening to me warrior?" Redthorne poked the barbarian with his staff.

"Crug hear. Crug no like. Cleric dead for sure. Just..." the fighter counted on his fingers for a moment, "two of us now. Not good. This place bad."

The mage leaned back against the wall of the alcove they had taken refuge in after the spider fight. "Yes, I know. However we're blocked off from the exit. Big dropping slab remember? We have no choice but to push on." He consulted a piece of parchment. "I think I know where we are anyway." He pointed at a location on the map. "According to this there are goblins that way somewhere," he waved his hand to their right, down a dark corridor.

"Goblins easy kill. No problem."

"Yes, for once we're thinking along the same lines. The important thing is... **We must not split up!** Do you understand? Hey! Are you listening to me?"

"Quiet. Crug hear something."

"Don't quiet me! This dungeon seems to work by picking people off one by one, if we stay together... Hey! Where are you going? Weren't you listening to what I just said?"

"Crug hear woman! Maiden need help! Quick!"

"What the... Don't be an idiot! What's a woman doing down..." The wizard cursed to himself as the barbarian stood up and started jogging off to the left. "Blast the moron!" He scrambled around, stuffing papers into his pack before scrambling after his sole surviving companion. "No more barbarians! I swear! Next time it's Rangers all the way. Crug you numbskull! Where are you? Oh there." He glanced the back of the barbarian hurrying off down a fork in the tunnel, and scrambled after him. "Wait for me!"

The wizard panted as he raced down one tunnel and then up another after his companion. "Hold on blast you! This is not somewhere we can simply run about wildly!"

The passage terminated abruptly, and the figure stopped at the dead end to turn and face him.

As Redthorne drew closer some sixth sense caused him to slow and raise his staff. "Crug?"

The fighters' form shimmered and changed, to be replaced by a different profile altogether. The impostor was still tall, but far from the muscle bound torso of the barbarian, this one seemed to be more corpse-like. Indeed, it appeared to be skeletal thin. Pale skin was drawn tightly over bones, and dark eyes stared out at him from a deathly white face.

The figure stood still, its black robe hanging loosely around it, revealing a sword strapped to one side. A dark Aura swam about the weapon, visible only to the wizards' extended senses.

"Beast! What have you done with Crug?"

"The barbarian is being dealt with by some friends of mine. He shall be worm fodder before you can do anything about it wizard." The voice was barely more than a hiss.

"Then you shall die!" Redthorne raised his staff.

"**Wait!**" A claw-like hand raised in a gesture. "Look behind you."

Redthorne looked at the creature through narrowed eyes. What was going on here? He glanced behind him. Two more figures, mere zombies, were at his back, one wielding a rusty sword and the other apparently straining to hold a spear.

"You may get a spell off, who knows? It may even hurt me, but even if you manage to harm me, my friends will run you through."

"What's your game creature? Why do you toy with me thus? Do you have my comrades?"

"Your comrades are no longer a consideration," it said ominously. "However, I need your help."

"**My** help? **My help?**" Redthorne kept his staff leveled at the figure. "You are but a foul servant of evil! Why should I help you?"

"Aside from the obvious answer that you will end up dead if you don't? It could work to your advantage."

Redthorne cocked his head to one side. This didn't seem like your usual dungeon ploy. Something strange was going on here. He lowered his staff slightly, whilst still remaining alert. "Go on, I'm listening."

~ \* ~

"Save me! Help!"

Crug could hear the damsel clearly now, her high pitched voice ringing with desperation. He held his sword in front of him and moved, panther like, towards the sound. Of course it could be a trap, but Barbarians didn't heed that sort of thing. They went in sword swinging. It was a tactic that had always worked for him before.

Turning into a large cave he squinted in the gloom. The voice was coming from... over there! He slid quietly forward, towards a dark shape lying on the floor.

Crug crept up and knelt down next to the figure. "Never fear pretty maid... Arg!" The barbarian leapt backwards and swung his sword.

The trollop\* cackled and rolled to one side, avoiding the swing. "Oh! My love has come to rescue me!" she rasped, clasping her hands together in mock adoration.

"Troll! Me kill now!" Crug jumped forward with surprising agility for someone with such bulk, catching the trollop by surprise with an attack that cut her arm neatly off at the shoulder.

\*Female troll that is.

"You Human! Do you know how long arms take to grow back?!" The creature, no longer amused, snarled, showing long yellow fangs.

"Hah! Crug no scared one little troll!" The barbarian advanced, weapon ready to strike again.

"Perhaps a big one then?" A shadow detached itself from the cavern wall and advanced to reveal the largest, meanest looking troll Crug had ever seen.

"Crug know no fear!" said Crug, not quite truthfully.

The large newcomer stepped forward, hefting a huge club. "Come then."

Crug spat and advanced, thrusting his sword as he did so. It pierced the trolls' side, causing green blood to spurt messily.

"Get him!" shouted the trollop.

Suddenly the barbarian was surrounded by large green creatures. He dodged to avoid a swing from a club, only to have claws rake his back, scoring lines of fire across his body.

He twisted, slicing and cutting green flesh as he did so.

There was a sick crunching noise, and a something slammed into his ribs. He heard his bones break under the impact and the air seemed to be sucked from his body. Crug staggered, looking up just in time to see the large troll swing his giant weapon round in a long arc. Time seemed to slow. He tried to jump back, but his legs were no longer responding. The barbarian could only watch as the club drew level and then smashed into the side of his head. He heard a short tearing sound and, for a brief second he seemed to be flying through the air.

Then his detached brain ball hit a wall, and it all went dark...

~ \* ~

"I still don't believe the Barbarian would be defeated that easily," the wizard said again as they walked down the service tunnel towards the troll quarters.

Lurching along with them were Cuthbert and Percy, muttering amongst themselves as they went.

Dreth shook his head. Why were mages always so stubborn? "You haven't met Kevin. He's the largest troll this side of the Luminous Lands. Even if he is a big, er..." He trailed off.

"A big what?" asked Redthorne. "Hey! Is that zombie eating a foot?"

"Sorry!" said Cuthbert, holding out the remains of the Halfling's appendage. "You want a bite? I haven't eaten much of it."

The wizard recoiled in horror. "That's Littlehorn!" he said accusingly.

"Part of him anyway," grinned Cuthbert, nibbling on heel.

"You are monsters! What am I doing with you?"

"Not becoming dessert if you remember?" said Dreth, trying to nudge the conversation back on topic, whatever that was.

"Did you also take my Cleric?"

Cuthbert grinned widely for an answer. In his mouth a lone gold tooth sparkled.

Redthorne shook his head. "I should have listened to Barth. He told me hiring adventurers from a tavern was a mistake. It seems he was correct."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," said Percy kindly. "This is one tough place."

"Okay, somewhere around here," said Dreth.

"Are there these tunnels all through the dungeon?" asked Redthorne.

Dreth nodded. "I assume so, though we only know the ones in our area. This is as nearest exit I know of to the troll territory." He felt around the wall, looking for the hidden door switch. "It's been a while. Ah, here we go." He pressed several bricks in succession and part of the wall swung aside with a grinding noise, to reveal a damp passage beyond.

They stepped through and moved off as the door swung shut behind them.

After a little way down Dreth turned to the wizard. "Best keep quiet. Don't say anything provocative. We agreed to give your barbarian to them as a good will gesture, and the leader is a friend of mine, but we don't want to push them even so. Trolls are not renowned for their honor and even temperament."

The wizard nodded as they walked into a dimly lit cavern. To one side large green forms sat, lay, or stood about, several apparently fighting with each other. To the other side smaller figures, young trolls, were

playing some sort of kickabout game. Dreth saw what they were using for a ball and hoped the mage wouldn't notice, though it seemed the wizard was too busy trying not to gag at the smell.

They walked through the cave towards a crude dais, upon which a huge troll lounged. He had a wilted flower in his greasy hair. On one side of him a trollop was sprawled on the floor, chewing on something.

The seated troll saw them and stood up, one hand on his hip. The enormous creature loomed above Dreth as he approached.

"Dreth my good fellow! So wonderful to see you again my dear!" His voice was surprisingly camp, which seemed strange coming from such a big creature. "We received your present!" He gestured at a pile next to his seat, which turned out to be Crug, neatly dissected.

Dreth felt the wizard stiffen next to him, and laid a hand on his shoulder for a moment before turning to the troll and speaking. "Glad you didn't have any trouble with him. Let me introduce you to my team. This is Redthorne, mage. Standing drooling here are my old colleagues Cuthbert and Percy, zombies first class. Guys, this is Kevin. He's the leader of the trolls."

"Charmed to meet you two. Please my lovelies, help yourself." The troll king gestured towards the barbarian pieces, upon which the two zombies hissed their thanks and lurched forward to pick at the remains.

"So, my dear, a mage eh? Are you sure you know what you're doing? They can be such beasts!" Kevin draped a friendly arm around Dreth, who took it stoically.

Dreth shrugged. "If I intend to seek out the treasure of this place, I'm going to need all the help I can get."

Kevin sighed. "Well, your funeral I suppose, but you know humans can't be trusted. Living ones anyway," he amended hastily. "Such a waste of a handsome body too." He pawed at Dreth and shook his head sadly. "So, what can Uncle Kevin do to help?" The troll put a finger into his lanky hair and twisted it around whilst pouting at the wizard, who stood quietly to one side.

"I need information about how to get to the inner sanctum. Any help you can give us would be appreciated."

Kevin frowned for a moment. "Well, as it's you asking darling, I have someone who may be able to help." He looked around for a moment. "MUUUUDD!" He shouted in a deafening roar, which echoed off the walls.

Dreth looked around. No one seemed to be paying any attention. Kevin scowled. "That bitch. Wait here a moment." He minced off, somehow managing to make the 'raving fairy' walk look dangerous.

The zombies wandered back over, mouths full of Crug.

"That troll is eating her own arm!" said Cuthbert in a stage whisper to Dreth, pointing to the trollop.

"So?" asked Dreth.

"It's disgusting is all," replied Cuthbert, waving the remains of the barbarian's hand and spitting out several finger bones.

"Well, you are what you eat I suppose." Dreth shrugged and turned to the mage, who was looking on in revulsion. "See? Your great fighter is nothing more than lunch. Do you need any more convincing?"

"You've made your point. But tell me again. What do I get out of this deal?"



"You get to live for one thing, and the treasure is supposed to be fabulous, if we can reach it. You will get your share."

Redthorne nodded, but he didn't look too happy. He opened his mouth to speak again, but was interrupted by the arrival of Kevin, who had a small figure in tow.

"This is Mud," said Kevin, gesturing at his stunted companion. "He's my... ah, advisor." He gave a lewd wink.

Dreth looked Mud over. He didn't seem to be much of a troll in the traditional sense. Barely as tall as Dreth, the creature had a hunchback and wore round battered spectacles. His skin was a sickly white color, instead of healthy green. Under one arm he held an enormous book.

"We need to get to the treasure. What can you tell me?" asked Dreth.

Mud coughed and pushed his glasses further up his warty nose. "The treasure is it? Well, what I can tell you is mainly hearsay, gathered from other denizens and adventurers."

"Before they were eaten," added Kevin. "He knows that. Get on with it." Kevin examined his nails, which were painted a variety of colors.

"Well, it's not much. There's really only one way to go from here that I know of."

"And that is?" asked Dreth.

"The Dark," replied Mud. "I don't know what's in there though." He shrugged.

"Great," said Dreth.

"Would you stop for lunch sweetie? I think there's enough to go around. If not, perhaps the wizard?" Kevin looked at Redthorne and licked his lips.

"Ah, no. I think we'd better get off, thanks anyway," said Dreth hurriedly. He gestured at the zombies. "Come on you two, stop stuffing your faces and let's go. We have a dungeon to delve!"

"Well, if you need anything, you know where to find me." Kevin gave a little wave and turned back to his throne with his arm around Mud.

They were on the way out when Percy noticed the young trolls playing football with the barbarians' head. "Hey!" he complained. "No fair! They're playing with their food!"

~ \* ~

"Here we are then. Home sweet home." Dreth pushed on the door to his crypt, which swung open with a creak.

Redthorne entered cautiously and looked about, taking special note of the pile of body parts and stacks of discarded armor and weapons.

"I helped him with his chair," said Percy.

The wizard examined the bones that were assembled into a throne-like seat. "Very atmospheric," he said, and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

"I have to get something, back in a minute," said Cuthbert, shuffling out.

Dreth took a final look around his room. How long had he been here? Three Hundred years? More? Time was not easy to track when one was underground day and night. He'd almost forgotten what outside looked like. He pottered around, putting a few items in his sack with the snacks.

"So, this is the undead area is it?" said Redthorne, evidently trying to make conversation.

"Yesss."

"Seems to be a lot of zombies around."

"Indeed."

"Why is that?"

Dreth looked up from a pile of skulls. "Why is what?"

"Why the undead?" Redthorne gestured to himself. "I'm a wizard of the 11th order of White Light. I have quested far and wide in my search for knowledge and power. Yet wherever I go it seems I encounter undead. Zombies, skeletal warriors, mummies, ghouls, wraiths, ghosts, vampires, and the occasional lich," he ticked them off on his fingers. "That's why I hired the Cleric. I dislike those of the holy orders to tell you the truth, too full of themselves in my opinion, but they are useful." He paused a moment to stare at the head and spine Cuthbert had left on the table. "Well, usually."

"You wonder why tombs have so many undead wandering about in them?" Dreth said. "Perhaps because they are tombs?"

"A point I admit," said Redthorne, nodding thoughtfully. "Though not only tombs, dungeons of all kinds, and ancient buildings as well."

"Well, that's easy." Dreth tried on a helmet with a skull emblem on and discarded it after a few moments consideration. "Low maintenance. Other creatures need air, they get old and die and, of course, they need food. Undead don't."

"So what are all those half eaten body parts in your bag for?"

"I said don't *need* food, a snack here and there helps while away the time. Good for the complexion too."

Redthorne was about to say something further when Cuthbert returned, sidling into the room.

Dreth threw one last item into his bag and passed it to Percy. "Carry," he ordered.

"Ready to go then," said Cuthbert.

"Wait a moment! Hold on a minute! **Stop!**" Dreth said, halting Cuthbert's progress towards the exit. "What, by all that is damned, is **that**?" He pointed a long bony finger.

"I would ask you to watch your language from now on," sniffed Cuthbert. "And it's not an 'it', it's a...er, he. Yes, a he I'm fairly sure." Cuthbert pushed forward the small figure that had been hiding behind his leg. "Go on, say hello to Uncle Dreth."

One brown and one blue eye peered up at Dreth from knee level, as the miniature zombie shuffled forward uncertainly.

"H...hello Uncle Dref," it said. "'m Sprat."

Dreth stared, unable to formulate a response. Centuries of half-life had thrown adventurers, monsters, animations, spells and a wide assortment of strange devices at him, but he'd never seen a tiny zombie before.

"He's my son. Put him together myself," Cuthbert beamed proudly, moving the small undead back behind him as Dreth's face went a paler white than usual.

Dreth opened his mouth. No sound came out. He tried again. "What... how, I mean *what do you mean* he's your son? You're dead for Dreg's\* sake! You can't have a son!"

\*Dreg. Relatively minor deity of Not-quite-living creatures.

"**U**ndead," corrected Cuthbert. "And that's racist, or something, that is. The re-animated have every right to have offspring."

Dreth brought a hand up to his head. He suspected he was having a headache, which he had always thought impossible in this incarnation. "I don't actually think that is the case. *Living* reproduce. The dead don't. They are practically well known for going around not having children."

Cuthbert sniffed. "I don't care."

"Anyway, he can't..." Dreth paused for a moment as he was about to ban the little one from coming along. 'Why not?' he thought. A small body could reach places the others might not, and anyway, it would be one more obstacle to throw to the wolves, or dragons or whatever they were bound to meet. Anything that could add to his chances of success should be welcomed.

Dreth smiled a horrifying smile. "Well, of course the little one can come along! I expect he's excited to be out and about, aren't you son?" He ruffled the 'kids' hair, nearly dislodging the scalp in the process.

Cuthbert looked at Dreth suspiciously for a moment. "Well, okay then." He straightened Sprat's hairline and smiled down at his child. "See? Mr. Dreth is a good monster."

"This is all very touching, but are we going to get moving or not?" Redthorne spoke from where he was waiting in the doorway.

"Where are we going anyway?" asked Percy, struggling with the bag.

"I believe The Dark is the only real option available," said Dreth. He closed the door to the room that had been his for the last unknown amount of centuries, and looked up. "This way," he said. "Cuthbert, in front please."

With the zombie taking point they set off.

~ \* ~

The door was stone. Ancient stone, with dark markings engraved upon it that twisted in unnatural shapes the eye couldn't quite follow. Before it Fallacy the Fair stood bound between two stakes embedded into the ground. Her arms and legs were stretched into a star shape, muscles pulled taut. Her heaving bosom

glistened with sweat, despite the chill of the chamber. She couldn't remember how she had ended up in her current position. The last thing she could recall was being in her house with her mother, and a shadow falling over them.

She heard footsteps behind her, and a low voice spoke. "The Door must be opened. He will walk the earth once more, and feed upon the souls who dwell upon it."

Fallacy's eyes widened, and she struggled against the bonds as the cold bite of metal entered her back. She screamed in agony as the blade moved down, slicing open her skin. A pause, and then something entered her body through the gash and groped around inside her. The light began to fade as she felt a tearing sensation.

The last thing she saw before succumbing to the darkness were her own lungs flung over her shoulders, still heaving as she gasped desperately for air...

~ \* ~

"Behold. The Dark." Mud gestured at the tunnel entrance that led down into an inky blackness. "A place of menace, gloom and Evil. No one who has ventured into it has returned to tell their tale. Some say it's a bastion for lost souls. Others say the Darkest Lords of Hell were imprisoned here when the Light caught them, where they catch you and feast upon your spirit for eternity. I believe it's Nothingness. A place in the universe that remained unfilled by the Creator when he was bringing All into being."

The group looked doubtfully at the blackness.

"A good place to throw the garbage though," said Percy brightly.

"So, how many people have been lost down there then?" asked Redthorne.

The White Troll looked uncomfortable for a moment. "Er. Well. I think a half-elf escaped down here once. A thief if I recall correctly."

Dreth sighed. "So 'No One who has ventured into it' consists of one thief, probably running away from Kevin in a feeding frenzy?"

Mud sniffed. "We trolls aren't renowned for keeping records you know. Anyway, you asked me to show you the way, there you are. Have a good time." He turned away and marched off back towards the Troll Caverns in a huff.

"I can cast a light spell," said Redthorne, once he had gone.

"No need," said Dreth. He held out a hand and looked at Percy, who dug around in the sack and pulled forth a couple of torches.

"A light..." Percy looked around as column of fire roared up from the floor next to him. "Oh, that's handy," he said, He plunged the torches into it, igniting them just as the flames died down to reveal a figure.

"A demon!" said Redthorne, stepping backwards and raising his hands.

"Oh, it's only an imp. What do you want short stuff?" asked Cuthbert.

"I'm here to stop you." The imp, a knee high red creature with a traditional demonic tail, stood self-importantly in their path. The circle of fire guttered out around him.

"Ha! Even zombies can take imps out!" Percy stepped forward.

"Wait! I command you!" The imp held out a hand.

"What's the holdup here?" asked Dreth. "What do you want imp?"

"Are you Dreth?" asked the small devil.

"What's it to you?"

"I'm here on behalf of the Management. You are hereby ordered to desist from your unauthorized movements and return to your posts. Failure to do so will have..." the imp paused for dramatic effect. "Consequences."

Cuthbert looked at Percy. "Isn't that a sort of board game?" he asked.

### **The Dark**

"You've heard my warning," the imp crossed its arms and stared at them haughtily. "I await your response minions."

"I'll minion you, you little..." Cuthbert stepped forward, but Dreth put a hand on his shoulder and restrained him.

"Come now Cuthbert; let's not get overly excited," Dreth said in a slow voice. He turned to the imp. "May we discuss this for a few moments in private please sir?"

The little devil sniffed imperiously. "I suppose I can wait for a few minutes. Hurry up then."

"Of course," Dreth replied. Signaling Redthorne to follow, and pulling Cuthbert along with him, he moved a little way down the corridor. Percy and Sprat stayed with the imp.

"What are you doing?" hissed Cuthbert. "I can take that little blabbermouth!"

"I'm aware of that", soothed Dreth. "However, here's a chance to gain some information about our mysterious DM person, as well as get us a canary."

Cuthbert thought about it for a moment. "Well, okay, but I get to eat the canary."

Dreth rolled his eyes. He turned to Redthorne. Pulling the wizard and zombie close in a huddle, he spoke in a low voice. "Let's see what you can do then wizard. Here's the plan..."

~ \* ~

"All I'm saying is that we zombies have been down-trodden long enough. It's about time we were recognized for the vital work we do..."

The imp was tapping his foot as Percy droned on at him when the others returned. He glared at Percy until the zombie shut up, and then turned to Dreth. "Well? What's your response? I can't hang about here all day you know!"

Dreth stepped forward. "Well, it's like this you see... NOW!!!"

The imp squealed as the guardian leapt at him and pinned him to the floor as the wizard raised his hands and uttered a short spell, the words of Power booming around the corridor. A few moments later there was a brief flash of light around the imp, and the creature screamed.

Redthorne nodded at Dreth, who stood up, dusting his hands. The imp bawled a stream of obscenities, but remained still, frozen in place by the wizard's spell.

"Now we'll see who's in charge," he said with satisfaction. "My wizard friend here has cast a spell on you. You won't be able to move or teleport until he lifts it. So it's in your best interests to co-operate. We'll start with an easy one: Who do you work for?"

"Not saying! Let me go! You'll be sorry when He hears about this!" The imp farted. A protest that sent the wizard gagging for air, but had no effect on the others.

Dreth delivered a vicious kick to the imp's face, imploding several teeth. "Who is He? Tell us!"

"Owowowowowow! You'll pay for that I swear!"

Percy squatted down next to the figure and poked the Halfling's foot into its eye. "Told you not to mess with us zombies didn't I? Look where you are now." He shook his head sadly.

"You zombies are getting above your station! When I get back I'm going to ask for a purge, get a new lot in and aaaaahhhahahahahhh!"

"That's enough Percy, I want to extract the fingernails *before* we break his fingers." Dreth stepped up and pulled the undead away.

"Oh, you're in so much trouble," groaned the imp.

"You know," Dreth looked down at the red figure, "I've heard that you imps are very proud of your tails. You certainly have a long and sleek one. It would be a pity if you were to have an 'accident,' and it was somehow cut slowly away with my sword."

"Oh no. No, you wouldn't! Do you know how many centuries it took me to grow that?"

Dreth reached for his blade. "Of course, all you have to do is give us a little information." He looked at the imp, who tried to return his gaze before finding that Dreth was remarkably good at it and giving up.

"Oh very well. But you have to promise to let me go when I tell you what you want to know."

"Of course," said Dreth smoothly.

"Fine. The Management oversees the dungeon. Servant imps and other minions collect the treasure left behind by adventurers, the stuff that isn't kept by the guardians of course."

"And who is the Management?"

"*I don't know!!* They just appear as shadowy figures to me! Look, I'm just an imp okay? Not exactly high up in the hierarchy."

Dreth regarded him for a moment and then sighed. "Okay then."

"You don't believe him surely?" asked Redthorne. "He *is* a devil, albeit a minor one, the species is not renowned for telling the truth."

Dreth stood up. "The problem is, he'll just lie about everything, and how are we to know what's real and what isn't?"

"So, you'll let me go now?" asked the imp.

Dreth nodded at Cuthbert, who came forward with a long coil of thin rope retrieved from Dreth's bag. The zombie started to tie it around the imp's neck, cutting off a piece to secure his arms and tail behind his back.

"Hey! What's going on? You said you would release me!" the imp complained as Cuthbert rolled him around on the floor.

"Yes, I lied," responded Dreth. "Is he secure Cuthbert?"

The zombie tested the bonds. "He won't get out easily."

Dreth spoke to the imp again. "Now, my good friend the wizard is going to remove the paralysis. You still won't be able to teleport, so don't try anything funny."

"And here is me planning to nip off for a quick drink down the bar," the imp said dryly. Sprat poked him in the eye, and the little demon hissed at him.

Redthorne moved his hands about above the creature, and the imps legs began to waggle furiously.

"What's your name imp?" asked Dreth.

"Ichabod."

"Well Ichabod," Dreth picked the imp up with one hand as he spoke. "We just need one more thing from you."

"What's that?"

"We require a scout. Be a good fellow and see if anything is waiting for us down there will you?" So saying, Dreth threw the screaming imp down the tunnel and into The Dark. As soon as he entered the gloomy portal he disappeared from view, and his cries were abruptly cut off.

"Oooh, that's not a good sign," said Cuthbert.

They waited. After a moment the rope moved and a minute later started to pull away. "I feel like I'm fishing. I used to like fishing when I was alive." Cuthbert frowned as he let the line slip through his hands. "At least, I think so."

Dreth waited for another minute, watching as the rope slowly moved into the tunnel. "Well, whatever's in there it doesn't seem to be waiting at the entrance. Let's go." He pushed Percy forward and they followed him down.

"I can't see anything!" Percy.

"What happened to the torches? Are they still on?" Dreth squinted in the absolute blackness that had enveloped them.

"Let's see." A pause. "Arg! Yes, burning away." Percy again.

"Where are you Sprat? Don't wander off."

"I'm here pa."

"It seems this area nullifies light," came Redthornes' voice. "Let me try a spell." There was a moment of incantation followed by nothing. "Evidently it suppresses magical illumination as well."

"The imp's stopped moving." Cuthbert's voice came from just ahead of Dreth.

"Give the rope a tug," said Dreth.

There was a distant yell. "Still alive then. Go on. Percy, lead the way."

"Don't see why it has to be me up front all the time," grumbled Percy. "Let's send the kid first."

"Hey! That's my son you're talking about!"

"It's not your real son. You just put him together from spare parts. He has one of my old hands even. You never did it with anyone."

"Ha! Shows how much you know," Cuthbert's voice oozed smugness as they felt their way along a narrow passage.

"You never!"

"Did so! Remember Emmy?"

"Her??? Didn't that fighter bash her skull in?"

"Yes, thank you for reminding me about that. Anyway, we did 'the dance' in the lower tomb."

"Are they talking about what I think they're talking about?" asked Redthorne of Dreth.

"Who knows?" said Dreth. "However, I don't recommend trying to find out."

"The social life of zombies seems to be more complex than I realized," mulled the wizard. "Not that I'd thought about the subject much. At all in fact."

Percy and Cuthbert were still talking, their voices echoing through the dark corridor.

"That bitch! She told me she was frigid!"

"What can I say, some zombies..." Cuthbert was cut off from a voice ahead.

"Finally you get here."

"Is that you Ichabod?" asked Percy, bumping into Cuthbert, who had stopped abruptly.

"No, I'm the tooth fairy with a back-payment."



"What are you waiting for imp?" Dreth asked.

"Do they give back payment?"

"I banged my head on something on the wall. I thought I would wait until you kind gentlemen came along to investigate, as my hands are currently tied behind my back for some reason."

"There are some torches here, quite a few of them," Percy's voice came from ahead, near the imp. "Oh, and some tinder boxes."

"Why would there be torches here? Ours still don't work," Redthorne's voice came from one side.

"Try and light one Percy," said Dreth, a suspicion growing.

There were noises as Percy fumbled with the tinder box. A moment later a torch flared up. "Hey! I can see again!" he said.

They looked around, to find themselves in a standard looking dungeon corridor made from dark gray stone blocks. It stretched away into the distance in front of them.

Dreth frowned as he doused his old light. "Why do these torches work and ours don't?" he asked.

"Obviously some sort of special enchantment," replied the wizard.

"Hmmm, and why are they here? Why not at the entrance?" Dreth took one and examined it as Percy lit several others and handed them round. The torch seemed normal.

"Definitely some sort of magical emanation," said Redthorne.

"Give one to the imp," Dreth told Percy. "Imp, get going. You're still on scout duty."

"And how am I supposed to hold it with my hands tied genius?"

"Good point. Cuthbert, untie his tail, he can use that."

They waited as the zombie released the imp's extremity, and Percy handed him a light. The imp coiled his tail around the torch.

"Right then, off you go," said Dreth, gesturing ahead.

Ichabod gave him a nasty look, but staggered off down the tunnel without saying anything more.

Dreth looked on as the imp disappeared into the dark, until only his torch could be seen bobbing along like a Will-o-wisp.

"Right, after him then."

They started walking towards the light.

~ \* ~

Ichabod muttered to himself under his breath as he stumbled down the corridor. "Stupid denizens, just wait

until I get back, I'm going to file such a complaint." He stopped. The tunnel split into two. There was straight on, and now a new corridor off to the right. He looked down each one. Both disappeared into the gloom. Shrugging, he turned right and moved along the new way, which was remarkably similar to the old one except it wound about more.

He turned another corner and carried on into a widening space until a hiss next to his ear brought him up short.

"What have we here then? An imp!" The voice was hard as diamonds.

He gulped. "I will have you know I am a representative of the Dungeon management," he said. "If you..."

"**Them!!**" said the voice. There were more hisses. They sounded like snakes. Ichabod had always liked snakes, though he was willing to reverse his position. "*They* are the ones who imprisoned me here! Well, nice of them to send me a snack!"

Ichabod dropped the torch and turned to run, but several sharp stabbing pains in his back caused him to stumble.

"My pets like you it seems," the voice said, as the imp felt chunks of his flesh being torn from his body. He twisted to confront his attacker. No sooner than he did so he realized his mistake. He tried to raise his hands, but they were still bound behind his back. There was a feeling of heaviness as his eyeballs crusted over.

He managed one brief scream before it all went black...

~ \* ~

"He's stopped," said Cuthbert.

"There is a junction ahead, goes off to the right," said Percy. "Our imp went that way. Shall we follow?"

"Give it a moment," said Dreth.

"Hey! Did you hear that? Sounded like a scream!"

"Pull him back!" ordered Dreth.

Cuthbert tugged on the rope and grunted. "Must be stuck, oh wait, here it comes." He pulled for a short while. "Seems to be resisting," he said. "Either that or he has gained..."

The zombie stopped speaking as the object on the end of the rope slid into view. It was a perfectly formed stone statue of Ichabod.

"Douse the lights! **Quickly!**" shouted Dreth.

They did so, just as something turned the corner. Dreth thought he saw a snake emerge into the corridor just as the torches were extinguished. He pushed Redthorne behind him, not because he cared for the wizard, but he had gone to a lot of trouble to get the man alive, and he didn't want to lose him at the first hurdle.

There was a hissing sound from ahead and Percy shouted. "Hey! Something bit me! Get off!"

There were sounds of a brief altercation, and another voice, a female one, screamed briefly.

"Hold!" shouted Dreth. "Who goes there?"

"Who dares trespass on my domain?" came the new voice.

"I'm Dreth. Guardian of the Undead Way, and who may you be?" He had his suspicions.

"Oh, a guardian. Well, that's alright then. Why don't you light the torches and we can all have a nice little chat."

"I don't think so," replied Dreth. "Percy! Don't even think about it!"

"Undead eh? No wonder my pet's poison didn't have any effect."

"You're a Medusa aren't you?" said Cuthbert, putting the clues together. "I heard there was one of your kind in the dungeon."

There was a low laugh. "Well worked out my undead friend. Still, it won't do you any good. You cannot escape The Dark without my help, you're prisoners here, just as I am, and all I need to do is get a light. Someone will peek in the end, they always do."

"I may have something to say about that," Dreth fingered his sword. "Your type can be killed too."

The laugh again. "But then you would be trapped here for ever! I tell you what, if you give me a couple of your party, I'll tell you how to get out. How is that for a deal? One guardian to another."

Dreth stared into the dark. Lose two of his party already? He'd only just started. One of the zombies he could lose, maybe the kid, but the others? It was too early, there was bound to be harder challenges ahead. He felt his blade again. Medusa were killable, but how many were there here? And was she lying about the way out?

He snarled as a snake slithered over his foot.

~ \* ~

Smoke curled atmospherically around the edges of the door, swirling mysteriously along the gray floor before dissipating. The stone portal opened slowly with a dull grating noise, as if reluctant to spill forth its contents. There was a short pause, and then a heavy footstep. Another and then another, until a large figure finally emerged. It looked at the remains of Fallacy for a moment, her exposed lungs steaming in the chill of the room.

With a low rumble the gaze turned to the hooded figure standing behind the slumped body. The robed shape stood with knife in one hand, the blood dripping down the serrated edges of the blade into a dark pool on the floor.

"Messy," it said.

"*I have summoned you!*" cried the hooded man, holding his hands up in dramatic fashion.

"I know."

"You are mine! To use as I see fit, until I dismiss you! By the power of..."

"I know all of this. You do it every time."

The robed figure lowered his hands uncertainly. "I rather enjoy it, truth be told."

"Who do you want me to kill?"

"By what means do you know you will be required to remove life?" asked the summoner, who was finding it hard not to speak dramatically.

"I have never been summoned for anything else. It's always the same task."

"Yes, well." The man grimaced in annoyance inside his hood. "I do indeed have a task for you. Heed my words now, and follow my bidding..."

The newly summoned being leaned forward to hear its masters' commands...

~ \* ~

"I don't think we're really ready for statue-hood yet," said Dreth.

"So you reject my generous offer! You will regret..." the Medusa started.

"Hold on, hold on here!" Percy's voice interrupted her monologue. "Such a bad temper Ms. Medusa. What could be the problem I wonder? Bad breath? Unfortunate wind? No, I know! Down here alone, with no companions and unable to use a mirror? You must be feeling a mess! I bet you would kill... er, cheer loudly for a good makeover. Isn't that right?" The zombie paused a moment, to a surprised silence. "Come now. No need to be shy. We're all friends here, dungeon denizens together and all that. You can share. How long was it since you had a good facial?"

"Well..." the Medusa began. "I don't know..."

Dreth heard Percy step forward. "Look, I used to be in the beauty business when I was alive. Good at it too I was."

"Really?" asked the Medusa.

"Really?" whispered Dreth to Cuthbert.

"Best Salon this side of the Dragon's Teeth," said Percy's voice proudly. "Now, I can't see you, not and remain able to shake my booty of course, but perhaps if I could just touch?"

"I don't know," the snake headed woman said uncertainly.

"Look, what's your name?" Percy was on a roll now. Dreth was quite impressed.

"Agnes. Agnes Lookstun."

"What a lovely name. My mother was called Agnes," said the zombie, working the charm for all it was worth. "Now, Agnes, let's just have a feel...Ow!"

"Sorry! My hair is very protective. Go on, try again. They won't bite this time."

Dreth heard Percy muttering to himself as he felt the Medusa's features. "Huh! Dry as a bone! Flaky skin, needs moisturizer for sure, oh, for want of a good set of tweezers! Now the hands. Oh my lord, when was the

last time you had a manicure? "

"Well, you know..."

"Don't you worry. I'll have you feeling like a million gold pieces in no time. Do you have somewhere to work? It's going to be tricky with no light, but you're in the hands of an expert..."

~ \* ~

Dreth sat back, resting on a statue in lieu of a chair, some sort of Paladin by the feel of it, whilst Agnes lay back with dungeon moss draped over her face. It was still pitch black. Percy was in a nearby room mixing various muds and alga together, mumbling about 'split ends' under his breath. Cuthbert and Sprat scuttled about finding the ingredients he specified, whilst Redthorne rested against a wall, a blanket of snakes wrapped around his body for warmth.

"Why do you go around turning people to stone anyway? What's the point?"

"It's how my species feed. We extract the life energies from the body. The turning to stone part is just a side effect really."

"You said you're trapped here? We just walked in, can't you walk out?"

"Ha! If only I could! You think I would be here in this dank pit? I was caught decades ago by a team of goody goody elves. I hate elves. They trapped me with an enhanced sleep spell. Next thing I knew I was in here." The Medusa paused as Percy dipped her hands into some sort of liquid in small bowls.

"Don't ask what I made this out of," the zombie said before scurry off, tripping over Sprat as he did so.

"So you're restrained in some way?" continued Dreth.

"The area beyond the torches is like a wall to me. I can't go through it. You won't be able to either for most of it. Still, I know one way out that you should be able to take. The Dark is a little weaker in one section. Still too strong for me, but I think others could push through."

"So you won't be able to join us then. Pity, we could use your talents."

"Ha! I hope you get through! This damned Dungeon is nothing more than hell for me. I had hatchlings and a statue of a husband back home. I've lost hope in ever seeing them again. I hope they still keep Ronald polished." She sighed.

"I'm sorry. If we can, we'll find a way to get you out."

"I've never met someone trying to escape before," said Agnes as Percy came back and rubbed some sort of oil onto her hair, which hissed in pleasure. "Well, not a prisoner like me anyway. A few adventurers of course, I don't get many come this way. I end up feeding on bugs and rodents mostly." She paused in thought. "Good job I don't have a big appetite."

"There," said Percy wiping his hands on his front. "Leave that on for an hour and you will feel like a new monster."

