

The Infamous Tales of a Demon Imp

Book One: The Founder's Tomb

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Q u a r t z , W i n e a n d W a x

IT turned out that Witheric and the dark haired boy weren't staying in an inn, or anywhere that had rooms to rent. Rather, they were living in the strangest canal boat I had ever seen. We wound our way through twisted backstreets and over a bridge until we reached the river where the fishing boats were docked for the evening.

And there it was.

Or was it?

Because that was the thing. I didn't notice it at first, which was strange because I notice everything. And it should be pretty difficult to miss a canal boat.

Its low-lying hull was painted dark blue and had a single scar of white that ran from the tip of the prow to the rear of the stern. It wasn't a neat white stripe, but a jagged line that splintered like fractal lightning. Up close, none of the paint really looked like paint at all, too faded and patchy to have received a fresh coat anytime in the recent past, but somehow the hull still managed to glint strangely in the dwindling light. It was more like tortoise shell than paint. And scrawled inside the

white lightning in what looked like black charcoal was a name: *Frederick*. It didn't seem like a normal boat name, not even for one so strange as this.

As we drew nearer, I saw more of the details. It had a swan's head carved up out of the prow and the wooden cabin's whirling grain shone in the sunlight. There were small round windows, stained glass green and red, and a thin black metal chimney pipe with a pointed cap that stuck out crookedly from the top of the cabin. It was the only thing about the boat that wasn't in some way disarmingly elegant, making it appear out of place. But I liked it; it had character.

The boy went ahead and unlocked the cabin door with a surprisingly large, old, and battered key, ducking inside and taking me with him. Witheric followed behind, closing the door. The inside of the cabin was as strangely comforting as the outside, with large royal green padded chairs that could have easily doubled as beds, judging by the size of them, and blankets folded neatly in the corner. The crooked chimney pipe came through the ceiling to join a small cast iron woodstove with a wide top that I assumed was for cooking, and the circular windows had tiny cream curtains that looked like they were made of leather.

In fact, they looked a bit like extended bats' wings.

The curtains were definitely bleached bats' wings.

Witheric and the boy continued to talk about things of no interest to me, so I studied the rest of the cabin. It was bigger than it should have been from the outside.

A lot bigger.

Then they began to unpack their other purchases which got my attention. These I observed with great interest.

There was an eight-piece set of alchemical glassware and copper chemistry equipment, full of twirling glass tubes and bulbous flasks. It was quite magnificent and the grade of the glass was very fine, much finer than I would have thought could be bought from Undertown. It looked like genuine Mercanium wares. Witheric started to wrap each piece of glass in the spare blankets to stop them from getting broken which gave me time to properly study each item. I didn't like the look of any of it myself; they looked uncomfortably like what a Physician might use to melt wax, boil alcohol and crush quartz. Quartz was worse than glass when it came to being bound within a substance; it contained so many different minerals that if being bound in glass was like fitting a square peg in a round hole then being bound in quartz was like fitting a many dimensional irregular polyhedron into a spherically symmetric vacuum the size of a pinhead.

There were a couple of dusty old books and leather-bound tomes that got packed away into boxes, along with an assortment of other items including many silk scarves, some very large marbles, and a stuffed parrot. The boy emptied a bag filled with gold and silver jewellery on to the table, and none of it was fake.

I wondered whether they knew what their purchases were worth. And then I caught the sight of Witheric's face, giving nothing away and remaining quietly impassive. Of course he knew exactly what everything was worth.

Which was bad.

Did he know what I was worth?

Then the boy pulled out three small and very old glass jars. No human would be able to smell what was kept inside them, but I could, and their contents made me nervous. One was a dendrotoxin extracted from snake venom, another was crystalline cyanide, most likely ground from cassava root, and the third was

concentrated urushiol distilled from poison ivy. These poisons were hidden away with the flasks of acid they had bought from Ned, beneath a floorboard in a secret compartment that I hadn't noticed.

Another thing I hadn't noticed.

What was wrong with me?

The boy filled a kettle with what looked like red berry juice and fed the wood stove while Witheric sat down to flick through one of the books they had bought. I thought that this was quite rude. Was no one going to pay me any attention?

"Now then," said Witheric suddenly. "I think that we are ready to go, don't you?" The boy nodded and sprinkled some spices into the kettle he was boiling.

"I'll untie the barge." He unbolted the door and ducked outside for a moment. The barge rocked and there was a clatter as he jumped back on and pushed the barge away from the bank and into the river. As we bobbed along, he bolted the door behind him and went back to stir the warm juice drink.

I did the Demon equivalent of blinking and tried to clear my mind, which had grown strangely foggy. There was a strange smell in the air that I couldn't place, and colours were becoming oversaturated. I didn't think anything of it. I was rather caught up in feeling sorry for myself. And worrying about all the things that I had somehow missed.

"Would you mind waking up Frederick for me?" asked Witheric. The boy nodded and kicked a wooden panel next to him, hard. It was such a strange and unexpected thing to do that I involuntarily tried to localise - and failed to, of course - causing the ring to jump in its box with a clatter. The panel made a popping sound like a stone being dropped into water and slid to the side to reveal a metal lever with a shiny red handle and a couple of other dials.

My head was still swimming, and I was starting to feel disorientated. I'm sure that if I had been feeling better then I wouldn't have been so jumpy. But no one noticed the clattering of the ring over the crash as the boy kicked the panel.

I studied the lever and some of the other dials and wondered what sort of boat this was. There was a little wheel with an upward handle that folded out of the panel as well, presumably to control the tiller.

"Frederick," called the boy, tapping on the dials. There was a slight groaning and the dials flickered into life. "We're ready to go." The whole barge creaked and then the red lever moved of its own accord, leaning forward and gently clicking into place. A bright green eye blinked into life at the end of the lever's red handle.

Yes, an eye. And I don't mean a metaphorical eye. I mean that at the end of the red lever handle was an actual shiny white eyeball with red fleshy eyelids and a luminous green iris. I had mistaken it as simply a red sphere on the end of the lever, like a handle, but no. It really was an eyeball.

It blinked twice and glanced around before settling to stare resolutely ahead.

"Thank you, Frederick," said the boy.

And we started to move.

Alarmed, I opened my Demon Eye and had a proper look around the barge. I thought that they must have bound a Demon to the boat itself and commanded it to drive the barge through the water. But there was no sign of any other Demon, apart from me. I would have noticed if there had been. So I wasn't sure how they had done this. Perhaps a much more powerful Demon than I had agreed to Imprint onto the barge to Animate it, but why would a Demon do that, and how would these two weirdos have ended up with so great a treasure?

I didn't know, and my vision had grown too bright and swirly to think straight. I didn't panic, but simply became oddly aware in a detached sense that I wasn't fully functioning.

I feel the need to pause here and defend myself. I had only just escaped from two hundred years of confinement in a tomb and had been fighting the ring's binding practically ever since. I was quite depressed and what I had hoped was freedom had turned out to be just another form of captivity. And yes, I was out of practice. I was not out of shape - I was still the Demon Imp extraordinaire, you understand - but it had been a long vacation. That I didn't want to go on. Forced upon me by my sworn enemy.

So not a great vacation.

I didn't realise that the boy had been boiling a kettle full of alcohol, strong wine, maybe port or sherry by the smell of it, for at least the last ten minutes. And as a result, I was alarmingly drunk.

You may not understand why that is such a bad thing. Being drunk for a Demon is not the same as for a human. For starters, it is neither pleasant nor enjoyable. Rather, it is as though our Spirit has begun to drown in a small jar of cold clouds made of barbed wire which you don't really notice until too late.

So I didn't notice. Until Witheric pointed it out.