"Thank-you zombie," said Agnes.

Percy blushed, or would have done if he had any blood circulation. "Oh, you know. We all have our talents."

~ \* ~

Dreth turned to the Medusa, or at least where he thought she was standing. They were in another stone corridor, though the lights were still doused of course. Agnes has guided them along a maze of dark passages, leading them by touch and sound, until they had reached a place she said was the start of the way out. "You sure you can't get through?" he said. "It would be great to have you along. We could manage some sort of bag or something..."

"It's okay. Don't worry. I'll be fine knowing you are doing this. And your zombie's makeover feels wonderful too. My hair has never been so slinky!"

"My pleasure," said Percy. "I've left the cream in your parlor, on top of the stone dwarf. Don't forget to use it once a day without fail."

"I will. Now. Here, push hard, I'm sure you'll be able to get through."

The Medusa guided them on. Soon Dreth felt a resistance, as if walking against a strong wind. He forced his way onwards.

"Daddy! Help!" came the voice of Sprat. "It's too strong."

"Hang on to me son," replied Cuthbert from just behind Dreth, who was pushing hard against the invisible barrier.

"I can't go any further!" Agnes's voice called from behind. "Good luck! I hope to see you again!"

"Please let us know you're approaching first!" shouted Percy.

The group struggled onwards, driving forward through the shield and out of The Dark...

~ \* ~

"Are we there yet?" asked Sprat.

"If I knew where we were going I might be able to give you an answer," said Cuthbert, looking meaningfully at Dreth.

They were wandering around in empty gray stone passageways, as they had been doing since they had left the Dark. They had stopped once to allow Redthorne to rest, but had spent the rest of the time moving steadily along, their echoing footsteps the only sound in the silence. It felt like they were walking along the same stretch of corridor over and over again. If it wasn't for the layer of dust on the floor, Dreth would have believed it some kind of magical trap.

"Are you sure this isn't that maze you mentioned?" asked Redthorne.

Dreth sighed in annoyance. "I told you a hundred times already, how should I know?"

"Well, it's your dungeon."

"It isn't *my* dungeon. If it was my dungeon I would know my way around wouldn't I? I'd be sitting in some

sort of control room stroking a white cat and laughing manically whilst watching everyone kill each other."

Before the wizard could reply Cuthbert pointed. "I can see something! Light! Light at the end of the tunnel!"

"Probably a dragon knowing my luck," muttered Dreth, but hurried forward anyway, Redthorne close behind.

The pale glow grew as they moved closer, to reveal a simple doorway. After shoving the zombies through first, Dreth walked after them cautiously.

The small chamber was lit by orbs of blue fire set into the walls. Their glow cast a strange tint over the area, making it look like the whole place was underwater. At the far end of the room a figure rested upon several large cushions. It looked a little like a bronze statue, sitting cross-legged. Eight arms waved about over an enormously fat belly. The head was overly large, with lots of small horns protruding from the top like strange fat hair. The mouth was wide and filled with sharp white teeth, while slitted green eyes observed their approach.

"What is this place?" asked Percy to the world in general.

"Welcome to my lair," said the creature. "I am the Oracle Farnsworth the Fair."

"Ooh! I have heard about this chap!" said Cuthbert, jumping up and down and clapping his hands. "You can ask him any question and he has to answer it. Truthfully too mind you."

"I'm bound to answer a question, just one," said the Oracle, "Just don't make it too long."

"Oh, an Oracle. Seems a bit of a strange place to put one of them," Dreth mused. "Still, why not?" He shrugged and stepped forward. "Names' Dreth. I'm a guardian in the dungeon. Nice to meet you Oracle."

"I know who you are, may your journey take you far," replied Farnsworth.

"This isn't my question to you, so don't answer it if you don't want to, but perhaps you would like to join us on our little quest? We could always use someone good with information."

The Oracle's eyes seemed to gleam for a moment, but then it answered. "Your offer is kind but I fear, until my time is done, I am bound here."

Percy was covering his ears. "Stop speaking like that! It's very annoying! Or I will push my fingers inside your eye sockets and waggle them about!"

"Now now," said Dreth calmly to the zombie. He turned to the oracle. "My friend is a little excitable. Still, he does have a valid point."

"Oh don't be a bunch of philistines," the oracle said. "Everyone knows Oracles speak in rhymes."

"That does it. Finger waggling time." Percy stepped forward but Dreth pulled him back.

"We can ask one question each or just one for the group?" Dreth asked, holding onto the struggling undead. "Again, this isn't our question for the Oracle. Just a query."

"One question for the group, though nothing about pea-soup."

"What?" Asked Cuthbert. "*Pea soup*? Is that the best you could do? Couldn't think of anything to go with

group eh?"

"It's not easy to rhyme," answered the oracle wiggling its eyebrows, "all the time."

Redthorne stepped forward. "In that case," he said. "The question is..."

"Oh no! Grab him! **Stop him speaking!**" Dreth shouted, and the three zombies jumped the wizard, holding him down and covering his mouth.

"Mmffff," said Redthorne, flailing about. The undead were too strong though, and he soon slumped back in defeat.

"I ask the questions here," said Dreth, glaring at him.

"Hey, why should you get to ask the question? I would rather like to know if there is any way I can return to life," Cuthbert complained, standing up as Percy straddled the mage.

"I thought you weren't very good at being alive?" asked Dreth.

"Doesn't mean I wouldn't like another chance though."

"Well, if I we can find the wizard to undo my curse, maybe we can ask him to help you too," said Dreth.

"Oh, that's going to be likely! And what if your wizard is dead? He could be. It's been a long time."

"There's bound to be someone who can help you, zombies are all over the place. My situation is special."

"Hmph, self self self." Cuthbert folded his arms and put on a sulky expression.

Dreth, ignoring the muffled complaints of Redthorne as Sprat played with his hat, turned back to the Oracle and regarded him thoughtfully. "Now, Oracles are a perverse lot, so I'm sure you will take any chance to twist my answer, or take the meaning in the wrong way. So, let me think a moment."

"Come on," Cuthbert pleaded. "If you think hard enough you could ask some sort of question about both of us."

"Forget it," Dreth said, making a slicing gesture with his hand. "That may produce some ambiguity. These Oracles are tricky creatures you know. They twist your answers around and make them all riddle-like. I hate riddles."

"Look, all I'm saying is you could as a question like, oh, I don't know. Mmmm..." Cuthbert wrinkled his face in thought, which didn't produce the most picturesque effect. "Okay, we could ask something like..."

"**No! Don't!**" Dreth shouted, waving his hands about as he realized what the zombie was about to do.

"...how can we turn from undead back to living creatures?" Cuthbert looked up as Dreth slapped his hand to his head. "What? Oh."

The Oracles eyes gleamed bright orange for a second, and then it spoke in a somber voice that echoed around the room:

*"Dreth must be strong willed,*



*The first step - his betrayer,*

*Must be found and killed.*

*Cuthbert, for life to win,*

*Must redeem himself,*

*Be absolved of his sin.*

*Percy is an easy case,*

*Just find the one,*

*Who knows his face.*

*For Sprat, little hope for joy,*

*He needs to find a soul,*

*To become a real boy."*

The squat figure smiled evilly and closed its eyes, whereupon a shimmer ran over it, and it stilled, turning into a dull bronze statue.

"Great, now look what you did!" Dreth said, gesturing at the inert form.

Cuthbert looked smug. "Heh, serves you right for being selfish. Anyway, you had your answer didn't you?"

"*Find my betrayer?! Who the hell is that? I don't remember any betrayer!*" Dreth heaved a deep breath, from habit rather than need. "Count-to-ten, count-to-ten," he muttered to himself.

There were noises as Redthorne began thrashing around again.

"Let him up, the damage is done now," said Dreth. Percy stood up, freeing the wizard, who climbed to his feet and gave him a dangerous glare.

"What's a 'soul' daddy?" asked Sprat, looking up at Cuthbert with large, mismatched eyes.

"Er," said Cuthbert. "It's a kind of animal. Yes, an animal, that's it. Very rare."

"Oh," Sprat wandered off as Cuthbert looked at Percy and shrugged.

"Come on. Let's move," scowled Dreth.

"Which way?" asked Percy, pointing to the five exits, each of which lead off into a dark tunnel.

Dreth looked from one to the other. The all looked about the same. "We'll let Cuthbert decide. After all, he's taking point."

The zombie scowled and chose an exit at random. "This one."

"Fine. Lead on," said Dreth.

"I will," Cuthbert replied, and stamped off down the corridor in a huff. Dreth stalked after him.

Percy looked at the mage. "Kind of chilly all of a sudden isn't it?"

"If you ever sit on me again zombie, I'll turn your head inside out." Redthorne stormed off after the other two.

Percy looked down at Sprat. "How about you?"

"I like you Uncle Percy."

"You're a good kid Sprat. Remind me to give you the next liver I get."

"Ooh! Thank you Uncle!"

"Let's go shall we?"

Taking the smaller undead's hand, Percy set off after the rest of the party, Sprat skipping alongside.

~ \* ~

Agnes hummed to herself as she put away the cream. She had only used it once since they had left, but her skin felt so much better already. Maybe she hadn't eaten, but meeting Dreth and his crew had lifted her spirits.

Then she heard it. An echo. Someone was coming. This must be her lucky week! Food!

She moved through the darkness towards the sound of approaching footsteps. Her snakes hissed in anticipation. She didn't need to see where she was going, over the years she had become familiar with every little nook and cranny of her domain. Her prison.

That was unusual. The intruder hadn't stopped to light the torches. Ah well, sometimes they missed them.

The tread grew louder, and she sent some of her pets off around the corner to greet the guest.

The footsteps didn't pause, and there were some distressing squishing sounds. Not promising. Agnes backed up and grabbed her torch, lighting it just as the large figure came into view.

"Gaze upon death..." she started, before fully comprehending her visitor. "Oh shit."

Large cold fingers grabbed her neck and lifted her like a toy into the air. Her hair bit at the intruder angrily, but were totally ignored.

"Where are they?" Red eyes glowed.

"Ackk," responded the Medusa, gesturing wildly at her throat.

The hand released her and she fell to the floor coughing.

"Where are they?" the deep voice could best be described as 'gravelly'. "Tell me and live."

"Live? This is life is it?" Agnes spat, her anger rising, even in her terror. "Do your worst. I'm cheering for

them! Finally one of us is doing something!" She waved her fist.

The intruder looked at her for a moment and then the huge hand shot out with a speed that belied its size. Agnes was grabbed by the head, the cold hard embrace crushed several of her hair-snakes, and green blood dripped down her face.

She felt herself being lifted off the ground and screamed, clawing futilely at the solid grip that held her in the air. The creature squeezed. She could hear a cracking sound as her skull split under the pressure, pieces of bone penetrated her brain matter. Her eyes were slowly forced out of her head, blood and brain tissue oozing from the sockets and out of her nose.

As the Medusa breathed her last, a strange sound emanated from her mouth. In her final seconds alive, she laughed. Agnes welcomed release.

~ \* ~

The dark walls of the entrance dripped with slime, echoing through the passage as it hit the rough stone floor. A flickering torch dimly illuminated the scene, casting eerie shadows that seemed to almost possess a life of their own, as if some otherworld demon was trying to cross over.

A muscular figure hunched over, his black studded leather armor creaking under the strain. He put his sword to one side as he frowned, large yellow canines dripped with saliva as he muttered under his breath. Reaching out with a large hand tipped with sharp black fingernails, he plucked a small item from the creature next to him.

He took a deep, rasping breath and spoke.

"Look, all I'm saying is: that if the square root was valid if  $x$  over  $\pi$  equals  $z$ , when  $z$  was a factor..." Harry drew various markings on the wall with the piece of chalk, trying to illustrate his point, but Herbert interrupted him.

"No no no! You're forgetting to factor in Hubert's Theorem, which postulates that the variance of  $z$  can be attributed to..."

"Wait! Did you hear that? Someone's coming!"

The two guards quickly stood up, grabbing their weapons as they did so. Herbert hastily erased evidence of their mathematical discussion, just as a small group approached from down the main corridor.

The two growled and put on unfriendly expressions as the party stopped in front of them. The lead figure seemed to be a zombie.

"What you want?" grunted Harry.

The undead creature looked back over his shoulder. "Boss! There are a couple of Orcs here blocking the way. Do you want to speak to them?"

One of the figures stepped forward, pushing his way to the front. He seemed to be a tall thin human, though a very pale one, wearing a long dark robe with a sword strapped to his side.

"Orcs. You're a bit far in aren't you? I thought Orcs were strictly low level stuff."

"We Black Tribe Orcs. Greater Orcs us," Herbert said, slapping his armored chest. "What you want?"

"I'm Dreth, Guardian of the Undead way. I wish to enter."

"No one pass. We guards," responded Harry.

"Yes yes, I'm sure you have your orders and all that, but we would just like to speak to your leader, we won't be a bother," said Dreth, frowning slightly.

"You not pass. This Black Orc territ.. terri... land," Harry said, hefting his large and wicked looking mace meaningfully.

"Look, we are workers of the dungeon ourselves, all we wish to do is speak to your King."

"Me don't know..." Herbert seemed to be wavering.

Harry had no such qualms. "You not pass. King says no one pass alive."

"Ah, well, you should let us through then, because we aren't alive, are we now?" Dreth raised a thin eyebrow.

Harry paused for a moment as he evaluated this loophole.

"What about him? He look alive," said the Herbert, pointing his sword at Redthorne.

"Well, he does, that's true. But er, he's a zombie as well, just fresher than most, that's all."

Harry waved his mace again. "Me guard! You not pass. Go away, or me beat you urg..."

He was cut off as the tall being plucked the helmet off Harry with one hand and grabbed his head with the other, brutally slamming it into the stone wall behind. Sparks bounced around in front of Harry's eyes as the sharp pain seemed to reverberate inside his skull.

He roared and raised his mace, but the creature stepped inside his swing and brought a bony knee up between his legs, crushing the genitals with a powerful blow. Agony lanced through the Orc, and he screamed as blood dripped down his thigh.

He tried to back away, but the guardian stepped closer and head-butted his nose, causing flashes of light to streak across his vision. Before he could do anything else foul tasting fingers grasped his mouth, upper and lower, pulling his jaw open with a strength that Harry, for all of his mighty thews, could not match. He yanked at the undead's skinny arms in a vain attempt to free himself as bones begin to splinter. There was a grinding noise as the attacker twisted and wrenched the lower portion of his face off. Blood and mucus ran down Harry's throat, and he spluttered and gargled, speckling Dreth with red.

The Orcs' knees began to buckle as the beast in human form wrapped its arms around his neck.

"I don't deal with underlings." The dry words were whispered into his ears, just before Dreth twisted violently, and everything went black...

~ \* ~

"Black Orc down! Black Orc down!" shouted Percy, doing a little jig and waving his arms about.

Dreth glared at the remaining guard, hissing in annoyance. "Now. Are you going to let us in to see your leader, or do I have to *really* get angry?"

"Y...y...y... this way sir," stammered Herbert.

"Finally, some co-operation." Dreth frowned as the guard began to turn away. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"W...w...what?" asked the Orc.

Dreth pointed to his side, in which Herbert's sword was embedded.

"Oh, s...sorry sir! How did that get there? I will have it out in a just moment." The guard pulled at the weapon, which slid out with a dull pop. "There, right as rain."

"What happened to 'Me Grug, you bad'?" asked Cuthbert, scooping the eyeballs out of the dead Orc and handing one to Percy, who popped it into his mouth.

"What? Oh, yes, that. Well, we have to act the part," said Herbert.

"I suggest it may be worth rethinking your strategy," said Dreth.

Herbert looked at the body of his friend, whose skin was being peeled back by Sprat. "You could have a point there."

~ \* ~

A heavy tread engaged a hidden mechanism, which in turn activated certain waiting magics.

For the second time in a day the Oracle found himself awakened from stasis. He hissed in annoyance. True, every question he answered brought him closer to release, but it also used up some of his life energy. The only satisfaction he had was answering the questions posed as literally as possible. Petty, he knew, but you had to take your pleasures where you could.

Then the large figure entered the Oracles' chamber, and his eyes opened wide. Still, he uttered his usual opening line. "Welcome to my lair, I am the Oracle Farnsworth the Fair..."

The huge creature strode over to him and leaned down, red eyes close to his. "Where did they go?" It said.

"Your question is obscure, I..**Ark!**"

A giant hand had wrapped itself around his neck and squeezed, saving him the work of figuring out what rhymed with 'obscure'.

"Answer me."

The Oracle gulped, or tried to. The hand was tight. "They went that way." He croaked, pointing at an exit with all of his arms.

"Sensible." The hand opened, and the Oracle gasped for breath as the brute strode off in the direction indicated.

"Bully," he choked, but he waited until it was out of hearing first.

~ \* ~

Dreth and co. followed the guard through a maze of caverns, passing through several heavily barricaded areas along the way. Orc warriors peered over the stone walls, weapons by their sides.

"Expecting trouble?" asked Dreth.

"Always," replied Herbert.

Past the barricades they wandered, into Orc territory proper. Large caverns, water dripping from high ceilings, were separated by skins of various creatures hanging from crude wooden frames. Living areas, where Orcs of all sizes and dispositions walked, sat or worked. Males, females and younglings alike stopped and stared as they past.

Redthorne wrinkled his nose. "Urg. They could use some sanitation."

"Oh hush," Dreth admonished. "Human settlements aren't exactly sparkling clean."

"I can't smell anything," said Percy.

"I told you that you needed a new nose the other week," said Cuthbert.

Eventually they turned into a more private area, guarded by imposing looking warriors dressed in dark chain mail vests and wielding large swords. Herbert had to negotiate several times before being allowed to pass. They did so though, and not long after entered a medium sized cavern, lit with bright torches.

In this space Orcs mingled in small groups around the walls, talking with each other in low grunts. The center of the cavern was left clear, an obvious walkway leading up to a large throne carved from dark stone.

Sat on this throne an impressive looking Orc sprawled. Black armor was strapped about him, with various tokens obviously taken from his victims hung at strategic points on his body. An enormous two handed sword leaned unsheathed against his seat, and Dreth thought he could see blood glinting darkly on the blade.

The Orc King was deep in discussion with another, much smaller, Orc whom Dreth thought may be a Shaman of some kind. The group stopped a respectful distance away and waited to be noticed.

Finally the shaman-Orc bowed and backed away.

The King looked up. "What have we here then?" he rumbled.

Herbert stepped forward. Dreth couldn't help noticing he was shaking slightly. "King, I am Herbert, a lowly guard from the outer tunnels. These creatures requested an audience with your loathfullness." He jerked a thumb.

"Did they now?" The large Orc slumped back into his chair and gestured. "Who is the leader amongst you? Why do you wish to speak with King Oscar of the Orcs?"

Dreth gave a shallow bow. "King, I'm Dreth, Guardian of the Undead way. My group is trying to find the way to the center of the dungeon. We would appreciate any assistance you could render."

Oscar chewed on a necklace of dried ears. "Searching for the treasure are you? How interesting." He leaned forward. "Approach."

Dreth walked slowly forward. The Orc waited until he was close, then, in a single smooth move, he grabbed his giant weapon and brought it down in a great vertical swing towards Dreth's head, narrowly missing the horizontal arc defined by the guardian's dark blade as Dreth responded in kind. As the swords swooped past one another Dreth stepped swiftly to one side, and the Orc's weapon hit the floor with a shower of sparks and a resounding clang. The deafening sound gave way to the sinister hum of Dreth's sword, the tip of which was now hovering at the king's throat.

"I'm going to assume that was some sort of Orcish test," said Dreth, keeping his sword a fraction away from the leader's throat. "I'm also going to assume I have passed." He tilted his head slightly to one side. "I have passed, haven't I?"

The King looked at him for a moment and then burst out into raucous laughter. Dreth took that for assent, and stepped back, sheathing Darkblood smoothly.

The Black Orc commander nodded and sat down again. "You will do, un-alive man."

"So, formalities over, do you have any information for us?"

Oscar made a face for a moment, and then shifted slightly as a loud rumble emanated from his rear. Several Orc spectators applauded.

"I happen to know the direction you need to go. It isn't far from here. However, in exchange for said information, you must do us a favor."

"Go on," said Dreth.

"In the next territory along are a tribe of Ogres. For reasons of them being lying scumbags, we have been at war with them for some time. Unfortunately, despite our natural superiority, they still resist."

Dreth frowned. "As good as I am, I don't think I can win a war for you."

The King made a dismissive gesture. "We don't need that. We will crush the Ogres ourselves when the time is right. Until then, they have something we want."

"And you want us to retrieve it for you?"

The Orc nodded, and smiled a yellow fanged smile.

"And what is this object?" asked Redthorne.

Oscar stuck a large finger up his nose and rooted around for a moment before answering. "That, my dear zombie, is a state secret. However, you will find it in a small metal box in the Ogre Leaders' chamber."

"So, easy to get to then," muttered Percy from behind Dreth.

Dreth considered this for a moment. "Fair enough. We can have a look anyway. Where are the Ogres?"

Oscar gestured at Herbert. "You. Show them the way, and answer their questions."

Herbert bowed.

"You are dismissed," said the King, waving one hand at them and scratching at his groin with the other.

Dreth bowed and backed away, mainly to be sure he had the king in his view whilst still in sword range, before turning and following the guard back out of the throne room.

They followed Herbert out of the hall and down through a maze of winding passageways. The Orcs in this area were all warriors, speaking in low voices, sharpening weapons or just lying on the floor. Dreth couldn't help noticing quite a few with recent looking wounds.

Eventually they arrived at a fortification along a major passageway and climbed several steps up to a narrow walkway shielded by a wall constructed of large stone blocks. They peered over the barricade, to look down a long wide tunnel littered with Orc and Ogre remains. In the distance, a good five minutes run by Dreth's estimate, a similar barricade faced them. The Enemy.

"The Ogres are down there," said Herbert unnecessarily. "We call this The Tunnel of Blood'."

"Delightful," said Dreth, examining the war zone. "I'm not sure about the direct approach though. It doesn't seem to have worked well for you."

"I could use an invisibility spell," ventured Redthorne, who had also been looking over the area.

"Do they have mages?" asked Cuthbert.

Herbert made a neutral gesture. "They have shamans, like us. Don't know how powerful they are though."

Redthorne pulled at his beard. "I should be able to overcome a few witch-doctors," he said confidently.

"There are some other ways in as well, passages generally too small for them, or us, to use. They are probably trapped though, and I heard someone say that there are... vermin that live in them. Vicious vermin," the Orc added.

Dreth ducked down as a large crossbow bolt flew up the passageway and embedded itself in the wall behind him. Percy yelped and dropped to the floor. He scuttled on all fours to crouch behind the wall, where he sat, hands on his head. Cuthbert stepped to one side and pushed Sprat behind him.

"Snipers too," Herbert added cheerfully.

"Are you sure about this Dreth?" asked Cuthbert. "There must be other ways to get to the treasure."

"Why don't we just walk into their territory and pretend to be friends?" asked Percy, from the floor.

Herbert shook his head. "No way to the Ogres except through us, at least without going miles around."

"Mmm," said Dreth. He peered over the wall again, carefully, and thought about it for a moment. "Finally he turned to Redthorne. "Wizard," he said, "get casting, I want invisibility on us all, and a shield if you can manage it..."

"Hold on, hold on!" interrupted Percy. "Are you suggesting we walk down there?" He gestured with a thumb over the wall, just as javelin sized missile flew up, missing Cuthbert by a fraction.



"Percy is right," said the other zombie from the floor. "There has to be a better way than up suicide alley there."

Dreth frowned. "What about these tunnels?" he asked of Herbert.

"Over there, too small for you lot though," replied the Orc. "Anyway, have fun, I have to get back to my post." He marched off, leaving the group to ponder the small opening near the ground.

Dreth looked down. "Split. How would you like to play a little game of Steal the Ogres' Treasure?"

Sprat, who was sat in a corner sucking a thumb,\* looked up at him. "Name's Sprat," he said.

\*One he had found on the floor.

"Spit, Spat, whatever. How would you like a lovely new, er..." Dreth cast about for something that would appeal to the young zombie. He reached into the bag that Cuthbert had dumped on the floor. "A nice shiny leg bone? Still has some meat on it! See? Lovely and rotten." He waved the limb about.

"Ok," said Sprat.

"Hey! Wait a minute there!" Cuthbert raised an arm, before realizing that could get it taken off. "That's my son..."

Dreth cut him short. "Let's let young Sprot decide what he wants to do, eh youngster?" Dreth attempted to wiggle his eyebrows playfully, only succeeding in making a face that would have normal children wetting their pants. "Do you want a bone lad? A lovely bone?"

"Oh, come on, that's just blackmail," complained Percy, "who *wouldn't* want a lovely leg bone?"

Sprat reached up and took the leg.

"Kid's decided, it's a done deal," declared Dreth.

Cuthbert shook his head and covered his eyes. Dreth knelt down and spoke slowly to the little undead. "Now, this nice man here," he gestured at Redthorne, "will cast some spells on you, okay?"

Sprat nodded, his head wobbling alarmingly.

"Excellent." Dreth went on to explain what he wanted. "And I will just hold onto this leg until you come back okay?" He stood up and nodded at Redthorne, indicating he should start his magic.

Redthorne, standing back in a protective wall niche, cast a number of quick incantations. He waved his hands in several intricate gestures and pointed at Sprat, summoning a protective shield about the small zombie. That done, he spoke several words in a strange hissing language, and cause the small zombie to fade from sight.

"Cool," came the voice of Sprat.

"Now Spot," said Dreth, "off you go. Remember, if you don't come back with the box, I will personally tear your head off and feed it to the nearest Orc."

"Name's Sprat," mumbled the invisible zombie, but stumbled off towards the dark tunnels, his progress marked by his footsteps shuffling along, and the odd movement in the debris strewn floor...

~ \* ~

Sprat crawled through the passageways, some tight even for him. Around him creatures and *things* scuttled about in the dark. He was glad uncle Dreth had got that warm human to do the magic thing on him.

He paused a moment, squeezing back against the wall to allow something slimy and green with no legs to slither past. Stopping only to stick a finger in and taste the trail of slime left behind, not very nice, he carried on. The noises he had been hearing for a little while were getting louder.

Sure enough, around another corner, light could be seen filtering in. He scrambled towards it, poking his head out cautiously. Uncle Dreth had said these Ogres didn't like little zombies, so he had to keep very quiet.

No one seemed to be about, so he pulled himself into the small cave, which was stacked high with boxes. Resisting the temptation to peek inside, he walked quietly along, towards the only entrance he could see. He passed through it, dodging to one side as a large ugly beast carrying a club thudded past. Waiting to ensure the ogre was gone, he carried on along the wide passage.

Skipping around another two giants, he crawled through one cave and then another and another, looking for the sign that Uncle Dreth had told him about.

Just as he was about to give up he saw it - a large skull on a pike, outside a doorway with a curtain across. He crept up carefully and listened. From the other side thunderous snoring could be heard. He peered under the curtain, and then squirmed through, being careful not to disturb anything.

The room inside was dark, but he could make out enough. There wasn't much to see actually. At the back of the wall was a large table, too high for Sprat to on to. To the side was a wooden chest with a large lock. Directly opposite was a low bed. Lying on top of that was a huge ogre, snoring loudly enough to make the floor vibrate.

Sprat sidled around the wall, standing on tip toes to see what was on the table. Just the remains of a meal, some unfortunate Orc by the looks of it. Glancing at the form sleeping on the bed, Sprat crept over to the chest and heaved at the lid. Locked.

He looked around. There! Around the neck of the slumbering Ogre was a chain. Attached to the end of the chain, dangling over the side of the bed, was a large metal key.

The young zombie looked at the key and then at the chest. They seemed like they could match. Pushing his arm on more firmly, he tiptoed forward. The snoring rose to a crescendo, and the monster snorted, rolling to the side, facing the undead. Sprat stood still, not breathing, though this was normal for him.

After a moment, the snoring started again, this time accompanied by grunts from the sleeper. He seemed to be mumbling about someone called 'Doreen' and how he was going to 'eat her up'. Sprat smiled. He would sure like to have a whole person to eat too!

He drew near, hand worming closer to the dangling key. A grunt, and the ogre opened his eyes, staring right at the little zombie. Sprat froze, nearly biting his tongue off.

A long second passed, then another and another. Slowly the giant's eyelids dipped and closed. A moment later the snores started again. Sprat stood where he was. How had he not been seen? Wait! Stupid! He was invisible!

Another snort and a massive hand swung around, nearly removing Sprat's head in the process. Lunging under the arm Sprat grabbed the key and twisted, disengaging it from the chain. He dropped to the floor as the ogre

rolled over again, pulling the chain with him.

Wiping his forehead dramatically, Sprat slithered over to the chest and inserted the key. He turned it slowly, wincing at the grating noise it made. Finally, it clicked open.

He pulled on the lid again, and this time it lifted. Pushing it back he peered inside, looking for the box Uncle Dreth had described. It sure seemed a lot of work just for one leg bone...

~ \* ~

Herbert's new partner was a young Orc, fresh from the nursery pits as far as he could tell. He was none too happy at being assigned to a 'dead end alley' as he put it.

"Look, don't complain. This is easy duty," said Herbert.

"Cowards work!" exclaimed the new boy, whose name was Frank.

Herbert sighed and settled back. It was going to be a long watch.

"Hey, someone's coming!" said his eager partner. "All right! A bit of work already. Maybe this isn't so bad after all."

Herbert gripped his sword as Frank stepped forward, clutching a wicked looking flail. "Hold! You're entering... oh."

An enormous figure leaned down, looking the young guard in the face with glowing red eyes. "Where are they?" it demanded.

Frank hesitated, but then seemed to gather some courage. "I don't know who you are, but I'm a Black Tribe Orc warrior..." he began.

Herbert, who was trying his best to become part of the corridor, closed his eyes. Wrong answer.

There was a dull crunch, a clang of flail being dropped on the floor, followed closely by thud of dead Orc. More footsteps, stopping close in front of Herbert. He opened his eyes a fraction, to look into a face that appeared to be made of wall.

"Where are they?" The creature repeated.

"Ah... they went that way," he blabbed, pointing at the entrance he was supposed to be guarding.

The head nodded. "Sensible." It stood up, towering above Herbert, and strode onwards, as if a tribe of greater Orcs posed no threat to it.

Glancing only briefly at the body of his short lived companion, Herbert slipped into the passageway after the intruder. If he moved quickly, and used a short cut, he should be able to beat it to the throne room.

~ \* ~

Dreth paced up and down, to the distress of the zombies who pointed out that he was drawing fire. Indeed, several missiles had narrowly missed the half-alive figure.

"What's keeping him? Surely he should have found it by now?" Dreth turned again. An arrow whizzed passed his head.

"He's probably already ogre stew," complained Cuthbert. "When I was alive there was a saying: Never send a boy to catch a bird in the hand." He frowned. "No, wait, that wasn't it."

"Never bite a hand until it feeds you?" suggested Percy.

"Good advice that," said Cuthbert. "Get the food first, *then* the hand. Two apples with one stone that is."

"Will you two be quiet?" shushed Dreth. "I think I can hear something." He knelt down by the hole, just as Sprat popped his head out.

"Hello Uncle," he said, face covered in grime.

"Did you get it?"

"Here," said the little zombie, handing Dreth a closed box with runes inscribed all over it.

"Excellent," said Dreth, snatching it away.

"I also..."

"Yes, very good Splot, Cuthbert will give you your leg now." Dreth was concentrating on the box, trying to open it.

"But I..."

"Sprat! Are you all right?" said Cuthbert, crawling over. "Did you see the ogres? What happened to your invisibility?"

"It went away," said Sprat. "And..."

"Well, you could have been killed! What do you have to say for yourself mage?" Cuthbert turned and shook a finger at Redthorne, who merely shrugged.

"Daddy, I found a..."

"Here's your leg little one, good job!" Percy handed Sprat his reward, beaming a rotten toothed smile.

"Curse it!" said Dreth, shaking the box. "It's sealed magically somehow."

"Let me have a look," said Redthorne.

"I don't think so wizard," Dreth held it close. "Come on, we'll deal with the Orcs first, then worry about opening it."

They moved off, Sprat happily gnawing on his new leg.

~ \* ~

King Oscar sat on his throne, enjoying the administrations of one of his wives, who was busy applying oral

activity to his utensil.

"Sire!" said one of his minions. "The zombies are back."

Oscar raised a finger, and the guard waited for a minute, until the King let out a long and happy sigh. "Well done my dear," he said, dismissing the wife, who backed away, dabbing at her mouth.

"King Oscar!" The voice was calm yet radiated power.

The king looked down his nose at the skinny pale human. "Ah, it's you again. And I see you have brought your friends too," he observed the zombies & wizard behind their leader. What do you want?"

"We bring you your box sire," said the pale human, holding forth the object in question.

King Oscar sat up straight. "Indeed! Bring it here quickly!"

"First, your end of the deal, where's the way to the dungeon's center?"

Oscar laughed uproariously. "That? Hahahahahaha! That's easy! It's through the ogres' domain! Hahahahahaha!"

The human's face tightened. Oscar pointed a long dirty finger at him.

"Tricked you good didn't I? Now, hand over the box!"

Dreth handed it over, keeping a wary eye out for tricks.

"How did you disarm the tracking device?" asked Oscar. "Just out of curiosity."

"Tracking device?" Dreth looked puzzled.

Oscar opened his mouth, closed it and then opened it again. "Don't tell me you didn't remove the spell? The ogres put a..."

"Sire! Sire! The ogres are attacking! Everywhere!"

"You idiot!" snarled Oscar, picking up his blade. "Sound the alarm! All troops to defensive positions!" He turned to Dreth. "First though..."

Herbert ran into the chamber shouting, cutting off the king mid-flow. "Sire! Sire! We're under attack!"

"I know that fool! The ogres want their..."

"No, not the ogres! Something big! It's killed a dozen warriors already, and it's heading here! It asked about them!" He pointed at the undead.

"Us?" asked Cuthbert, looking from side to side nervously.

Dreth turned to the king. "What's inside it?" He asked.

"What?" Oscar was momentarily confused. "Ah, the box! Ha! Wouldn't you like to know?"

"That's why I asked."

King Oscar smirked, despite the chaos as Orcs ran back and forth about the cavern. "As you will. Inside here is the key to the Central chambers! Hahahahaha!" He slapped at his leg in mirth. "That's right! You just handed over the only way in to the treasure. How smart do you look now?"

"I see." Dreth drew his black sword slowly. "Then you should give it back."

"Come get it!" Oscar raised his giant blade, beckoning with one hand.

The human ran at him, and Oscar swung high, bringing his weapon around in a powerful sweep. The undead guardian brought his blade up and blocked it with a screech of metal on metal. Sparks flew as both stepped back. The king was surprised. The human was stronger than he looked. Never mind! He smiled and thrust forward suddenly, moving far faster than he had before. The sword caught Dreth in the middle of the chest, penetrating his flesh and protruding out of his back.

Oscar grinned widely as the human looked down at the weapon embedded in his body. His grin faded as Dreth looked up again, his face set in an expression of anger.

"You will pay for that." Slowly the human pushed forward, *up* the king's sword, the blade sliding through his body, pushing further and further out of his back as he made his way closer to the hilt.

Oscar stepped back, but this merely pulled Dreth closer to him. He looked into the guardian's black eyes, and for the first time in his life knew fear.

"My turn," whispered Dreth.

The cold kiss of metal entered the king's abdomen, sliding through his organs with a burning, yet icy, touch. Oscar opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. The heat in his body seemed to be sucked away, drawn into the black sword.

The last thing he knew was the sound of laughter. "*Awake!*" Came a voice inside his head, "*awake at last!*"

~ \* ~

Dreth pulled at the sword, trying to free it from the body of the dead King. It moved slowly, as if resisting his efforts. Keenly aware of an urgent need to not be there, he pulled harder, finally succeeding in wrenching the blade out of the corpse with a wet sucking sound.

The weapon dripped with green Orc blood, but under that it seemed to throb with dark power. A low moan emanated from it. "Bllllloood," it said, black energy crackling up its length. "Feeeed meee."

Dreth had no time to wonder at this sudden awakening. Quickly grabbing the box, he turned around to face the others. The king's sword was still sticking out of his body, front and back, but he didn't have time to remove it just now.

"I don't wish to rush you, but half an army of ogres are after that thing," said Cuthbert, indicating the rune-box.

"Let's get out of here then," said Dreth. He started heading towards the way they had come in, only to stop as a giant figure stepped into the cavern.

Red eyes scanned the crowd, finally settling on him.

The enormous stone Golem stepped forward, batting away an Orc who was too slow or foolish to get out of its path. "Dreth, Guardian of the Undead Way. The Management has sent me. You are charged with deserting your post."

"Oh futtocks," said Percy. "That's a Guardian Golem. They're practically indestructible! We're screwed."

The Golem stepped forward, massive arms reaching out for them.

Dreth stepped away and raised his sword, which seemed to be trying to pull him forward. This monster was not something to be trifled with though. He risked a quick look around. Behind him came the sound of battle, as ogres and Orcs fought for dominance. Another exit to one side was crowded with Orcs trying to get away, and the only other way out was behind the Golem.

"This is going to be tricky," he said. "Look," he said, stepping backwards and pulling the dead king's sword out of his body at the same time, "let's see if we can't come to some sort of arrangement hey? I mean, surely we're all on the same side, right?"

"Not really," replied the Golem, advancing. "Don't get me wrong, it's nothing personal, but I have my orders. You must be made an example of." It lunged forward.

Dreth skipped back and brought his sword up to block the blow. The blade met the fist with a loud clang.

"Aaarrrgg!" said the weapon, "that hurt!"

The Golem smiled a stony grin. "Magic swords don't scare me little man. Now, stand still and take your punishment like a guardian."

"Not bloody likely!" said Dreth, and dodged to one side to avoid another swing. "Wizard, cast some sort of spell! Stop him!"

Redthorne, who had retreated to a safer distance, scratched his head. "Tough one, these Golem types are usually fairly proof against magic. Still, give me a minute and I'll see what I have." He made a gesture and a large book appeared in his hand, which he started leafing through.

"I don't have a minute you useless... urg!" Dreth tumbled across the floor as the huge fist managed to finally connect. The runebox went flying.

"E... F... G... Gas... Giants... Gnomes... no, not that, Gold... mmm, thought I'd lost that spell." Redthorne thumbed through his book muttering to himself.

Dreth picked himself up, then quickly dived to one side to avoid being squashed by the Golem's foot. "Read faster blast you!" he shouted, performing a series of really quite amazing maneuvers, trying to stay out of the creatures' reach.

Sprat, meanwhile, had picked up the runebox. The little zombie looked at the marauding animation, and then at the seething mass of Orcs and ogres, still fighting in the main entrance. He waddled up to the mage, who was mumbling under his breath, and tapped him on the leg.

Redthorne looked down, placing a finger on the page so he wouldn't lose his place. "What?" he asked.

The small zombie pointed at the box and said something to wizard.

Dreth jumped onto the dead king's throne, and then did a somersault over the back of it. Percy and Cuthbert applauded and shouted encouragement.

"I hope you're not distracting Mr. Wizard, you short assemblage of spare parts!" he shouted, ducking. The Golem's fist smashed into the wall next to him, dislodging rock and leaving a large crater.

Dreth just about managed to get a glimpse of Redthorne casting some sort of quick spell before he was hit again. He was sent flying through the air to land at the feet of Cuthbert and Percy, who were standing out of the way and watching the action.

"Good one boss!" said Percy.

"Nearly had him there!" said Cuthbert, giving a thumbs up sign.

"Don't put yourselves out or anything," said Dreth, staggering to his feet. "I think I've broken a rib." He looked around just in time to see the Golem throw the throne at him.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Percy, as the chair smashed into the cavern floor beside them, exploding in a mass of stone shrapnel.

"What's Sprat up to?" asked Cuthbert, lurching away at speed as the giant creature approached.

Sparing a quick glance at the small undead, Dreth jogged in a wide circle around the cave. The zombie had the runebox in his hand and was walking with a determined gait up to the Golem. As he watched, the little zombie took aim and threw the box at the Stone Guardian. It hit and stuck to its leg. The Golem took no notice, intent on pursuing its prey.

Dreth looked wildly from side to side. The ogres were pushing forward, having nearly overwhelmed the Orcs, and the other entrance was still crowded with refugees from the fight. He skipped left, but the Golem darted forward, cutting him off and trapping him in a corner.

"Look, you don't have to do this, really," said Dreth. "Throw off the shackles of oppression brother! Rise up and fight the overlords!" He raised his fist in a salute, in a desperate attempt at false camaraderie.

"But I like my job," said the Golem, closing in. "It is annoying being summoned from the Sleep sometimes, but the hours are good, and you get to see places and meet interesting people. If only briefly."

"I don't suppose you would take a bribe?" Dreth asked, scraping the bottom of the 'options' barrel. His back was now against the wall, in several senses.

The guardian shook its head as he loomed closer, towering above the half-dead. He raised a fist. "Time to be very, very sorry," it said.

Dreth closed his eyes. There was a slight pause followed by an enormous crash, then silence. His head remained unflattened. He opened his eyes again.

Where the Golem had been standing was a large pile of ceiling.

"Couldn't find Golem," shouted Redthorne from the other side of the cavern, "this was the best I could come up with."



Dreth eyed the pile of rock. It moved slightly.

"I wouldn't hang about it I was you," said Cuthbert. "That won't hold it for long." Even as he spoke an arm broke through the rubble, dislodging several large boulders.

Dreth skipped past and retrieved his black sword from the floor where he'd dropped it. Just as he did so the first of the ogres, a huge dirty white creature wielding a studded club and wearing a battered helmet, broke through the Orc lines and stepped into the cavern. Several, more normal sized creatures, followed closely behind.

The giant ogre saw Dreth and squinted at him. "Fee fi fo fum," it said in a deep bass voice. "I smell the blood of a... zombie."

Several of the following ogres shook their heads.

"Nearly had it that time sir!" said one. The giant swung his club idly and knocked the speaker flying.

"Be he 'live, or be he dead," he continued, walking slowly towards Dreth and company. "I'll grind his bones to make my... porridge."

The other ogres groaned.

Dreth started to reverse, but the sound of sliding rock made him stop and turn. Behind him the Golem rose from the rubble like a vengeful mountain. Red eyes glared at him, piercing the dust like demonic searchlights.

"Oh poop," said Percy.

"Look!" shouted Dreth, pointing at the Golem. "It has your box! Get it quick!" He dived out of the way as the big ogre roared with anger and charged, club held high. The rest of his force raced after him.

The two sides met with a massive crash. "Let's not wait and see how this turns out," Dreth said.

They ran around the edge of the cave, ducking once as an ogre flew out of the melee over their heads, to smash into the floor beyond and lay still.

"Do you think they will stop it?" asked Redthorne.

Percy shook his head. "They will delay him, but ogres don't have anything strong enough to beat a Guardian Golem," he said. "You can't kill them unless you find their heart, or break the body into little pieces, from what I hear."

The group ran past piles of Orc and ogre bodies, back down the passage they had been before. The barricades had been smashed, and corpses of both sides littered the way.

"Look at all this food!" wailed Cuthbert. "What a waste!"

"You can stop and have a snack if you want," said Dreth, jumping over a headless corpse, "but I'm not waiting for you."

They raced down the now deserted tunnel towards the Ogre side, arriving there with only one slight delay, when Percy tried to collect body parts for 'supplies', and climbed over the unmanned barricade at the end.

The ogre caves were mostly deserted. Only the young and a couple of old creatures had been left behind. Those looked suspiciously at the group as they passed, but none made a move to intercept them.

"What are we looking for?" said Percy as they wandered around the main cavern.

"I don't know. Some kind of entrance, probably one not oft used," replied Dreth.

"How about that?" asked Redthorne, pointing to a dark corner.

They followed his finger. Set well back into a recess was a metal door.

Upon closer inspection it looked unused; rust had built up over the surface. There didn't appear to be any lock, just one large handle. Dreth took hold of it and pulled.

It took a bit of straining, but it eventually cracked open. "A little help here," he said.

Percy and Cuthbert ducked around him and grabbed the edge of the door. With the three heaving together the portal finally, reluctantly, opened. A waft of cold air came from beyond.

"Ahh, smell that dungeon breeze," said Cuthbert.

"I will, when I get a new nose," grumbled Percy.

"Come on, I'd rather not wait for the ogres or that blasted Golem to show up again," said Dreth. He pushed the two zombies forward, into the dark behind the door.

"More tunnels!" shouted back Cuthbert.

Dreth, Redthorne and Sprat entered, dragging the door shut behind them and blocking out the light.

"Allow me," said Redthorne, and cast several magic-torch spells.

The tunnels, once illuminated, turned out to be roughly hewn from bare dark red rock. The area just beyond the door was fairly wide, but it headed down and quickly narrowed.

"Lead on then," said Dreth to Cuthbert.

The zombies started down the tunnel, but Redthorne spoke to him. "I need a rest," he said. "I still have to sleep, even if you don't, and casting spells drains you."

Dreth nodded. "Fair enough, we'll rest as soon as we get a little way away from here."

They walked on, stumbling down the uneven passage. Soon it split into two. Figuring one was as good as another, Dreth let Cuthbert decide which way. This meant he had to let Percy decide the next one of course. Soon they were hopelessly lost.

"Well, at least the Golem won't find it easy to track us," said Percy cheerfully.

"I need to stop," said Redthorne, after a little further. "I'm fit to drop."

Dreth signaled a halt, and the wizard unrolled his sleeping mat and fell onto it. He was snoring in minutes.

"Ahh, look at that. How sweet," said Percy. He moved forward slightly. "Do you think he would miss a hand?"

"Leave him alone," said Dreth, trying to find a comfortable place to sit.

"It's not fair. Cuthbert has his Halfling foot," Percy complained, pointing to Cuthbert's belt.

"Do you still have that thing?" asked Dreth.

"I'm aging it. Halfling meat is best aged, very tasty." Cuthbert licked where his lips would have been, had he had any.

"Daddy," said Sprat. "Have we seen a soul yet?"

"Not yet son," said Cuthbert, straightening out some of his sons' limbs.

"But I want to be warm, like the man in the funny dress," sniffled the young zombie.

"They're robes, not a dress," said Cuthbert. "Don't worry lad, Uncle Dreth will find us a way to make everyone warm again, won't you Uncle Dreth?"

"You may get lucky whilst I'm looking for my contract," replied Dreth. He narrowed his eyes in thought. "What did that oracle say about you? You have to redeem your sin? What sin is that then?"

Cuthbert looked up, and was quiet for a while. "It was a long time ago," he said.

Dreth waited, but nothing more was forthcoming. He shrugged to himself, and settled down to wait.

~ \* ~

"Did you hear that?"

Dreth looked up, broken out of the reverie that he used instead of sleep. "What?"

"I thought I heard something," said Percy, peering into the dark, back the way they came. "Maybe it's the Golem."

"We had better go," said Dreth. "Wake up the wizard, he's had long enough to rest. We should get out of here."

Cuthbert poked the sleeper, who spluttered as he awoke. "Come on wizard, we need to move," said the zombie.

Redthorne quickly packed his gear, and within short order the team was moving off again. They walked for another hour, choosing passages at random, until the tunnel started to open up.

"Finally," said Dreth.

They emerged into a vast cavern. The stalactite laden roof soared high over them, dimly lit by some sort of lichen. Straight ahead, running across from left to right, a chasm plunged into inky blackness. The path veered off, running parallel to the deep underground canyon. The other side could just be made out in the gloom, too far across to jump.

Percy peered over the edge cautiously. "That's a long way down," he said.

"Come on, keep moving," said Dreth.

They walked along the path for a while. It was twisty and uneven, and in several places narrowed alarmingly.

"Anyone know anything of this place?" asked Dreth.

"Not me," said Percy.

"Nor me," said Cuthbert.

"Me too," piped up Sprat.

"Well, you're only little," said Percy.

"Maybe so," replied Cuthbert, "but he has the brain of an adult. I think it was a ranger actually."

"What's that?" asked Redthorne, interrupting the genealogy conversation. He pointed upwards.

They followed his gaze, to see a round something swooping down upon them. A hissing noise accompanied the creature as it flew into range.

"Beholder\*!" shouted the wizard, and dived to one side to avoid a beam of energy from one of the monster's eyes.

\*A magical creature. They are spherical (ball shaped) with no limbs and float in the air. Beholders have one large eye, and several other smaller ones on eyestalks. They can cast a variety of magics that emanate from these eyes, and are generally not monsters you would want to trifle with.

"Hold **hold**! We're on your side!" shouted Dreth, waving his arms about over his head.

The beast flipped away, flying round in a circle. It came to stop above and in front of them, and studied the group for a moment.

"We're from the undead area!" shouted up Dreth. "I'm Dreth, from the Undead Way, these are my frie... companions." He waved at the others.

"Oooh, nearly slipped there," said Cuthbert.

The beholder came closer carefully, hovering a short distance from them, over the canyon. His main eye glowed a dull white. "Zombies!" he said. "Long time since I saw any of you lot here. What do you want?"

"We're heading towards the center of the dungeon," replied Cuthbert helpfully, earning a Look from Dreth.

"Really? How exciting!" The beholder flew closer. "I always wanted to know what was in the middle." He waved some of his eyestalks. "Names' Robert," he said. "Bob for short."

Dreth introduced himself and the others. "This mage is with us," he said, pointing to the wizard, who was crouching behind a rock.

"Well, not sure about an adventurer, but if you vouch for him..." Bob was cut off from above.

"Robert! What are you doing there? Are you speaking to someone? If it's that floozy from down the way you are going to be in trouble..." The voice was high pitched and grating.

Bob sighed. "The Ball and Chain," he explained as another beholder, slightly smaller, came into view.

"Well, the ball anyway," whispered Cuthbert to Percy, nudging the other zombie and winking. Percy sniggered.

"Who's this? What are you doing speaking to intruders?" The second beholder floated next to Robert, wagging her eyestalks angrily.

"They aren't intruders. They're guardians, same as us!" protested Bob, rolling his major eye at Dreth.

"Guardians they maybe, but not like us, oh no! We do our job Robert Beholder! You may not care, but I don't want one of those letters thank you very much." She floated down a little. "Remember what happened when that giant slug refused to slime? Warning letter one day, shriveled piece of skin in a pile of salt the next. Now, you use your ray on these creatures or there will be no you-know-what for you tonight."

She bobbed next to Bob, crossed metaphysical arms and tapped a metaphysical foot.

Her husband heaved a deep sigh. "But honey..."

"*Don't you honey me!* You do what I say! Now, is it going to be little piles of intruder dust, or are you going to be sleeping in the hatching chamber on your own again?"

"...but I've been talking to them! How would it look if I suddenly used my disintegration beam now? Downright rude is what."

"Fine, in that case you can float up to the top of the cavern and then swoop down again. Your new friends can have that long to bugger off, or something. We run a respectable chasm here, no chatting with the victims."

Bob's face fell, he rotated to face Dreth and, incidentally, away from the missus. "Sorry, but I better do as she says. Once she's in this mood there's no talking to her..."

"I *am* right behind you you know!" interrupted the shrill voice.

Bob made that 'clenched teeth' look all males get at some point or other when dealing with unreasonable spouses. "Look," he continued, "if you turn about you should make it out of our territory before I reach the roof and back. It's probably for the best, you wouldn't make it through the next chamber anyway, and I really don't want to disintegrate you. It always gives me a splitting headache when I do that, which isn't funny when you're basically all head."

Dreth raised a finger. "It isn't really very convenient you know," he started.

"We don't care!" Mrs. Beholder pushed her husband out of the way. "Now, are you going to get going, or do I have to do the job myself?" She glowered at them.

Dreth scowled. He didn't want to have to fight his way through these beasts if he could help it, they had the advantage of terrain if nothing else, but he didn't really want to go back either. He scratched his head.

At his side the black sword whispered to itself. "Kiillllll...." It said.

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### **Cavern Chaos.**

Mrs. Beholder glared at them, something Beholders are well equipped to do. She opened her mouth again but Dreth raised a thin finger to forestall her.

"Excellent!" he beamed, subtly forcing Darkblood down into its sheath. "I would expect nothing less from a pair of such frightening guardians. Quite right, not to let strange creatures make their way through your cavern without any explanation. No doubt when I finally report to the management this will earn you a commendation!"

The female beholder closed her mouth for a moment and then opened it once more. Dreth spoke again before she could say anything.

"No doubt you're wondering what I'm talking about." He folded his arms and nodded. "Let me tell you why we're here, and why we're heading to the center. A Guardian Golem has gone berserk and is rampaging through the dungeon; he's been attacking hard working denizens, not unlike yourselves. I've even been forced to consort with mere adventurers to help bring him to task."

"A guardian?" asked Bob, eye swiveling left and right.

"Yes, he's coming this way even now," said Cuthbert, stepping forward. "He piled through a whole tribe of Ogres just up the way," he gestured back towards the caverns, nearly knocking Sprat into the chasm as he did so.

"He is?" squeaked Bob's wife. "This way?"

"Under the circumstances, I'm sure that you would want to let us pass as quickly as possible, and to take refuge yourself as well. After all, we wouldn't expect you to try to actually stop a berserk Golem. That would be beyond even your abilities..."

Bob swelled up at this, expanding like a balloon being pumped too energetically. "I will have you know we are Advanced Level guardians! We're quite capable of dealing with a Golem here and there."

"Now dear," his wife floated next to him. "You know Golems are resistant to magic, your rays would have little effect, and if it's a *Guardian Golem*..." She paused a moment and looked at her husband.

Bob coughed and deflated a little. "Well, I suppose they aren't weak enemies, and I wouldn't want to put you in the way of something as dangerous as that. Still..."

"Look, let's go back to the hole and stay out of the way until this has blown over." Mrs. Beholder rubbed up against him.

"Before you do so, any directions would be appreciated. We're a little off course..." Dreth smiled a skull grin.

"You know, I wouldn't mind seeing the center myself," said Bob.

"Now Robert, let's let these nice undead go. You know we don't exactly get on well with Von and his creatures anyway." She started to drop away into the chasm.

Bob sighed. "I suppose so." He turned to Dreth. "Follow the path until you come to the bridge, you can't miss it. Watch for the plank in the middle though, it's a bit loose. Once you are over, turn left and take the tunnel with the large green rock next to it."

"Thank-you," said Dreth. "Your actions will be noted."

"Come on Robert!" echoed a voice from below.

Bob winked several eyes and bobbed up and down. "Have to go, good luck to you!" He turned about and dropped out of sight into the crevasse before any of them could say anything more.

"Damn, I wanted to ask him about what's ahead," said Dreth, standing on the edge and peering into the depths.

"Von and his creatures," said Percy. "Apparently."

"Let's get a move on," Redthorne stood up from behind his rock. "I feel too exposed here, and I dislike depths."

"Nice couple though," Cuthbert said conversationally as they moved off. "Must remember to ask them to our next party."

~ \* ~

Two spots of red appeared in the dark, swiveling back and forth as they drew closer. The ragged kobold scout cowered against the wall. He knew it had been a risk, sneaking into these tunnels, but curiosity had finally overcome good sense. Now it pushed itself against the dead end and prayed to Kolog, the god of small beings trapped by bigger ones\*.

The Golem stamped up the passage, crushing a loose rock underfoot as it did so, and then stopped as the tunnel ended in a blank wall. It had lost track of the prey, and the good mood it had built up ripping apart ogres was beginning to dissipate.

"**You!**" it shouted, spotting the kobold trying to meld into the rock face. The little monster fell to its knees and started wailing. The Golem picked it up between two fingers and drew it close to its mouth. "Have you seen a bunch of undead and a wizard pass by here?"

"N...n...n....n....n...no s...ssss..sir."

The Golem growled and studied the hanging form for a moment. It was insignificant, not worth wasting any time over. "Bah." Dropping the creature it turned about and stamped back up the tunnel.

\*A minor god, and one that's not seen often. It hides most of the time.

Behind it there came a noise of a minor monster wetting himself.

~ \* ~

Fyy Fleetfoot trod carefully as he stole up the passage. The hunting group had learned the hard way that this particular dungeon had more than it's fair share of traps and dangerous creatures. Already Hammath Highhand was holding five arrows he would have to take back to the Forest. Five arrows he would have to present to families who would see their sons and daughters no more.

Shaking his head, causing his long hair to whip to the side, he frowned. *Concentrate!* He admonished himself. Grasping his rapier for comfort he peered up the dark tunnel with keen amber eyes. Was that movement ahead, in the infravision range? He stopped advancing and stood silent and unmoving as only a seasoned hunter could, becoming part of the environment, at one with the surrounding stone.

*Stone!* If only he was back home, surrounded by the mighty trees of Jollygreenwood. Already there had been talk in the party about turning back. Only honor kept them searching.

Fyy was the very image of a woodland elf. Tall, thin, garbed in green with a feather in his cap. He had a long bow slung over his shoulder and a quiver of arrows on his back. At one hip swung a thin sword, its silver pommel elegantly designed with runes etched into the metal. Long blond hair hung down to his shoulders, covering his pointed ears, which were currently straining to catch the slightest whisper.

*There!* Again, a flicker of something ahead. He should report to Hammath. Stepping backwards he started a noiseless retreat. It came as a shock then, when there was a low whisper in his ear.

"Going somewhere?"

Pulling on his sword, he turned quickly about. Something smashed the side of his face, taking skin off, crushing his cheekbone and sending him flying into the wall, which he bounced off.

The elf spat out a tooth and scrabbled backwards, trying to focus with one eye filling with blood. He saw nothing, yet the front of his tunic was pulled forward. He kicked out and his foot connected. There was a grunt and Fyy's arm was twisted backwards at the elbow, breaking the joint with a splintering sound. He screamed in agony and tried to escape the grip, but whatever it was lashed out again, smashing him in the ribs and knocking him to the ground.

Fyy's thoughts turned to flight, and he grasped at the floor, attempting to pull himself along with one good arm. There was a sharp pain in his leg, and he cried out as a chunk of flesh was torn from his thigh.

He felt strong fingers grab his neck, and his head was lifted up and then smashed into the hard stone cobbles. Lights flashed before his eyes, and agony echoed around his being as he was brutally abused by the unseen attackers.

The last thing he was aware of was the sound of hard breathing, and cold jaws wrapping around his jugular, biting deeply, and feeding on his white Elven meat...

~ \* ~

"You are a cowardly beast, unworthy to wield one such as I." Darkblood hissed as Dreth wiped some remaining Orc king gunk off the blade. "A fiend like you should revel in blood and slaughter. With your half-life and my powers we would be an unstoppable force for evil!" The sword pulsed a dark, throbbing light as it spoke.

"Hah. Didn't do much against Mr. Golem did you?" Cuthbert piped up from his perch on top of a boulder. "What was it again? Oh yes..." His tone took what he intended to be a high pitched girly voice. "Oooh, that so hurt me! Boo hoo!"

**"You are a worthless piece of mangy flesh!"** roared the sword, red flashes of energy crackling down its length. A wave of hatred emanated from the weapon, which left the zombie totally unconcerned.

"Better than an old bent piece of metal! Didn't do your previous owner much good when he came up against



Dreth now, did you? All talk and no gore, that's your problem." Cuthbert stuck the remains of a rotten tongue out and attempted to blow a raspberry, but only succeeded in spitting it out. "Ahhhh mmu uuunng!" He mumbled, scrabbling after the mouth part.

Darkblood laughed in malicious glee as the zombie scuffled around, trying to locate the errant item amongst the pebbles and rocks. "I would have sliced this pathetic excuse for a guardian in two, had my owner had the wits to use me instead of grabbing for his mace," he said.

"Enough you two!" snapped Dreth, sheathing the sword and standing up. "Where is that wizard? How long does it take to relieve yourself?"

He looked around. They had passed over the canyon of the Beholder without incident, and were now in yet another cavern, the walls the same dull red color, slick with condensation. They had paused briefly to allow Redthorne to perform his toilet, and act which he wasn't keen to perform in front of them.

"I'll go and look for him," said Percy.

"No need." A figure loomed up out of the gloom. "I'm here. Let us proceed."

"Mmmm unngg!" protested Cuthbert, still on all fours. He lifted a rock and paused for a moment as some small insect attempted to squirm away. He picked it up and crunched down, chewing awkwardly.

"We can get you another tongue later," said Dreth. "Let's move, we've wasted enough time already." He turned and walked off.

Cuthbert took one desperate last look around, and then stood up and hurried after them.

"Asssbbbd" he spat.

They traveled on, rocks and pebbles clattering underfoot, the sounds echoing around the large cavern.

"How big is this dungeon anyway?" asked Redthorne.

Dreth shrugged. "I don't know really. Pretty big though. It's been around for a thousand years or more, so they say."

The wizards stroked his beard in thought. "And in all that time, no one has ever claimed the treasure?"

"Not that I know of," said Dreth. "But then no one tells me anything."

Redthorne opened his mouth to speak again, but whatever he was about to say was cut off by shouts and screams from Percy.

Dreth hurried forward to see the zombie rolling on the floor. Attached to his neck was a small fairy-like being, wings flapping as it bit into the undead's throat.

"Get it off! Get it off!" screamed Percy, pulling at his attacker. "OOooowoOOwww!"

Before he could take any action the creature let go and shot backwards into the air.

"Urg! Disgusting! Rotten meat! Yargg!" The small figure recoiled, spitting and wiping at her mouth.

"What do you expect?" yelled Percy back, clutching at his torn neck. "Serves you right! Hope you get food poisoning! OOow!! Little bitch!"

The flying attacker looked around as the others approached. She was small, about twice the size of a man's hand maybe. Dark hair floated about her head, and tiny wings buzzed behind her as she flitted to and fro so fast it was hard to make out her features.

"Fresh meat!" she cried, spying Redthorne and darting forward, a blur in the air.

Fast as she was, Dreth was faster, intercepting her and batting the diminutive aggressor away with his hand, causing her to tumble backwards and land roughly on the ground.

"Ow! Watch it ugly, or I'll bite your ears off!" She sat up holding her head.

"You can try," said Dreth standing over her. "Now, tell me who you are before I step on you and squash you like a bug."

The small figure spat and stood up uncertainly. Dreth squatted down and examined her more closely. Now she was still enough to make out her features, he could see a pretty face surrounded by long dark hair. She looked like a tiny human female, maybe early twenties, clothed in a simple black dress which looked like it had seen better days.

"Draw a picture, it will last longer," she said nastily. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

"Name's Dreth, Guardian of the Undead way. What's your moniker shrimp?"

The small woman sighed and sat down on a pebble. "I'm Smudge, Fearie from the Black Garden."

"The Black Garden? Never heard of it," Dreth said.

"It is some way from here, presumably anyway, near a hidden entrance to the dungeon. I was with a group when a large party of elves came through. They captured me but I managed to escape, and now I'm lost. Hungry too." She eyed Redthorne meaningfully.

"Since when do Faerie go around eating meat and attacking innocent zombies?" complained Percy.

"I said a *Fearie*, not a Faerie you blundering fool!" the small creature sneered at him. "There is a noticeable difference. Fearie are superior in almost every way." She sniffed a superior sniff to emphasize her point.

Dreth stood up as Smudge launched herself into the air again, flitting about like an oversize black wasp. "Well, you're welcome to tag along with us if you want, but no biting the wizard."

"Hmmp." She sniffed again. "He's probably too old and stringy anyway."

"Here, take a snack from my supplies," said Dreth, gesturing at Cuthbert to open the bag. "They're a bit old I'm afraid, but better than nothing."

Cuthbert passed Smudge a hand, which she struggled to carry, finally settling down on Sprat's head to eat it as they walked.

"Tell me about these elves," said Redthorne. "What tribe were they from?"

"I don't know," shrugged the Fearie, her mouth full of finger. "They all look the same to me. Seemed pretty determined to get into the dungeon though. Very strange actually, Elves don't usually care about treasure, at least as a community."

"I see," said Redthorne and fell back a little, deep in thought.

"Something wrong?" asked Dreth.

"What? Oh, no, nothing." The wizard waved a hand in dismissal and then looked up. "I think we're coming to the end of this cave."

Dreth noted the change of subject but didn't comment. The cave was indeed narrowing. Off to one side a stout wooden door was set into the wall, looking totally out of place in the rough rock.

Cuthbert placed an ear to it and listened for a moment. "aarn eearanfuu," he mumbled.

"What?" asked Percy.

Uuuu aad... uuu aaaarn eer uffuuu", Cuthbert repeated.

"I think he said he couldn't hear anything," said Dreth. He pushed at Percy. "Open the door, see what's behind."

"Bah. Bully," the zombie muttered, but pulled on the portal anyway. It creaked open to reveal a gray stone dungeon tunnel behind, running left to right. The undead stuck his head through and looked carefully around. "Can't see anything," he said and stepped through.

The floor immediately gave way beneath him, dropping him into space. There was a scream, a moment of silence and then a dull thud.

"Uuuueee!" shouted Cuthbert, and ran forward to peer into the trap.

They all looked down into the pit. Percy was lying on the floor, a large spike through one leg. "Help!! Help! Get me out of here!" he screamed.

"Shhhh!" said Dreth, making gestures with his hands. "No telling what monsters around here." He looked up. "Smudge, Spit, go and check out the passageway a little, make sure nothing is coming. Cuthbert, get the rope out and haul him back up."

Smudge mumbled something about being ordered about, but flew off a little way down the tunnel. Sprat did the same, sliding past the trap and grumbling about how some people couldn't remember his name.

"Oooooohhh, what a day!" groaned Percy from his landing place. "First bitten half to re-death by a flying black midget, now my best leg ruined! And I think I've broken a rib too." There was a cracking sound, then a squelch as he pulled something free from his chest. "Yep. Look at that. No good to anybody now." He threw the bone away, and then saw something lying nearby. "Hey! I've found some treasure!"

"What is it?" Hissed Dreth, still worried about attracting attention. "Pass it up!"

"Ho! Wouldn't you just like that?"

"Pass it up or we leave you down there to rot," said Dreth. Then, because he was a bit of a stickler for detail,

added: "More."

"Oooh, one day you are going to get what's coming to you." Percy grunted as he threw the sack up. It fell back and hit him in the face. "Ohhh! For Dreg's sake. Why me?"

Eventually, with a lot of groaning and complaining both Percy and the sack were recovered. Dreth snatched the bag away from him. "Now, what have we here?" he said, and opened it...

~ \* ~

Silth Harshlore peered around a corner and scowled, his white teeth gleaming against black skin. *Curse this area! It all looked the same.* He slid around the wall and moved smoothly forward, eyes darting left, right, up and down, checking for traps as he went. He had already nearly been skewered by spikes and squashed by falling rocks. This was a perilous region.

He found a small alcove and, after checking it carefully, squatted down to rest. How could they have lost it? It must have been stolen, despite what Scut had said before the squad leader had gutted him for dereliction of duty.

Anyway, if they didn't find it they would all be made an example of. He fingered his sword. Perhaps he should try and make it out on his own, he knew of a colony not too far away, in the Shadow Mountain Range.

Silth's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of something approaching. He stood up and moved back against the wall, further into the shadow, as a hulking figure loomed into view.

The solid form of the Golem stopped, and Silth cursed as a piercing red glare swung around to appraise him.

"I am Silth Harshlore, Drow Elf scout. I carry nothing of value, killing me would be pointless," he said boldly as the eyes drew close.

The Golem bent over to address him face to face. "Where are they?" it asked.

"Where are who? My party? I will not tell, gut me if you will, for they will do worse should I betray them."

"I am not interested in your pathetic group. I'm searching for the one called Dreth."

Silth shook his head. "Never heard of anyone by that name. I'm not from this area though."

The Golem rumbled and drew closer, the eyes seemed to burn into him, and for a moment Silth thought his time had come. Then it stood up again and stepped back into the passageway again.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Silth leaned against the wall. There was a sudden 'click' and he just had time to look around before the trap's darts skewered him.

He grabbed at his side as acid sizzled and smoked, burning his flesh away. A fiery pain spread down his body as clothes and skin succumbed to the corrosive. The Golem watched, unmoving as he slumped to one side, his internal organs now exposed to the air.

"Help... me," he gasped, holding a hand out towards the stone creature. His fingers started to dissolve where he had touched the dart, and one fell off. As he dropped to the floor in agony the watching giant lost interest, and turned away to clump off down the corridor.

As his liver was eaten through, Silth thought he heard it humming to itself. Then everything went black.

~ \* ~

"What," said Dreth, pulling a bundle out of the sack, "in Dreg's name is *this*?" So saying he held up, by a leg, a chubby baby wrapped in a ragged cloth.

"It's a baby elf! A cute, young, juicy baby!" exclaimed Percy. "Oh please, please! Give me a bit! I have never tasted baby elf before! Just an arm, or maybe a leg."

"Uuuugg uuuuur!" agreed Cuthbert.

Dreth held the baby upside down and looked at it. It gurgled and attempted to put a fist into its mouth. Big green eyes stared at him in a sickeningly cute way. He grimaced. "Very well, but I get the liver and the brain. Here, slice it up." He started to pass the infant to Cuthbert when he was interrupted.

"**HOLD!!**" Redthorne stepped forward, his staff blazing light. "I had forgotten what foul beasts you really are! I will **not** allow you to devour this innocent."

"Oh foo! What are you going to do Mr. Wizard?" asked Percy, though he eyed the pulsating staff warily.

"I will use all my power to stop this depraved act, even if it costs me my life," replied the mage.

Dreth paused, the baby still held in one hand, and looked at the scowling Redthorne. He glanced over at the zombies, who would have been drooling if they were capable of such. Even Smudge was licking her lips.

"Well, I don't know. I mean it *is* a baby. We don't often get such a morsel down here you know..."

"You may kill me," growled the wizard, "but I will take the zombies and the flying shrimp with me at least. And who knows? You may find you're not so tough yourself."

Dreth scratched his ear and thought about it. He was fairly sure he could take out the wizard, but the mage had the right of it. It was likely that Redthorne would do a large amount of damage before he could stop him, and Dreth couldn't really afford such a setback.

"Here then, you want it, you look after it." He passed the baby over to the wizard, who nearly dropped it in shock.

"Aaaawww! What did you do that for? Do you know the last time we had a baby down here?" moaned Percy.

"Uuuuuuu!" said Cuthbert.

"That's right! Never! You're such a spoilsport." Percy folded his arms and tried to sniff.

"Uuu uuu uuhhh ahhh uuuung?" asked Cuthbert, gesturing to the baby and his mouth.

"No, you can't have its tongue. It's too small anyway," said Dreth. "Now, fix Percy up. We still have that Golem behind us, remember?"

"Bah. This will come back and haunt you, mark my words," said Percy. Still, he held out his leg as Cuthbert reached into his bag and drew out the zombie fixing kit.

"It can't have been in that pit very long," said Smudge, hovering over the infant, which clapped its hands in delight.

"You're right." Dreth looked about. "Whoever left it may still be near. We'd better be careful."

"At least it seems to be in good health," said Redthorne. He leaned his staff against the wall and made a complicated gesture. There was a flash of light and a bottle of milk appeared in his hand. "Dinner time."

"Very convenient," said Dreth. "You always carry a milk conjuring spell with you?"

"I am a wizard of the 11th order of White Light, capable of many spells beyond your ken creature," replied the mage haughtily, as the baby sucked happily at the meal.

"Mmmm." Dreth wasn't convinced. There was something going on here. However, centuries of half-life had taught him patience. He would find out in due course, or it would be baby brains for breakfast. He looked at the zombies. "Are we ready?"

Percy was standing up carefully, testing his damaged leg whilst leaning on Sprat. "I think so."

"Good. I suggest you watch where you step from now on." Dreth turned to the wizard. "Keep the brat quiet, or I'll be having a sudden snack." He gestured at Percy. "Let's go."

The zombie muttered something under his breath, but limped through the door, being careful to step around the pit. The others followed, with the mage, still holding the baby, bringing up the rear. Sprat trotted next to him, fascinated by the little elf.

~ \* ~

Furn sloped forward, bow ready and senses straining. The rest of the group was close behind, in standard dungeon formation. The sorceress was in the center, protected by the other warriors.

He wiped his brow. Elves weren't supposed to sweat, but the strain was beginning to take its toll on them all. They had encountered several dangerous creatures, and brave hunters had fallen in battle fighting them off. Still more had succumbed to a swathe of deadly traps, and they had just discovered the half eaten remains of Fyy Fleetfoot, their best scout.

Still, they were the best of Jollygreenwood, so they pushed on. They had a job to do, and they would do it or die trying. Unfortunately, thought Furn, it was looking as if the latter would be the likely outcome.

He stopped suddenly, raising his hand as they rounded a corner. A short distance away was a creature. A zombie! He drew his bow back and fired in one smooth motion, hitting the beast in the arm. It fell back with a dry hiss.

The other elves moved forward, bows ready and blades drawn. The mage started to chant a spell.

The zombie crawled back, to be replaced by another figure in a long robe. *Another zombie*, Hurn thought as he threw his bow to the ground and drew his rapier. No, not a zombie, it was moving too fast, he barely had time to get his weapon up as the attacker swung his black blade around in a low sweep.

He blocked, but the dark sword simply smashed through the metal of his rapier, leaving him staring at a stump.

As the others rushed up to help him, the creature thrust, moving far faster than he had ever seen anything move before. The blade pierced his chest, and now he could hear the laughter, the cold evil laughter, in his head.

As he felt his life energy sucked away into the metal of the sword, the shouts of his comrades faded, to be replaced by a dark voice that became his whole world.

"*Blooooo*," it hissed. "*Blooooo*."

~ \* ~

Dreth pulled Darkblood out of the body of the elf and whirled to meet another attack. He swung again, but the elf he was now facing ducked, and he clove naught but air.

He risked a glance around as his enemy danced back to avoid his follow-up thrust. Cuthbert had dragged himself backwards and was busy pulling the arrow out of his arm, moaning all the while.