"I should think the wine is probably done by now," he said to the boy, who closed the wood stove's vent to stop the air getting in. He brought the kettle over and placed it on a wire rack on the table, next to the box in which I was being kept. Now that it was so close, and now that I knew I was being spiked, I started to feel nauseous. Very nauseous.

Witheric pulled the wooden box across the table and sat it on his lap so that he could examine the tabletop. One glance and things went from bad to worse. Carved into the wood were endless glyphs detailing a Complex Confinement that would keep any Demon trapped within the space above it. The boy started to pour the steaming wine onto the tabletop where it flowed along the grooves, creating a series of wet and shining active red glyphs that spiralled inwards. As soon as they were all full, a flash of unnatural red light rippled across the spiral and the first part of the Confinement was complete. He returned the kettle to the stove.

Meanwhile, Witheric produced several long white wax candles which slotted into holes in the middle of the table as part of another cluster of glyphs. Once lit, the candles began to melt with unnatural speed, releasing puff after puff of fine sealing-wax vapour. The wax dribbled down into the grooves creating a second series of soft yellow active glyphs. As soon as they were done, they started to glow, the red and yellow light creating a shimmering web of luminosity like a wall around the edge of the table.

He then opened a draw on the side of the table and drew out a series of eight carved quartz glyphs that matched the grooves that remained empty, pushing them into their proper places. The third and final series of sparkling white active glyphs flickered into pulsating life as red, yellow and white lights wavered in the air, glittering in and out of existence. The threefold walls of the Complex Confinement were complete.

With the Confinement finished, I watched on in dread and horror, only just managing to make sense of what I was seeing. Looking back, I wasn't that drunk. But having had no exposure to alcohol for so long my tolerance was greatly diminished. This wine, although strong, was nowhere near as strong as the pure

ethanol that the Master had used to beat me in the tomb. And he had only just managed it.

Okay, so maybe I was a little bit out of shape as well as out of practice, but only a little bit.

What can you expect?

The boy set up a small octane burner in the middle of the table, much like the one Tim had been going to use in the desert, only this one had a fancy tripod with a stone dish perched on top. Witheric opened the box, carefully took the seeing glass out and put it next to him on the sofa, before dropping me onto the stone dish.

The boy lit the octane burner, and then they waited.

And I waited.

And I think that the boat (Frederick) waited as well. I was sure that his eye on top of the red lever handle kept on looking at me.

Sure enough, the heat of the octane burner caused the gold to soften. After no more than a couple of minutes of awkward, terrifying silence one side of the ring collapsed and the binding broke.

I'd felt the binding tense as the gold got hotter and hotter; that's the only way I can describe it, tensing. A binding feels as though it is alive, and for all intents and purposes, it is. It fights being broken as though it doesn't want to die, and gets angry if you struggle against it.

The gold melted, the binding glyphs failed, and I was released from the ring. I didn't localise or do anything that might have given me away, I just hovered there ethereally, trying to ignore my splitting headache and drunken stupor. Even though there was little point in my current state, I had a look at the glyphery on the table to check it for loopholes but, somewhat unsurprisingly, I couldn't find any. And even if

I could find a loophole, as soon as I escaped the table the seeing glass would suck me in and I'd still be trapped. At least neither of them seemed to have realised that the binding on the ring had broken yet.

"You've been unbound for two minutes. Perhaps it is time that we talk?" said Witheric, bored.

Okay, so maybe he had noticed.

I didn't like Witheric.

I particularly didn't like his neat pointy white beard.

I don't like beards.

Or priests, or horseradish.

I didn't say anything of course. I may have been drunk and trapped, but I wasn't beaten. I could still be stubborn, and, if that failed me, rude.

After a long and drawn-out silence, Witheric turned to the boy. "We should be out of the city by now. Hurry Frederick along." The boy nodded and went over to the open panel to press a button and whisper to the eyeball. When he straightened up, the lever rotated further forwards on its own and the boat accelerated, every wooden timber seeming to purr with delight. "And bring over the wine kettle," commanded Witheric. "I want to talk to this Demon."

The boy obeyed and brought over the wine kettle, using a wet cloth to keep his hands from burning on its brass handle. He set it down next to the table and then screwed a glass tube into the spout so that the alcohol vapour kept puffing towards me. There was even a little dangling dish hanging just below the tip of the tube to catch any condensed drips.

"So," said Witheric. "When shall we start talking?"

The key to not letting the situation get any worse was to not talk. So I didn't say anything. Besides, I would probably have ended up word vomiting; that was the annoying thing about alcohol, which was probably why Witheric was using it. He leant back and investigated the space where I was drifting around, delocalised.

"Fine. I'll talk," he declared. The boy glanced up at me and then away again, his glance disturbingly close to where I actually was, before listening to the old man.

"My name is Witheric. I am the Scholastic Scrivener and Secretary of Scrutiny of the Mercanium, and have held this position for more than fifty years. I teach two courses there: one on Advanced Complex Confinement Glyphery in the Sixth Demonic Plane, and the other on Rigorous Contemporary Logic and its Articulation. When I was twelve, I was banned from my studies because I bound a Demon from the Seventh Plane into the First Plane during my second-year examination. It was assumed I had cheated since that was supposed to be impossible. I was allowed to re-enrol after I proved that it was perfectly possible, just difficult. Oh, and I once had a conversation with the Demon that is Lady Fortune's Doorman."

The Mercanium's Scrivener *and* Secretary... And hearing those courses, no wonder he knew what he was doing with this Confinement! I gave up on trying to find a loophole in the glyphery. Even if I hadn't been drunk, I doubt that I would have been able to find one. He must have enrolled into the Mercanium at the age of eleven, four years younger than was allowed, and had managed to bind a Demon from the Seventh Plane in only the Second Plane. There were only eight Planes of existence! I'm not even going to mention Lady Fortune's Doorman. As I have already said, she is a tale for another time.

Witheric continued: "My longest ever argument with a priest lasted a little longer than three and a half days-"

I laughed. I couldn't help it, I was drunk. Instead of pressing me and trying to get me to talk, Witheric hardly even acknowledged that I had made a sound and carried on.

"-and by the time we were done, the priest decided that the Priesthood wasn't for him. That was five years past now, and he was the then Chief Priest. I have discovered three glyphs. I oversaw the moving and reburial of Master Aseteryx' remains almost thirty years ago."

Aseteryx.

Just hearing his name made my non-existent alcohol saturated blood boil. I felt the air thicken around me for a moment as I threatened to localise. If I didn't keep my emotions in check, I would end up taking a physical form and that was a step closer to communication, which I didn't want to do. The wine kettle was still puffing away.

And then I realised that Witheric had stopped talking. He was looked at the quiet dark-haired boy who was looking *right at me*. I hadn't localised but he was still looking at me. As soon as I saw him staring, I opened up my Demon Eye to have a proper look back at him, but the stench of the alcohol was so overpowering to my sharpened Demonic senses that I had to close it almost immediately. Even so, there was something wrong about him, and he must have sensed me looking as he awkwardly turned away. The boy caught Witheric's eye, and he nodded. It was only a small nod, but it was a nod nonetheless.

"What's going on here?" I managed to splutter out, the world spinning and my thoughts rocking on waves of nausea. Witheric turned his attention back to me.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Come off it," I slurred. "I'm not an idiot." I wasn't going to give him, or anyone else for that matter, my Name. That was as good as signing your life away in servitude.

"I'm not asking for your Name. I just want *a* name so that I can call you something."

"No."

"I'm not going to make you do anything."

I laughed. "Then what am I here for? I know you high and mighty Mercanium types: all you want is power, and the way that you get it is with Demons."

"And I know you Demon Imp types, shallow as a summer stream with not even the slightest care for the rest of the world. Stupid and sadistic," snapped Witheric.