Percy and Sprat were trying to fend off another elf, whilst Smudge was flying around yet another, nipping in and biting where she could, whilst avoiding the swings from his sword.

Parrying a blow, he stepped back. They needed to do something quickly, in a moment the elves would overwhelm them.

"Down!" cried Redthorne from behind, and he obeyed as a large pulse of yellow energy passed over his head, enveloping several of the enemy and reducing them to cinders. Cries went up from several of the elves and Dreth grinned to himself.

However, the spell faded far too quickly. As it dissipated Dreth saw a tall female elf in long robes, chanting a counterspell. "Damn," he said. "There's a sorceress with them!"

The surviving elves moved forward again, whilst Dreth and the others withdrew slightly.

"You will die for eating Fyy, foul beasts," said one of the elves, who was dressed in gilded armor and wielding a glowing white sword. Evidently the leader.

"Who the Dreg is Fyy?" asked Dreth, trying to take a position that would block the corridor.

"Who cares?" said Darkblood, "just let me at him, I will suck his life force out to feed my own."

The elves scowled.

"Not helping sword," said Dreth. He braced himself as they closed in.

Something large and indistinct leapt out of a side passage with a howl, and landed on one of the elves guarding their mage. The elf screamed in agony as his arm was torn clean off, spraying blood everywhere. Another two beasts followed, jumping into the Elven hunting party and throwing them into confusion.

"What is it? What is it?" cried one, swinging his sword blindly in front of him as his colleague went down.

"Ware!," shouted the sorceress. "They're invisible!"

Dreth stared at the Elven leader as he looked back and forth between his howling men and the undead party,

his position now compromised.

As another of his warriors screamed, he snarled at Dreth. "Damn you! This isn't finished, I'll kill you later."

"Hah, join the queue," said Dreth, but he was talking to air. The leader had jumped into the fray against the new attackers, evidently able to see the creatures.

"What's going on?" asked Smudge.

"Let's get out of here whilst they're distracted," he answered, turning and moving quickly away down a random tunnel. "Leave that thing Cuthbert!" he said, but the zombie shook his head as he heaved at the elf Dreth had killed earlier.

"Uuuu huuu."

The group trotted away, nearly losing Sprat to another pit trap.

Eventually, after well and truly losing themselves in the maze of passages, Redthorne cried out for a rest.

Dreth nodded, and they stopped in a corner. "Percy and Sprat, go back a ways, make sure no one is following us. Cuthbert, Smudge, check down there and over there." He indicated the two passageways ahead. "Be careful of traps."

Percy looked longingly at the Elven corpse, but he and the others moved off into the gloom to make sure they were all clear.

Dreth drew Darkblood and wiped the blade down.

"Delicious," hummed the sword. "I always did enjoy elf. They have so much more energy in them."

"What were those creatures back there?" said Redthorne, patting the baby, who was squirming about in his grasp.

"Some kind of invisible wolf-man as far as I could see," replied Dreth. He looked at Darkblood. "Was that your doing, me being able to see them? The others obviously couldn't."

"Just one of the advantages of carrying me into battle," said the blade smugly.

"Hmm," said Dreth, looking up as Percy and Sprat returned. "Well?"

"I could hear something in the distance, but it didn't seem to be getting closer," said the zombie. "I think we're alright for a little while." He squatted down and took a large bite out of the arm of the elf Cuthbert had brought along.

"Oh! Elf meat is so tender!" he said, chewing blissfully. "Here lad, I promised you a liver." He turned back to the body, but was interrupted by Smudge, who came zipping back at a fast pace, even for her.

"What's wrong?" asked Dreth.

"You mentioned a Golem was after you yes?" Asked the Fearie.

"Yes."



Neil Hartley.

"Big fellow, glowing red eyes is he?"

"Where is it?" asked Redthorne.

"Back away. I don't think it saw me. It was just standing there, not moving."

"Maybe it's run out of magic or something," said Percy.

"We should be so lucky," said Dreth. "Ah, here's Cuthbert. About time! Anything up there?"

"Uuuu hhhhuuu!!!" said Cuthbert, pointing urgently down the corridor he had just explored.

"What's that?" said Dreth.

"Uuuu uuuuuhh uuuh hhhhuuuu!!!" repeated the zombie, jumping up and down.

"What did he say?" asked Redthorne.

"I'm not sure. Something about cake may be?" Dreth frowned.

"I think he said 'two eyes'," said Sprat.

"Eye cake?" asked Smudge.

"**Uuuuhh Hhhhuuuu!!!**" Cuthbert grabbed at his head in frustration, then stopped suddenly as an idea came to him. He held up 4 fingers.

"Fingers?" asked Percy, puzzled.

"Oh wait! I used to play this when I was alive," said Dreth, then wrinkled his brow. "I think. Four words?" He turned to Cuthbert who nodded, pointed and touched his nose.

"Is there something wrong with his nose now?" Percy said, still catching up.

"First word," said Dreth, as Cuthbert held up a finger.

"Small?" guessed Redthorne.

"A small word?" asked Smudge, hovering near the wall.

"The?" said the mage.

"And? IF? At? A? A! The first word is 'A'." Dreth folded his arms in satisfaction.

"Fourth word," Smudge said.

"Dance!" Percy finally caught on as Cuthbert gesticulated wildly.

Cuthbert frowned at him and shook his head.

"Drink?" said Dreth, then as the zombie changed actions... "Lean against the wall? Talk?"

"**Party!**" said Redthorne, as inspiration struck.

"Party. The fourth word is party. A something something party," said Smudge.

"Second word," Dreth said, beginning to enjoy himself.

"Thinking!"

Cuthbert scowled and scratched his head.

"Scratch! OW!" Percy rubbed his arm where Dreth had hit him.

Cuthbert looked at the floor, hoping for inspiration, then clicked his fingers and cupped his hand around his ear.

"Ear."

"No no, *sounds like*," corrected Smudge.

"Sounds like... pain?"

"No. Injury? Hurt? Ouch? Ow? Ow! Sounds like 'ow' "

"Now?"

"Wow?"

Cuthbert pulled the top of ears up.

"Drow?" said Dreth, and Cuthbert pointed at him. "Shit. A Drow Elf party."

The zombie touched at his nose and nodded madly, pointing up the passageway.

"Oh, oh! I have one! I have one! Let me have a go!" Percy waved his hands about wildly.

Dreth ignored him. "So we have Drow one way, Mr. Red eyes down that way, and our good friends the Elven hunters somewhere behind us." He looked at Redthorne as Cuthbert bent over the dead elf and began fiddling about with the mouth.

"It seems very crowded in here suddenly," he said, narrowing his eyes in thought and rubbing his chin.

"Don't forget the invisible wolf-men," said the wizard, in what sounded like overly casual tones.

"Finally! Everyone look! Look at me! I have a new tongue! A shiny new elf tongue! I can talk again! I can probably speak Elvish and everything." Cuthbert danced about, sticking his new body part out so everyone could see. "Hey, where did the Fearie go?"

Dreth looked about, down all three corridors. "I don't know, but I'm getting a bad feeling about all of this..."

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**Holding the Baby.**

Dreth looked at Redthorne holding the baby and frowned. "Groups of Woodland Elf Hunters don't go dungeon delving; they are just not the type. And suddenly there's a pack of Drow wandering about as well. They wouldn't be seeking treasure here." He pointed a bony finger. "And I don't think you were surprised to find that baby either." He tapped the pommel of Darkblood meaningfully. "Start talking."

The wizard scowled. "Pah, very well. This elf," he jiggled the baby, "is what I actually came here looking for. I've been sent to retrieve it by my Order. It was a stroke of luck finding it so easily, I must admit."

"You came to this dungeon looking for a baby elf?" asked Percy. "Not the treasure? It's very fabled our treasure you know."

"The treasure means nothing to me," said the mage. "The baby is what I wanted."

"So you have it now, why not just leave?" asked Dreth.

"Amazing! Doesn't want the treasure," Percy muttered to himself.

"It's not as simple as that. I don't know my way out of here, and I can't teleport far accurately enough with the baby to get outside, for technical reasons. I figured the best chance I have of staying alive is to stick with you, at least until a better choice comes along, but that's not too likely in this place."

"Can I have your share of the gold then?" asked Percy.

"So what's so special about this infant?" Dreth said, ignoring the zombie.

"This baby is destined to save the world from great evil. When he's older of course. The elves are no doubt from his tribe, out looking for him. The loss of a young one would be very disturbing to them."

"Or magical artifacts, I like magical artifacts."

"Shut up Percy," said Dreth. Then to the wizard: "So why not just give them the baby back? They're on the side of Good aren't they? It would get them off our backs at least."

"Pah, elves." Redthorne made a face. "They'll just take him back to their bloody forest and hide him away. 'Non interference of destiny'," he made the 'speech marks' sign with his hands. "You know how elves are. He needs *training* if he's to survive. To survive, grow up and be able to save us that is. My order can give him that training. Such a thing must not be left to chance."

Dreth looked at the zombies. "I don't know," he said.

"I say we hand them both over to the Drow, they might help us if we do," said Cuthbert.

"Just leave the wizard to it, he's dragging us down," interjected Percy.

"It's no good arguing, those choices are risky to you too," said Redthorne, obviously not liking where the conversation was heading. "What are we going to do? Where can we go now?"

"I don't know. It's not like a door is just going to open up conveniently to let us through, is it?" asked Dreth.

There was a grating noise from behind him. Part of the wall slid back, to reveal an entranceway.

"How did you do that Uncle Dreth?" asked Sprat.

"Never mind," said Cuthbert, "never look a gift unicorn in the eye. Come on." He heaved on the dead elf and pulled it into their unexpected escape route.

Dreth shrugged and followed him, as did the others. Once the last of them were inside, the wall slid shut again, blocking the exit.

"So now what?" asked Redthorne, looking about. They were in another service tunnel, slightly narrower than the main passage, but made of the same gray stone.

"I think we're supposed to follow this character," said Dreth, pointing at the large half cat, half man creature that had suddenly appeared in front of them. Standing on two legs, the muscular beast was human shaped, yet covered with a light brown fur. Startling green eyes stared out over a snub black nose and a mouth filled with sharp teeth. It was naked except for a pair of ragged shorts, and was gesturing at him with a clawed hand.

The others looked at each other. Percy crossed his eyes and put a finger to his head, making the 'mental' gesture. "Er, who would that be then?"

"This chap here, he's standing right in front of you," replied Dreth.

Cuthbert looked at Redthorne, who was frowning. "He's gone. Eaten too many brains, that's his problem. I always said the old gray matter was bad for you. Makes you unbalanced. Not enough nutritious fat content."

"I'm *not* unbalanced," said Dreth, annoyed now. Then something occurred to him. "Oh."

"That's the spirit," said Percy, patting him gently on the shoulder. "The first step to recovery is recognizing you have a problem."

"The only problem I have just now is you two imbeciles!" retorted Dreth, shrugging off the zombie. "There is a cat-man creature standing right here. He's obviously invisible."

"Of course, *invisible*," said Cuthbert, winking at Percy. "Humor him," he mouthed.

Dreth smacked him about the head. "Morons! This blade has the power to see the invisible. Yonder fellow is no doubt one of the creatures that attacked the elves. Wizard, can't you detect it?"

"Wait a minute," replied Redthorne, "I can do one better." He put the baby in a special sling he had rigged up to enable him to keep his hands free, and cast a short spell.

There was a general wobbling of the air, and suddenly the zombies jumped.

"Oh, *him*," said Cuthbert. "Invisible was he?"

Dreth ignored him. "Lead on," he said to the cat-man, who turned and loped off down the corridor.

He started after him, followed by Redthorne. Cuthbert and Percy each took a leg of the dead elf and dragged the body behind them, Sprat sat on the chest, enjoying the ride.

~ \* ~

Harm stalked down the passageway, following his scouts.

"It's just down here," said Smudge in a low voice. "They're trapped between you, those elves and the Golem."

"You had better be right," said the Drow leader. "I've lost too many of my men as it is, curse this trap riddled maze." He made a quick hand signal to his troops, and they drew their weapons.

"Watch out for Dreth, he's strong and fast, you'll have to immobilize him. And the wizard is dangerous too. The zombies are nothing," said Smudge, hovering over Harm's head. "Just around that corner." She pointed.

Harm made a curt gesture, shutting the Fearie up. His men crept forward and one of them peered cautiously down the corridor. After a short pause he stepped forward, moving out of Harm's sight for a moment. A second later he returned. "Nothing, there's no one there."

Harm looked at the Fearie.

"I swear! They were there just a few minutes ago! They can't have gone far! Maybe they're using invisibility, or perhaps Redthorne's teleported them!" Smudge flitted about nervously under Harm's angry gaze.

The Drow looked at his mage, Kruel Darkhand, and jerked his head. She nodded and walked around the corner. He followed.

"Nothing," she said, after casting her senses wide. "Nothing invisible in sight, if you see what I mean. And I would detect a manna residue from a powerful spell like teleport."

Harm drew a deep breath and his sword at the same time. "Fearie," he started. "I would like to make a short *sharp* point..."

"Sir! Something approaching," one of his scouts interrupted the pending execution. "It's big whatever it is."

"The Golem!" squeaked Smudge. "We're undone! It will butcher us all."

"Quiet you," said Harm. He looked around. "Battle formation. If this thing's half as bad as I've heard, we'll be lucky to escape with our lives should it think badly of us. I do the talking." He cast another look at the Fearie, who nodded.

The Drow spread out, swords drawn as heavy footsteps approached. Harm couldn't see anything with his infravision, but the two dots of red light were hard to overlook.

The Golem stopped in front of the elves and looked around. Its gaze came to rest on Harm, and it stepped closer. Bending down to face the Leader it spoke:

"Where is Dreth?"

"Honestly? I've no idea," replied Harm coolly. "But it may interest you to know..." He was cut off as the Golem rumbled threateningly.

"He's been here recently, I can *smell* him. Tell me where he went." The eyes pulsed.

The Drow put out a hand in a calming gesture. "Look, I don't know. However, my diminutive friend here," he pointed at Smudge, "says a wizard has the item we're searching for, and *he* is traveling with your friend. We're both after the same group. You want this Dreth fellow, and we're after the wizard. If you pat our backs, we'll scratch yours." Harm wondered what *could* actually scratch the animation. He made a mental note to confer with his mage later.

The Golem stood upright again, towering over the Drow. After a moment of contemplation it looked at Harm.

"What do you propose?"

~ \* ~

The cat-man turned another corner, and the group hurried to keep up.

"Slow down there," grumbled Percy.

"Drop the dead elf," said Dreth. "It's just slowing us down."

"Bah, alright for you to say, with your bag of tasty body parts," said Cuthbert.

Dreth stopped suddenly and drew Darkblood. The zombies squealed and jumped backwards as he strode towards them. Raising the sword he hacked once, twice, four times. Sheathing the blade again he picked up the now severed legs and arms and put them in his sack before turning to the undead.

"Now, leave the torso. You can have the limbs later, when we've arrived."

Cuthbert and Percy glared, but followed as he hurried off after their guide again.

As they traveled along something occurred to Dreth. He motioned to Sprat. "Sprout, back in the Orc caves you said you found something with the box. What was it?"

"Oh, just a lovely black marble uncle Dreth," said the little zombie, fishing around in his rags and producing a shiny spherical object.

Dreth plucked it out of his hands and examined it. It certainly did look like a marble. It was about the size of a large one, and made of some material which seemed to suck the light away. He showed it to Redthorne.

"Wizard, what do you make of this?"

The mage looked at it and squinted. "I don't know. It has a powerful magical aura though, whatever it is." He was distracted as the baby started to squirm. "Hush little one, are you hungry?" He made a gesture and produced another bottle of milk.

Dreth examined the 'marble' again for a moment and then looked at Sprat. "Tell you what little Spug, Uncle Dreth will give you a lovely elf arm in return for this. What do you say?"

"Oooh yes please uncle!" The little zombie beamed.

"Hey! That's our arm that is," complained Cuthbert, as Dreth fished around in his bag.

"Excuse me, who killed him exactly?" asked Dreth, glaring at the zombie as he presented the limb to Sprat, who cuddled it excitedly.

"We carried it along with us though," complained Cuthbert, but in a low voice.

"I think we've arrived," interrupted Redthorne.

They looked forward, to see the cat-man pressing various parts of the wall in careful order. Sure enough a section slid away.

Dreth stepped through cautiously. He found himself in a cavernous chamber, constructed from giant granite blocks. Grand columns rose majestically to a ceiling high above, hidden in the gloom. The walls he could see were draped with majestic, yet faded, tapestries depicting knights and wizards battling various dark creatures of the underworld. Low torches flickered in sconces set in regular intervals around the walls.

"Cooo, look at this place," said Percy.

"Fancy!" Cuthbert remarked. "Hello!"

*"Hello, ello, lo..."* came back the echoes.

"Heh, let me try one," Percy cupped his hands about his mouth, ready to shout.

"Be quiet you two," snapped Dreth. "Who knows what's waiting for us here?"

Percy dropped his hands quickly.

The party moved forward cautiously, their footsteps bouncing off the walls, seeming very loud in the still air.

"There," whispered Redthorne, pointing ahead.

Dreth squinted. A dais had been built in the center of the chamber. On the raised platform, facing away from them, was a large dusty throne, inset with gold and precious gems.

"Come closer. Don't be afraid." The whispered voice cut through the air.

"I'm Dreth, guardian of the undead way, I'm not afraid," said Dreth.

A dry chuckling ensued. "Oh, I know who you are; I know who you all are. I've been watching you. Come, come. Come around to where I can see you. It's been some time since I had visitors."

The group looked at each other and Dreth shrugged.

They did as they were bid, walking around to stand in front of the throne.

"Welcome! Welcome my friends! Do you know of me?"

Dreth pursed his lips. "Can't say I do," he said. "Can't say I do..."

The figure slumped in the throne sighed a ragged breath and waved a hand. "Well, it's only to be expected I suppose. You may approach me, I don't bite you know."

"No offence or anything, but you don't exactly look well," said Cuthbert.

"Look who's talking!" replied the man in the throne, as a maggot squirmed its way through the zombie's neck and wiggled around in puzzlement.

It was true though, he didn't look wonderful. Dressed in what were probably once fine clothes, the man had seen better days. His skin was hanging off, one eyeball was all white, and his scalp had only a few ragged wisps of hair protruding. Teeth were black or rotten, and his visible flesh was an unhealthy yellow color, pot marked with scabs and sores.

"You happen to catch me at a bad time is all," he said, as the group looked at each other uncertainly.

"Anyway, I didn't bring you here to listen to you badmouth me. If you don't want help then you're welcome to go back to your friends in the tunnels. Things didn't seem to be going so well out there."

Dreth put up a hand in a calming fashion. "Ignore Cuthbert, he's an idiot. Of course we would welcome any help you can give."

"Mmf." The ragged man snorted for a moment and glared at the zombies before carrying on. "My name is Harvey. Harvey Von McVon."

"Von McVon? What sort of name is that?" asked Percy.

"My name!" roared Harvey. "Want to make something of it?"

Percy made an 'all right then' face, but wisely, for once, said nothing.

Von McVon resumed his dialogue. "I've heard of your quest, and I would like to help you."

Dreth nodded. "Call me cynical if you will, but what do you get out of this?"

Harvey chuckled. "In return for my assistance, I just need a small favor."

"Here it comes," said Redthorne. "Pop over there and dispatch that demon for us would you?"

"Nothing so drastic wizard," said the ragged man. "I just need you to go and retrieve something for me. A simple operation."

"If it's so simple, why don't you do it, or your good cat-men friends?" asked Dreth, waving off in the direction they had come.

"They prefer the term cat-people actually. Very correct folk they are." He pulled himself sideways, to lean on one of the arms of the throne. "No, they won't help, at least to that extent. Ungrateful felines!" Harvey scowled. "As for me, I'm limited in where I can venture. Should I stray too far from this cursed throne," he slapped the item in question, "I will perish."

"Doesn't look like you're far off now," muttered Percy.

Dreth made a face. "Mmm. So what's this little quest of yours that's so easy?"

"I told you. Merely recover an item. It's in a crypt down yonder way," he waved towards the far end of the chamber, at a large stone door. "Crypts should be right down your alley I would have thought. Almost like a holiday." He wheezed strangely, and it took Dreth a moment to realize he was laughing.

"And what is this item? Last time we retrieved something for someone it didn't turn out so well," Dreth said, remembering the Runebox escapade.

"I don't know," replied the man. He held up his hand to forestall the protest. "Look, I'll come clean, alright?"

"That would be a first," muttered Redthorne.

"I was once a powerful wizard, and no, before you ask, I can't help your curse Dreth. Anyway, I was greedy, and I signed a deal with the Management here for eternal life."



"This all sounds very familiar," said Percy. "You two should have a good chat about reading contracts before you sign them." He pointed at Dreth and Harvey. Cuthbert sniggered.

"Quiet," said Dreth, irritated because the zombie had a point.

"As your friend mentioned," Harvey went on, "I didn't read the small print. The spell bound me to this throne. It regenerates me, keeps me alive, although not in pristine condition admittedly. I've festered here for generations, trying to escape. In fact I was the one that created the cat-people. They were supposed to work for me, to be my army, but they refused. Now they live in the caverns nearby and ignore me for the most part. Though they do sometimes help me out when I request it."

"And this object, which you still haven't told me about, will help you escape?" Dreth pondered the implications of such an item.

Harvey shook his head. "I don't know. This item is something that's being kept there by the Management. I *really* don't know what it is. All I know is that they think it's important, so I want it to piss them off. That is why the cat-people won't go there; they don't want to rile the rulers of this forsaken hole. I'm past caring, and you've already annoyed them." He slumped back in his throne. "There, the whole sordid story."

"You really don't know what it is?" asked Percy.

"I told you, no idea."

"And if we bring you this item, what do we get?" Dreth said.

Von McVon leaned forward and poked a scabby finger at them. "I can tell you how to get to the treasure. That's what you want isn't it?"

"Let me consult for a moment," Dreth replied, and went into a huddle with the others a little distance away from the throne. "What do you think?"

Percy shrugged. "Why not? We don't exactly know where we're going anyway. One way is as good as another."

"I don't trust him," said Redthorne.

"You're a wizard, you don't trust anyone," replied Cuthbert. "I don't trust you, come to that."

"If we do find this item, maybe we can take it with us," said Sprat, surprising everybody.

Dreth looked down at the little zombie. "My thinking exactly Spurt. Glad one of us is on the ball. And if we can't, then we bring it back here anyway, or discard it altogether." He turned back to Harvey, his decision made.

"We'll do it, but no guarantees."

Von McVon wheezed his laugh again. "Excellent. I knew you were the ones."

Dreth let that comment pass. "Any hints? A bit of help? Perhaps a map?"

"I can do one better." He raised his voice and shouted. "Tom!"

From the shadows one of the cat-men emerged, he was almost identical to the one from the tunnel, but had black fur.

"This is Tom, my assistant. He can show you the way."

"I though the cat-men didn't want to help?" asked Cuthbert, eyeing the newcomer uncertainly.

"Cat-people," corrected Tom with a low snarl, "is the correct term. We're a society of equals unbiased as to gender."

"Tom is my assistant," said Harvey. "He's more curious than the others it seems. Or maybe he's just spying on me for the rest of them. Eh Tom?" He squinted at the feline.

The cat man ignored the comment and licked a paw.

"Are you invisible?" asked Percy. "I mean, er..." He stopped, confused.

"No. Only some of us have that trait," said Tom. "I can still rip your throat out faster than you can blink though." He flexed a hand stuffed with sharp claws.

"Charming," said Percy with a sniff.

"Delightful as this little chat is, shall we get going?" asked Dreth.

"Wait a minute," said Redthorne. "I need to change the baby."

"Into lunch would be good," said Cuthbert, but quietly so the wizard wouldn't hear.

~ \* ~

"I just don't like it. Why split up when we're already so weak?" Xyth Greenfinger peered down the corridor.

Vish sighed. She was tired of listening to Xyth complain. His moaning was beginning to distract her, and that could be fatal in this place. "Because," she explained for the thousandth time, "Hammath has so commanded."

"But those invisible things are still around, we could end up like poor Rendath, newly married he was too."

"Our mage has cast spells on us. We should be able to see them now, as you well know. Anyway, if we can recover the baby we can all get out of here."

Greenfinger made a face. "None of us are going to get out of here. Hello? What's this?" He paused, running a finger lightly over a section of wall. "Some mechanism. No doubt a trap that will maim and poison us." He examined the stone carefully.

Vish Woodstroker rolled her eyes, but waited patiently as the other elf brought out his tools. A moaner he was, but Xyth was bloody good at avoiding traps, as well as spotting hidden things. He had already disarmed several snares that she would have walked straight into. He'd also found the area they were now in, which seemed to be cut from a different rock than the maze that had been slowly killing them before. She hefted the tube Marrim Runecaster had given her. To be used against the wizard if they encountered him, she had said. Vish didn't want to encounter anything.

There was a click and Xyth stood up. A portion of the wall fell away to reveal a large and gloomy room

beyond. "After you," he said.

Scowling, Vish drew her rapier and stepped carefully through the doorway. Mist crept atmospherically over the floor, and the temperature dropped rapidly.

"Come on in," she hissed moving forward slowly.

Xyth crept in behind her and made a noise. "It's cold!"

"Shhh!" said Vish, looking around. "I think there's something over that way." She stalked through the mist towards several large caskets lined against the wall. "Oh crap. We're in some sort of tomb, let's get out of here."

She turned to go, but as she did so the fog erupted next to them, to reveal an enormous shape. "Hur hur! Gut gonna have me some elf!" it said in a loud voice, lunging at her with huge hands.

Xyth screamed and danced backwards as Woodstroker ducked and stabbed at the monster with her blade. It struck home, but was merely a pin prick to the creature.

"Aaahhh! Bad! Gut hurt! Gut bash!"

Vish jumped high in the air to avoid the clumsy attack, but it had been a ruse. Another hand grabbed her, pinning her arms to her side. "Xyth!" she cried, but the other elf was nowhere to be seen.

A horrendous visage drew close, crooked yellow teeth in a massive mouth loomed. Fetid breath washed over her as her captor examined its prize.

"Let me go!" The elf struggled to speak.

"No chance!" The hand squeezed.

Vish opened her mouth, gasping for air. She felt her ribs crack, and her arms break as the giant tightened his grip. "Bastard..." she just about managed to croak, then the world faded...

~ \* ~

"This way, keep up please." Tom scurried silently along as the others tried to match his pace.

"Slow down, there could be traps," complained Cuthbert, "Sprat can't keep up and neither can I."

Dreth nodded. "The zombie makes a good point for once, about the traps I mean," he said.

Tom folded muscular arms. "I wouldn't fall for any traps," he said.

"Well, I might," said Dreth, "and if I get cut in half I'll make sure you suffer the same fate."

The cat-man sneered, but slowed his pace.

"How much further?" asked Percy. He peered around at the walls, which were almost black in color.

"Not far now," hissed their guide.

"Are you sure this is wise?" asked Redthorne.

"No, but then nothing I've done recently is wise," replied Dreth. "Come to think of it, I wasn't too wise getting into this whole mess in the first place. Percy was right about me not reading that contract."

"Told you so," said the zombie, overhearing.

"You can hardly talk can you?" said Cuthbert. "Bet you didn't plan on being undead all your life did you?"

"Oh, pot calling the cattle black!"

"Kettle not cattle," interrupted Dreth. "And be quiet you two, I think we're here."

They drew up beside Tom, who was standing next to an archway. Peering through, Dreth could make out some narrow stairs heading down. "There's no chance these stairs are trapped of course," he said dryly to the cat-man.

Tom merely grinned smugly. "I don't know. This is as far as I go. I'll wait here for you, though you probably won't come back up."

"I had a cat once," said Dreth. "I had it neutered." Ignoring the look on Tom's face, he turned to Percy. "Your turn. Get going."

"One day you're going to run out of guinea cows, and then where will you be?" the undead grumbled as he gingerly stepped onto the first stair.

"I'll manage somehow," said Dreth, pushing Cuthbert down next.

Once the zombies had climbed a little way in, Dreth followed, with Redthorne and the baby behind. Sprat brought up the rear.

The stairs wound around in a spiral, and were narrow and uneven, making the footing treacherous. The gloom deepened as they descended, and it started to get colder. Still, no traps were sprung, and they made it down to the bottom safely.

"Well, so far so good," said Percy.

They examined their new surroundings. There wasn't much to see. A short, wide passage, made of the same black stone, led up to a solid looking wooden doorway.

"Forward!" commanded Dreth. "Go around the wall though. I don't like that patch of light stone in the middle there."

The zombies complied, making it to the end of the short corridor unscathed. The others followed cautiously and soon all were stood contemplating the portal.

"May as well," shrugged Dreth, and pushed.

The door swung open with a creak, to reveal a cavernous dark chamber. Mist crawled over the floor, and the walls and high ceiling stretched out as far as they could see, disappearing into the gloom.

"Ooh!" said Percy. "We never had mist. That is *so* cool!"

"Harvey said the item was here, stored in the middle casket," said Redthorne. "It must be that one over there, on that platform." He pointed to a raised section some distance away, which stood higher than the surrounding fog. Perched on top of the dais were several large caskets.

The group started forward, but almost immediately Cuthbert kicked something. He stooped and fumbled about, trying to locate what he'd kicked.

"A skeleton, poor bugger. All crushed," he said eventually.

"No doubt it wasn't a skeleton when the crushing took place," said Dreth. "Which leads me to my next question."

"What did the crushing?" Redthorne finished for him.

"Er, probably he did," said Percy, pointing.

"Oh fug!" Dreth backpedaled quickly, followed in short order by the others, as a giant form lumbered towards them, an idiot grin on his face.

"Gut eat!" Boomed a voice, which echoed around the hall. The large shape, at least three times as tall as Dreth, was dressed in tattered brown rags. His greasy brown hair fell past broad shoulders, and he was in serious need of a bath. A long warty nose overhung a wide mouth, full of crooked yellow teeth.

Dreth turned just in time to see the door slam shut. "Scatter!" he shouted, as the huge figure swung at them.

They needed no telling. Redthorne was picking up speed rapidly, the baby crying as it was bounced around. Of Sprat there was no sign. Cuthbert and Percy were dodging left and right.

Dreth sprinted into the dark as the giant's laughter bounced off the walls. "Such fun!"

"Let me at it! I'll slice its fingers off! What a feast!" Darkblood complained from his sheath.

Dreth ignored the sword and ducked behind a boulder, which turned out to also be sheltering the wizard, who was squatting down, a hand over the baby's mouth to keep it quiet.

"Can you cast some sort of protection spell on me?" said Dreth. "A shield of some kind?"

Redthorne nodded. "Keep the baby quiet while I work."

Dreth grabbed the infant and stuffed some of his robe into its mouth as the mage hastily worked his magic. In the distance he could dimly see the giant chasing Percy, who was running in circles and screaming.

There was a sudden flash of light, and a shimmer surrounded Dreth briefly.

"Done! You should be good for about 20 minutes," said Redthorne. "The shield will protect you from crushing but not sharp objects. I figured that thing would rely on smashing rather than swords."

"Thanks for the tip," said Dreth and stood up. He drew Darkblood as he walked forward, looking like the angel of death as he strode through the fog.

"**Giant!** Come on and pick on someone not your own size!" he shouted.

The beast stopped running after Percy and looked around. "Little man die now!" he said, and lumbered forward.

Dreth held his ground, hoping the wizard's spell would be up to it. The giant was big! Fat bounced as it jogged towards him. Ugly too. Its face made Cuthbert look pretty.

As it closed the giant slowed, puzzled as to why its prey was not running away.

Dreth raised Darkblood, which positively hummed with bloodlust. "Feed meeee!" it moaned.

"Giant! Surrender now. You cannot hurt me. I'm Dreth the Giant Slayer."

"Gut bash! Gut no afraid!" came the response.

"Gut! Is that your name? Listen to me. I am Dreth of the Undead Way! We're from the dungeon too. No need to attack us!" Dreth tried reasoning.

Gut merely snarled, and grabbed him with a giant fist, enveloping Dreth. Darkblood was held out horizontally though, and the sword pierced the giant's hand, resulting in a howl of pain of deafening proportions.

"Bloooooo!" shrieked the blade, drinking life essence.

Still, the cut was not fatal, and giant was big and strong. He squeezed hard.

The spell held, and a look of puzzlement washed over the huge face as Dreth remained unharmed.

"Have you had enough? Or do you want me to get angry?"

Gut dropped him and, clutching his injured hand, backed away. "Gut sorry Mr. Dreth! Gut not know! Please not hurt Gut!"

Dreth picked himself up off the floor and dusted himself down. "That's better. A bit of respect!" He turned around. "Come on out! Our friend has learned his lesson."

Slowly the others emerged from the haze. Sprat popped out of the fog next to Dreth, making him jump. "I found a stick!" he said happily, showing Dreth a short tube clutched in his hand.

"Yes yes, go and play with it somewhere else, there's a good minion," said Dreth, keeping his eyes on Gut.

Sprat nodded and skipped off, waving his new toy around as the others approached.

"Good job," nodded Redthorne.

Dreth spoke to Gut, who was sitting down now, blubbing to himself. "Giant! Which casket have you been told to guard?"

"That one sir, please not kill Gut sir! They said Gut hurt people as long as box not touched." Gut pointed at the raised platform they had spotted earlier.

"Very good," Dreth replied. "Stay there then. If you are good I will er, let you help us some more."

"Oh joy," muttered Cuthbert.

They climbed onto the dais and looked at the casket, which was made of dark stone. The cover was of the same material, without adornment, and appeared to be simply rested on the top.

"It's a bit coffin like isn't it?" said Percy cheerfully. He heaved on the lid, which slid open in a cloud of dust.

They peered in. "Cooo! Look at that!" said Cuthbert.

"A babe," Percy replied. "Cute, and tasty looking."

Dreth slapped his hand away. "No eating the merchandise. This woman must be what old rotten wants." He brushed a few cobwebs away and looked her over.

She was, he had to admit, fairly attractive for a corpse. Long hair was arranged carefully about her. It was striped white and black, like some sort of desert animal Dreth only half remembered. She was garbed in a simple long black robe, and her skin was a pale and delicate cream color. Her hands, which were crossed over her in the classic pose, were adorned with four rings, each one had a different colored jewel set in the middle, which sparkled even in the limited light.

"Well, no sense hanging around." He bent over and then stopped. She had opened her eyes and was looking at him.

"Er, hello? Who are you?" she said. "Are you the one?"

Dreth paused and then straightened up. "Could be," he said. "Name's Dreth. We were, er, just passing by. So. Ah. How's it going with you then?"

Percy tittered and whispered something in Cuthbert's ear.

"I'm waiting," the woman said, sitting up in one swift motion, vampire style.

"What a lovely name," said Cuthbert. "I'm Cuthbert, this is Percy. Zombies first class at your service."

"Ignore these idiots. Who are you waiting for?" Dreth enquired politely.

"I..." She frowned. "I don't know."

Redthorne tapped Dreth on the shoulder. "A word?" he said, and moved away.

Dreth followed as the woman rose, slightly unsteadily, to her feet.

"Let me help you there," said Percy, as she climbed out of her coffin.

Cuthbert, determined not to be outdone, leapt forward. "You must be hungry after sleeping so long. Here, allow me to offer you a bit of Halfling foot, it's nice and aged." Cuthbert proffered the said item.

"Put that disgusting thing away," said Percy, knocking Cuthbert's hand. "She's a lady of refinement, any buffoon can see that. A Halfling's smelly foot isn't going to satisfy her, she needs something more along the lines of juicy eyeballs, or a tender baby parts."

"Well, I don't have any baby eyeballs, you'll have to ask Redthorne for those, but I *do* have a foot." Cuthbert waved the thing in the air, losing the last remaining toe in the process. "Which is one foot more than you have, so why don't you just stand aside and let me look after the lady?"

He turned back to speak to the newly animated female, but she'd wandered off, looking around in puzzlement at the surroundings.

Dreth huddled with Redthorne, who spoke in a low hiss. "Are you really going to take her back to that creature on the throne?"

"That was the deal," said Dreth.

"But who knows what he'll do with her?"

Dreth shrugged. "Seems a shame I admit, but what can you do?"

"Take her with us! You can't allow her to fall into that creatures' grasp!"

"I agree with the wizard," said Cuthbert, who had wandered up. "We should keep her and use her to bargain our way past the Golem."

Dreth pursed his thin lips. "Good point. But what about old cat-face and his friends outside? We have enough people angry at us, without adding more." He looked around. The newly resurrected woman was standing a little way away, whilst Percy hovered about her, trying to make small talk. The giant was sitting in the mist, sucking a finger and humming a horribly out of tune tune.

Dreth made a decision. "We'll take the giant back with us. Old McVon doesn't know what's in the box, so he says. It could be anything. We shall say it was sparky over there we found." He jerked a thumb at Gut.

"Do you think he'll swallow that?" asked Redthorne. "He's rotten, not stupid."

Dreth scowled. "He'll have to. Come on, let's go."

Percy wandered over with the woman in tow.

"What's your name my dear?" Dreth asked.

The woman frowned for a moment. "I can't remember. Something beginning with 'M' I think."

"Matilda?" suggested Cuthbert. "Myrtle maybe?"

"Myrtle! What kind of name is that?" scoffed Percy. "She's obviously a Maria, or perhaps a Millie."

The woman shook her head. "None of those sound familiar."

"I'll just call you M for now then," said Dreth. He walked up to Gut and kicked him in the shin. "Hey! Big man. I've a task for you."

"Gut listen."

"You are re-assigned." Dreth paused at the giant's puzzled look. "I mean you have a new job. Ok?"

"Ok."

"Good. Come with me, I'll explain what to do on the way."



The Giant stood up and nodded. "Gut follow."

"I just hope he can fit up the stairs," said Cuthbert as they headed towards the exit.

~ \* ~

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Sooth Slyfoot hissed at Xyth as they moved swiftly down the tunnel. He was usually good at knowing where he was, but this dungeon was not his precious forest, and it was harder to keep track of the route.

"Of course I do," retorted Xyth, but there was a hint of doubt in his voice.

"We've already been gone too long," said Hurn, who was carrying his favorite rune-sword. "Vish is long dead by now."

"She may be alright, Vish is a fine warrior," said Sooth. He didn't believe it himself really.

Frell Keeneye, bringing up the rear of the impromptu rescue party, merely shook his head.

The four elves moved swiftly down one passage and up another, following Xyth's inner map.

"It's somewhere around here..." Xyth said, but Frell cut him off.

"Quiet! Do you hear that?"

Four sets of pointy ears cocked, as they concentrated on listening.

"Someone's coming!" whispered Sooth. He looked around for a retreat route. They didn't want unnecessary trouble now. "Back! Down here!"

"Careful!" shouted Xyth, leaping forward and pushing Sooth to one side.

A set of spikes that had been carefully concealed in the walls but a moment before, shot out into the space where Sooth had been standing.

They picked themselves up off the floor. "Thanks," said Sooth, shaken.

"That's torn it," said Hurn. "They've heard us. Weapons!"

The four readied themselves, falling into combat formation as a group of shadowy figures rounded the corner.

"Drow!" hissed the elves as one.

"Fair skins!" the reply came back.

Sooth's mouth drew itself into a scowl. The dark elves were a hated enemy, an anathema to everything his kind stood for.

"Shit," murmured Xyth as more of the Drow came into view, "we're outnumbered."

Sooth saw he was right. There must have been about a dozen of them. "Get ready to run," he hissed, his eyes never leaving the enemy, who were closing slowly with weapons drawn.

"Run? They are Drow!" Hurn spat.

"There are at least twelve of them!" Sooth answered, "I don't want to commit suicide right now thank you!"

The elves ducked as one as the Drow released a hail of crossbow bolts.

"Arg! I'm hit!" cried Frell, pulling the bolt out of his arm.

"Run!" shouted Sooth, and they ran, Xyth leading the way.

There were shouts of glee from behind them, and their dark cousins took up the chase...

~ \* ~

"What's this?" Tom asked as Gut heaved himself out of the stairwell, up which he had just about managed to squeeze.

"Nice to see you too," said Percy, who had taken a dislike to the cat man.

"This is your masters' prize," said Dreth.

Tom sneered, showing long canines. "He's not my master. We cat people acknowledge no outsider as our superior. You're saying this giant is what the Harvey wanted?"

"The very same," said Cuthbert cheerfully. "You get a lot of bang for your gold with us!"

"Where's your wizard?" the cat man asked.

"Dead," replied Dreth. "Died fighting the guardian down there."

"It was a doozo!" chimed in Percy. "A demon as big as a house!"

"Doozy," corrected Dreth. He turned to Tom. "Lead on then pussycat," he said.

Tom hissed at him, but, after one more puzzled glance at the giant, stalked off down the tunnel. Dreth grinned and followed him.

The others trailed behind, the zombies unusually quiet. Sprat fiddled with the tube he had found as he brought up the rear.

It wasn't too long before the group once more entered the large throne room. All seemed to be as before, until they approached Harvey anyway.

"Hey! You're looking better," said Cuthbert. "Did you take something? Can I have some?"

Indeed, Harvey was looking considerably healthier than in their last encounter. His rags were now fine wizard robes, and his skin fairly gleamed with health. Long black hair was tied back on his head. Only his eyes remained cold and dead.

He smiled crookedly as Dreth stood in front of him. "You succeeded in your task?" he asked. Even his voice sounded healthy, vibrant even.

"I really must have a go on that throne," Percy said in a low voice. Cuthbert nodded.

"Harvey, may I introduce your prize." Dreth held out a hand and Gut clumped into view.

"*This*? This was in the casket?" Harvey stood up, frowning.

"Yes. Absolutely. Why? Not what you were expecting?" Dreth looked askance at the wizard.

Smoke was now emanating from Harvey's ears. "Where is she?" he demanded. "Where is the woman?"

"Woman?" Dreth could have earned a standing ovation for his acting. "What woman? We found this giant in the casket. Unless your cat man took us to the wrong crypt of course." He shrugged and tried, not very successfully, to look innocent.

"That's Cat *person* to you," scowled Tom.

**"I will not be cheated!"** Harvey Von McVon thundered. He raised his hands and muttered several words of Power, which bounced around the room.

Dreth stood back and put his hand to his sword. The zombies hid behind Gut.

"I think the cat poop is about to fly," whispered Cuthbert, peering through the giant's legs.

There was a shimmering in the air, back in the gloom of the chamber. Harvey smiled. "Ah, there you are my dear. Would you like to approach and say hello? Don't be shy now. That's right." McVon grinned and nodded insanely as M stepped forward hesitantly. Redthorne close behind.

"What happened?" hissed Dreth at the wizard. "I thought you said you could keep her cloaked?"

The mage shrugged. "Sorry, he took me by surprise. Whatever he is, Harvey is a powerful spell caster."

"Great, just what I need," said Dreth. He moved to stand in front of the woman, blocking her path.

"Stand aside!" McVon commanded. "She's mine! With her potential I can rule this mangy dungeon, and the world beyond too! Once her power is realized, there will be nothing I cannot do!" He threw his head back and laughed heartily, a sound which echoed around his chamber.

"Good evil laugh though," Percy said.

"Absolutely," agreed Cuthbert. "Much better than that last one. You remember? About fifty years ago? That anti-paladin."

"Oh yes, mind you I think..."

**"Quiet fools!"** commanded Harvey, cutting the zombies off. "Cease your babbling. Move aside creature, and I will allow you your continued miserable existence."

"Oh, I'm sooo scared," said Dreth, drawing Darkblood.

"You cannot hope to stand against me. I will crush you like a bug!"

"You and who's army?" said Dreth.

"How about this one?" Harvey made a gesture, and from the shadows emerged a large number of Cat people.

"Touché!" said Cuthbert.

Dreth looked from side to side, counting as the cat men slid forward, fangs glistening in the low light.

"My friends!" Harvey raised a robed arm. "Kill this meddlesome meddler, bring me the woman!"

"No."

"I shall..." Harvey did a double take at the cat man who had spoken. "What?"

"I said no." The half-feline who stepped forward was larger than most of the others, and clad in an altogether better class of loin cloth.

"What do you mean 'no'? What's the meaning of this disobedience?"

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"It's no longer your time wizard. Now is the time of the Cat-People. With this woman we shall rise up and assume our rightful position in society, that is to say - the rulers."

"Your rightful position is doing what I say!" screamed Harvey, flecks of spittle flying from his mouth.

"No longer!"

"You don't know how to tap her power, or even what it is!"

"We're patient. We'll find out." The Cat leader dismissed the wizard and turned to Dreth. "We have no argument with you. Step away from the woman, and you and your friends will be allowed to proceed unharmed."

Dreth looked around and moved backwards, to stand next to M. There was a pause and then in a blur of motion he grabbed her and raised Darkblood, holding the sword against her throat. "No one move!"

Cuthbert rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on! That has to be **the** corniest line anywhere!"

"What would you suggest then?" Dreth glowered, keeping a close eye on Harvey and his cat buddies.

"Oh, I don't know." Cuthbert said, thinking. "How about: Move and she gets it?"

"That's just as bad!" interjected Percy. "I was thinking more like: Stand still! Should thou move I will slay this innocent female!"

"Oh, not bad," Cuthbert said. "Try that one."

Dreth heaved a sigh and tried again. "Stand still! Should thou move I will..." He never finished the new improved line.

There was a crash and the door to the chamber flew open. Four elves piled through, swords drawn. They had moved a good way into the room before they realized they weren't alone, and skidded to a halt, standing back to back with weapons wavering to and fro.

"What the fu..." one started to say before he, in turn, was cut off.

All eyes turned to the door again, as about a dozen Drow raced in, intent on the prey in front of them. "There they are! Get themmmmm..." The leader of the dark elves trailed off as he took in the scene.

The cat people looked at the Drow. The Drow looked at Harvey. Harvey looked at Redthorne, who looked at Dreth. Dreth looked at the elves. Gut looked at everybody.

There was silence for a moment.

**"Kill them all!!!"** Harvey screamed and threw a fireball at Dreth, who ducked and parried with Darkblood at the same time.

The Fireball bounced off the blade and careered into a cat person, who exploded in a mass of blood and singed fur.

The room erupted as everyone attacked everyone else. Harvey threw spells about almost at random, causing several more of the felines to burst into flame before the leader leapt at him and forced him to defend himself with a staff, pulled seemingly from nowhere.

The Elves spotted Redthorne and the baby, and tried to cut their way through to them, but were bogged down by Cat people responding to their attack.

The Drow split up into two groups. One group tried to reach the elves, and the other attempted to reach the wizard. A random spell from Harvey hit one of them, neatly removing his head.

One of the cat people swiped at Dreth, and he retaliated with a howling Darkblood, slicing the attacker down the middle, spilling intestines onto the floor in a pile of steaming offal. He whirled and pushed M toward the zombies, who were still sheltering behind Gut. "Here, take her! Get over to that exit!" He pointed at a small door in the corner.

The zombies nodded and dragged M away, just as one of the cat people sprang at them. It landed on Gut, claws digging into the giant.

Gut howled and went berserk, batting the creature across the room. It landed in the middle of the elves, which were in the center of a three way fight between the Drow and the Cat people.

Elf and feline scattered as the giant flailed around madly, forcing the cat leader to jump out of the way of a frenzied swipe.

Harvey took advantage of the distraction to run after the zombies, but he collided with Redthorne, who was throwing white light at a Drow sorceress. The dark elf mage was obviously not a master, but she was just powerful enough to fend off the worst of Redthorne's spells and force the mage back, occasionally throwing a spell in turn.

Harvey took one of these spells in the chest as he ran into Redthorne. It bounced off his wards leaving him unharmed, but knocked him to the floor in the process. Dreth cut at him as he passed, slicing into his side.

Darkblood pierced McVons' skin, and he cried out in pain, throwing a bolt of power in a reflex action. The purple energy bounced around the room and fried two of the Drow, including the sorceress, as well as several more cat-people before hitting Gut squarely in the back.

The Giant roared, and kicked an elf across the chamber.

Dreth reached the zombies, who were tugging frantically at the door. "Open the bloody thing!" He cried, chopping at a cat woman who was about to pounce at Redthorne. She yowled as Darkblood drank her essence greedily.

"Allow me!" said Redthorne. He pointed his staff, and the door blew apart.

"Good stuff," said Percy, and dove down into the darkness beyond, followed by Dreth, Cuthbert, Sprat and M. Redthorne threw one parting pulse of white light at Harvey, who deflected it, before ducking down after them.

There was a scream from Harvey as he saw his prize getting away. He knocked a cat man away with one hand and pointed a finger with his other. A blast of fire erupted from the tip, to explode with enormous force above the doorway. Stone shards flew, cutting down several more cats and another Drow. The room shook with the force of the blast, and then, with a loud rumble, the ceiling collapsed.

~ \* ~

"Wooo yeah!" Cuthbert grinned as the party hurried down the small corridor that they found themselves in. "High five!" he said to Percy.

"I think I lost a finger!" complained the other zombie.

"High four then!"

"Yeah!"

"I'm glad you two enjoyed yourselves," said Dreth dryly, wiping blood off his sword. "Is everybody all right?"

Apart from Percy's lost finger, it seemed the group had come through unscathed.

"I need a rest though," said Redthorne.

"Let's move a little distance away from that madhouse first," said Dreth. He looked at M. "Er, sorry about that back there. I was kind of at a loss what to do."

"So you thought you would try and cut my throat?" M replied.

Dreth shrugged. "Seemed the way to go at the time."

M made a face, but said nothing.

They hurried along the narrow tunnel, which was hewn from sandy brown rock with an uneven ceiling. Dreth and Redthorne had to duck on more than one occasion as the roof dipped down. The ground below them was loosely packed earth.

The path wound back and forth, like a meandering stream, for a good period of time. Certainly long enough for Redthorne to complain again.

"I want to get out of this passage first," said Dreth. He looked ahead. "Is that light up there?"

It was. The group approached cautiously as the route opened up, and they found themselves standing outside the entrance to a small cave in the side of a low hill. Dim light seemed to emanate from an unseen source all around them. The ground stretched away into the distance, covered in scraggly plants which hugged the earth,

as if afraid to be seen.

"We're outside! Outside!" Percy bent down to touch the ground. "Out again, after all these years."

"I don't know," said Cuthbert. "Unless something radical has happened I don't think this is outside."

"Of course it is," argued the other zombie. "How could it not be? There are no walls! Look!" He pointed at the absence of such.

"I'm with Cuthbert on this one," said Dreth. "Unless things have been rearranged, 'outside' had a sun."

"Could be night," said Percy stubbornly.

"True, but even so, there are a few tell tale signs that suggest your theory is flawed."

"Like what?" Percy folded his arms.

"Well," Dreth pointed upwards. "Outside doesn't have a bloody great rocky ceiling high above for a start. And this black sand doesn't look very earthlike. We're in some sort of massive underground cavern."

"No cavern. The Under Plains!" A new voice piped up.

Dreth reached for his sword. "Who said that?"

"It was I! I spake!"

They looked around as a small skinny figure stepped out from behind a patch of dry, yellow brush.

"A goblin? What are you doing here?" asked Cuthbert. "Lost are you?"

"I'm a Black Goblin! I roam these plains. I know no master! I wander where I please."

"Ah, a local." Dreth stepped forward. "Tell me, ah..."

"Gerald," the goblin said.

"Tell me Gerald, where are we exactly?"

"Thee truly knows not?"

"I just said so didn't I?"

The Goblin puffed out his skinny chest. "Ware travelers! Thee standeth upon the Under Plain of DUME!" The small creature cackled and rubbed its hands together in maniacal fashion.

"And what, pray tell," asked Dreth, "is the Under Plain of Doom?"

"Not Doom, DUME. D-U-M-E," replied the goblin, spelling it out.

"Of course, how silly of me," Dreth stated, hanging on to his patience by a thread.

"The Under Plain is a dark, dark place. Dark and black and dark." The goblin hunched over, warming to his

tale. "A vast plain of darkness, black darkness, ruled over by the Castle of Oversight, which towers above the dark black dark..."

"Yes, yes. It's very dark and black, we get the idea. Get on with it." Dreth glared.

Gerald scowled at being interrupted, but hurried on as Dreth tapped Darkblood meaningfully. "They say," and here the creature paused and looked left and right, as if someone could be listening. "They say *they* reside there."

"They being...?" asked Cuthbert.

"The rulers of course," the goblin whispered it. "The Lords of the dungeon."

"Interesting." Dreth scratched his chin. "And the Under Plain? No doubt it crawls with creatures both foul and depraved?"

"Oooh, foul and depraved indeed. Good one." The goblin stepped closer and pointed with a finger. "All around horrid creatures stalk the land, preying upon each other. Killing in ways too horrible to mention." It shuddered. "Many dangerous things lurk here, oh yes they do."

"Well, now there's one more," said Dreth, standing a little straighter.

"Is there anywhere safe to take a rest?" asked Redthorne, sitting down on a small hummock.

"Safe? There be no safety in the black, dark and black Under Plains of Dume," stated the goblin with some relish.

Dreth reached down and picked the small creature up by its head. "Gerald, tell the man what he wants to hear."

The goblin made a face. "Fine. Be like that." He pointed to the left. "Over yonder is the Black Desert, where *they* reside, or so it's said. Never been there personally."

"Okay, not a big fan of that direction," said Cuthbert. "What else do you have?"

Gerald flailed about. "Very well. Put me down and I will tell you all."

Dreth dropped him with a thud. "Start talking," he ordered, "or you're going to be seeing some doom alright. Black or otherwise."

The goblin glared at him. "Bully," he said.

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### **The Under Plains of Dume.**

A large figure stepped through a door that was hanging from its hinges, and stopped to survey the room beyond. Bodies lay strewn about the chamber. Several had been fried, though many bore sword wounds. Most were cat-people, though an Elven corpse was upside down against the far wall with an apparently broken neck. At least four Drow were interspersed amongst fallen stone pillars and chunks of granite ceiling.

The Golem picked its way through the carnage, towards the center of the room. It stopped in front of the golden throne, looming over Harvey, who was slumped in the chair with his eyes closed. There was a large gash down his side, congealed blood around the wound appeared as a black stain against the colorful material



of his robes.

"Where did they go?" the Golem asked.

"Eh? What? Oh it's you. Bugger off, can't you see I'm healing?"

The large outline leaned forward, red eyes boring into the recumbent figure. "Tell me where they went."

"Or what? Are you threatening me? Hahahaha!" Harvey laughed. "Come on stony, just try it."

The Golem made a noise. If it had had emotions it would have been feeling angry. It raised a fist. "Tell me now, or I smash your moldy head into paste."

McVon sat up and sneered. "I don't think so."

The fist moved, a blur as it plummeted down. Harvey reacted with equal speed, throwing his hand up, palm out. The fist met a blue wall of energy which stopped its flight cold. The two remained motionless for a long moment, each straining to best the other. The red eyes of the animation boring into the lifeless ones of the immortal wizard, as each put their strength into the contest.

Finally the Golem stepped back. Harvey heaved a sigh and settled into his chair again. He looked at his dungeon counterpart for a moment, and then waved at a pile of rocks near the wall. "They went that way, through the rubble. Into the Under Plains."

The Golem looked at him for a second and nodded before turning away. "Next time," it said.

"Yeah, right," replied Harvey. He watched the Golem start to dig through the collapsed ceiling, a calculating expression on his face. "Oh, you may want to tell your masters he had The Girl with him."

The animation stopped digging a moment and looked at him. "The girl?"

The wizard nodded.

The Golem thought about it for a moment, and then shrugged. "Not my problem, she doesn't fall within my mission parameters." It started digging again.

Harvey smiled to himself and closed his eyes, letting the power of the throne pulse through him as he listened to the sound of burrowing. It had been a good day.

~ \* ~

Gerald swiveled about. "Over that way, just beyond the bottomless pit, is the Dark Lake. The fetid waters of which lap up against the Goblin Forest where the reserves stay."

"Reserves?" Cuthbert cocked his head to one side.

"Aye. Under the black..." Gerald glanced at Dreth and revised his words. "Under the trees of the Goblin forest is where the dungeon creatures wait until they are assigned for duty."

"A waiting area?" Dreth asked.

"Why not? You don't think the denizens just appear out of thin air do you?"

"I never went there," said Cuthbert, a tad bitterly.

"You didn't?" The goblin scratched his head, dislodging several small insects. "Come to think of it, there aren't usually many undead there."

"Blatant discrimination," huffed Percy.

"Wait. You live in this place?" said Dreth. "I thought you roamed this land, acknowledging no master and all that."

"Yes, well in the night maybe, but I have to sleep somewhere don't I? And I don't acknowledge any master. The missus now, well she's another matter."

"I see." Dreth looked at Redthorne, who was sagging badly. "How far away is this forest of yours?"

"You have to venture through the bla... er, none light sands, avoid the giant scorpions, then it's just five minutes down the road, first on the left. Can't miss it, bloody great big forest. Trees everywhere."

"How about you act as a guide?"

"Sorry, I'm a bit busy..." Gerald looked up into the pointy end of Dreth's sword. "Love to, love to. Let's be off shall we? Mind that rock now, wouldn't want you tripping up and skewering me would we?"

Percy and Sprat helped Redthorne to his feet, and they all set off after the goblin, into the Under Plains of Dume.

~ \* ~

"Down here, it's just ahead," said Garret.

Slice Gutgood peered along the passageway at the dim light coming from the entrance. "Good," he said. "Go back to Harm, tell him we've found it. We'll investigate."

"B...but Harm said to wait for him," stammered Garret, who was rather cowardly for a Drow elf warrior.

Slice knocked him to the ground with a backhanded swipe. In contrast to his two companions, he was large and muscular. Far more so than usual for one of his kind, and he had used the extra weight to help him bully and kill his way up to squad leader rank. He didn't intend to stop there either. "Do as I say, or I'll throw you in first," he snarled.

Garret whimpered, but picked himself up and scampered back down the tunnel.

"Are we certain this is wise?"

Slice looked at his remaining companion. Primrose Slyeye looked back steadily. If Slice was honest with himself, Primrose unnerved him. The other dark elf was small and slim, slightly smaller than normal if anything. And *Primrose*! What sort of name was that? Yet there was something about him that halted Slice's usual response, which would have been to knock him around the head and yell at him. Instead he just growled. "I am in charge here. Do as I say."

Primrose merely shrugged and gestured for Slice to continue.

Glaring at the scout, Gutgood pulled his sword out of its sheath and stepped forward carefully. Primrose sauntered along behind, seemingly at ease with the world.

The door was hanging off the hinges. Inside the room was a mess. Half of the ceiling had fallen in somehow, semi-burying a variety of victims. Slice saw some of the cat-men they had run into briefly once, as well as four members of the previous Drow raiding party. One elf was lying against the far wall.

"Looks like we missed the fun," said Slice, nudging a cat man with his foot.

"What's that over there?" said Primrose, gesturing with his sword.

"Looks like some kind of throne. Maybe there's someone on it."

"After you then, oh glorious squad leader."

Resisting the urge to break the others' arms, Slice closed in on the sitting figure. It seemed to be a human in long colorful robes. He was apparently asleep.

Grinning, Slice slid up to the man and placed his sword against the throat. "Wake up!" He said.

"Ah. Slice..." Primrose started.

"Quiet you!" Slice jiggled his blade. "I said wake up."

The man opened his eyes. Dull, gray eyes. "I'm in a good mood today," he said. "So if you remove your sword *and* your person from my presence, I will allow you to carry on living."

Slice laughed the low throaty and confident laugh of thugs everywhere who think they have the upper hand, and yet are about to find out they have just picked on some kind of super being from another dimension.

"Well, so be it."

Slice screamed as he was picked up by an invisible force and thrown upwards, to smash against the ceiling. "Wha...!!"

"I did warn you." The voice floated up from below.

Slice screamed again as his armor burst into flame, charring his flesh. The smell of burning meat reached his nostrils. He thought he could vaguely hear Primrose shouting. The tatters of his clothing fell away, dropping to the floor far below and lessening the pain slightly.

The reprieve didn't last. There was a giggle, from some unseen creature, and his burnt skin was picked at and stripped away. Agony shot through Slice, searing his being as his flesh was slowly peeled back, to reveal muscle and bone below.

Blood dripped down like rain as the invisible hands pulled at his now exposed ribs. A crack echoed around the chamber as one was snapped off.

Darkness began to close around Slice as something dug into the hole in his front and, with a wet sucking noise, ripped his heart from his body. The last thing he heard was a quiet voice.

"Delicious."

~ \* ~

Harm looked at the mangled and broken carcass of his squad leader, and turned to Primrose. "Looks like you are promoted," he said. Then he faced the mage sitting in the throne. "Sir Wizard, I am Harm Undertow, leader of this Drow search party." He bowed slightly.

"Welcome to my lair," replied the man. "I'm Harvey Von McVon. Please excuse the mess, it's the maids' day off."

"We're looking for a wizard carrying a baby. Have you seen such?"

"Ah, it's been so busy here recently." Harvey tapped fingers on the arm of the chair. "Still, I think I can safely say that I have. He was with a couple of zombies and some... others. If you wish to find them, I suggest you look over there. They went in to the Under plains."

"The Under plains!" Harm exclaimed. He nodded at the mage. "Thank-you." Harm gestured at the rest of his squad, and they trooped over to the entrance indicated by the wizard. A tunnel had been dug through the rubble, leading down to a small passageway.

The Drow entered. After a moment, a small flying figure flitted in after them.

~ \* ~

"What's that?" M pointed off to the right.

Dreth looked. "It seems to be a large hole."

"Oh that! That's the bottomless pit that is," said Gerald, acting the tour guide. "They say it was made by The Master when he was looking for Nothing."

"How can you look for nothing?" Scoffed Cuthbert.

"It's very difficult," said the goblin. "Have you ever seen Nothing?"

"Er, I think so," argued Cuthbert, holding a finger up. "When I look for something, and I can't find it, I get nothing."

"No no no, that's not nothing. That's merely the absence of the thing you were looking for. True Nothing though, well, that's hard to get."

"So, how do you find nothing then?" asked Dreth, intrigued despite himself.

Gerald merely shrugged. "How should I know? Do I look like a wizard to you? Steeped in the arcane arts? I think not. A basic minion is me."

"Bah," said Cuthbert. "And how can it be bottomless? I'm going to look." He stepped off the path and lurched over to the hole.

Dreth did a good imitation of a deep breath and followed him. "Stay with the wizard Sprug," he ordered Sprat, as Redthorne stopped and sank down on the black sand, the baby still cradled in his arms.

The group caught up with Cuthbert, who was looking around on the floor.

"All the stones have been taken," said Gerald.

"Fine." Cuthbert dug into a pocket and pulled forth a small copper coin. He flicked it in and peered over, watching it fall into the blackness.

"It's not going to hit anything," sighed the goblin, crossing his arms.

"Shhh!" The zombie leant over, trying to listen.

"Did he find it?" Asked M.

"Find what?" replied Gerald.

"Nothing."

"Oh. I don't know."

After several minutes of waiting Dreth lost his patience. "Come on, I'm not hanging about all day waiting for something to hit a bottom that may not be there." He turned about and stalked back to the path.

"It can't be bottomless!" said Cuthbert, hanging on for another few moments. "Hey! Wait for me!"

~ \* ~

It was dark. Something heavy was on his body, making it difficult to breath. Another hard thing was resting on his head, and it hurt.

Moaning, Gut tried to move. At first he couldn't, making him panic, which in turn lent him strength. He heaved and, after a moment of straining, something gave. Hope blossomed, and he pushed again and again. Eventually a ray of dim light penetrated his dark world, and his hand broke through into open air.

Wiggling and scrabbling, Gut pushed his way to the surface of the rubble, eventually sitting up like some kind of deformed land whale.

He looked around and saw a shiny chair. A figure was sat on it, looking at him with interest. Gut snarled as he recognized the magic man from before.

"Before you think about trying to bash me," the wizard said, interrupting the giant's thought process, "you should know I didn't do anything to hurt you."

"Gut nearly squashed under stone," Gut responded, logic going into overdrive and making his head hurt even more.

"Ah, but that was an accident. The spell was aimed at your friend Dreth. He tricked you."

Gut scratched his head. "Dreth giant killer. Gut afraid him."

The man laughed, causing the big man to growl.

"Oh no, I'm not laughing at you, it's not your fault. Dreth is a bad man, he lied to us all."

"Dreth not giant killer?" Gut wrinkled his brow.

"Far from it my large friend. He pulled you away from your duty didn't he?" At the answering nod Harvey carried on. "And do you know what happens to monsters that leave their post?" A shake of the head this time. "The Management."

Gut went pale, though it was hard to see under the dust. "Management?"

McVon nodded. "I tell you what Mr. Gut. If you do me a favor, I'll put in a good word for you. I'm a friend of Them."

"Please help Gut! Gut not know!"

"That's alright. I can see you are an honorable monster who was tricked away from his assigned tasks."

"What Gut do?"

"Well, it's really something you need to do for yourself. If you get the woman back that you were guarding, and kill Dreth, then I'm sure they would forgive you. Maybe even give you a reward. How does that sound?"

"Gut like! Gut squeeze Dreth until he very sorry!"

"Good, good. I would just ask that you let me speak to the woman a moment before you return her to her box. Would that be okay do you think?"

The giant nodded. "Gut do! Gut go now. He stood up, scattering rock, but then paused, his face drooping. "But Gut not know where he go."

"I think I may be able to help you out there." Harvey smiled.

~ \* ~

"Careful now," said Gerald. "Follow me and be quiet. Walk where I walk."

"What is it?" asked Dreth.

"Scorpions. Big ones. Giant even. If you're quiet, and you follow me exactly, we'll be alright."

"I don't see any scorpions," said Percy.

"Go on then. You walk over there a bit. We'll wait here."

Percy looked at the goblin, then at the black sand. "Er. Maybe not. After you."

"Right then. Remember, follow my path exactly. And *be quiet!*" Gerald walked off; following a winding path only he seemed to be able to see.

Dreth followed, with M, Sprat, who was playing with his tube, and then the zombies escorting Redthorne and the baby bringing up the rear.

The goblin moved steadily, and Dreth wondered if he was playing some kind of joke. Still, he had been okay so far. Better safe than sorry.

"Half way," mouthed Gerald after a few more minutes.

Dreth nodded, and kept walking.

They almost made it.

Sprat, picking at his tube, suddenly saw a dark spot. He touched it. The end of the tube exploded, throwing the small zombie onto his rump.

The others stopped and watched as a bright light sailed slowly through the air like some sort of errant firework. It swung about. Dreth waved at it as it circled his head. The light dodged easily, and moved onto M before stopping suddenly, like a dog scenting a bone. It hung still for a second before heading straight for the Wizard, who moved too slowly. He put his hand out and started to speak, but the light exploded.

In its place, hovering in the air next to Redthorne, was a figure about as big as Dreth's hand, garbed all in red with a pointed beard and long forked tail, waving a tiny pitchfork.

"Aha!" it said, and stuck the minute weapon into the baby.

The baby did what all babies do. It howled.

"Oh, shit! That's torn it!" said Gerald. "Run!" He followed his own advice.

There was a shifting in the sand around them, and large pincers began to emerge.

"Scorpions!" shouted Cuthbert, "Giant scorpions!" He shambled forward at top speed.

They ran, Redthorne trying to hush the baby, the small red figure hovering over him all the while, cackling.

Gerald waved madly. "Over here! They won't follow here!" He climbed onto an area of rocky ground.

Everyone headed for him, but Percy was too slow. A monstrous claw reached out and grabbed him, pulling him back.

"Help! Help! I'm caught!" He cried, as the scorpion dragged him backwards. A pincer closed, snipping his left leg off. "My leg! My good leg! EEEEEeeehh!" The zombie screamed as he was flipped onto his back, and caught sight of the beast's giant sting flying down towards him.

There was a blur in the air, and the tail erupted in green goo. Another movement and the claw met with a similar fate. "Come on!" said Dreth, Darkblood in hand. He grabbed the zombie by his remaining leg and pulled him after him, swinging the blade at another of the creatures.

"My leg! You have to get my leg!" cried Percy.

"We'll get you another leg! I have one in my bag," said Dreth, dodging a stinger and lashing out with the sword.

"But that was a good one! I got it from a barbarian," Percy lamented his loss loudly as Dreth darted around the giant creatures, dragging the zombie behind him.

"Shut up!" Dreth, moving with speed, managed to dodge, evade and hack his way back to the rocky ground, where the others were waiting. The scorpions retreated reluctantly as he did so, returning to feed upon their dead and wounded. One of them took the leg, to the renewed complaints of Percy.

"That's alright, no need to thank me," said Dreth, wiping gunk of Darkblood. He turned from the zombie, who was lying on the ground and moaning, and faced the small flying figure that had started the whole thing off.

"What the hell are you?" he demanded.

"Hheeeehhhheeee!" said the thing, and disappeared with a pop.

"Wizard!" Dreth looked at Redthorne for an explanation.

"It was a Spite," said the mage, still trying to calm the baby.

"You mean a sprite," said Cuthbert.

"No, a Spite. I'm afraid we haven't seen the last of it either." Redthorne looked up. "It was attuned to me. Another wizard must have cast it. Maybe the Drow. In any case, it will pop up and interfere with anything I do."

"Can't you dispel it?" asked M.

"That's the whole point, I can't. Spites are highly magic resistant. If I start to cast a dispel charm, it will no doubt pop into my face and jab my eyes, or do something to distract me and make the spell fail."

"There must be something we can do," said Dreth. "We have enough woes as it is, without some malevolent pixie jumping in every time we don't need it."

"I need rest," said the mage. "Maybe when I'm more awake I'll be able to think of something."

"Fine." Dreth turned to the goblin. "Where's this waiting area of yours then?"

"We're nearly there."

"Come on then. I'm getting tired of this place already."

Gerald nodded, and they set off once more. Percy hopping along to the rear.

~ \* ~

"There," said Sooth.

Hammath nodded and drew his sword, which gleamed with white light. "Come on then," he said.

The Elven hunting party, much depleted, walked after him in battle formation. They were badly rattled now. Over half their number had been killed, and Sooth and the others had barely managed to escape the fight with the cat things and the Drow. Even so, they had lost Frell Keeneye.

They followed Hammath as he walked through the rubble and the bodies, stopping before a large golden throne.

"Oh now what?" The mage sitting on the chair spat as the elf approached. "Can't a fellow get two minutes of rest without someone tramping through his domain? I should put up a sign or something."

"Hold foul wizard. I am Hammath, leader of these valiant Elves of light, we are..."



"Yes yes. They went that way okay? Go away and stop bothering me!"

"...looking for a baby," Hammath plodded on, aware that this wasn't going as expected.

"Fine, the baby. Yes, with the wizard and the undead. Go on, you should be able to find them by following the crowd."

Hammath looked at Marrim Runecaster, who shrugged. "I will allow your life..." he started.

"Look, just bugger off will you? Before I decide to shove that glowing sword up your..."

"As you say!" interrupted the elf leader, backing away and making a pacifying gesture with his hand. He turned to his party. "Let's go."

Leaving the muttering figure behind, they ducked down into a small tunnel...

~ \* ~

"The Black lake," said Gerald, "and the er, Black Forest." He looked at Dreth, who was scowling at him. "Hey! Don't blame me okay! That's just what they're called!"

Dreth looked ahead. The Black Lake lived up to its name. A dark mass of water receding into the distance. To the right, a forest of gloomy and twisted trees loomed overhead.

"Home sweet home." Gerald rubbed his hands together.

They walked on into the trees. "Cool place," said Percy, stopping to pick up a branch to use as a crutch.

"How far goblin?" asked Redthorne, the weariness apparent in his voice.

"My hut's just ahead. I like to keep on the edge of things," replied Gerald.

As predicted, the hut soon appeared. A ramshackle mound, made of a variety of different kinds of wood cemented together with mud and moss. The door was set at an angle in a shallow hole in the ground.

"Come on in," said the goblin, pushing the entrance open. "Honey, I'm home, and I've brought guests!"

There was no response. "Hmm, must be out," Gerald shrugged. "Here, wizard, you can sleep here." He showed Redthorne to a rather dirty sleeping area.

The mage unrolled his own mat and fell into it, asleep with the baby next to him as soon as he hit the floor.

"How sweet," said Percy. "Now, how about that leg?"

Dreth tossed him his sack. "Actually, I think I ate the last leg a little while ago."

"What!?!?"

"Sorry." Dreth said, in a not very sincere tone. He turned to Gerald. "So, what do you have in this resort of yours?"

"Oh, lots of things! Where do you want to go?"

Dreth considered. "We don't have much time. No doubt our... friends will be hot on our trail."

"Well, there are many facilities for sure," said Gerald. "We have an alchemist, a necromancer, some shops, all sorts of things. And the port too."

"I need to find a leg!" complained Percy, looking up from the sack.

Dreth turned to Sprat. "Sprog, you stay and look after the wizard and the baby. The rest of you, we're going into town."

"Yes!" exclaimed Percy, hopping up and down excitedly.

"But Uncle Dref, me wants to go with you," the little zombie moaned.

"Once the wizard wakes up, you can follow us," said Dreth. "Goblin, which way are the facilities?"

"Oh you can't miss the main area," said Gerald leading them outside again and pointing. "Just go that way for about five minutes. You'll find a path. Turn left and follow it."

Dreth nodded. "Let's go then."

With Cuthbert helping Percy, and M walking beside him, they strode off into the woods.

~ \* ~

"That must be it," said M, pointing at a low wall.

They were on the path, which wound around through the trees. Ahead was what appeared to be a settlement of sorts, surrounded by a wooden barricade. The trail led to a set of double doors.

As the group approached a goblin stepped out in front of them. It was wearing a battered helmet and holding a short spear. "Halt! Who goes there?"

"We do," replied Cuthbert.