I bristled. "That's a Mercanium lie, if ever I heard one!" How ever did he know I was an Imp? He shouldn't have known that. "I think you'll find that I care very much about the world."

I would never normally admit it, but I'm ashamed to say that it is true. Although I go to great pains to look the part of the world's worst Demon, I do care. Back on the Fourth and Fifth Planes, I'm a pretty pathetic Demon, all things considered.

"Well, if you are not like all the rest of your kind, then maybe I am not like the rest of mine," replied Witheric. "Either way, I'm glad you care, because we need your help."

I'd had enough. Enough of the bindings, of the wine, of being trapped, of this man and his beard, his lies and his fake kindness. He still had me bound and drunk.

I had had ENOUGH. So I did something that I had learnt to do during my two-hundred years of imprisonment in the tomb. In my drunken haze, I started pulling in all the surrounding water vapour to form a high pressure cloud, and there is a lot more water vapour in a river than there is in a desert, so it was a surprisingly dense cloud. Then, with the right number of partial localisations, I made a miniature storm system. It rumbled.

Witheric's eyes widened, which was *so* satisfying. He started to get up and say something. His binding probably couldn't stop lightning because since when had a Demon been able to summon lightning? No one would think to protect against *that*.

Since *today*.

Since *me*.

Because I am the Infamous Demon Imp Extraordinaire.

There was another rumble and then I let the cloud go, sending bolts of pink lightning ripping through the wet air and into the glowing glyph covered wooden table. There was crackling and flashing and the smell of burnt sugar as wax blackened, wine bubbled, and quartz cracked. Witheric and the boy scrambled back as the red, yellow, and white lights of the Confinement flickered and died, the inside of the barge illuminated instead with pink and purple. And then the cloud dispersed.

As soon as I had vented my drunken rage, I sighed and let myself be pulled into the seeing glass. Sure, it was another Confinement, but I was past caring.

And hungover.

So for the second time, in far too short a time, I did the closest thing a Demon can do to sleeping and ignored the world. Again.

T H E F O U N D E R ' S T O M B

The darkness swallowed me up in a way that I knew all too well: it was the warm embrace of fate, of inescapable happenings that were outside my control. I knew this feeling. It meant that the gaps between the Planes were thin here; that what was happening in the Lower Planes was particularly sensitive to what was happening in the Higher Planes and vice versa, which made things unpredictable.

The universe was holding its breath.

Of course, the universe wasn't really holding its breath, as the universe didn't have any breath to hold. But I was holding mine. In fact, I wouldn't have surprised if Lady Fortune had foreseen this very moment, as I entered the darkness of the secret extension to the tomb. I would have to ask her about it, if I ever saw her again.

I stumbled slowly through the passage before turning back to call something to Bert, but found that there was nothing but darkness behind me as well as in front of me. It seemed that the door had closed.

I gulped.

You see, I had not forgotten everything that had happened during my time with Witheric and Nort. As much as I might have tried to, mainly for angry and selfish reasons, I had been unable to erase those memories. I knew what it meant that this tunnel was actually here: I knew that it meant that this tomb was the Founder's tomb; I knew that it meant that Witheric's guesses had been correct; I knew that it meant I would undoubtedly find the High Sphinx waiting for me at the end of it all.

That wasn't the only reason why I gulped. Sure, defeating the High Sphinx was a significant undertaking, even for me. But – luckily – having unparalleled arrogance and self-esteem meant that I could exist in complete denial about the significant probability of my destruction at the claws of a Higher Plane Demon.

It was easier to pretend that I was invincible.

That seemed to have worked so far.

No; the real reason that I gulped was because in some small way, maybe, I had, albeit only briefly, kind of slightly liked them.

(There, I said it.)

(I actually said it.)

I liked them. Only a little bit you understand. But that was a lot for the Living.

And they were somewhere in front of me, maybe even being torn apart by the High Sphinx right now.

Worse still, there was a good chance that the last thing I ever said to them was a threat: I had said that I would kill Nort if I ever heard anything about the blue crystal shard being used against Demons.

The last thing I ever said to Witheric, in Nort's hearing, was that I would kill Nort.

And now I might be too late to save them.

All because I left.

I picked up the pace. I didn't run or delocalise and fly because I suspected that I might still be able to catch the High Sphinx by surprise if I kept myself localised. A Higher Plane Demon is more sensitive to the Higher Plane nature of Demons, so delocalising was a last resort instead. If I delocalised, it would probably be like sounding a small trumpet announcing my presence. So I kept to the First Plane only.

The tunnel branched into two, so I stopped. It wasn't completely pitch black, which meant that there must have been some light source up ahead, so I was able to inspect each of the archways. There was no distinguishing feature on either of the arches, they were just plain rock roughly hewn from the sandstone of the tunnel, but there was no time to pick randomly and hope for the best; I needed to pick the correct tunnel first time, and fast.

I decided to risk opening my Demon Eye, only a sliver. A Higher Plane Demon like the High Sphinx would undoubtedly leave ripples in the Lower Plane; something so inherently non-physical by nature will always have a tendency to overflow the Lower Planes in an attempt to get back onto the Higher Planes where it belongs.

The sliver was enough, and I saw the ripples. The left tunnel was the one that led to the High Sphinx.

I just hoped that I hadn't sent any ripples of my own ahead of me, opening my Demon Eye. The reality was that I wasn't a particularly powerful Demon, so I

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shouldn't need to worry about that, but the High Sphinx was and might be able to detect even my weak overflow...

I carried further down the tunnel, and after a while it split into three more corridors.

I stopped.

How was I ever supposed to find Witheric and Nort in this maze! I was able to work out which tunnel was the right tunnel by virtue of being a Demon, but they didn't have that ability.

I blinked again and decided that the middle tunnel was the one that I wanted. But as I climbed up the steps to the tunnel I found that I was getting very tired. I shook my head, trying to clear the sleep inducing fog that had formed behind my eyes, and shivered. I kept going, labouring against the sudden acute exhaustion that was invading my consciousness, stifling all cognition, until I could hardly take another step. In the haze, I thought I saw Nort up ahead, but it was just a hallucination of my mind in the moment before I fell asleep. Cool air caressed my face as my head lulled towards the floor...

There was a breeze.

I snapped my eyes open and altered my form. Giant dark leathery bat's wings burst from the bone just below my shoulder blades on my back and I enlarged my lungs, altering the composition of my muscles and heart. Already stumbling back onto my knees, sleep still heavy on my mind, I flapped my new wings as hard as I could, sending flurries of dust whirling up from the ground and dispersing the airborne toxin. I inhaled deeply, then stopped flapping and held my breath. I had about two minutes before I would need to breathe again thanks to my

new lungs. In that time I needed to work out where the sleep-gas was coming from and get away from it.

I stood as still as I could, and felt for the cool breeze. It seemed to be coming from the middle tunnel, which was where I wanted to go. I grumbled to myself, and leapt into the tunnel, half running and half flying, using my new wings to propel me through the air.

A minute and a half went by and I was pleased with my new muscles. The physical effort of running wasn't draining my blood of oxygen too quickly but I knew that I couldn't go on for much longer. Suddenly the tunnel opened up in front of me and there was another small chamber, this one with four more tunnels. I settled to the floor with some elegant flapping, and let the rest of my old breath out. There was no poisonous breeze here.

I looked around the four tunnels with a sinking feeling. I was running out of hope. I couldn't see how I was going to find Witheric and Nort.

The tunnel that would take me to the High Sphinx was the far left tunnel this time, and I approached it with caution. I couldn't just delocalise and look around with my Demon Eye to see what the trap was, but small and subtle changes in form might not alert the High Sphinx that I was here. They would have to be my method of defence. Which meant that the only way to work out what the trap was, was to trigger it.

Great.