"*Undead!* We don't want your type in here," snarled the guard.

Dreth stepped up. "What are you implying?" he said.

"We have our standards! No unauthorized zombies."

Dreth drew Darkblood, and moved it towards the small figure. "How's this for authorization?"

The goblin went cross-eyed looking at the point of the blade. "If you kill me, there are many others to take my place," he said.

"Good, they won't miss you then, will they?"

There was a blur, a brief slicing noise and a thud. The head of the goblin came to rest at the base of a tree trunk, some distance away from the rest of its body. Dreth sheathed his sword and pushed at the door. "I think my pass was accepted," he said, and stepped through.

He found himself in a small and bustling village street. Shops and two storey houses built of white stone lined the cobbled road. It all looked very normal, if you overlooked the inhabitants.

Most were goblins, but trolls, orcs, the occasional ogre and all manner of other denizens wandered around. Dreth thought he saw a demon striding along even. They wandered down the road, heads swiveling from side to side like tourists coming to a big city, until they came to a small square. In the middle was a statue of a dragon eating a fighter of some description.

Dreth turned the others. "Right then, I suggest we split up. Cuthbert, help Percy find a new leg. M, I think you should try and locate some sort of oracle, or library, see if you can't get some information about yourself."

"What about you?" asked M.

"I'm going to wander around. Do you have any gold?"

M shook her head, so Dreth dug into his pouch and passed over some treasure. "There, that should keep you going for a while. Meet back here in one hour. And... **be careful!**"

"Yes dad," said Cuthbert.

Dreth watched the others go, and then walked a little way along the street until he found what he was looking for. A restaurant. 'The Adventurers' Gizzard' the sign proclaimed.

He opened the door and strode in. Inside was not overly large, with room for about a dozen tables. Several goblin waiters moved around, serving the denizens seated there.

"Table for one," he said to an Orc standing nearby, and was led to a seat near the window.

"Someone will be with you in a moment," the Maitre De said, handing him a menu.

Dreth nodded and sat down, gazing out of the window which overlooked the statue in the square. He spent several minutes watching the various passers by, enjoying the peace and quiet before he was approached by a scrawny goblin.

The waiter was dressed in a white jacket with blood stains, old and new, liberally splattered all down the front. "Hello Sir, Madam or Being. My name is Nigel, I will be your server for today. How may I serve you?" He whipped out a notepad and waited.

Dreth glanced at the menu briefly. "What do you have?" he asked, deciding he couldn't be bothered to read it. "Something decent though, I don't want your goblin muck."

"You're in luck sir," the waiter said, ignoring the remark disparaging his species. "We have some fresh human virgin, just in, served with Belladonna salad and the dip of the day."

"Oh yes? And where have you managed to find fresh virgin around here may I ask?"

"Sacrifice off-cast sir, from the big nob's in the castle."

"I see." Dreth rubbed his chin. "Very well then. I'll have a portion of thigh."

"And how would you like your thigh sir?"

"You cook it? Oh. Well." Dreth considered this unexpected turn of events for a moment. "Medium rare then."

"Very well sir. Drink?"

Dreth expelled air noisily and glanced at the list in the menu. "A Screaming Organ sounds interesting."

"Excellent choice." The goblin made a final note on his pad and waddled off to spit in the meal.

A surprisingly short time later he returned with a large glass. It was filled to the brim with a red liquid. "Your Screaming Organ sir," he announced, and scampered away to deal with another customer.

Dreth examined the beverage. There was an eyeball and a piece of pineapple stuck on to a cocktail stick. Some kind of brown substance was smeared around the rim of the glass, though it could have been they just hadn't cleaned it in a while. A portion of finger bobbed in the middle.

Hardly an 'organ' he mumbled to himself, but took a sip anyway. It tasted pretty much like it looked. Dreth put it down for a moment and considered the flavor. After a minute he decided it wasn't bad, and had another taste.

He was just finishing it when the goblin returned, staggering under a large covered platter, which he placed in the middle of the table. Taking a moment to straighten himself out, he removed the top with a flourish.

"Viola! Your thigh sir."

"I believe you mean, *voila!*" said Dreth, examining the dish. "A *viola* is a type of musical instrument, or possibly a kind of flower. Still, the thought is what counts." He waved at his now empty glass. "I almost enjoyed that. Another is in order I think." He glanced at the menu again. "Let's try a 'Slaughter on the Beach' this time."

"Very good sir," said the goblin. He took the glass with him and withdrew to the kitchen, leaving his customer pondering the meal.

Dreth poked at the food. It seemed to be authentic thigh, and though he couldn't actually tell if it was from a virgin or not, it looked female human. The meat was surrounded by some kind of plant leaves, which Dreth thought rather distasteful, though there was a side-dish of blood-sauce and sliced heart pieces.

He tucked in, pausing only to sip at the new drink which was delivered a few minutes later by the goblin.

"And how is your meal sir?" The waiter asked.

"Exffllmmt!" Mumbled Dreth, his mouth full of allegedly virgin thigh.

The server nodded, pleased, and left him to eat.

~ \* ~

"Here we are," Percy said. "A necromancer."

"That's not a necromancer!" said Cuthbert.

"Ok Mr. I'm-so-clever-I-can-read. What's it then?"

"It's a blacksmith. It says so up there. S-M-Y-T-H-E." He read the letters out one at a time.

"Smyth!" Percy hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "That's the *name* of the fellow. Come on."

"I don't think it is," Cuthbert began, but the other zombie was already hopping in to the store. He followed, to find himself in a hot workshop. A stout figure of a dwarf was hammering something on an anvil. "See? Smith. Horseshoes, armor and all that. Come on."

"Wait a minute," said his friend. "Hey, shorty! A little service here?" Percy raised an arm and jumped forwards.

The dwarf stopped and eyed the undead warily. "What ya want zombie?"

"What's your name?" Asked Percy.

"Smythe. What's it to ya?"

Percy shot Cuthbert a look of triumph before addressing the store owner. "Master Necromancer, I've a task for you..."

Cuthbert rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall as Percy explained his need.

~ \* ~

Dreth sighed contentedly, picking at his teeth. The meal was now no more than a bone on a plate. Various empty glasses testified to several more cocktail experiments, and he was feeling good about the whole expedition for the first time. Waving over at the goblin, he scanned the drinks menu for one he hadn't tried yet.

"I trust sir enjoyed the meal?"

"Very good. Besht thigh I've had in centuries. Now then, I don't beleef...sorry, believe I haff... have tried a Dragon Sour yet."

"I will bring one immediately sir."

"Make it a double."

"Of course sir." The waiter scribbled the latest order on the tab.

Dreth leaned back and rested his hands across his stomach. He felt a bump in his robe, and wondered what it was. Fishing around he drew out the black 'marble' that the little zombie had found in the Runebox. He smiled for a moment, remembering the Orc king's last moments, skewered on the end of his sword. *Good times, good times.*

He patted the blade. "You know shword, you're a good weapon. Did I ever tell you that?"

"You're drunk!" replied Darkblood, slightly muffled in his sheath.

"Nonono! Really, the besht sword I ever, ever had."

"Drunk!"

"I'm sorry sir, did you say something?"

Dreth looked up to see the goblin place a large glass in front of him. "Wha? No. Never mind." He smiled and lifted the blue colored drink to his mouth, taking a large swig. "Good shtuff. Good good. Meybe a bit shour, I mean sour."

The waiter looked at him for a second, but then turned and wandered off to serve another client.

Putting the glass down a moment, Dreth once more examined the black marble, rolling it between his fingers.

"Exusssse me." A dry voice hissed at him from nearby.

He looked around. A figure in a hooded robe was sat at the next table. The dark of the cowl hid any facial features, but two white points of light served as eyes. "Do I know you?" asked Dreth.

"My apologiesss for interrupting your meal. I am Lord Bone, necromancer. Guardian."

"Good ta meet you," replied Dreth jovially, raising his glass and taking another drink. "I recommend the cocktailsh here, they're really very good."

"Yesss, ssso I sssseeee. However, I wasss wondering if your gem issss for ssssale. Sssssuch an item would be ussseful to me."

Dreth glanced at his marble. "You mean thish?"

"Indeed."

"You know what it ish then?"

"But of coursse."

Dreth leaned forward, a little unsteadily, and smiled. "How about I buy you a drink and we have a little chat?"

~ \* ~

M wandered down the street, stepping to one side to avoid being run down by some sort of large four legged beast with three heads. As she did so she noticed a sign over a small store. "A seer?" She muttered to herself. "Well, why not?"

Thus decided, she stepped forward and entered the shop.

It was dark inside, and smelled of strange and unpleasant herbs. The room was plain, furnished only with a small table in the middle. Two chairs, one at either side, were pulled up against it. The far wall boasted a curtain, currently drawn.

"Hello? Anyone here?" M asked.

"Just a minute, be right there." A high pitched woman's voice came from behind the curtain. "Take a seat."

M briefly wondered where she would take a seat to, before realizing she was supposed to sit. She shrugged and sat down on the nearest chair just as the curtain twitched to one side.

A figure walked in. She was seemingly human, still fairly young, dressed in a long pale dress which covered her figure. Her head was devoid of hair, and eyes were covered with a black cloth. In one hand she held a long white staff.

"Sit child," she said.

"I am."

"Oh. Yes, so you are." The seer stumbled into the chair opposite, bumping her shin in the process, which produced several interesting curses. Eventually, with much groping around, she managed to sit down.

M watched impartially.

"Now child, what can I do for you?"

"Firstly, stop calling me child. I doubt you're any older than I am."

The seer's shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry. It's just everyone expects an old seer. Why is that? I thought if I just called everyone 'child' it might set the mood a bit."

"Oh. Well." M blinked in frustration. "Look, I'm here because I don't know anything about myself. Can you help me?"

The seer nodded and produced a pack of cards from somewhere. She placed them on the table face down, spreading them out. "Turn one over."

M did so.

"**Death!**" exclaimed the seer dramatically.

"No it isn't."

"It isn't? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. It's some kind of..." M leaned over and tried to make out the picture. "Some kind of devil I think."

"A devil? Are you certain it isn't death?"

"Positive."

"But it's always death!"

"Nope, sorry."

The seer scowled and bent over the cards, fiddling with her blindfold as she did so.

"Hey!" exclaimed M. "Are you peeking? You're not blind!"

"What? Of course I am. Blind as a bat. Totally without vision. Sightless oh yes."

"No you're not! I can see you peeking!"

"Oh fiddlesticks." The seer pulled at her covering, revealing a perfectly good pair of eyes beneath. "Sorry about that. It's just if the seer isn't old, then apparently they must be blind. It's an image thing you know?"

M pulled a face. "Are you a real seer or not? I just want a reading, or whatever you do."

"Of course I'm real! Gifted with the Sight from birth." She looked at the card M had turned over. "Well well, it *is* a devil. How odd."

"Why should that be odd?"

The seer didn't answer, but flipped over a card. It was death. She flipped over another. Death. Another and another. All death.

"Oh, I see," said M.

"Give me your hand," said the seer. "Enough of the show stuff."

M complied, and the mystic closed her eyes as she held it in her own. For a minute there was silence.

M was just about to say something when the woman spoke.

"I see something. It's shrouded in mist, as if far back in time. I see a village. A young girl running. It's you. You're a child, perhaps nine or ten. Your mother is calling you. M?" The seer frowned. "Em? Emerald! Your name is Emerald."

"Oh. M. Of course."

"Wait! There's more!"

The room dimmed suddenly, and a cold wind seemed to sweep through it, chilling the occupants.

"A figure. A dark figure. Powerful. Dangerous. It... It's taking you. Your mother... your mother is trying to stop it. It...It... Oh!" The seer gasped, and her eyes flew open.

M looked into them, and saw an image. A young woman, weeping, pleading before a shadowy outline. A child crying. Movement. A bright red splash of blood. The screams of the child, louder now, and a laugh. A laugh of pure evil.

"It killed your mother. Took you." The image changed. Fogged. For a moment there was nothing, then the fog turned red and the seer screamed, pulling backwards, away from M, falling to the floor.

Emerald stood in alarm, running around the table. The seer looked at her, blood running from her eyes.

"Leave here! Never return! Your future is pre-ordained! Leave here now. **GO!**"

Emerald stumbled back, turned, ran out of the door into the street. She moved quickly away from the seer's shop, before leaning against a wall, panting hard. *What was **that** about?*

She looked up just as a large figure turned a corner in front of her. "Oh shit!"

"Gut see you!" the voice boomed. The giant started to run towards her, scattering a group of goblins in the process.



"Bugger!" Emerald ran.

~ \* ~

Dreth emerged into the air and inhaled deeply. He was feeling quite content with the world. The feeling lasted for nearly thirty seconds. Looking up the street he saw a large and unmistakable figure, red eyes piercing the crowds as it scanned them.

"Oh Dreg!" he exclaimed, stepping back against the wall. He waited until the golem was looking the other way, and then staggered quickly down the street, wishing he hadn't had so many drinks. He bumped into Cuthbert and Percy on the corner of the village square.

"The other way, quick!" he hissed. Then did a double take. "What'sh that??"

"Good isn't it?" said Percy, proudly extending his new leg. It whirred and ticked, glinting in the dim light. "Hey! Have you been drinking?"

"It'sh metal!" exclaimed Dreth, trying to focus and ignoring the comment.

"Clockwork," said the zombie. "Two days on one wind. You have to keep up with the times you know."

"Well, better put it on 'run' setting. Old shtone... stone face is behind us."

The zombies turned with Dreth and they started back down the other street, only to stop short.

"Hey. Aren't those Drow?" asked Cuthbert.

"Fug!" Dreth squinted at the scene, which appeared to be spinning slightly. "Back, back!"

The three ducked back, running into the square. "There's M!" Cuthbert pointed at the figure crouched next to the base of the statue.

They lurched over to her. "Hey! Fancy meeting you here," said Percy.

"Get down!" That giant is here." Emerald made shushing gestures.

"He ish not alone," said Dreth.

"Are you drunk?" asked Emerald, peering closely at him.

"Disgusting isn't it? Us in mortal peril and he hits the bottle," Percy said. He moved closer to Emerald. "Stick with me, I'll see you alright."

Dreth scowled and tried to speak clearly. "Over there, towards the exit." He pointed back to the first street.

Trying to run inconspicuously, the four moved quickly along the road. Dreth weaving slightly.

"Phew!" said Cuthbert. "Made it." He pushed at the gate and bumped into Redthorne and Sprat coming the other way.

"Elves! The Elves are coming," panted the wizard, jiggling the baby.

"They chased us through the woods," chimed in Sprat.

"You have to be kidding me!" said Dreth. "Shince when did we get sho popular?"

"Have you been drinking?" asked the mage, sniffing. "I can smell Blooded Mary."

"He's a lush," said Cuthbert.

"Shut up!" Dreth said, closing one eye in an attempt to see straight. "Come on, down this shide shtreet."

The fugitives made their way through down the alleyway, emerging near the main square again. Peering out from behind a crate, hand over one eye, Dreth assessed the situation whilst trying not to sway.

The golem was standing near the statue, looking around. Up one street he could see the Drow questioning several goblins, and the giant was up another road, scratching his head. No doubt the elves were heading in from the other direction.

He looked at the two remaining roads. One was Dock street, and the other was Desert Lane. Not the most promising prospect, though it could lead out of the village.

"What do we do?" asked Percy, polishing his new leg.

Dreth moaned. "I need another drink," he said.

~ \* ~

"What do you mean he is *somewhere near*? I don't want **somewhere near**, I want results! Find him, quickly, or it will go badly for you!"

"As you command," the Golem replied in what could have been interpreted as a weary tone, had that been possible.

"Very well, I expect to hear some good news soon." The Master of the Dungeon waved a hand in an intricate gesture and the picture in the mirror faded, to be replaced with his own scowling reflection.

"Wretched automatons," he muttered to himself. "How hard can it be to track down a couple of undead in a tiny village?" The Master was about to turn away when the mirror pulsed red, an indication that there was an incoming message.

He frowned and made the activation signal. The red glare dimmed, to be replaced with a wavy image that crackled and jumped about madly. The Master swore and adjusted the vertical hold, fiddling with it, cursing all the while, until it finally stabilized and the picture could be seen clearly. Once it did so he rather wished the thing had remained broken.

"Overlord," he bowed low. "I'm honored to speak with you." He held the pose, trembling before the figure in the mirror.

The Overlord waited a calculated moment before allowing him to rise. "We are displeased," he said.

"Displeased?" The Master's voice wavered slightly as he mentally flicked through a list of private projects and wondered which one had been discovered. "Oh mighty one, what have I done to incur your wrath? I am a loyal and obedient servant, dedicated to the Greater Bad."

The Overlord leaned forward and glared at the Dungeon Master, who quailed under the gaze.

Fiery red eyes set into a scaled face with a flicking forked tongue. Horns perched on top of a head that was affixed to a long serpentine figure writhing over a pit of lava. Victims below, roasting in agony within the flames, whilst blood ran from eye sockets picked bare.

All of this was not present.

Indeed, any onlookers would have been surprised at the evident fear the Master was showing. The image was hardly one that most would immediately run from. The Overlord stared at the Master through thick round glasses. A comb-over crawled over a shiny scalp. His scrawny frame sat at a pleasant desk with a single flower in a vase to one side. Paper was piled up in neat stacks. In the background a comfortable sofa could be seen. Fiery pits with screaming victims being horribly tortured were, if anywhere nearby, in a soundproof room out of sight.

"I'm talking about Dreth," the non-horrific figure continued. "My reports indicate he has left his post, and is seeking escape."

"Dreth?" The Master said, puzzled at this interest. "The Undead Way guardian? You have nothing to fear oh great one. I've dispatched an agent to, er... dispatch him. I've just been in communication with it in fact, and expect positive news any moment."

"**Fool!** You have no idea who he is do you?" For a moment, a flicker of a moment, a spark of red seemed to appear in the Overlord's eyes. Perhaps it was just the reflection of the flower though.

"He... he's just a guardian your magnificence."

"Just a guardian he says." The Overlord rolled his eyes and made an 'I'm dealing with a moron face' as he jabbed a finger forward. "If he succeeds in escaping, *your* life will be extinguished as though it never was, though not before your broken body has been put through the most deviant and painful tortures I can think of." He sat back in his chair and tapped the desk. "The situation is beyond your understanding. Needless to say, I expect you to ensure that he returns to his post, or is removed from the picture in some way." He leaned forward again. "I hope I have made my... desires clear enough."

"Y... yes oh superb and ultimate Awfulness."

"Good. Get on with it then."

The picture winked off, leaving the Master blinking in bafflement. Eventually he pulled himself together. "As you command," he said belatedly, and turned away. This was going to take something special.

~ \* ~

"Come on," slurred Dreth. "I have an idea." He squinted out from behind his cover, waiting until the various parties were looking elsewhere, then dashed out into the square, weaving erratically.

The rest of them looked at each other and followed quickly, Percy's new leg clanking and whirring all the while. They pursued Dreth down Dock street, keeping near the edge of the road and out of sight as much as was possible.

Dreth lurched uncertainly over the cobbles, round a shallow bend and on past various shops and buildings of a nautical nature, until they finally arrived at the docks. They were in luck. Two vessels were moored there.

From one a line of creatures were shuffling, hopping, jumping and floating forward, moving slowly on to the ship, which appeared to be some sort of double decked boat lined with windows.

Moved towards it, Dreth pushed several creatures out of the way to get to the front.

"Hey! There is a queue here you know!" One orc complained as he was pushed backwards. He squeaked as Dreth stared at him, exhibiting an unusual sense of self preservation for one of his species. "I mean: please, after you."

Others weren't so easily cowed though. A high pitched voice came from further back. "Hey, you! Get to the back of the line! Robert, do something about these ruffians!"

A large ball shape floated over the orc, swooping down towards Dreth. "You heard the lady, you can wait your turn like... Oh! It's you!"

"Hello Bob, wha' you doing here?" Dreth looked up at the Beholder, trying to speak clearly.

"Ho ho! Same as you by the smell of your breath!" Bob winked several of his eyes. "Been sampling cocktails have we? Hur hur. The Missus and I are taking a break. We get one vacation every season. Pretty sweet eh?"

"A vacation? That's just typical that is," Percy joined the conversation. "When did we ever get a holiday? Eh Cuthbert?" He didn't wait for his friend to answer. "Never! That's when. Blatant discrimination against the undead. I'm going to have some words with the management I am."

"Er, yes." Bob looked at Dreth. "In a rush are we? Only there seems to be plenty of room on the boat, and even if there wasn't, the tours leave once every hour. You wouldn't have to wait long for the next one."

"Ah, it'sh a bit of an emrgcnsy...emersyn...urgent shituation you shee," said Dreth, trying to tap the side of his nose and missing. "That Golem? He ish chasing us. We need to get away quickly."

Bob's eyes widened, an impressive site on a Beholder. "Indeed? Chasing you is he? Are we in any danger here?" He looked around a little nervously.

"No no no no," reassured Dreth. "Jusht after us he is. Listen, I've an idea. Do you think you could do ush a favor?"

~ \* ~

Harm stared after the vessel that was rapidly dwindling to a dot on the horizon. "You sure they're on it?"

Primrose, who was currently not enjoying his elevated status, nodded. "They boarded just as it was about to depart apparently. The Beholders saw them go."

Harm looked at the two monsters that were floating nearby, and frowned. The creatures were too dangerous to take on without serious risk to his men. Not that he cared about his men as such, but their numbers were dwindling, and he would need them when he caught up with the wizard. "Is this true?"

"Oh yes," said the nearest one. "Quite rude they were. My wife commented on it at the time, didn't you dear?"

"Absolutely," replied the slightly smaller of the two. "But what can you expect from zombies?"

"Did you see a wizard and a baby with them by any chance?" Harm made an effort to be civil despite

mounting anger.

"Yes, I believe there was. How strange," the first Beholder answered. "Now then, if you would excuse us, we have theatre seats booked. Not that we use the seats of course, but you know what I mean." The two swiveled about and floated off, bobbing over the Harm's head.

Harm looked about. "Faerie!"

A small figure flittered close. "It's Fearie," Smudge said.

"Whatever," Harm waved a hand. "Fly out to that ship, see if the wizard is on board."

"What ship?"

Harm looked out over the lake again. The vessel had disappeared into the gloom.

"Elves!" Primrose interrupted Harm's would-be response.

"Dark scum! Prepare to die!" An elf noble, wearing jewel encrusted gilded armor, strode forward, drawing a blazing white blade. Behind him his warriors stood, weapons drawn.

Harm's face twisted with hatred. He drew his own Runeblade, which pulsed with a dull red light. The two magic swords crackled in the proximity of each other. His men readied their weapons in response to the threat.

The Drow leader faced the enemy, whose own features were lined with loathing. "It is your blood that shall be spilled here surface dweller. This is our territory."

"You stole one of ours. We're here to take vengeance. Where is the babe? Hand it over and you will at least die with a shred of honor."

Harm laughed. "Even if I were in possession of the infant, the seven hells would freeze over before I handed it over to you. My masters have other plans for that one. It shall not live to thwart Evil!"

"His destiny is already written in the future. You cannot prevent the will of the gods."

"My Lords think otherwise."

"Your thinking is flawed, Light will triumph! I, Hammath Highhand so declare!"

The two stepped closer, weapons held ready. The blades hummed and glistened with magic, each straining to reach the other. Sparks flew between them, and the air shimmered with energy.

"And I, Harm Undertow say otherwise!" Harm lunged forward suddenly, causing the elf to skip back to avoid being split open.

"Vermin!"

"Light dwelling slug!"

The two leaders circled each other, looking for an opening and growling at each other.

"HOLD!" A shadow fell over the combatants. "There shall be no fighting in the village of Dume, by order!"

The elves looked up as one. A large flying beast, scales glinting in the dull light, hovered above, wings beating against the air with a dull noise, reminiscent of thunder. The Wyvern bared its fangs and hissed down at them from a mouth packed with sharp teeth. A small green figure could just be made out hanging on to a saddle at the base of its neck. Above it, another two of the dragon-like monsters, complete with their own riders, circled.

Harm glared, whilst still managing to keep one eye on the elf. "By order of whom?"

This question seemed to puzzle the Wyvern rider a moment. "Just by order," it said. "Failure to comply will result in dinner."

"Dinner?"

"For my flying friend here." The goblin patted the neck of his mount, which hissed again.

"Oh." Harm thought about it a moment, remembering that Wyverns were supposed to have poison breath amongst other abilities, and decided now was not the time to test his luck. He looked back down, towards the elf. "I suppose this is your lucky day sunlight worshipping worm."

Hammath looked as annoyed as the Drow, but nodded reluctantly. "You shall befoul the air a while longer, dark scum." He lowered his sword.

"We have another visitor," said Primrose, stepping closer now that the prospect of imminent death had faded slightly. He nodded his head.

Down the street came the Golem. Harm couldn't tell why, but for some reason the animated being looked annoyed. He watched as it strode up to him and stopped.

"Where did they go?"

The Drow sighed and sheathed his sword. This whole expedition had become more complicated than he'd bargained for. 'A quick snatch of the baby elf and then back,' his superior had said. 'Easy in and out.'

"Well?" The Golem was waiting.

He pointed out towards the lake. "They went that way, on a boat of some kind."

The animation looked at him a moment longer then, without a word, strode away. Harm watched as it walked into the lake and disappeared from view under the waves.

"Sir!" Primrose, who was beginning to annoy Harm, gestured towards the elves.

"Now what?" The Drow looked and saw the Elven leader speaking with someone onboard the only ship in port. A ghostly galleon, with rigging hanging in tatters. Translucent, half skeletal crewmembers strode the decks, preparing to cast off.

"Oh no they don't!" he declared, striding over to the gangplank just as the elves began to board the ship. "Hoy there! Who is the Captain of this bucket?" he shouted up at the deck.

The outline of a grizzled pirate, ghostly hair waving about his head, peered over the side. "That'll be me."

"I wish to hire your vessel, and perhaps your services," shouted Harm. "My men and I are in pursuit of the

boat that recently left this berth. I can pay in gold."

The Captain smiled a gap toothed smile. "Arr, then ye best board sharpish like. For we be casting off right quick."

Undertow waved at his men, and they trotted up the gangplank, to stand on an apparently rotting deck near the Elven party.

The captain stumped over, his peg leg making a clumping sound. "There be no fighting with each other on my ship Drow. Else ye be pitched over the side. Are we being in agreement?"

Reluctantly, Harm nodded.

"Good. Now then, about that gold..."

Harm haggled with the Ghost Captain as the crew cast off lines and made ready to sail. Just as they were about to depart a large figure bounded up the walkway, to land with a thump on the deck. The giant looked around, panting.

"Gut go sailing!" he declared.

~ \* ~

"I couldn't see anyone," said Cuthbert. "I think we got away." He traipsed up to the waiting group and sat down.

Dreth removed his head from where it had been resting in his hands. "Oh. Never again, I swear. I'm never going to touch another drop."

They were some way outside the town, sitting in a slight shallow. Ahead of them the terrain grew sparse and barren, no doubt the desert that the street had been named after. Back the way they came was the Black forest, whilst over on the horizon the cavern wall could dimly be seen.

"Ha, serves you right, having a slap-up feed and not inviting us along." Percy put his hands on his hips. "*Let's all split up*," he said in a bad imitation of Dreth. "Now the truth outs. Mr.Piggy here wanted to wallow in gluttony."

"This is all very well," said Redthorne, who was changing the baby. "But where do we go from here? We still don't know where this great treasure is, and half the underworld seems to be after us."

"I wish to find out who I am, and why I'm here," said Emerald.

Dreth thought a moment, though it hurt his head. "Someone said that there was some kind of Castle in the desert," he said. "Or we could head towards the wall, try and find a way back into the dungeon proper."

"Why not ask that goblin we met where to go? He can't be that far away," said Percy, fiddling with his new leg.

"I don't want to hang about too long, who knows if our plan worked, or how long it will throw them off our trail?" Dreth rubbed his forehead and looked around. Why was this so complicated?

The baby burbled and wiggled its legs.

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**The Management.**

"Well what are we waiting for? Let's go find that treasure!" Percy attempted to strike a dramatic pose.

"And where exactly do we start looking?" Dreth asked. "We need a map or something."

Emerald stood up. "Then we have to see the Management, they will surely know. And in the meantime perhaps we can get a few questions answered. Like who I am."

"Are you crazy?" Percy abandoned his pose. "Stick our heads into the turtle's mouth? Out of the frying pan and under the wire?"

"I don't know," Dreth mused, tapping his chin with one finger. "The idea has some merit."

"Oh, and I suppose we simply stroll up and knock on the front door do we?" asked Cuthbert. "Hello Mr. All-powerful dungeon manager. Could you kindly direct us to the treasure? And whilst you're at it, would it be awfully bothersome to ask you to call off your unstoppable monster that is chasing us?" He folded his arms. "I don't think so."

"Perhaps we could dress up?" Sprat piped up.

"A disguise eh?" Percy smiled. "I like your thinking lad."

"Fine. I shall don the top hat and tails, along with a rubber nose I just happen to keep in my pocket here then," said Cuthbert, who was in full sarcasm mode now.

"Oh hush you two. I'm sure it won't be as bad as all that," said Dreth. "I mean, how likely is it that anyone would go up to the Management castle of their own accord?"

"You mean only the terminally stupid or suicidal would try it?" asked Redthorne, raising an eyebrow.

"Exactly," Dreth snapped his fingers. "It's a perfect plan."

"My definition of perfect is obviously out of date," muttered Cuthbert.

"So it's agreed then," said Dreth. "Off to the castle!"

"Great," said Cuthbert. "Its times like this I'm glad I'm already dead. I mean, what's the worst that can happen to me now, eh?"

"You'd be surprised," said Percy, slapping his friend on the back.

They started walking towards the dark sand of the Black Desert.

~ \* ~

"Avast ye lubbers! Pull over and prepare to be boarded!" The ghostly captain shouted down at the tour boat.

Harm leaned over the side, trying to spot his prey amongst the tourists. He turned to Primrose. "Take some men, get down there and secure the baby before those surface scum beat us to it." He turned to face the small figure flittering about near his head. "Fearie, fly over there and scout ahead."



Primrose nodded as Smudge flew off, and turned to arrange a boarding party. Harm waited impatiently as grapples were thrown or fired at the target. The ropes tightened and the vessels began to draw together.

Before they were even close half a dozen Drow were crawling, or in Primrose's case walking, along the ropes to the other ship. Unfortunately so were an equal amount of elves.

Harm gripped his sword and leaned over the rail as the two parties reached the boat and began searching it.

"I will dispose of you and your vermin kind you know." The leader of the Elves had moved over to stand by him. He too watched the search.

Harm laughed. "You and who's army? We're stronger down here, and you know it. Spare me your empty threats surface crawler."

"The forces of light shall ultimately be victorious!"

Harm glanced at the light elf leader. His armor glistened even here, in the gloomy depths of the cavern. The others' gaze was set firmly on the tour boat. The Drow leader leaned close. "When this is all over," he whispered, "I am personally going to lead another raid topside to your little camp. There I'm going to tie you down so you can watch as my men enjoy themselves with your women before they dispose of them. Finally I'm going to hamstring and blind you, and leave you to live out the rest of your miserable existence as a useless cripple."

The Elven leader went red and gripped his sword, turning towards Harm, who was grinning with glee. "I shall cut you down where..."

"Landlubbers!" The tirade was interrupted by the captain. "Yer men say there be no baby on yonder vessel, arrr. What be ye wanting to do now?"

Harm slammed the rail with his fist. They'd been tricked! He turned to the captain. "Turn your boat about. We're heading back to the village, full speed ahead!"

~ \* ~

The dark structure of the castle loomed above the party, the upper towers disappearing into the gloom of the cavern.

"Certainly looks the part anyway," said Cuthbert, leaning back and gazing upwards.

"Where's the entrance?" asked Dreth.

They were in the depths of the Black Desert. The castle had been visible for many leagues, the only building in the vicinity. They had slogged towards it as fast as they'd been able, stopping only to allow Redthorne to rest occasionally.

Now they had reached their target. An imposing citadel of solid dark stone, which gave the distinct impression that it was watching their every move.

"This way, I think I see a drawbridge," said Emerald.

They trudged round to the entrance. A huge portal that hung over them like some sort of cavernous maw. Two giant figures stood either side of the way in, covered from head to foot in heavy plate mail armor, and holding

swords as long as Dreth was tall.

"Guards," hissed Redthorne.

Dreth rolled his eyes. "No! You think?"

Redthorne's visage darkened. "Don't speak to me thus fiend. I am a wizard of..."

"The pink light party yah yah yah. We've heard it before mage." Dreth looked at the Cuthbert. "The old 'prisoner' trick here I think?"

Cuthbert nodded.

~ \* ~

Gordon stood silently and watched through his visor as the party approached. Several undead surrounded what appeared to be a mage carrying a baby. One of the zombies pushed the wizard ahead of him, causing a variety of angry complaints as they clumped over the drawbridge.

The tallest being, a thin human who looked like he had seen better days, approached the other guard, who happened to be Gordon's sergeant, Simon.

"Prisoner delivery."

"Docket," said Simon.

"Docket?"

"Your paperwork. Hand it over."

"Ah yes, the docket. Where did I put it?" The tall man made a show of patting his pockets.

Gordon looked on as the man searched his robe, to no avail.

"Ah, sorry. I seem to have misplaced it. Still, never mind eh? I'm sure..."

"No docket, no entry," said Simon, who was the methodical type.

"Look, we have an important prisoner here..."

"No docket, no entry," repeated the guard.

The man took a deep breath. "Look my friend, I am..."

"Don't care who you are. We have our orders. No docket..."

"...no entry, yes yes yes, I understood you the first three times." The human brought his hand up to his chin thoughtfully. "Shall we start again? My name's Dreth. I've an important prisoner here, a wizard of..."

"No docket..." Simon began.

"Ok. I tell you what," said the man holding up a hand to forestall the ritual response. "I will make you a deal

yes?"

Simon leaned forward. "No..."

There was a blur of action. Gordon blinked. The man now had a long dark sword in his hands. The blade was throbbing with black light and humming. It was also dripping with blood.

Simon stood still for a moment more, then slowly, very slowly, his right half peeled away from his left and fell to the floor with a loud metallic clang. The other half followed suite.

The man looked at Gordon, who had not moved throughout the entire episode. "Now. Shall I try again? We have an important..."

"Pass friend," said Gordon, who was only two hundred years from retirement and had never liked Simon much anyway.

The man nodded and sheathed his sword. "Much better. I commend your initiative." He looked around. "Bring the prisoner!"

The troop marched on into the castle.

Gordon didn't move. He was on guard duty, watching the Black Desert for any possible sign of enemies. He saw none, as usual.

~ \* ~

"Cooo, it's alright for some isn't it?" said Percy as they wandered through vast halls lined with plush furnishings. The zombie ran his fingers along a strangely colored couch. "Look at this. Real Gray Elf skin. Must have taken eight or nine elves to cover this. They cost a fortune you know.

"Come on, stop admiring the fixtures and fittings," said Dreth. "We have to find this manager before someone complains about the guard back there."

"Mmf," said the zombie, but padded after the others, his metal leg clanking on the marble floor.

They walked up a long corridor, through a set of ornate double doors and found themselves in a large room decorated with a variety of hangings. Several comfortable chairs lined the walls. Opposite the door there was a single large wooden counter.

Behind the desk a perfectly formed female figure was sitting, busy filing her nails\*. She was dressed in a simple red gown that emphasized her dark flowing hair, which tumbled playfully over her shoulders. Two small horns protruded only slightly from the top of this black mane. The receptionist looked up as they entered and raised a shapely eyebrow. "Well well well, what do we have here?"

"Undead mostly," replied Percy absently. Cuthbert smacked him around the head.

The woman put down the nail file. "And what can I do for you?" The tone of voice she used suggested any number of interesting possibilities could lay in the answer.

Dreth approached her, the rest of the party in tow, and rested casually on the desk. "Listen, we were supposed to have a meeting with the boss, don't suppose he's around by any chance?"

The receptionist leaned forward, exposing a low cut top straining to withhold a more than ample cleavage.

"Holy Dreg!" exclaimed Cuthbert, noticing the woman's figure for the first time. "Hello good looking!" He leered at her. "How about you and me do the dance of the dead baby?"

"Ignore my lecherous friend," said Dreth, "his brain is rotten."

"It's not *that* rotten," replied the zombie. "This dear lady is fulsome enough to stimulate parts others cannot reach."

\*Into points, Dreth noticed.

"I'm sorry," replied the secretary, "I don't do zombies. They have a tendency to fall apart when the going gets rough." She noticed Redthorne for the first time and licked her lips. "Wizards though, now wizards I *like*!" She preened and batted her eyelashes at the mage, sending an almost visible surge of lust forward. "How about it sweetie? Fancy a good time do we? Dump the kid and we can get down and dirty." She jiggled her bosom, producing an interesting effect.

Redthorne coughed and turned red. "Ah, I don't consort with demons," he said. Still, Dreth couldn't help noticing he wasn't addressing her face.

"Back Succubus!" Emerald stepped between the two. "Desist from your temptations."

"And who is this?" The receptionist eyed the woman up and down slowly. "Well, not bad. You can join in too if you want, make it a party why not?"

She winked at Emerald, who opened her mouth and flushed.

"Look, we can have an orgy later..." said Dreth.

"We can?" Cuthbert smiled so wide his face split.

"...but now we'd just like to visit your leader."

The Succubus pouted, which in no way made her look any less attractive. "Sorry, you're out of luck. He's busy in the library, researching some summoning or other, so I gather. Could be a while."

"Well, yes," said Dreth, improvising quickly. "We know that."

"We do?" asked Percy, looking at Emerald, who frowned at him.

"This is why we have the wizard," Dreth gestured at Redthorne. "He's here to assist. The baby is for a sacrifice."

"Ah, I did wonder." The receptionist sat down and picked up her file again. "Down the hall, second on the left."

"Thank-you," said Dreth walking off and nodded at the others, indicating they should follow.

"Listen," started Cuthbert to the succubus as the others shuffled away. "My parts are quite solid, if you would just..."

"**Cuthbert!**" Dreth shouted back, interrupted the undeads' chat-up line.

Cuthbert rolled his eyes and moved reluctantly after them.

They marched down a carpet lined hallway. White magical lights lit the passage, casting their glow over a variety of portraits on the walls. The pictures were mostly actions scenes, with various monsters fighting, and usually winning, against a variety of different adventurers.

"This is it," said Emerald, pointing to a large door.

"Right, let's meet this Dungeon Management then," said Dreth, drawing Darkblood. He kicked the door, forcing it open with a crash, and pushed Percy in ahead of him.

"Hey!" the zombie complained.

Dreth paid him no heed, and looked around the room, which was large and square, lined with book-cases and comfortable reading stations. "You!" he shouted. "I want a word with you."

The figure in the corner looked up, his face hidden in the folds of the hooded robe he was wearing. The large tome he had been holding fell to the floor as he jerked with surprise. "What's the meaning of this? I'll have your hides!" He raised his gloved hands and started to make a gesture in the air, but stopped as Darkblood pricked at his chest.

"Keep very still," said Dreth.

"Who are you? What do you want? Do you realize who I am?"

Dreth leaned forward and smiled his skull smile. "Oh, indeed. And do you know who **I** am?"

"A soon to be dead..." The figure cut off a moment and peered at him. "Wait a minute! Are you that meddlesome Guardian? The one who has run off?"

"The very one. And I want some answers."

"I don't parley with minions," replied the hooded man haughtily, crossing his arms.

"In that case, I've no reason to keep you around." Dreth pushed Darkblood forward slightly.

"On the other hand, negotiation is often the way forward," said the Management, quickly implementing a policy U-turn.

"I knew you would see reason," Dreth eased the sword back very slightly and looked around. "Nice place you have here."

"Look at me! I'm the boss!" Cuthbert was sitting at a large wooden desk. "Hey! Are these cigars?!" He opened a small box. "Why they are! Dragon Finest Blend. Very nice." He bit the end off one and looked around for a light.

"Why are you here?" asked the Master.

"A question some of us have been asking ourselves for some time now," said Emerald, stepping forward. "Maybe you can provide the answers?"

"You! How did... What are... I mean...?"

"We ask the questions here," interrupted Dreth. "Now, you can start with telling us where to find the treasure."

"The dungeon treasure?"

"No, aunts' secret recipe for chocolate sauce," replied Dreth, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Of *course* the dungeon treasure!"

"Oh, it's in the Pit, a few leagues north of here, but you need a key to get in."

"That would be the one in the Runebox I take it," said Redthorne. "The one our young zombie friend stuck to the Golem."

Dreth scowled. "I don't suppose there's another one by any chance?"

The Master laughed. "Not a chance! We don't make it easy for anyone to stroll in and help themselves." He smiled evilly. "So you'd better give up now. If you promise to return to your post I'll forget this whole thing ever happened."

"There's no other way in?" Percy looked up from a book he was pretending to read.

"No." The Dungeon Master leaned forward slightly, squinting at Dreth. "Who are you anyway? Why is the Overlord so insistent you don't leave? Tell me, and maybe we can work something out. I know what his weakness is you know."

It was Dreth's turn to frown. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"And who am I? Why have you held me prisoner?" Emerald pushed her way forward.

The Manager rubbed his hands together slightly. "You are part of an agreement with have with a Lower Power my dear. I'm afraid you will have to return to your casket, or It may get annoyed."

"It? Who is It?" Emerald asked.

The Dungeon Master chuckled from within his hood. "Sorry. The time for answers is over. Now you will pay for your insolence!" He raised a hand even as Dreth lunged forward with Darkblood.

The sword pierced the robe, but it was too late. The body of the Master no longer filled it, and it dropped down to hang loosely around the blade, which howled with anger.

At the same time shouts and the sound of many footsteps could be heard from the corridor outside, approaching quickly.

Dreth ran over to the door just as the burly figure of an orc entered the room. He pushed the guard to one side, smashing him head first into one of the bookcases, and slammed the door shut, leaning on it to prevent anyone else entering. "Percy, Cuthbert, find something to barricade us in, quickly!" he shouted. The door vibrated as someone bounced off the other side.

The zombies and humans hurriedly dragged a desk and a heavy bookcase over, and the portal was soon wedged shut.

"Now what?" asked Cuthbert, picking up his cigar again. "That won't hold them forever."

"Mage, spell us out of here!" Emerald said.

"I can't, unless you can think of a way to nullify the Spite," Redthorne answered.

"Why do we still have this wizard?" asked Percy. "He's no use to us unless he can cast some kind of spell."

"Let's give them the female," said Cuthbert. "Maybe they will trade our release for her."

"Try it zombie, and you will be looking for a metal head to match your leg," said Emerald, suddenly fierce.

"Stop your bickering," shouted Dreth. "Let me think." He turned to look at the guard he had thrown to one side before. Reaching down, he picked the Orc up by the collar with one hand and slapped it around the face until it woke up. "How do we get out of here?" he hissed.

There was a noise of water hitting carpet. Dreth looked down and made a face. "Oh come on!"

The Orc blubbered. "P... please mister, I just started last week, I knows nothin' I does."

"Then you're no use to me," said Dreth. He made a movement. There was a noise and the Orc shuddered in pain, but only briefly.

Dreth withdrew his hand from the guard's chest with a sucking sound. He let go of the body and took a bite out of the heart before looking at the rest of the crew.

"I'm really pissed off now," he declared, waving the dripping organ in his fist. "We come all the way here for what? Nothing."

"You got an Orc heart," pointed out Percy.

"This?" Dreth tossed the thing to one side. It fell the floor with a dull splat. "Tastes horrible. Orcs always do. Now. I think it's time to focus people. Our beloved Manager said we can find the treasure in The Pit, wherever that is. The one place it probably *is not* is in this castle. So, suggestions?"

"Everyone knows castles have secret tunnels," said Cuthbert. "We just have to find one."

"Right," Dreth snapped his fingers. "Zombies, get on it. Try pulling the books."

"There may be a book that can help us," said Redthorne.

"Fine, check out the books," said Dreth.

The zombies started searching the library noisily. Dreth went over to the desk and picked out a cigar from the box. Had he ever smoked when he was alive? He really couldn't remember. He tucked the smoke in a pocket thoughtfully. Next to the box was a crystal ball on a stand. As he looked at it, there was a flicker of movement. He stopped and looked closer.

The ball was full of mist, as was traditional. As he gazed into its depths, the picture cleared, to show a house surrounded by fields, viewed from above, as if from a bird. As he watched, the view moved closer, zooming down over the roof and slowing, to show a yard full of chickens. A figure was feeding them, a young elf maid, with long flowing golden hair, dressed in a simple yet fetching dress.

The elf was muttering to herself as she threw grain to the animals. Suddenly she looked around, as if startled by something, and appeared to gaze straight at Dreth, her piercing eyes boring straight into his.

The image disappeared with a dull flash of light as Percy shouted. Dreth looked up, annoyed for some reason at the interruption.

"Woohoo! Just call me secret passage finder!" The zombie attempted to do a little jig, but ended up tripping over his own metal leg and landing on the floor with a crash.

With a last puzzled glance at the crystal ball, Dreth walked over the zombie. He stepped over the recumbent undead, who was writhing about like an upturned beetle, and peered into the passageway that had been hidden behind the book-case. Steep stairs led down. "Well done," he said. "Let's go."

Redthorne moved over to the cloak the Dungeon Master had left behind, and picked it up, peering at it intently.

"Are you coming or not?" Asked Dreth.

"This robe has a powerful aura," replied the wizard. "It may be more than it looks."

Dreth strode over and held the garment up to the light. "Looks normal to me."

"Yes, well, you're not a wizard are you? Trust me, this is a magical robe."

Dreth nodded and stuffed the Master's robe into his bag. "As you say. However, for now let's get out of here, before they break in the door."

As if to emphasize his point there was a loud crash as the guards finally got themselves sorted out into a battering team.

They got out, Dreth closed the passage door once he was through, leaving the empty library behind them.

~ \* ~

The Golem trod steadily forward, red eyes piercing the inky blackness of the water without effort. Some kind of strange underwater crab detected its approach a moment too late, and was crushed underfoot. The Golem didn't notice. It *did* notice a yellow glow pop into life ahead and to one side of it though.

The automaton stopped as the Master's scowling face appeared in the picture. "Where are you now?" he asked, his voice distorted by the water.

"In the Black Lake. Someone said Dreth took a boat..."

"Idiot! You were tricked! Dreth and seemingly half the dungeon are in the castle! Get back here at once and deal with them!"

If the Golem were alive it would have sighed.

"And hurry! They're in the library. There are books in there that I don't want him finding."

"Yes Master." The Golem started to turn, and then paused. A spark of curiosity passed through the silicon brain. "Why aren't you wearing anything?"



The Dungeon Master looked down. "Cursed teleport spell!" He looked up again. "You! Get moving!" The image disappeared with a red flash.

The Golem turned and started running back the way it had come, stirring up the bottom and leaving a cloud of mud in its wake.

~ \* ~

"How long do we have to wait here?" complained Percy.

"Yes, this light is playing havoc with my skin," said Cuthbert, peeling a strip off his face to emphasize the point.

"It won't be too long now," said Dreth from his position on the brow of the dune.

"I don't understand why we're waiting at all," said Emerald. "Surely the longer we stay in one place, the more chance we have of being found."

"Exactly," replied Dreth, his gaze never leaving the horizon.

Emerald gave up and went to join the wizard, who was resting on a mat and holding the sleeping baby. "Have you thought of a way to get rid of the Spite yet?" she asked.

Redthorne shook his head. "They are hard to kill." He sighed. "Dreth could probably skewer it with his sword, he's fast and powerful enough, if we worked together, but he insists on waiting here and staring off into the distance."

"What's he up to?" she asked, sitting down next to the mage. "We must have been here nearly a full day."

The wizard shrugged. "I suspect he has a plan. Whatever else he is, Dreth isn't stupid. At least I'm well rested now."

Sprat played with the dark sand as he listened to the others talk. He didn't understand what was going on, but if Uncle Dreth said they needed to wait, then they needed to wait. Daddy had always said that Dreth was some kind of very powerful zombie, and so should be respected, or at least feared, which was the same thing really.

The little undead looked up. Dreth was motioning to him. "Come here Spit, I've a task for you."

Sprat frowned at the mangling of his name, but obeyed, plodding unsteadily over to Uncle, who gripped his shoulder hard enough to crack bone.

Kneeling down Dreth looked Sprat in the eye, and held the black marble up between two thin fingers. "I want you to do something for me. It's very important you do exactly as I say. Do you understand?"

Sprat didn't, but nodded anyway.

"Good. Now, look over there. What do you see?"

The undead child followed the direction that Dreth was indicating, and saw a large figure, distant, but approaching fast.

"That's that nasty stone man!" he said.

"Sshhh!" said Dreth, putting a finger to his dry lips. "This can be our secret, okay? If you do as I ask, I will give you all the arms in my bag."

Sprat grinned and nodded, he loved arms!

"Very well. All you have to do is go to the Gol... er, big stone man, and touch him with this marble. Do you understand? Very well. Go on, there's a good zombie."

Sprat smiled, took the marble, and trotted off towards the advancing Golem.

~ \* ~

"Be ready to move," called Dreth over his shoulder.

"Finally!" said Cuthbert, throwing another piece of skin to the floor. He looked around. "Hey! Where's Sprat?"

"I sent him on a small errand," said Dreth.

"What? What errand? What do you mean?" Cuthbert dragged himself up beside Dreth and looked over the black sands, his eyes widening as he took in the scene. "Hey! Where's he going? You've sent him to his doom! Do you know how long he took to build? How many precious hours and adventurer parts went into him? You monster!"

Dreth bowed slightly. "Why, thank you."

"I will not stand by and let my son be squashed by a walking brick! I'll save you Sprat!" Cuthbert lurched after the little zombie.

"Indeed. Perhaps we should all see how this one turns out." Dreth drew Darkblood and stalked after him.

Cuthbert didn't look back, but hobbled over the dry earth as quickly as he could. Ahead of him Sprat closed with the Golem, who headed directly for the little zombie.

"Sprat!" Cuthbert slid down a dune, nearly losing a hand in the process. "Come back!"

It was too late. Even as he closed, the small and large shapes met. He closed his eyes, waiting for the screams and noise of re-death.

Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes again. The two figures were standing face to face, or face to kneecap anyway. A strange black glow surrounded them.

"Excellent," said Dreth, passing him.

"What? What's excellent?" He chased after Dreth and the two drew near to the Golem and zombie. Up close Cuthbert could see that Sprat was holding the black marble up, touching the automation. The stone was the source of the strange glow.

Even as they stared the light dimmed and died, and the two figures moved once more, looking about curiously.

The Golem's gaze fell upon Cuthbert. "Daddy?" it said. "Why are you so small?" It looked down at Sprat. "Hey! That's me!"

"What's the meaning of this?" demanded the body of Sprat.

Dreth leaned over and plucked the black gem from the zombie's grasp. It was no longer black, but clear, as if made from ordinary glass. He bent down to address Sprat, or at least Sprat's body.

"Now then Golem. Not so high and mighty now are you?" He laughed a low chuckle. Then he stepped forward and tapped the RuneBox that was still attached to the stone monster's side. "And I believe this is mine too."

"What have you done?" asked Cuthbert, totally bewildered. He looked around as the others caught up.

Dreth stood up. "This," he held up the marble, "is a device to transfer the consciousness of two bodies. I met a helpful necromancer back in the village who told me all about it. Your son and the Golem are now firmly housed in each other. A far more satisfactory arrangement, I'm sure you will agree."

"Daddy, I'm scared!" said the Golem, using Sprat's voice.

"You will not get away with this!" said the Golem from inside Sprat.

"But I have," said Dreth. He raised Darkblood. "And now, I'll finish you off for good!"

"**Wait!!**" Cuthbert leapt forward and held on to Dreth's arm, stopping the swing. "You can't kill my boy!"

"He's not your boy," Dreth gestured at the large stone shape. "**He** is!"

"Even so, I demand you let the body live. Or un-live even."

Dreth looked at him a moment, and then lowered his sword. "Very well, but the Golem cannot be allowed to roam free. Tie him up and guard him. You lose the kid, and trouble will follow." He sheathed Darkblood and walked away. "Come on. We have a treasure to find."

~ \* ~

Garret Murkhard crouched down next to a stunted tree and tried to catch his breath, whilst simultaneously not breathing. Those cursed elves! They were damned good, he had to admit.

He peered around the trunk nervously. They had managed to keep away from each other on the ship and through the village, but once they left that haven the age old hatred between Drow and Elf surfaced, and the following few hours had been full of a fierce skirmishes between the two groups. The natural advantage of the Drow being on 'home' turf had been neutralized somewhat by the hunting skills of the surface scum, who were at their best in the forest terrain.

Garret had been separated from the rest of the Drow in the last encounter, and was now desperately attempting to locate his comrades.

Moving slowly he crawled out of his hiding place. Keeping behind brush wherever possible.

There was a sound and a sharp pain in his middle. He looked down to see a white arrow protruding from his waist. *Shit!* He dived to one side just as another barb whispered past.

Pushing his way into a nearby bush he pulled at the protruding shaft. The pain nearly made him pass out, and he staggered backwards.

"Does that hurt?" A silken voice came from behind.

He whirled round, trying to bring his sword up at the same time, but he was too slow. The grinning elf moved his rapier in a blur.

Garret felt the cold kiss of metal as the blade sliced open his stomach. He looked down breathlessly, trying in vain to hold his intestines in as they looped out through his fingers.

His breathing ragged, he looked up into the hard eyes of the enemy. "Please..." he gasped.

"I will be merciful where you would not be," the hunter said, raising his sword.

Garret's eyes widened as the weapon flew through the air. For a moment he felt a burning pain, and then the lights went out.

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### **The Pit.**

The rock wall of the cavern loomed above them.

"Now what?" asked Emerald.

"I don't know," said Dreth. "I just get the feeling here is where we can get out. There must be a secret door. Percy, try pushing that light colored patch over there."

Percy moved to comply, grumbling under his breath. He was rewarded by a hiss and an expulsion of green vapor which issued forth from a hidden aperture.

"Poison gas!" exclaimed Redthorne, moving hastily away. Emerald quickly followed him.

Percy waved a hand in front of his face, unaffected by the trap. "Great, now I'll smell of poison all day."

"Should be an improvement then," said Cuthbert. He pointed to a sharp bulge of rock further up the wall. "This looks a likely handle. Do you think it's trapped in some horrible fashion as well?"

"Only one way to find out," replied Percy cheerfully. He pushed at the stone.

A panel hidden in the wall slid to one side with a dull grinding sound.

"Easy!" said Percy, stepping through and looking left and right. "We're back in the tunnels."

Emerald looked at Dreth curiously. "How did you know that was there?" she asked.

Dreth shrugged. "I don't know. I just did somehow."

The others entered the passage, Redthorne and Emerald waiting until the gas had cleared first.

Dreth looked down. "Light!" he commanded.

"Allow me," said Redthorne. He raised his hands and began an incantation, only to stop abruptly as a small red figure popped into view in front of his face and bit his nose.

"Ooowoowowowow!" shouted the mage, grasping at the Spite, which disappeared with a giggle and a pop. The wizard's spell dissipated, incomplete.

"So much for that," said Dreth. He turned to Percy. "Do we have any left in the bag?"

Percy rummaged through the depleted sack and pulled a torch out. "Just one," he said. He lit it and held it up so the party could see.

Dreth looked about. The passageway was hewn through dark rock and sloped down, but was otherwise unremarkable.

"So we go further down?" said Emerald.

"The Manager said the treasure was in The Pit," answered Dreth. "That would imply a section lower than normal."

"Down it is then," said Cuthbert.

They moved off, following the narrow and winding tunnel in silence.

As they picked their way forward, Redthorne drew level with Dreth. "How about helping me get rid of this curse then? You can surely skewer the Spite if I lure it forth. Your sword would kill it, I'm sure."

"Later wizard. Once we're out of these tunnels."

The mage scowled, but dropped back again.

"Is it me, or is it getting hotter?" asked Emerald a little while later, wiping her brow.

"Is it?" Asked Percy. "Heat doesn't affect me anymore." He stumbled slightly.

"Careful there," said Dreth who was walking behind him.

"What's that?" asked Sprat, pointing ahead and knocking Cuthbert over. "Oops, sorry Daddy. I'm not used to this body."

"Just take care will you? You could have knocked my head off."

"What did you see?" asked Percy.

They all looked forward. Dreth could make out some kind of orange light filtering through the darkness. "Put out that torch."

In the dark they could see the light more clearly.

"Looks like fire," said Dreth. He turned to the body of Sprat, which was tightly bound with rope and tied to Percy. "What's ahead Golem?"

The zombie smiled. "Well done Guardian. You've found the Pit. Your just desserts are very close now."

"Mmm," said Dreth. "Carry on, slowly."

They shuffled on, the light and heat increasing until they emerged into another huge cavern. This one shimmered with fumes rising from slow moving lava rivers, the cause of the orange glow they had seen. Uneven paths of black rock were lined with stunted trees. The trails meandered about past craggy rocks and deep crevasses, leading towards a large mound in the distance.

"I don't like the look of this," said Redthorne, patting the baby's back.

"No turning back now," replied Dreth. "Onwards!"

They walked along the path, taking care when it paralleled the pits, which were often filled with pools of bubbling molten rock.

"If this is where the treasure is," said Emerald, dodging to one side as a bubble splattered red hot lava near her, "surely there would be a guardian?"

"Um," said Cuthbert, stopping suddenly. "I think I know what it may be."

They all looked to the large pit which had opened up in front of them. Sat there, red wings folded back on a glistening scaly hide, was a dragon. Its body was the size of several elephants, and a wicked looking tail, at least as long as the body, waved back and forth behind it, culminating in a spiked ball that resembled a giant mace. The creature looked up, yellow eyes the size of plates widening as it saw the group. As they stood rooted to position, it slowly walked over to them, huge feet crunching over red hot rocks.

"And *what* do we have here?" it rumbled in a deep voice, sending a wave of heat over them.

Dreth pushed Cuthbert to one side. Best not chance the zombie saying something stupid with this beast. "Hello there!" He waved in what he hoped was a friendly fashion. "The name's Dreth. I'm the guardian of the undead way."

"Are you here for the treasure?" the giant creature asked, steam blowing from its nostrils.

"I refuse to answer that question," said Dreth, "on the grounds you may incinerate me."

"Because Dungeon guardian or no, I would be obliged to roast, and then eat you." It narrowed its eyes.

"Actually, I think I would just roast you. Dead meat gives me indigestion."

"Oh, absolutely," said Dreth hastily. "No need to be hasty now!"

"Well then, why are you here?"

Dreth thought quickly. "The, ah, Dungeon Master himself told us to pop along and check up on the treasure. Kind of an audit," he said. "It's a nuisance I know, but, well, procedure." He made a 'what can you do?' face, and shrugged.

"Really?" The dragon lowered its head. "Jonathon said it was time for an audit? He told you to come here and check the treasure?"

"Indeed, he was most insistent," Dreth replied, nodding. "Go and make sure it's all there, he said to me. I said, 'Jonnie,' we're kind of close you see, 'Jonnie' I says, 'no problem. Consider the job done.' So here we are. Now, if you would kindly step aside..."

"Oh. I don't think so."

"No?"

"No."

"I will have to report this to Jonathon you know," said Dreth, who was getting nervous.

"Knock yourself out," said the large lizard. "Though I would point out one thing."

"What's that?"

The dragon leaned close, wafting Dreth with superheated breath. "The Dungeon Master's name isn't Jonathon."

"I see," Dreth replied, leaning backwards slightly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the others starting to slowly sidle away.

"Still, I'm a reasonable dragon. Perhaps the Master was having a joke with you eh?"

"Ahhh, yes, that was probably it. He is a card eh?"

"So, if you can guess my name, I'll let you pass."

"I thought you were a dragon, not a sphinx."

"I went on a cultural exchange once. It was very enlightening. Now, are you going to guess or not?"

"Do I get any tips?"

"Yes, get it right or I'll eat you."

"Seems a bit unusual to me," said Dreth.

"I know, don't tell the union, they'll have me up on charges of leniency during work hours." The dragon grinned, exposing a mouth full of long, needle sharp, teeth.

"Right. Your name. Let me see," Dreth scratched his head, whilst desperately trying to think of a way around this beast. "Could I just consult my friends?" He waved his hand behind him, at Cuthbert who was desperately shaking his head.

"Of course."

Dreth nodded and sauntered as casually as he could, which wasn't very given the circumstances, back to the group.

"Thanks! Now we'll **all** be roasted!" hissed Cuthbert.

Dreth ignored him and spoke to Sprat, in the Golem body. "Sprat," he whispered. "I want you to kick this dragon's ass for me."

"What? I can't do that Uncle," said the Golem. "It's too big, and I'm scared! 'm only little you know."

Dreth rolled his eyes. "Look, you're in a practically indestructible body. You can do it."

"Sorry Uncle, me's too scared."

"Times up!" came a low rumble from behind them. "Take your best shot, and then I'll take mine."

"Shit," said Dreth with feeling. "Well, if you want something doing," he muttered. He looked at his companions. "When I give you the signal, run. I'll distract him." Without waiting for an answer he turned back and approached the monster.

"So?"

"I think your name is... RUN!" he shouted, and drawing Darkblood in a blur of motion stabbed the dragon square in the muzzle with all his strength.

"Powwwweerrrr! Lifffffe!" hissed his sword, drinking the dragon's essence greedily.

The beast howled and pulled back instinctively, dragging Dreth off his feet. A massive gout of white hot flame swept the cavern floor, narrowly missing the others, who were moving away at best speed.

Dreth held on tightly as the dragon roared, nearly deafening him in the process.

"**GET... OFF... MEEEEEE!**" it bellowed, whipping its giant head around and dislodging Darkblood, sending Dreth flying through the air. He landed on an open patch of rocky ground, and quickly rolled to one side to avoid the wash of fire that followed.

"Missed!" he shouted back, diving behind an outcropping of rock.

"I will bite your limbs off one by one and cook them in front of you!" The dragon's voice echoes off the walls.

"It appears to be annoyed," said Darkblood.

"You think?" He peered around the rock, and then broke cover in a run, heading directly for the monster, taking it by surprise as it lumbered towards Dreth. Ducking another blast of fire he ran under the belly of the beast, swinging his blade above his head and hacking the exposed belly.

Scales and blood rained down around him as the magical sword cut through the dragon's armor, causing another bellow of pain. Darkblood cried out in bloodlust.

"Look out!" the sword screamed, but Dreth was already jumping to one side as the giant creature flopped down, trying to crush him.

He dived clear as it crashed to the floor, hacking at the rear leg in passing and cutting a large gash in the foot.

"The tail!" Darkblood shouted a warning, but it was too late. The dragon's scaly appendage swung round and smashed into Dreth, catapulting him into the air over the dragon.

He twisted in flight, grabbing an ear as he somersaulted over the head, and landed on the beast's neck.

"You have **got** to be kidding me!" bawled the dragon, jumping backwards and shaking its body from side to side like the worlds biggest dog.



Dreth held on with one hand, like some bizarre version of a rodeo rider, sword held high in the other as he swayed with the bucks and sudden turns of his enormous mount. As he swung around he briefly saw Cuthbert and Percy waving and cheering from near the cavern wall.

"Ride him Crowbone!" came the distant yell.

"That's Cowboy moron," muttered Dreth to himself, just as the dragon leapt into the air. "Oh shit."

"That's right," snarled the monster, wings pumping like mad, "let's see how you like being crushed against the ceiling!"

"I think we should get off!" said Darkblood.

Dreth jumped.

~ \* ~

"Uncle Dref!" shouted Sprat as the thin figure fell from the back of the monster. He watched as his favorite guardian tumbled slowly through the air, to land with a splash in a pool of lava. There was a dull explosion of black flame, and then nothing.

There was stunned silence from the onlookers.

"He's gone," said Percy, who was standing next to Sprat. "He's really gone."

"But... but you tol' me he was inde... indist... can't be killed," said Sprat, tears welling up from the cold stone he inhabited.

Cuthbert shook his head. "That's what he always told us," he said. "I guess he was wrong."

Sprat didn't hear him. A red hot rage was burning up his new body. What had Uncle asked him to do before? He raised his large stone hand. Ah yes, that was it.

"It's ass kicking time," he said.

Ignoring his daddies' cries, he headed for the dragon, which had landed and was scratching its nose on the floor.

"You! Dragon!" he shouted. "I want speaks to you!"

"Go to hell!" the monster roared back, and blew a ball of flame at the Golem.

The fire hit head on, washing Sprat with a mild tingling sensation. Then it was gone. He continued to advance, splashing through a shallow pool of lava as he approached the killer.

The dragon did a double take and opened its mouth wide. A gout of white hot fire hit Sprat in the chest. He walked into it, feeling the heat building, even in his magically animated stone body. Rivulets of molten rock began to dribble down his front, as the fabric of his being began to melt in the intense heat. Still he pushed on.

The dragon kept up the flame as the distance closed between them, but even such a mighty guardian had to breathe, and eventually the fire petered out.

Sprat stood there, glowing a dull red. "This for Uncle!" he said, and swung at the dragon as hard as he could, punching it on the side of the head.

The lizard howled as the blow knocked it off its feet. Blood and broken scales erupted from the side of his face.

Sprat followed up the attack with another, but this time the dragon dodged, and he only got a glancing hit in before something slammed into his back, cracking his torso and sending him staggering to the side. Twisting about he grabbed the tail as it came around again. Wrapping his arms around it, he squeezed.

This time several boulders were shaken loose at the screech. The Golem Sprat held on as he was lifted him into the air and slammed against the ground, forcing him to let go.

The two monsters stood up and faced each other. The dragon was battered and bleeding from various wounds, and Sprat was cracked in several places. The two creatures snarled and charged at the same time.

There was a loud crash as they collided.

Both screamed, and blood and chips flew as they rolled on the floor, biting, punching and scraping. Through boiling pools of liquid stone they tumbled, sending volcanic rock and lava flying as they pounded at each other.

Sprat hit and hit in blind fury, but the combination of heat and beatings from the dragon's claws and tail was beginning to tell. As they dropped off a chasm one leg suddenly shattered, causing pain to fire along silicon nerves.

He tried to pull away, but the tail once more came around and slammed him into the side of a small cliff. Another huge blast of flame blinded him for a moment. When it cleared, the dragon was holding a colossal boulder in its two front claws.

"Meet a distant cousin," the dragon gasped. It raised the stone and brought it down. Hard.

Sprat felt the impact as rock hit rock. Slowly he fell back, his body breaking up under the abuse. Then there was light as the boulder was lifted again. The shape of the giant lizard loomed over him, blurred this time.

Sprat tried to reach up, but his arms were not responding.

"Good fight," snarled the beast. "Now, though, now it's time to say goodnight."

It brought the rock down again.

Everything went black.

~ \* ~

"My son!" cried Cuthbert as he watched helplessly from the side of the cavern. "My little Sprat!"

"There there," Percy said, patting him on the shoulder. "You can make another one."

"It's not the point!" wailed the other zombie. "He was so young, so innocent! He hadn't even butchered anyone yet! Now he'll never taste the succulent flesh of a screaming adventurer. Oh, the injustice of it all!" He waved his fist at the shape of the dragon.

"Daddy!"

"Never pluck out a still beating heart..."

"Daddy! 'm here."

"Never gorge on an exposed brain..."

"DADDY!!"

"Huh?" Cuthbert looked around at the still tied body of the little zombie. "Sprat? Is that you?"

"It's me daddy."

"But you were..."

"When the bad dragon dropped the stone I came back here."

Cuthbert bent down and hugged Sprat. "Oh son! You're back! Oh joy! Oh wonder!"

"Oh crap," said Percy.

"How can you say that?" Said Cuthbert, "it's a miracle."

"And *that* is a very pissed off guardian." Percy pointed. "I told you we should have gone with the wizard and the woman back up into the tunnels."

The three zombies looked up as the dragon limped over to them. It spat out a tooth as it approached, and snarled. "Usually I don't eat dead meat, but for you lot I'm going to make an exception," it said.

Cuthbert stood in front of Sprat. "Take me! Just leave my son!"

"No deal. You're all going down." The dragon opened a giant maw.

Cuthbert put a hand in front of his eyes and waited for the end.

There was a pause and a familiar voice came from nearby.

"Now you've made me *really* mad!"

The zombie peered through his fingers. Climbing slowly over a ridge of stone, holding a black sword, was what appeared to be a burning skeleton.

"Dreth? Is that you?"

"In the flesh," came the reply. Then the form looked down. "Well, in the bone maybe."

The dragon turned to face the burning Dreth. "You! How are you still alive?"

"I'm very hard to kill," said Dreth. "Now then, I believe I owe you a guess." He pointed his sword at the dragon. The blade seemed to steam with black mist. "Care to give us a clue?"

The guardian paused, looking at the burning undead standing in front of it. Then it seemed to sag. "Er, Drago is probably a good guess."

"Drago the Dragon? Not very original is it?" said Cuthbert.

"Want to make something of it zombie?" the monster growled.

"Drago then. That's my guess. Unless you want to go for round 3 with me?" Dreth waved Darkblood.

The giant beast hesitated, considering. Finally it let out a massive sigh. "You're too much trouble. Another time," he replied. The dragon sat down heavily, causing a small tremor. "I'm hurt, and it's not worth the effort, damned Golem."

"So we can go on?" asked Percy, helping Cuthbert untie Sprat.

"Go on, help yourself. It's over there, in the mound." The dragon pointed with a long claw. "You need a key though."

"I think I know just where to find one," said Dreth, looking out at a broken stone body.

~ \* ~

"So how did you know Sprat's consciousness would come back into his body if he died?" asked Cuthbert.

Dreth shook his head. "I didn't. The plan was to sneak past while they were fighting."

Cuthbert looked shocked. "You mean...?"

"Here we are," said Dreth, interrupting.

The undead looked at the black door in the side of the mound.

"Let's see if this fits then shall we?" Dreth waved the key they had extracted from the runebox that had been stuck to the Golem's body. He pushed it into the keyhole and turned. There was a click.

"Give it a push Percy," Dreth nodded his head.

Percy frowned, but pushed at the door, which swung open with a creak. He peered inside. "All clear."

They entered and looked about. It was a small round room, decorated with exotic tapestries and lit by magical lights. At the far end was another door, made of fine wood inlaid with gold and silver.

"Finally, we made it." Dreth stepped forward and then stopped abruptly as a small pink imp popped into being.

"Congratulations! You have reached the treasure! The Dungeon management salutes you brave adventurers... Wait a minute, you're not adventurers!"

"Does it matter?" Dreth asked.

"Well, no not really," said the imp. He shrugged. "I'm just a messenger. Help yourself." He gestured at the door.

Dreth and the others stepped into the furthest room and looked about. There was a small pile of gold coins and a chest.

"Where's the loot?" asked Percy.

"You're looking at it," replied the imp.

"This?" Dreth. He stepped forward, knelt down and opened the chest. It was empty except for a short black stick in the bottom. He looked up. "Where is it imp? Where's your wondrous treasure?"

"It's not my treasure, I already told you," the creature replied. "And this is it, really."

"But the fabled treasure!"

"It's not that simple," explained the messenger. "You see, contrary to popular belief, adventurers find the treasure all the time, and what with the current budget cutbacks it just hasn't been restocked in a while." The imp expanded his arms in a kindly fashion. "Look, if you just wait until the new fiscal century, we'll have a big pile of gold, jewels and all manner of exciting magical..."

**"I'm not waiting for the next bloody hundred years!"** shouted Dreth, standing up and stepping forward in a definitely menacing fashion.

The imp skipped backwards, hands held out in front of him. "Nono no! Wouldn't be a hundred years! Fifty maybe sixty, tops."

"One lousy wand and a few coins! I had more than that back in my chambers." Dreth wasn't listening.

"Ah! But this isn't any old wand!" The imp was pressed against the wall now.

"What does it do then?" asked Percy.

Seeing Dreth halt his advance for a moment, the imp talked fast. "It's a wand of All Things, one of the premium magical artifacts of our time. One of a kind practically! You won't find another like that in a hurry oh no."

"A Wand of All Things eh?" Dreth said. "So what's it doing left behind then? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, honest, practically brand new it is."

"Tell the truth midget, or I'll put my sword to work on you. It doesn't have any charges left, does it?" Dreth patted Darkblood as he waited for an answer. The sword hummed.

The imp's eyes flicked to the blade and back again. "No, I mean yes! Yes it does. Well, er ok. It has one charge left and er..."

"And what?"

"Well, truth be told, it's a bit... picky."

"A bit picky!?! A bit **picky**!! I slog through crazed Golems, invisible cat men, mad wizards, medusas, giants, wild elves and angry dragons for a magic wand that's a '*bit picky*'!!!" He waved Darkblood. "Here, let **me** show you picky!"

"Oh, leave the imp alone." A voice came from the door.

The undead swiveled around, to see Redthorne standing there. Behind him was a small group of Drow elves. One was holding the baby, another was holding a black dagger to Emerald's neck.

"You!" Percy said.

"Me," said the wizard. "I'm glad to see you again Dreth, even though you seem to have lost some weight." He gestured at an elf in finer armor than the rest. "Allow me to introduce Harm Undertow, Dark elf commander."

The Drow bowed slightly. "At last we meet," he said. "You have led us quite a merry chase."

"You're working with them?" asked Dreth.

"We came to an... agreement," replied the mage. "Now, the only thing is, I want the wand."

"I see. And what if I say no?"

"Oh, there's no need for unpleasantness," said Redthorne. "I can supply you with information in return for it."

"What kind of information?" Dreth asked, still holding Darkblood.

"I know the location of someone who can release you from your contract."

"But the wand could do that."

"Maybe, maybe not. In any case, we need the wand."