Walk into a trap and think fast. That was the plan.

I wandered nonchalantly over to the far left tunnel and paused as I drew nearer to the archway. Nothing happened immediately, so I took another tentative step forward, and still nothing changed.

Maybe this arch was like the first one, and there wasn't a trap.

I shrugged and went to take another step but found that I couldn't. Instead, I was greeted by a wet squelching sound. I looked down, only to find that there were three giant pale leeches clinging to my feet, one on my left foot, one on my right heel and the third midway up my right calf.

They were more like huge slugs really. Leeches aren't nearly so slimy.

I stared at them, confused, and tried to take a step but my legs were unresponsive.

I stifled a weak laugh that came out as more of a gurgle. I couldn't feel my feet, or my legs for that matter. The slugs squelched happily and I watched in vague amusement as they pulsed, sucking my blood.

SUCKING MY BLOOD?!

I snapped myself out of the strange trance, no doubt induced by some venom they had injected into me when they first latched on, and glared at them. I was, quite frankly, both disgusted and impressed. They were horrible wet creatures with nasty spines along their backs and veins that flared red every time they sucked. And they had eyes: big black bulbous eyes full of dull cunning that seemed to be mocking me.

I flooded my own system with anti-toxins and a series of poisons of my own, altering my immune system to account for them. As sometimes happen when making minor changes of form like this, an unexpected change also occurred: my irises became fluorescent green. I blinked in surprise, then shrugged and turned my attention back to the poisonous blood suckers on my legs.

After a moment, I felt the slug-venom stupor diminish as my body purified itself, and then watched in amusement as each slug slowed down in its sucking and

started to make small screeching noises. Now they were the ones that were confused. The blood that had one moment been nourishing their sickly bodies was killing them very quickly in many ways: asphyxiation, suffocation, paralysis, neurosis, coagulation, choking and so on.

Eventually, one by one, each of the slugs fell from my legs onto the sandy floor and started to wriggle, writhe and squirm. One of them even ruptured in a very explosive manner, spilling my blood mixed with black globules of congealed slug juice and thick pink jelly.

It was horrific.

I loved it.

I chuckled to myself and skipped over the dying slugs. As I sped away I turned to glance back one last time and stopped dead. For a moment, just a moment, I thought I had seen Nort standing by the slugs. I span around to get a better look but he was gone. I supposed it must have been a remnant of the slug venom. Or the sleeping gas. I flooded my immune system with more antitoxins just to be safe, and carried on down the corridor.

Having defeated the monstrous slugs, I was almost looking forward to the trap at the next junction. It took a little longer to get there and now there were five new tunnels to choose from. I did a quick calculation in my head: so far, including these five new tunnels, there had been one hundred and twenty unique destinations, assuming none of the tunnels reconnected. The chance of Witheric and Nort choosing the correct tunnel every time was incredibly slim indeed.

I stood as far away from the arches as I could and tried to guess what the next trap might be. When no likely ideas came to mind, I took a tentative step forward and looked for the inevitable ripples of the High Sphinx; without a doubt

the middle tunnel was the one that I wanted, and it seemed that I was getting closer.

I took another step forward and-

WHOOSH!

All five of the tunnels filled with fire.

I jumped and took a step back and the fires went out.

I grinned. Fire was nothing to me.

I concentrated for a moment and then walked towards the middle tunnel, making some more improvements to my form as the fires burst back into life. My ginger fur took on a metallic hue, almost like bronze or copper, and I flattened it down to cover my skin in the same way that a porcupine can flatten its spines. I now had an impervious shield that covered my entire body that would protect me from the heat. A second pair of eyelids clicked down over my fluorescent green eyes, these ones hard and transparent, and I covered my wings in superfine ceramic scales.

The fire was intense. Not just hot, but intensely hot. After a minute of walking through it my core body temperature had risen by about two degrees. I couldn't physically cope with it getting much hotter, but the fire didn't seem to care about that. (Obviously, as fire doesn't *care* about anything.) Another minute went by and the colour of the flames took on blueish undertones. I opened up my wings and angled them to catch the flames, propelling me forwards. I fought to keep calm as I kept on getting hotter. Five minutes passed like this until I finally couldn't take any more.

And then the tunnel ended and the fires went out.

I dropped to floor and relaxed my fur, shivering as my body went into shock.

When I eventually cooled down, I found that I wasn't looking forward to finding out what the next trap was anymore. The fire had been nowhere near as much fun as the slugs. Looking up at the next set of tunnels, I groaned. Unsurprisingly there were six to choose from, which put the number of possible destinations at seven hundred and twenty. I sighed and looked around at the plain sandstone walls and indistinguishable corridors ahead of me and wondered when this would end, and just how complicated the underground labyrinth could be.

The ripples led me to the second tunnel from the left. I peered into it and-
Nort.

Just for a moment, but he had been there, standing in front of me in the mouth of the tunnel.

I didn't move, but continued to stare at the empty space where he had been. Something was wrong about this. It had been niggling away at me since entering the sandstone passageways. At some point, I couldn't remember when, the tunnels had become lit. Not from any torch burning on the wall and it definitely couldn't be from the sun, deep beneath the desert as I was. It wasn't the light itself that was strange; I expected that whoever had enslaved the High Sphinx to guard the tomb had also made them promise to keep the tunnels lit. No, the strange thing was that I couldn't remember the tunnels going from pitch black darkness to this all pervasive light.

That, and Nort.

Nort appearing from nowhere was strange too.

Slowly I walked towards the tunnel and looked around carefully to make sure that I hadn't missed anything.

“Nort?” I whispered as loudly as I could. There was no reply, no fleeting glimpse of that dark haired pale boy that I missed.

I didn't like this, not knowing what was happening. It seemed that the only thing I could do was carry on deeper through the tunnels and hope that at some point I would find Witheric and Nort or find the High Sphinx and do what I came here to do.

After walking right up to the tunnel unhindered, I was decidedly uncomfortable. I didn't think for a minute that there was no trap at this entrance which meant that it was very well hidden. Carefully, I stepped into the tunnel, and banged my face against the empty space in front of me. An invisible barrier blocked the way. I groaned inwardly; the barrier was undoubtedly a Confinement or Expulsion, cast to stop Demons from getting past. The only way I was going to break it was by applying enough physical pressure that the glyphery, heated the sandstone until it cracked. If I couldn't do that then I would have to delocalise and force my way through it via the Second Plane.

The only change I made to my form before ramming the barrier was to get bigger and denser. That done I took several steps back and charged it again and again and again, but to no avail. With every failed charge I took an extra step away, grew some extra muscle density and thickened the plate armour on my shoulders. After twenty three failed attempts the room was filled with smoke where the barrier had been forced to dissipate energy. It have even started to become visible, faint orange and blue waves shimmering in the air.

I kept charging harder, faster and stronger every time and the barrier began to make a pained whining sound.

By the forty eighth charge I was running out of energy. All of the minor modifications to my form were draining, not to mention the physical exertion and pain of running at the barrier. It was immensely jarring and with every encounter it became increasingly unpleasant. I started to pant and drip with sweat, baring my teeth and hissing like an angry cat. I even went so far as to summon a black obsidian mace with which to smash my way through, but after seventy two failed attempts I knew that I wasn't going to make progress from this side of the Lower Planes.

I needed to get into the Second Plane, and that meant delocalising.

With a sigh, I made a mental note of my form. I was quite a beast: serrated copper coloured fur, muscles that bulged tightly against my skin, huge scaled bat wings, claws, teeth, glowing green eyes, a massively broad chest housing super organs and blood that could burn or heal at a whim.

I was impressive. Quite potentially this was one of the strongest physical forms I had ever taken.

I took three steps back from the barrier and rolled my shoulders as I prepared to fully delocalise and beat my way through. The ripples would be significant and the High Sphinx would know I was coming, so there would be no point in stealth after this. As soon as the barrier was down I would blast my way through every trap in this tomb between me and my Higher Plane enemy and get this over with.

“This is for you, Nort,” I whispered. Nort and Witheric were undoubtedly dead.

In the moment before I delocalised I saw Nort standing in front of me.

He smiled.

I delocalised.

MATTHEW LANE

SMACK!

Witheric slapped me hard across the face.

He pulled back and went to slap me again.

“Wait, Witheric, stop!” cried a voice I only vaguely recognised. “He’s coming around!”

Blurily, I raised an arm to protect my face, which was still stinging from the first slap. I blinked furiously and tried to make sense of what had happened. In the meantime, while I still had no idea what was going on, I was in a pretty bad mood.

“You slapped me!” I moaned angrily. “Why did you slap me?”

Witheric was covered in soot and his rich blue and white robes were tattered and blood stained. Even his annoying pointy white beard was dirty; that at least was some small consolation. Kneeling down next to me was Nort, who looked positively stricken with worry and rather sickly.

“Really!?” Witheric exclaimed. “You think that is the most important question right now?”

“Are you okay, Dark-of-the-Night?” asked Nort. I noticed that he seemed to be slurring.

I wobbled my way on to my feet.

“Why did you slap me?” I asked again. “That was not a very nice thing to do.” I still had no idea what was going on.

I looked around.

The other man with the voice I vaguely recognised was Albert, the dark skinned and remarkably tall Master from the Mercanium that I hadn’t found entirely annoying, holding a lit brazier. His small cylindrical purple hat was slightly askew.

His purple Master's robe was equally tattered and he was holding a blood stained cloth to a wound on his shoulder.

We were standing (well, I was still staggering around in a bit of daze, but I was slowly regaining my faculties) in the middle of a relatively small, dark, musty, dirty and rather decrepit looking room. There was a low stone table to one side with a skeleton on it and some jars next to that. It looked to me like an old preparation table, where the first priests used to prepare the bodies of the dead for burial; an entirely pointless practice in my opinion. The bodies should have been used in compost and put in the earth.

Someone really needed to tell the Priests about that.

I finally managed to stand still for a moment but swayed as the world span. This was not normal for me. A Demon does not lose their balance or suffer from vertigo. Albert reached out his other hand, the one that wasn't stemming the bleeding from his shoulder, and steadied me.

"Thank you," I said. Then I grasped his bleeding shoulder and squeezed, changing the fabric of reality. Albert jumped a mile.

"Dark-of-the-Night," said Witheric angrily, a silver chain appearing in one hand and a small glass vial in the other. I could smell the alcohol in the vial from here; it was inimitably strong. "What was that?" Albert was still holding the bloody cloth to his shoulder.

"I healed him," I said grumpily. "I wish I hadn't now, if that's the kind of thanks I get for it."

Witheric looked at Albert who removed the cloth. They both stared at the clean and fresh new skin underneath. I, on the other, thought I would do something useful, so I had a proper look around, this time with my Demon Eye.

As soon as I opened it and saw the ripples emanating from the High Sphinx (who was very close, I hasten to add) I closed it and remembered everything that had happened.

“It is quite unpleasant, isn’t it,” murmured Nort. His eyes were glassy and pink with swollen blood vessels and he was staring in the direction where the ripples were strongest: in the direction of the High Sphinx itself.

I looked at him and frowned.

I still had no idea what was going on.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Nort looked at me, his face so open and innocent that I felt an immeasurable regret for leaving him swell up inside of me.

“Everything that you think just happened,” he said, “never happened.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Satisfied that I hadn’t done something terrible to Albert, Witheric joined the conversation.

“When we got into the tomb, it was just booby trap after booby trap, but none of them were dangerous enough that they were likely to kill us. It seemed to me that they were designed to wound, to wear down any would be attacker, so that the High Sphinx could make short work of them.”

I nodded. “That makes sense,” I said.

“At least, that was how it was for myself and Albert,” continued Witheric. “For Nort, the warping of the Planes by the High Sphinx was enough of a trap on its own.”

“Every so often I wouldn’t be able to see what was happening in the physical world anymore,” said Nort dreamily, staring back towards the ripples. “I

would see long tunnels carved from fresh smooth sandstone and doorways; endless empty doorways to endless empty corridors.”

Witheric looked worriedly at Nort.

“Every time that happened,” said Albert, “he would collapse and we had to carry him. That was how I got wounded; I was carrying Nort when a spike of rock fell from the ceiling above and jammed through to my shoulder bone.” He rubbed his hand over the new flash on his shoulder. “Thanks for that by the way.”

I humbly accepted his gratitude.

“I would only get glimpses,” murmured Nort. “Only for a moment... And then I saw you.”

“And I saw you too,” I said, slowly putting the pieces together.

“We pressed on through the tomb,” continued Witheric, “and whenever Nort passed out, after he’d come to, he would tell us what was happening to you.”

“I wanted to help,” said Nort, looking back at me with tears in his eyes. “I really did, Dark-of-the-Night, I wanted to get you out of there so much, but I never had long enough and you never let me get close enough to you.”

“He kept saying that,” said Witheric. “He kept saying that we needed to get you out. We didn’t understand what he meant. Do you?”

I sighed as understanding slipped into place and I worked out just what had *actually* been happening.

“You are mortal,” I said. “You’re Living. It doesn’t matter if you manage to get to the High Sphinx; it will obliterate you. In fact, I expect that whoever bound the Demon wanted to make sure that you do get to it, so that the Demon could find out how you managed to get to the tomb in the first place. But another Demon... Another Demon might pose a threat to the High Sphinx, even though it is from the

Higher Planes. So the High Sphinx has been defending itself. It has created a labyrinth of tunnels, a fake tomb that it controls, in which it can trap any Demon that enters the real tomb. In the fake tomb there are challenges that the Demon has to face in order to get to the High Sphinx....” I gulped, and realised how stupid I had been. I had done exactly what the High Sphinx wanted me to do.

“Go on,” prompted Witheric.

“I knew that I couldn’t delocalise or the High Sphinx would know I was there. In reality, it probably knew exactly where I was the entire time; it was inside my head tricking me into thinking this fake tomb was real, watching me fight my way through all of the traps. And because I couldn’t delocalise, I was limited to making small changes to my form, getting stronger and faster and bigger and so on. In this way, the High Sphinx learned all of my strengths and all of my weakness, by watching me adapt. It already knows what I’m going to do to overcome any problem, so it will always be one step ahead.”

I changed form, from the supercharged muscly bat winged copper beast back into my thin and wiry giant ginger squirrel-monkey. I didn’t even bother to localise any spikes on my armour. There was no point in taking an impressive or powerful form; the High Sphinx already knew everything there was to know about it.

“So how did I get here?” I asked. “How did you get me out of the fake tomb of trickery?”

“I pulled you out,” said Nort.

“When I delocalised?”

Nort nodded.

Witheric raised an eyebrow questioningly. "I don't understand," he said. "How could Nort even see you, let alone pull out of this fake tomb?"

"Nort is part Demon, part human," I explained. I didn't know whether Witheric had told Nort or not, but from the flickering in his eyes, I assumed that he hadn't. Right now, I didn't care. And Nort didn't seem to have heard me anyway. "That means that he was partially influenced by the same trickery that completely fooled me - his Demon part was, anyway. His human part stayed here, tethering him to reality, but he's being pulled between the two. All the while I was fully localised in the fake tomb, he couldn't access me. But when I delocalised in the fake tomb, I must have moved onto a Plane that was nearer to wherever his Demon part was, which meant that he was able to reach me and pull me pack to the First Plane where he is tethered."