"You can't hurt me wizard, the Spite stops you casting any spells."

A female Drow in long robes stepped forward. "I've released the wizard from that curse."

Dreth looked at the assembled elves and then back at the wand. Why couldn't things go his way, just once?

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### **The Way Out.**

"I'm not so sure," said Dreth. "How do I know your information is worth the wand anyway? I mean, if the thing's so powerful, I may not need your help. I can just release myself with it."

"Don't be foolish now," said Harm, tapping the pommel of his sword. "I'm being generous in deference to your obvious contributions to evil, but I am not a patient elf. The offer will expire soon, and my wizardly friends here," he indicated Redthorne and his Drow mage, "are more than capable of dealing with you."

Dreth bent over and picked up the wand. Holding it in one hand he looked at the Drow, weighing up the artifact against the assembled foe. Eventually he tried to breathe in, realized he had no lungs and raised Darkblood instead. "I think you're bluffing," he said. "You saw me fight the dragon and know what you're up against. I think you'd have come in casting fireballs if you thought you could harm me."

Harm scowled. "You're being unreasonable. We mean business. Here, I'll give you a little example of what my mage can do, just to prove how serious we're about all this." He turned to the Drow sorceress. "Kill the female. Slowly. Very slowly."

"Ooh, a show!" said Percy, clapping his hands.

The mage smiled and approached Emerald, who struggled futilely in the grip of two guards. Taking her victim's chin in black fingers she smiled. "This is going to be fun."

As Emerald screamed, the Drow began to intone in a slow and ancient language, the words of the spell hanging briefly above her as black mist before dissipating.

Smiling in ecstasy the sorceress raised her arms high above her head, speaking in louder tones as the climax of the spell approached. The power of the magic was almost visible, distorting the air in the small chamber like heat rising from the desert floor. Dreth took a step back.

The Drow shouted the final words and held her hands out wide.

Emerald screamed in pain and fear as blood started to drip from her ears and eyes. "**Nooooo!**"

"Oh, but yessss," replied the Drow mage.

The elves looked on, white teeth showing smiles of great enjoyment as their sacrifice rose slowly into the air, flailing about wildly.

"Wooo!" said Cuthbert.

Dreth sidled slowly sideways.

"Wait." The sorceress stepped back. "That shouldn't happen."

A red glow was emanating from Emerald as she twisted about in agony.

"Uh oh," said the pink treasure imp, and disappeared with a pop.

"What's wrong?" asked Harm.

"Something's interfering with my spell." The Drow sorceress frowned and rolled up her sleeves. Taking a deep breath she opened her mouth to cast more magic.

**"Don't Bother!"** Emerald's voice, amplified many times over the norm, echoed around the chamber. The female magic user flew backwards, her body slamming against the far wall with a sickening crack of broken bones.

Dreth gave the wand to Cuthbert and put a finger to where his lips should have been. The zombie looked puzzled, but nodded and secured the magical device in his pouch.

The elves were backing away from Emerald, who was now hanging still in the air, her hair floating about her head like some kind of unholy halo. The red glow was stronger now, and an aura of immense Evil was pervading the room. Dreth noted, with some satisfaction, that it was obviously causing Redthorne intense pain. The baby was howling his lungs out too.

**"Leave My Vessel Be!"** came the voice again.

Redthorne slumped to the floor, unconscious, and several of the elves fell too, clutching their heads. Dreth moved quickly, grabbing the baby from the one holding it as he dropped.

**"This One Is Mine! You Will Do Her No Harm,"** said the Evil through Emerald. Each word came out at an almost physical intensity.

Most of the Drow were down now, unconscious or dead. Harm desperately dragged himself out of the doorway, staggering away with one other elf following closely behind.

The body of Emerald watched them go, and then swiveled round to face Dreth and the zombies.

"Er, hi," said Dreth. "Names Dreth, Guardian of the..."

**"Be Silent!"**

"No problem. Silent it is."

Emerald's drifted closer, bathing Dreth in red glow, which he now saw emanated from one of the rings on her finger.

**"You Are Responsible For Waking This Body. Therefore I Charge You With Keeping It Safe Until I Wish To Inhabit It."**

"Keep in safe, gotcha," said Dreth.

**"It Will Not Go Well For You If It Comes to Harm, Do You Understand?"**

"Well, no offence or anything your immense awfulness, but you seem to be pretty good at defending it... her... whatever, by yourself."

**"I Am Only Able To Visit This Plane To A Finite Number Of Times. You Will Look After This Vessel."** Emerald raised a hand and pointed at Dreth.

"She does go on a bit doesn't she?" Dreth heard Percy whisper to Cuthbert behind him.

"Duly noted," said Dreth, who privately agreed with Percy's opinion.

**"I Weaken. Something Is Resisting Me. Remember... Look After... This... Vessel."** The red light faded and Emerald floated slowly to the floor, coming to rest gently against the wall.

Dreth looked down at the baby in his arms. It was sucking its thumb. He tried to frown, remembered he had no flesh, and made a tutting noise instead.

"Well, that was pretty cool," said Cuthbert, leaning down and jabbing one of the Drow bodies.

"Are they dead?" asked Percy.

"Not yet," said Cuthbert, pulling out a rusty dagger.

"Leave them, Drow will give you stomach ache." Dreth, walked over to Redthorne and nudged him with his foot. The wizard groaned.

"I don't think I can get stomach ache, can I?" Cuthbert looked at Percy, who shrugged.

"Never been a problem for me," said the other zombie.



"Wizard. Wake up!" Dreth poked Redthorne again.

The mage stirred and clutched at his head. "Ow. What was *that*?" he moaned.

Dreth ignored the question. "Get up. We need to get out of here, and I want to know what you know about my curse."

Redthorne staggered upright. "And then I suppose you will kill me."

"Don't be stupid," said Dreth. "I don't care what you do, just tell me what you know and I will let you go."

"Give me the baby first," said the wizard.

Dreth handed the baby to Cuthbert. "Hold this, and don't eat any bits." He turned back to Redthorne. "If you tell me the information, I'll give you the baby, unharmed."

The wizard stroked his beard. "Deal, but we have to get out of here first," he replied.

"Fair enough," said Dreth. "Assuming we can find the exit."

"Hey boss, look who I've found!" Percy said from near the doorway. He held up the small ragged and unconscious figure of Smudge. "Can I eat her? Please?"

"Maybe later," said Dreth bending over one of the fallen Drow and taking the scabbard and robes.

The zombies watched as he sheathed Darkblood and donned the garments. Smudge came to just as he was clipping the cloak on.

"Welcome back Fearie," said Dreth. "How are you feeling?"

"Is that you Dreth? You look terrible," replied Smudge.

"Not as terrible as you will if you don't tell us how to get out of this dungeon," he replied. "You said your home was the Black Garden, and it was near an entrance. How do we get there?"

"I don't know."

"Fine," Dreth looked at Percy. "You can eat her."

"Wait! Wait!" The Fearie waved her hands as the zombie grinned and lifted the small form to his mouth. "I remember now!"

"Ohh," Percy moaned in disappointment as Dreth motioned for him to stop.

"So, how do we get out of here?" asked Dreth. "Start talking!"

~ \* ~

The mirror cleared to reveal the image of the Overlord, sitting at his desk, hands resting with fingers interlocked in front of him. His face was one of utmost calm.

The Dungeon Master fell to his knees in terror.

"I *hear*," the steady voice came through the portal, "that Dreth is still at large." The bespectacled figure leaned forward, pushed his glasses further up his nose and picked up a piece of paper.

He read the document for a moment more and then looked back at the Master. "Furthermore, he has in his possession the woman, and..." there was a hint of a twitch in the lips here, " *and* he has reached the center of the dungeon and **found the treasure!!**" The Overlords' skin began to smolder, and there was a definite reddish tinge to the otherwise unassuming visage. The table began to smoke where his hands were touching it and the paper he was holding burst into flame and was quickly reduced to ash.

"G...great and merciful Overlord, I can fix this. It's not too late," quailed the Dungeon Master from his groveling position on the floor.

"Issue a general alert, NOW!" shouted the Overlord. "I want Dreth cut into little pieces and locked in a magically sealed rune box, **do you understand me?** I don't care what it takes." The wooden surface of the desk smoldered and then ignited.

"At once your magnificence! It shall be done!"

"If it isn't, your still living hide will be used to refurnish my chair." With the final threat the image winked out, leaving the Dungeon Master shaking in dread.

~ \* ~

"Why don't you just use the wand to find out what you need to know?" Cuthbert asked, trying to jiggle the baby, and nearly dropping it.

Dreth patted his side. He had retrieved the magical device from the undead and secured it in a pouch. "I want to find out what the wizard knows first," said Dreth. "If he can direct me to my destination then we can save the wand for a real emergency. Anyway, the imp said the thing was 'picky', so there's always the chance it will go wrong. I need time to think how to use it best."

They were back in the lava tunnels again, following Smudge's directions. The Fearie was sitting on Percy's shoulder, tightly bound with some strips torn from his rags.

Dreth left the zombie behind and moved up to walk next to Redthorne, who was supporting Emerald. The woman had come round with no recollection of what had happened to her. Apart from some unsteadiness, she was unhurt.

"How did you get past the dragon anyway?" he asked the wizard.

Redthorne looked up and smiled a small smile. "Oh that was easy. We just said we were with you."

"Hmm. That was after you met up with your Drow masters of course."

"Don't be foolish," retorted the wizard. "We bumped into them whilst, ah, securing a defensive position against the dragon. I had to pretend to make a deal, or they would have killed us both at once. I knew if I led them to you we could overcome them together. We make quite a team eh?"

"Don't bullshit me wizard, I know you'd destroy me in an instant if you could. You were looking out for number one."

The wizard scowled. "Yes, well. Maybe."

"Oh, it's nothing to be ashamed of, I would dispatch you without a thought if it became necessary too," said Dreth casually.

"How reassuring," replied the mage dryly. "I will bear that in mind."

"Are you sure you aren't a Dark Wizard? I mean, you seem pretty intent on getting this baby at whatever cost. That's not very usual for someone on the side of Good, as far as I know."

"Sometimes there needs to be sacrifices for the greater good," said Redthorne solidly. "I do what's needed, that's all."

Dreth nodded. "Well, just remember, so do I. Don't get any funny ideas. We currently travel the same path, so there's no need for you to die needlessly."

Redthorne raised an eyebrow. "Now who's talking out of character? I think you're getting soft Dreth. All this talk of 'no needless killing.' What would your masters think?"

"I have no masters," said Dreth with feeling, but then, because he was honest at least to himself, added: "Well, none I acknowledge anyway."

"How far is this exit?" interrupted Emerald in a weak voice. "I could use a rest. My body feels like it's been through a wringer."

Dreth looked back at Smudge. "How far Fearie?" he asked.

"There should be a door any minute now," she replied in a sullen voice. "It leads to a little used portion of the dungeon. Through that and I know the way into the service tunnels. If we use them I can get us to the Black Garden with no interruption."

"There's the door now," said Percy, pointing ahead at a stout wooden portal blocking their way.

"Go and check it out," ordered Dreth.

Grumbling the zombie complied, shuffling forward and pulling back rusting bolts until it swung open with a creak. He peered through and then slammed it shut quickly, throwing the locks back into place hurriedly.

He turned around and leaned against it. "Er, I don't think we should go this way. There must be another route we can take."

"What? Why not?" Dreth demanded.

"Er... Dragons! Yes, dragons. *Hundreds* of them," said Percy, waved his arms about. "Big ones."

"Dragons?" said Smudge. "Are you sure?"

"Oh yes. For sure. You can't miss thousands of hungry dragons staring you in the face."

"I don't know," said Cuthbert, tapping his chin with one finger. "Wouldn't all those dragons be making some noise?"

"They were, er, sleeping. Yes, sleeping," replied Percy.

"I thought they were all looking at you?" asked Redthorne.

"Some of them."

"There are no dragons, are there?" Dreth queried.

Percy looked from left to right for a moment, before giving up and doing a good impression of a sigh. "No."

"So, what's behind the door then?" Cuthbert asked, striding forward.

"No! Don't go in there!" Percy cried. "It's bad, really bad!"

"Worse than dragons?" Cuthbert pushed him to one side and fiddled with the bolts.

"Pretty much," said his friend miserably.

The others watched as the Cuthbert shoved open the door a crack and peered around.

"Well?" said Dreth. "What do you see?"

The zombie pulled his head back and looked at him. "It..."

"Yes?"

"There's..."

"**What??!!** Spit it out will you?" Dreth cried.

"There's nothing. Darkness there, and nothing more." Cuthbert pushed open the door, making Percy wince. Behind it was a standard dungeon corridor, remarkably empty of dragons, or anything else for that matter.

Dreth looked at Percy. "Dragons eh?"

"What? Look, I swear I saw him..."

"Him?" Redthorne moved forward and squinted down the passage. "Who's him'?"

The zombie looked uncomfortable, which wasn't easy for a rotten walking corpse. "Someone."

Dreth scratched his skull, which was itching. "Come on," he said. "We're wasting time."

They moved onwards, Percy looking around nervously, but this part of the dungeon appeared to be abandoned.

"I told you, it's closed for remodeling," said Smudge when they asked her about it. "The last occupant, a kind of giant snake I think it was, was hacked apart by a group of adventurers some time ago. They simply haven't got around to assigning someone new yet, that's all."

Dreth shrugged. "Fair enough," he said. "I suppose we shouldn't complain."

"Hey," said Percy from ahead. "There's a room here."

The others examined the chamber, which was bare except for a few old bones in the corner. "Perfect," said Dreth. "We'll rest up here a while. Or at least the still living will."

Redthorne staggered over to a corner with Emerald. The two spread out their sleeping mats and collapsed into them. Percy put the Fearie down next to the wizard, making sure she was securely bound.

Sprat wandered into the room and poked at the bones.

"Any meat left?" asked Percy, shambling over and nudging a yellowing skull with his foot.

The little zombie shook his head. "Nufink," he replied.

"Leave the remains alone," said Dreth, squatting down in a corner. "No telling where they've been." He scratched at his arm.

"What's with you?" Cuthbert said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean with the scratching?"

"I'm itching, that's all."

"Oh, I see, and that's usual for a skeleton is it?"

"I..." Dreth paused. "Good point."

"Maybe you have fleas," the zombie said brightly, jiggling the baby.

"Don't be foolish."

Cuthbert leaned closer to Dreth for a moment. "Hey," he said. "I think you have some sort of growth!"

"What? Where?" Dreth patted the top of his skull.

"Where your hair used to be, and look, on your hands too!"

Dreth examined his corpse for a moment. "So there is. It looks like...tissue? It is! I think my skin's growing back!"

"Look," interrupted Percy from the back of the room. "There's another door back here. Maybe there'll be some treasure!" It swung open with a creak as he pushed at it. "Come on Sprat, let's go explore eh?"

"Be careful back there, don't fall into any pits," warned Dreth.

"See Sprat," said Percy, "Uncle does care."

"It's just last time we ended up lugging a baby about with us," muttered Dreth.

"Ha, *who's* lugging the baby?" said Cuthbert. He stuck his tongue out at the infant, who made a grab for it. "Oh no you don't," the zombie said. "That's genuine elf tongue, hard to come by."

The baby gurgled.

"Oh yes it is," said the undead, wobbling his head about, and speaking in the high pitched tones people often use when talking to the very young. "Elf tongue it is it is. Oh yes indeed. Elfy welfy to..."

"Please stop," said Dreth. "There's something very wrong about this scene."

Cuthbert was about to reply when there was a shout from the second door.

"Now what?" said Dreth, standing up and reaching for his sword.

He trotted towards the source of the noise, Cuthbert in tow, just in time to meet Percy hobbling quickly towards him, his clockwork leg hissing and whirring.

"It's him! I saw him for sure this time!" the zombie said.

"Who?" asked Cuthbert. "Who did you see?" He looked at Sprat, who merely shrugged.

"Him! Him! He's come back! I've been a naughty boy!" Percy rambled on madly.

"Shhh, you'll wake the living," said Dreth. "What are you babbling about? Pull yourself together!" He slapped the walking dead about the head, dislodging Percy's jawbone.

"Im! Ees ome ack!" Percy carried on, the lower half of his face hanging loose.

"For the love of Dreg." Dreth would have rolled his eyes if he had had any. He turned to Sprat instead. "What did you see in there?"

"Nufink Uncle Dref," replied the young zombie. "There was nufink at all."

"I think your friend has finally passed his 'best use' date," said Dreth to Cuthbert. "Time for a new brain or something." He turned around and went to sit back down again, scratching himself all the while.

Cuthbert helped the other zombie put his face back together. "Calm down," he said. "What did you see?"

"Him. My father! He wanted to spank me!" said Percy. "He always spanked me when I was naughty."

"Your *father*?" exclaimed Cuthbert. "Isn't that a little unlikely?"

"I saw him. Twice now," Percy reiterated, pointing behind him.

"Come on," said Cuthbert, leading the other zombie gently away. "Let's go and sit down, I'll get a rib for you to nibble on. It's been a hard day for us all."

Cuthbert led his friend to another corner of the room, where they rummaged about in Dreth's rather depleted traveling sack for a snack.

Dreth shook his head as he watched them. 'Zombies,' he thought.

Quiet descended once again, broken only by the occasional snore from the wizard. Dreth sat still, falling into the trance he used instead of sleep.

*"You betrayed me."*

"What?" Dreth looked up. There was no one there. He shook his head. "I'm spending too much time with those zombies," he muttered, and slowly fell back into his reverie.

*"Betrayed me and left me to die."*

This time Dreth jumped to his feet. "Who said that?" he demanded.

Percy looked across the room at him. "Did you see my father?"

"No, but I think I'm getting as crazy as you. I'm going for a walk. Stay here." Dreth picked up a torch and stalked off towards the doorway Percy had gone through earlier.

The room beyond was almost identical to the one he had just vacated. A chamber made of dull gray stone blocks, empty except for old cobwebs in the dark corners.

Dreth stood in the middle and waited.

Sure enough, after a few minutes, there was movement in the shadows. He peered into the gloom, to see a tall thin female figure walk towards him. She was slim and certainly attractive, if you overlooked the blank holes where her eyes should have been. Wavy hair hung loose over her ghostly white dress. Pale thin legs terminated in bare feet that slid across the floor like cold gusts of wind.

"Who are you?" asked Dreth.

The woman stopped and smiled. "Don't you recognize me?"

Dreth tapped his jawbone with a skeletal finger. "You do seem somehow familiar. Was that you speaking before?"

She moved closer, her translucent robe billowing about her as if an unfelt breeze was tugging at it. "Oh Dreth, I've waited so long for my revenge. We could have shared the power, but you were greedy, wanting it all."

Dreth nodded. "I don't recall the situation, but it certainly sounds like me."

"You betrayed me. And yet what good did it do you? Look at what you are now." The figure laughed; a chill sound. "A remnant of your past self. You can't even remember what you lost, can you? Can't even remember how you, in turn, were betrayed? Oh, the irony of it is almost overwhelming."

The woman was quite close now, and Dreth could see her form was translucent, the dull stone of the room behind slightly visible through the ghostly body.

"It would almost be worth letting you carry on like this, but I want vengeance!" She opened her mouth with a predatory hiss and lunged forward, her features suddenly becoming far more skeletal and corpse-like than a moment ago.

Dreth jerked back as she swiped at him with her hand, leaving three burning scratches on his forearm.

"Hey! Stop that!" He drew his sword and retreated several steps.

"Your blade won't help you now! It's time for my revenge! Time to join me in this hellish limbo, to walk the

earth, never knowing rest. You will wander through the ages with me. *Doomed!* Doomed with the knowledge there is no end. No end..."

"Hey, Dreth! You in there?" The spirit's monologue was interrupted by Cuthbert, poking his head around the door.

Dreth glanced back at the zombie, then forward again. The ghost had vanished.

"Cuthbert," he said, sheathing Darkblood, "I never thought I'd be glad to see your decomposing face."

"Well, that's not a very nice thing to say," the undead replied, walking into the room and gazing about. "Were you talking to someone in here? I thought I heard voices."

Dreth looked at his arm, where three dull red scratches marred his regenerating flesh. "No," he said. "You must have been mistaken. There was just me."

"Mmm. Well, I think we should get out of here. Percy won't shut up about being a 'bad boy', and it's beginning to get on my nerves, rotten and decomposing as they are."

Dreth glanced back around the room. Was that a slight movement of white back there? He nodded. "I think, for once, you have the right of it. This area is a little *too* dead, even for me. Let's go."

They moved back to the other room, and woke the wizard and Emerald. Dreth tied Smudge to Sprat as Percy was being a little erratic, jumping at shadows and mumbling about 'how he didn't want a spanking'.

"I'm still tired," complained Emerald, rubbing her eyes.

"Yes, well you can sleep when you're dead, which might not be such a long wait if we hang about here," Dreth replied. "Smudge, which way?"

The Fearie pointed down the corridor, and they moved swiftly off.

Behind them the shadows twisted and writhed in fury.

~ \* ~

Harm took a deep breath and composed himself. Standing to one side, and slightly behind him, Primrose fidgeted.

The double doors opened and the Drow priestess that had escorted them this far waved her hand. "You may enter," she said.

He nodded and strode forward, Primrose following several footsteps behind. The cavern was as he remembered it. Dark and warm. Webs hung from the ceiling, and there was a feeling of being... watched.

He followed the black path through the chamber up to the dais steps, where he stopped and knelt.

A shadowy form moved slightly within a giant cocoon on the platform. "SSsso, you return." The voice was a soft whisper.

"I have."



"Where issss the child?"

"I have..." Harm paused. "It is within reach. I've returned to request more troops."

"And what became of the onesss you were assssigned?" Harm thought he could see long thin legs waving about in the mass of white.

"They were, er, lost to various enemy forces. There was more resistance than anticipated."

"I ssssee. Lossst." The voice paused for a moment. "That is mossst careless of you commander."

"If you could provide us with further support..." Harm broke off.

A large shape had scuttled forward with blinding speed. There was a sudden cold stabbing pain in his stomach. He looked down to see a thin black tube piercing his abdomen.

"No..." he gasped.

Silken cords dropped around him, binding his arms to his side and rendering him immobile. His insides bubbled as a cold shape was ejected from the tube and forced inside his body. Another soon followed, and then another.

The webs tightened further, and he was lifted off the floor to be skillfully and smoothly manhandled up to the cavern roof, where unseen legs fastened him to the ceiling. Another sharp pain, and the tube pulled itself free from his body, leaving a dozen hard objects resting uncomfortably within his abdomen.

"You appear to be no usssse asss a ssssqquad leader. I've therefore assssigned you a new tassssk. You will keep my eggssss warm, until they hatch. Then you will provide them their firssst meal."

Harm tried to open his mouth to scream, but his body wouldn't respond, paralyzed by the Black Queen's poison.

As the light faded he dimly heard it speaking again.

"Now, Primrosssse isss it? What an interesssting name. I've a misssssion for you. I hope you have more successsss than your predecassssor..."

~ \* ~

Dreth pushed a black leaf out of the way and peered through the undergrowth. "Where?" he whispered to Smudge, who was now perched on his shoulder.

"Over there," the Fearie replied, nodding her head as her arms were still bound to her sides.

Dreth leaned forward. "Ah yes, I see it now. It appears to be somewhat busy."

"Busy? That can't be. We usually leave it open, to let victim... I mean visitors wander in."

"Well, there seems to be a gathering there now." He tried to get a better view of the entrance to the Black Garden, a large archway carved into the dark rock of the cavern.

They were crouched behind a bush with large dark leaves. Suspicious blood-red colored berries hung from the

thin branches. Around them the underground garden stretched out into the gloom. Plants and trees, all of which were twisted and unhealthy looking in some way, covered the floor. Overhead a canopy of rotting foliage blocked the view of the roof. Various insects crawled around in the vegetation, attempting to eat each other.

"You're right," Smudge said after a few moments of study.

"What's going on?" Percy appeared next to them.

"I thought I told you to stay back with the others?" hissed Dreth.

"I wanted to see," complained the zombie, trying to get a better view.

"Be quiet!" Dreth smacked his hand. "There's a load of monsters guarding the gate, the Management must be looking for us."

"Do we know any of them?"

Dreth looked again. "There are a load of goblins..."

"Oh, better not let them see us, they aren't going to let us pass," said Percy.

"Oh really? Would that be because of a certain consumed member of their royal family?" Dreth said sarcastically.

Percy rolled his eyes. "You eat one small goblin princess and you never hear the last of it," he complained. "She didn't even taste that nice."

"There are some trolls too, though I don't recognize any of them, and at least one beholder, but it isn't Bob. Some kind of shadowy hooded figure as well. Probably a mage, to make sure we don't get by with magic." Dreth moved back into the cover of the stunted bush they were hiding behind. "I don't suppose there's another way out nearby? Some handy secret exit?" he asked Smudge.

The small figure shook her head. "Nope, what you see is what you get," she said.

"Maybe we can go somewhere else," Percy said.

"Like where? Anyway, if this entrance is guarded, the others will be too. No, we're just going to have to find a way through." Dreth started moving carefully back through the dark plants, pushing aside small shrubs that snapped at him with flowers lined with teeth.

"Well, I may have a suggestion," Percy said.

Dreth looked at him. "This should be good, go on."

Percy smiled. "An ambush! A classic ambush," he expounded, pounding one fist into the other hands' palm. "We draw them into a trap and have at 'em."

Cuthbert clapped his hands. "Great idea! We lure them in and Dreth hacks them apart. It'll be fun, and we get to eat the losers."

Dreth scratched his re-growing skin and tried to scowl. "I'm not getting into a massive brawl again, at least

until my parts have grown back properly. If you want to fight, go ahead." He gestured towards the entrance.

"Oh no. We're only here for the ideas," said Cuthbert, shaking his head.

"And the body parts," piped up Sprat.

"How about you use the wand?" Emerald suggested. "Everyone seems to think it has enough power."

Dreth considered this. "Possibly," he replied, "but I'd rather leave it for an emergency."

"Look, it's easy," Redthorne said, impatient now the goal was so close. "We set up a distraction and slip past whilst they are, er, distracted. They're dungeon monsters right, how bright can they be?"

"You're treading on thin mice there wizard," said Percy, trying to look menacing. "**We're** dungeon monsters too you know."

"Exactly," said the mage, crossing his arms.

"Are you going to stand by and let him insult us like that?" the zombie complained to Dreth.

"I think I'm with the wizard on this one," Dreth replied. "And it's ice, not mice."

"Bah, some dungeon guardian you are, siding with the enemy." Percy kicked at the ground with his clockwork leg and looked sulky.

"Hey! What about me?" asked Smudge. "I demand to be released. I don't want to go outside, there are things out there that will eat me."

"I'm not sure we can trust you," said Dreth thoughtfully.

"Come on Dreth, old buddy," the Fearie said. "I had to do what those Drow said, they threatened my hive. You can understand that, can't you?" Smudge batted tiny eyelashes at him. "Come on, be a sport, untie me. I won't tell, honest."

"Weeell..." Dreth looked at her thoughtfully.

~ \* ~

Gurg picked his nose and examined the recovered contents. Deciding it wasn't worth eating he wiped it on the back of Buggle.

"Hey! Stop that!" his fellow goblin complained.

"I'm bored!" Gurg answered by way of response. "Why do we have to be guarding this stupid place anyway?" He indicated the entrance. "It's too close to outside, something might come along."

"Well, we won't have to worry too much about that," Buggle spat back. "Not with all these other guardians hanging about. Someone said that robe fellow was a lich, and that Beholder isn't something I would want to mess with."

"Is not a lich. We don't have any liches," argued Gurg.

"Do so."

"Don't so."

"Do so."

"Don't..."

The philosophical debate was interrupted by a shout from a troll, who pointed at a small figure zipping through the air towards them.

"Help me!" the flying form cried.

"Help?" asked the troll.

"They're over there." The Fearie pointed back towards a clump of rotting bushes some distance away.

"Who are?" The troll was still catching up.

"The ones you are after!" shouted Smudge, rolling her eyes. "I convinced them to let me loose. Hurry up! They're getting away!"

"Let's us put an end to these traitorous vermin," the cloaked figure, who might or might not have been a lich, hissed. It glided forward over the damp ground, heading towards the area indicated.

"Finally," Gurg said, picking up his spear, "some action!"

The monsters charged forward, the Fearie directing the way. "Over there! Come on! Move faster!"

The beholder swooped ahead, dodging branches. The trolls simply crashed through the undergrowth, and the maybe-lich seemed to fade in and out. The goblins had to jump over debris and around bushes much larger than they were, and hence started to fall behind.

"Hey! Wait up!" Gurg cried, tripping over a rock.

Buggle fell on top of him, squashing him into a patch of dubious looking soil.

"Get off me! We're losing them," Gurg complained.

"Ah, forget it," his fellow goblin said, sitting on a nearby stump. "They're too far ahead. We'll never catch up."

They looked forlornly on as the posse disappeared from view, charging after the outlaws with wild glee.

"Come on," said Buggle. "Let's go back to the entrance and wait for them. Maybe the trolls left something we can steal."

Gurg brightened at this suggestion. "Good idea!"

The two scurried back towards the entrance, just as a couple of other figures arrived.

"You couldn't keep up too?" asked Gurg, as they drew close.

"Actually, we're just passing through," said the nearest one cheerfully.

"Wait a minute!" Gurg put a finger to his lips. "I know you! You're the zombie that ate our princess a while back. **Hey!** You're the group we're watching for!!"

He started to shout, but a dull pain stopped him. Looking down he saw the tip of a black sword protruding from his stomach, intestines oozed from the wound it had caused, and dark blood dripped down his front. The sword hummed.

A voice from behind him spoke. "Sorry about this, nothing personal you understand, but we can't afford to have any witnesses."

The blade was removed, leaving a cold feeling in his insides. As the light started to fade, Gurg thought he heard the zombie speaking.

"How was I supposed to know she was a princess?"

~ \* ~

"What's that?" Sprat asked, squinting ahead.

"Oh my! I never thought I would see *that* again," said Cuthbert, awe in his voice.

"What's it daddy?" Sprat repeated. "It's too bright. 'M scared!"

"It's daylight son, real daylight."

The group marched steadily up the ever widening passage, until they stood, shielding their eyes, next to a small hummock in an area surrounded by trees.

As Dreth entered the clearing his stolen robes began to smolder and smoke. When the sun hit them they disintegrated entirely, leaving him standing in a pile of ash. Darkblood's new sheath remained strapped about him, obviously it was not of Drow origin.

"Great," he said.

"Why is Uncle Dref not wearing anything?" asked Sprat.

"It's a wardrobe malfunction," replied Cuthbert, not hiding a smirk very well.

"I can't go about like this," said Dreth. "I'm all exposed."

"I can see your liver," taunted Percy, pointing at the organ, which was regenerating amidst all the other usual internals.

"You can have a spare robe of mine," said Redthorne, hunting about in his pack and drawing out a red and blue garment. He passed it over to Dreth, who put it on.

"Mmm. Not really my color," he said critically.

"Look, we can't stand about here all day," the wizard said. "We had a deal. Hand over the baby and I'll tell you what I know. Unless you plan on reneging on our agreement?" He stepped back slightly and raised his staff.

"No no. I can't be bothered to take you on right now, and we need to be moving away from here. Tell me your information."

Redthorne looked at him for a moment, evaluating the situation. "Tell the zombie to stand next to me first," he replied.

"Cuthbert, take the baby over there," Dreth nodded.

Cuthbert muttered under his breath, but complied, moving to stand near the mage.

"Now wizard, speak!" demanded Dreth. "What do you know of my contract?"

"The Overlord has it," said Redthorne.

"The Management? In the Black Desert?" Percy asked.

"No, that's the Master of the Dungeon," said the wizard. "The Overlord is *his* master, and no doubt the ruler of other dungeons as well. I believe it works on some kind of franchise deal, from what the Drow told me, and from what I've heard from other sources."

"Interesting," said Dreth scratching his chin. "And where can we find this Overlord?"

"Ah. Well, I don't have a precise location for you. Most say that he lives in a large castle, somewhere over by the Dragon Forest. Others believe that he resides in the Ugly Swamp, to the north. However, these only rumors. I hear tell that the famed prophet, the Hermit of Farsii, knows the exact location."

"And where may we find this prophet?" asked Dreth.

"He's on the far side of the City of Real. In the hills somewhere."

"*That's it?* That's this 'valuable' information you've been boasting about?" said Dreth.

"It's more than you had before," he said. "I believe there's a village somewhere nearby here too." He shrugged. "Now, about the baby..."

Dreth looked at him for a moment, and Redthorne shifted his staff meaningfully. Finally though, Dreth nodded. "Give him the baby Cuthbert. We have no further use for either of them."

"Are you sure?" asked the zombie, hesitating.

"As much as it goes against the grain, yes. He's too powerful to deal with easily. I've enough on my plate as it is."

Reluctantly, Percy handed over the baby to Redthorne, who took it carefully with one hand, eyes never leaving Dreth.

Once the transfer was complete the wizard stepped back. "I would like to say it's been a pleasure knowing you Dreth, but that would be stretching the truth. However, for an evil murderer with no morals or conscience, you aren't a bad sort. I'm sure you'll understand if I say that I hope our paths never cross again. Farewell." With that, the mage raised his staff and uttered a powerful incantation. There was a flash of light, and the wizard and baby vanished.

"So much for that then," said Percy. "Hey! Who's he?" He pointed off into the trees.

There was a sudden movement. A young human boy popped up from behind a bush and ran into the undergrowth screaming.

"Wonderful, a witness," said Dreth.

"He looked tasty, shall we go after him?" Cuthbert asked.

The zombies looked at Dreth expectantly, who in turn looked at the evening sky.

"Come on! Fresh boy!" Said Percy. "Still kicking and everything."

Dreth practiced sighing, trying out his lungs, which were still not full regrown. "No. We need to get out of here. Besides, he probably belongs to someone, and if he goes missing we'd likely have a mob tracking us down."

He put his hand on Percy's shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm sure we'll run into plenty of victims. We're on the surface now after all."

The zombie's expression brightened, though this didn't make it any less horrific. "Well okay," he said.

"So, do we go straight to this Dragon forest then?" asked Emerald.

Dreth shook his head. "No, I think a trip to the prophet is a better bet. Even if this Overlord is in the forest, traveling elsewhere first may throw him off the scent, so to speak." He paused and looked around. "Of course, it would help if we knew where this city is. Ah well, one direction is as good as another for now I suppose. Which way do you think Percy?" he asked.

Percy considered for a moment, and then pointed off to their left. "I've a good feeling about that bearing," he said.

"Excellent," said Dreth. "After me then." So saying he set off in the opposite direction.

"Hey!" said Percy, who had started off in the way he'd indicated. "You're as bad as the living you are!" The zombie about faced and stumbled after his comrades, complaining all the while.

~ \* ~

The forest wheeled below the small bird, a lush verdant canopy of living green. Not that the bird, which didn't have a name because it was just a bird, thought of it like that. It didn't really think at all for that matter, merely being a small creature driven by the primordial instincts to survive, eat and procreate, not necessarily in that order.

The primordial instinct it *currently* felt was to have a bit of a rest, as it had had a busy day hunting for worms and insects and what not. Hence it swooped down and alighted on a branch of a small tree. Opposite this particular tree was a small mound, and in the side of this mound someone had built a stone wall, presumably to block off a tunnel behind. This must have happened some time ago, as the wall was mostly covered over by soil and various climbing plants.

As the bird watched there was a muffled noise, and the bricks quivered, as if something had hit them from the other side. A moment later the action was duplicated, sending bits of loose earth tumbling to the ground in a

miniature avalanche. The wall shook again as it was repeatedly attacked until, in a dull explosion, the bricks erupted outwards.

A hand appeared in the resulting hole, tearing more of it away and enlarging the gap, until it was finally big enough allowing an oversized shape to squeeze through. It was followed by a smaller figure, which clambered out after the first and stood next to it.

"We out!" exclaimed the big one.

"I told you we would find a way Gut. Hammath Highhand always keeps his word," the second one said.

Both forms had obviously been through a lot. The giant's clothes were torn and ragged, and several large and recent scars marked various points on his torso. The elf by his side wore armor that was dented and grimy. Bloodstains and other unidentifiable marks tarnished the metal, and his long hair was raggedy and ruffled.

"Where we go now?" asked the one called Gut.

"Now we'll go to my home. Many good hunters have lost their lives recently. Indeed, I may have joined them if you hadn't come to my aid against those damned Drow. I shall return to Jollygreenwood and gather more fighters. Together we shall track down Dreth, who has taken your lady of course, to recover our lost child."

"Ok," said Gut.

"Let us be off," said Hammath. "We have some distance to travel."

The two turned and set off through the trees, quickly disappearing from view.

The bird, who hadn't understood any of this, decided it was rested enough and left too soaring back into the blue sky, only to be tragically\* eaten by a hungry eagle a bit later on.

\*For the small bird that is. The eagle was quite happy with the situation.

## **End of Book 1.**

Book 2...

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Narg the Nasty and the Necromancers' Tower

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