Witheric and Albert looked at each other.

"Is that even possible?" asked Albert.

"I don't think that matters," replied Witheric. "None of this has ever happened before, so what we think is impossible isn't really relevant."

I was impressed. Witheric was right.

"Will Nort be okay?" he asked. I scratched at the white fur around my eyes and ears.

"We need to get him out of here soon," I said after a moment's thought. "His physical mind belongs in the First Plane; it won't endure being stretched like this for much longer."

"How long do we have?" asked Albert.

"Two hours," I replied, watching Nort carefully. "Maybe only an hour and a half."

“And if we don’t get him out in time?” asked Witheric. I looked him in the eyes.

“We must get him out in time,” I said seriously. “We must. There is no *if* about it.” He nodded.

“Then we need to face the High Sphinx now,” said Albert. “And after that we need to get out, and quickly.”

“That’s assuming there is an after that,” I said glumly. I was out of ideas and out of energy, but we were running out of time.

“Oh, there will be,” said Witheric mysteriously. “Now that you’re here, I have a plan.”

My ears twitched.

“Let’s hear it then,” I said.

Witheric grinned, and pulled out a small square of parchment.

“Recognise this?” he asked wickedly.

I leant over the parchment and winced.

“How could I not? I learnt that thing by heart.”

Witheric’s smile became triumphant.

“Perfect.”

G r i m D a r k

When I stepped into the second teaching auditorium I was surprised to find that it was empty of all of the Masters save for Albert, Master Keynes, old Master Groff and Witheric and Nort. I hadn't actually met old Master Groff before, so I started when I saw him and got ready to delocalise before he threw something at me.

"Aha!" squeaked old Master Groff, his voice somewhere between a turtle high on illicit substances and the noise that a really old tree makes when you hit it with the wooden handle of a large bread knife. I liked him immediately. "Witheric, so this is your Demon that everyone is so upset about?" I opened my mouth to protest at being called Witheric's Demon, but Witheric got there first.

"He's not actually *my* Demon," he said. "Although, I suppose that you are still bound to me from summoning that Soul in the morgue, which means that technically you are mine." There was mischief in his eyes so I got ready to argue.

"There will be time for that later," interjected Albert. "But right now we need to make sure that everything is ready."

That was fair enough, so I shut my mouth and sauntered over.

Master Groff reached out a withered hand which surprised me, so I took it, shook it and then wondered why I had taken part in an arbitrary human gesture of greeting.

“Well, you do seem to be a fine Demon, from all that I have been hearing,” he said to me. “A most excellent Imp, if I do say so myself.” And he winked conspiratorially at me. “You certainly seem to have pissed the other Masters off, so all credit to you for that.”

My first impression had been right; I did like this strange old man.

“I had Witheric’s help,” I replied, leaning in close to whisper back. “And he is remarkably irritating.” Old Master Groff chuckled. Albert rolled his eyes.

“Can we get back to the pressing matters at hand?” he said seriously.

“You’re right,” said Witheric. “Master Keynes, you were saying that the walls are all secure?”

“And guarded by the city guard and a handful of Masters as well. If we need to confine the entire Mercanium, then we will be able to.”

“How many Masters did we end up with, Albert?”

“Thirty eight, in the end,” he replied. “Plus over seventy Senior Practitioners; once they realised that their Institution was under threat they all started to volunteer. And some of the scribes – those that aren’t so afraid of Sloan – have volunteered with the guards as well. They’re spread over the library, the cellar and the old well where we’re expecting the skeletons to come from.”

“But they’re not too close?” asked Witheric. “If there is going to be an explosion, they can’t be too close to it.”

“Everyone has been given instructions to stay away, but stay in sight,” answered Albert. “All that is left is for us to go and take command. I’ll take the group outside the library. Witheric, you should take the group near the cellars and Master Groff can take the dried up east well.”

“Because Old Master Groff is dried up himself,” chuckled Old Master Groff.

“Master Keynes,” continued Albert, unperturbed, “retain charge of the wall but be ready to join any one of us if we need you. I think that would be best.” Master Keynes nodded.

“And don’t forget to aim for their heads,” I said, miming a swinging motion. I turned to Master Groff. “Master Groff, I’m coming with you. I need to get down that vent before all of this-“

The explosion shook the ground, the walls and the ceiling with such almighty force that I found myself on my back coughing up dust as small pieces of debris filled the air. Wildly, I opened up my Demon Eye and looked around as I struggled onto all fours and then onto my feet. I was the first to regain balance; Witheric was coughing and helping Old Master Groff from where he had fallen and Albert had just staggered to his feet. Nort seemed largely untouched and was already shifting a table that had pinned Master Keynes to the ground. Seeing that they were all unhurt, I span around and faced the direction of the blast. It had come from the library.

“It’s started!” I shouted as the dust settled and the ringing in my ears began to fade. So much for getting into the catacombs before the attack began. I guessed it was improvisation from here. “It’s the library! Albert, you need to get to the library!” Albert steadied himself and nodded, picking up his obsidian war hammer

and leaning on it as he caught his breath, straightening his little cylindrical hat. As he turned and ran out of the auditorium I pushed some more of my Spirit towards the hammer, letting my energy flow into it. And then he was gone.

As the rest of us brushed ourselves off and moved towards the door, a second explosion moved the earth, this one slightly further away. Everyone managed to stay on their feet this time, except Old Master Groff who had fallen into Master Keynes and knocked him back over. I turned towards the explosion, Demon Eye wide.

“Witheric!” I cried. “That is the cellar. You need to go!” He grasped my forearm and gave me a piercing look that seemed to cut through the Planes to the core of my impish self.

“Good luck,” he said seriously. And then he turned with a flourish, his midnight cloak fanning out behind him and his black staff deliberately knocking debris out of his path. I threw my Spirit towards it, and towards Nort’s knives as well, ensuring that they had the best protection I could provide without physically being there with them. Nort embraced me before following Witheric, his dark eyes wide with fear.

“I’ll see you soon!” I called after them, hoping to give Nort some comfort, but the words which sounded convincing out loud didn’t ring true in my heart.

I reached over to Master Keynes and hoisted him up.

“You should go to the wall. Now,” I said seriously. “If one of them sends for you, then that means that they’re being overrun. If that happens, we’re losing hold of the Mercanium and you need to activate the Confinement before you join them, sealing us all in here. At least then the skeletons will be stuck on this side of

the wall, giving the people in the city time to flee.” He nodded, and ran out of the door, a bolt of my Spirit bolstering the determination of his sword.

“That leaves you and me, Demon,” said old Master Groff. I nodded. “I may be old and dried up, but the skeletons aren’t going to know what’s hit them. I taught Witheric most of what he knows about tethering, you know, though I am sure he has invented all sorts since then.”

I had already turned to face east and was looking with my Demon Eye towards the forge and the vent that had been mistaken as a well. It was all too far away for me to see clearly, and the Planes were being disrupted everywhere I looked, so I couldn’t get a clear view. There was significantly less disruption towards the east, which was strange.

There was no third explosion.

Master Groff and I hurried towards the forge where the other Masters, Senior Practitioners and guards were all waiting, dusty, pale and scared, the rain hammering down leaving everyone cold and dripping. There were even some young Technicians in their turquoise belts among the volunteers.

“We heard the explosions,” said one of the Masters, coming up to Master Groff and not even sparing me a glance. “What’s happening?”

“The skeletons have come up through the library and the cellars,” explained Master Groff, “which means they’ll be coming up here any moment now, so prepare yourselves!”

I shook my head.

“No,” I said. “They’re not going to come up here.”

“What do you mean?” asked Master Groff.

“There isn’t going to be an explosion here,” I said.

“Then what is going to happen!?”

I scratched at my ear and glanced over to the east wall that was only fifty feet away. “Something much smaller, subtler, cleverer. And much, much worse. But I will deal with it. You should split your forces between Master Keynes, Albert and Witheric, and you,” I looked pointedly at Master Groff, “should join Albert specifically; things aren’t going so well at the library.” The screams and cries that were reaching my Demon Eye through the howling of the wind left me feeling certain that Master Keynes was going to have to activate the Confinement.

Master Groff only took a moment before deciding to do as he was told. Again, I found that I liked him, and was impressed. He had sound judgement. He started to direct the other Masters and men that were with us who quickly scampered off in the three directions of Master Keynes, Albert and Witheric, most of them heading towards the library, a few less towards the cellars and only a couple to join Master Keynes at the wall.

I stayed behind and waited, eyes flicking between the mistaken well and the east wall, wondering where and when I would see something. I kept on waiting but nothing happened; there was no sign of motion and the clamouring elsewhere in the Mercanium only seemed to get louder, deeper, shriller, harsher. While I waited I lengthened my claws and teeth, strengthened my muscles, did all of the things I always did before a fight. My armour sprouted spikes and obsidian knives appeared on my thighs and around my waist, my obsidian scimitar elongating along its wicked curve. I even grew my leathery bat’s wings. The wind would make it difficult to fly but not impossible.

Besides, Nort had said they were cool.

I knew that if things got very bad with Witheric and Nort then he still had the key and padlock that I was bound to; if he unlocked the padlock I would sense his distress call. And that hadn't happened yet.

Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes went by, and I still hadn't spotted any motion. Nor had Witheric tried to summon me to save him and Nort. It felt wrong, sitting here on my own while all of my friends (yes, my friends) were out there in the rain fighting for their lives. But I had worked out how the mind of this Ghost operated, and I was sure that He would appear here at some point.

I hoped I was right about His plan. I had only just worked it out, when the third explosion didn't come, but it felt like it was right.

Another ten minutes passed.

And still He didn't come.

And Witheric didn't call for me.

I risked stretching my Spirit and diverting my attention from the surroundings I had been watching so intently. I searched for Witheric's staff and Nort's daggers. My Demon Spirit in them called to me and I found them immediately, slipping into my Imprint in the weapons like a fish into water.

Witheric and Nort fought side by side, both soaked to the bone, and covered in dirt, soot and blood. Witheric's pointy white beard was neither pointy nor clean white and his midnight cloak was torn, and Nort had lost one of his gauntlets. There were other Masters around them, wild eyed and terrified, but Witheric and Nort had a certain sort of calm attention burning in their eyes, focussed on the task at hand.

They fought amid the rubble of the building that must once have sat above the cellars before the explosion, staff and daggers spinning and diving in flashes of sparkling black, moving

unnaturally quickly. My Imprinting had worked, and they both seemed without major injury, compared to those around them.

There were flashes of light – some green, some yellow and orange, others electric blue – as Witheric and the Masters exhausted their arsenal of Mercanium trickery; the air was filled with the blur of paper cards, copper threads, ball bearings, shards of glass, handfuls of quartz dust, puffs of alcohol and bubbling plumes of molten sealing wax. Witheric twirled his staff in his right hand while firing tether after tether from the glove on his left hand, turquoise lightning sparking across his fingertips.

Nort span like a small spinning top, throwing up cloud after cloud of powders from pockets I could never spot and darting in behind them, stabbing the skeletons that roared and lumbered around him. There were skeletons everywhere, all at least as tall as the one from the morgue, and in the darkness of the storm, their empty eye sockets glittered with a pale blue light. That was until they lost their skulls to Witheric's staff or another Master's ghyphery or a guard's spear. And then the light dimmed and the bodies collapsed.

But they were going to be overrun. In a matter of minutes the skeletons would overwhelm the Masters that were fighting alongside Witheric and Nort and they would be swept away. I could see that.

I pulled away from my Imprints and swept my Demon Eye around in front of me. There was still no sign of movement. Satisfied, I quickly threw my Spirit back out there in search of Master Keynes and Albert. I found Master Keynes' obsidian blade first, with the *M* of the Mercanium etched onto the side, and fell into it.

Master Keynes ran along the base of the wall, shouting something over his shoulder that was immediately stolen away by the wind. His once blonde hair was caked with blood and there was a long scrape up the side of his face, but other than that he seemed unharmed; the blade was doing its job well.

He jumped over a headless body of bones, and then that of a Master, and threw a small glass vial onto the ground which exploded, engulfing an oncoming skeleton in thick yellow smoke that flickered with floating glyphs the colour of morning sunlight. Master Keynes didn't pause, but swung the blade, swiping the skull to the side and running straight into the body, knocking it over without even breaking stride. He had a belt with eight more of those vials attached to it around his waist.

Up ahead there were two other Masters and a couple of guards fending off more than twenty skeletons in front of one of the gatehouses. Master Keynes didn't slow down, but threw two more vials in arcs over his head and another one around the side, pillars of thick yellow smoke bewildering the skeletons for a moment. When he fell upon them with the blade he cut down five before they rallied.

But rally they did, and one of the Masters fell with a scream as a bony hand tore through his stomach, dripping with blood and sagging intestines.

'No!' cried Master Keynes, before charging forwards, blade in one hand and a scroll appearing in another. He swung the blade and blew the scroll, and hundreds of tiny glyphs made of smoke sprang from the scroll towards the skeletons. With each glyph another skeleton slowed down to a grating standstill before having its skull smashed or struck clean off. But Keynes now had their attention, and those that remained turned to face him...

I pulled back again and scanned the wall. Still nothing. How much longer could I wait? I let my Spirit wander again and was drawn to Albert's obsidian war hammer.

Pain.

The air was full of it.

Albert swung the hammer from right to left, cracking bones and knocking gawky, hulking skeletons aside as they rushed towards him. It was a mass of twisting grey and brown as

they tore down the Masters and guards next to him, bright bursts of fire flaring in the background as other Masters tried to hold them off.

When he could stop swinging for his life Albert raised a hand to throw darts of purple fire, his normally musical voice booming out as he activated the glyphs causing them to crackle and spit purple globules as they flew. Some of his darts even shimmered through the air, sparkling when they embedded themselves into a skeletal chest, tethering the target in place for a moment or two.

He had lost his little cylindrical hat and one of his ears to a snapping skull, leaving behind a steady pulse of blood that trickled down his cheek. He was limping, a sharp skeleton's fibula protruding from his thigh. And his face was panicked, stricken, as the air was torn by the screams of the people around him.

He slipped over in the blood and rain soaked mud and a skeleton, bigger than any that I had seen so far and with shoulders so unnaturally wide that it had to swing its body with every step, lumbered towards him. It raised its long spindly arms, ready to bring them smashing down against Albert's chest. Albert reached into his pockets and threw up his hands... empty. And his eyes emptied too, as he realised this was it.

And then the war hammer swung up from beside him and cracked both the skeleton's arms and its collar bone, knocking it back. Albert's eyes widened as he looked around to see who had come to his aid, but there was no one. No one other than the Imprinted war hammer.

But that was enough.

He clambered up to his feet, tore the hammer from where it was buried and swung it hard into the skeleton's skull, leaving its body to crumple back into the dirt. But then Master Groff appeared next to him suddenly from the darkness of the rain

'We'll hold them off together, you and I!' the old man cried, flicking out ball bearings with more grace than you would have believed possible from his arthritic hands. Albert nodded, and

charged at the skeletons that were closing in. But even with Master Groff and his Masters, it was never going to be enough.

I returned into my giant bat winged ginger squirrel-monkey with a shiver and had one last look around. But still there was no sign that anything was happening, or even about to happen. I was still certain that I knew what the Ghost's plan was, and this was where I needed to be. But Witheric and Nort, Albert and Old Master Groff, and Master Keynes all needed me too. So with a sigh I leapt up into the rain and spread my bat's wings, and after three strong sweeps I was battling my way through the wind and up over the Mercanium towers. As soon as I spotted the fiery flashes that marked the last stand of Albert and Master Groff, I dived.

The skeletons didn't stand a chance.

I span and twirled and darted, my wings flaring and scimitar flickering with dirty pink flames, growling and gnashing my teeth as my eyes burned with Demonic rage against these foes that had dared stand against me. I surrendered to my primal nature, that part of my Demon Spirit that craved chaos and rebelled against arbitrary order and structure, tearing bones from sockets and limb from limb.

Through the rain I saw Master Groff and Albert with a handful of other Masters – all that was left of the thirty or so men that must have been fighting here – still managing to force the skeletons back deeper through the rubble of the library. I allowed the skeletons nearest me to run off into the darkness, no doubt towards the wall where Master Keynes would be waiting for them. It didn't matter; I would deal with them later. But now Albert needed me.

I let loose a battle cry and ran forward, pink lightning flashing from my furry fingers and shards of obsidian fizzing into existence around me and burying

themselves in eye sockets and through brittle skulls. The Masters rallied and Albert joined me, war hammer swinging with renewed vigour.

Moments later a strained silence fell, save for the whimpering of the wounded and the panting of those that still stood. I turned to Albert.

“There will be more,” I growled with certainty. “Be ready.” I yanked the skeleton’s bone that was protruding from his leg and threw it to the side, propping him up as he staggered. Then I pressed the gash and the wound healed beneath my fingers.

“Thank you,” he said, fighting to catch his breath.

“Not yet,” I said. “This isn’t over. Get the Masters to cast tethers in the ground all around here. When they come again, let them charge you and then activate the tethers.”

Before he could reply I had leapt into the air and was flying towards the cellar. I gritted my teeth as a horrible buzzing filled my senses, which I recognised as the emergency call of Witheric’s padlock.

As I spiralled downwards I changed form and the paws of my black panther smashed into the ground, propelling me forwards as the muscles on my shoulders rippled and grew until I was taller than any man. I leapt from fight to fight, tearing skeletons down like they were little more than toothpicks and leaving them behind for the Masters and guards that were left to deal with before they could stagger back up.

I let out a rumble from the back of my throat and lashed out with massive claws and sharp fangs that protruded from my lips. I ran into the thick of it, my nose filled with the scent of blood and marrow, and there at the centre of it all was Witheric, on his knees bent over Nort.

I stopped and practically shook the earth with my roar before obliterating the skeletons around them. I was just in time; they seemed to be holding on. But was I too late for Nort?

I padded over to find Witheric straining against the bones of an skeletal arm that refused to let go of Nort's shoulder, his pale face wracked in anguish.

"Dark-of-the-Night," he cried out weakly. Witheric turned abruptly to look at me before trying to pry open the fingers again. They had cut into Nort's skin which was weeping blood above his shoulder, and his fingers had turned an unhealthy shade of blue where the circulation had been shut off.

"He is going to lose the arm," grunted Witheric, "unless we get this off."

I glared around and quickly found what I was looking for. A short distance away was a skeleton with one of Nort's daggers between its ribs and only one arm, staggering around and swinging madly at a couple of guards who were trying to bring it down. A moment later and its skull was crunching between my jaws. I spat it out and pulled the dagger out of its chest with my teeth, returning it to Nort and crouching down next to Witheric. Witheric had been able to arm's break the grip once its Un-Dead host had lost its head. He was wiping away Nort's tears and gently closing and opening Nort's hand to get the blood flowing.

"Master Groff has joined Albert and they will survive for a little while longer," I told Witheric, my voice deep and guttural in my black panther form. "There was no explosion in the east but I think I know why."

"Why?" asked Witheric, a question of despair and hope in his eyes.

"There were breaks in the glyphery protecting the Mercanium along the east wall; someone put them there. If I am right about the character of this Ghost then

He is going to break through the wall Himself just before you are beaten so that you can see Him take the city.” Witheric nodded tiredly.

“What are we going to do?”

“I am going to go to Master Keynes, do what I did here and at the library if I need to and then tell him to activate the Complex Confinement. You’re almost beaten, so the Ghost will show Himself soon, and the Confinement should buy us some time. He’d probably have to come up anyway to break it Himself; I expect it will rather annoy him. But it should buy us time. ”

“Time for what?” gasped Nort through the pain. I looked at him and slowly changed form back into my giant ginger squirrel-monkey, and laid a gentle hand on his arm in the hope that it would calm him down.

“Time for me to stop Him.”

“The east wall, you say?” interrupted Witheric, using the staff to push himself to his feet before helping Nort up. I nodded. “I’ll see you there.” He turned to Nort. “Nort, I want you to go up into my chamber, lock the door, activate the glyphery hidden behind the bookcase. You will have to push the bookcase over but once you activate it, all of the Confinements and Expulsions I have cast to protect those rooms will activate. And I want you to stay there. Do you understand what I am saying to you?” Nort was shaking his head and tears were beginning to fall again, leaving clean tracks through the dirt on his face.

“No, Witheric,” he cried. “I’m coming with you. I won’t leave you!”

“Nort, I need you to do this for me,” said Witheric solemnly. “I need to know that you’re as safe as you can be.” Nort knocked Witheric’s hands from his shoulders violently, wincing as fresh blood dribbled from the nail marks where the skeleton’s hand had broken his skin.

“And say goodbye to Bert for me,” I said. Nort looked up at me.

“No,” he said again. “Goodbye? Why goodbye? This isn’t goodbye!”

“Nort!” said Witheric loudly. His commanding voice had come back, the one that brooked no argument. “Go, now. Or Dark-of-the-Night will just take you there.” I wanted to tell Witheric that there wasn’t time for that, that I needed to get to Master Keynes, but I didn’t. Nort just stood there, his shoulders shivering not with the sodden cold but with the effort of holding back tears. “Go,” said Witheric again. And Nort turned and ran into the dark towards Witheric’s tower.

“Goodbye, Nort,” I whispered.

Witheric and I fought off three more skeletons that had been lumbering towards us through the mud before Witheric grabbed my arm.

“I’ll see you at the wall,” he shouted, before swinging his staff and knocking a skull sailing through the air. I nodded and delocalised with a pop, and localised next to Master Keynes. Things were quiet. He glanced at me, too tired to be surprised.

“Albert is falling back to the wall,” he said. “They’ve been overrun. Apparently old Master Groff has been hurt and Albert is carrying him. They don’t know if he’ll make it.”

“We don’t know if any of us are going to make it,” I replied. “I expect that Witheric will be joining you soon as well. Everyone is being forced back to this side of the wall.” I shook my head; the east wall was on the other side of the Mercanium. I peered up into the darkness of the rain and the clouds, and the sky was lit up by lightning, revealing the sparkling blue slate rooves of the Mercanium towers and halls only for a moment, before returning the world to the grim dark of destruction. There was no use in me telling Master Keynes to take everyone east, through the

Mercanium. They would only meet the skeletons in the middle who were no doubt coming to us anyway.

“Activate the Complex Confinement,” I said. I saw the hope die in Master Keynes’ eyes. It was replaced by the fear of death as he realised that I was asking him to condemn everyone left in the Mercanium to die, trapping them in with the Un-Dead.

“It’s that bad,” he said. It wasn’t quite a question.

I only nodded, not having the heart to answer. Or to lie.

Master Keynes still had my sword at least.

“You need to go,” he said to me, another not quite question. “You should go.”

I nodded again, and clasped his shoulder before delocalising with another pop.

Lightning lit up the sky again.