

IN THE COMPANY OF OGRES

A. LEE MARTINEZ



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**A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK**

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A short list of acknowledgments and/or dedications:

For Mom, one of each.

For Michele. (Insert clever in-joke here.)

For the DFW Writer's Workshop, where I learnt me to be a gooder writer.

For me, because I was stupid or stubborn enough to get here.

And for Jim Varney.

ONE

HIS NAME WAS Never Dead Ned, but it was only a nickname. He could die. He'd met his death forty-nine times, and forty-nine times he'd risen from the grave. Although, after his reputation spread, people stopped bothering to bury him. They'd just throw his corpse in a corner and wait for him to rise again. And he always did. But every death took a little bit away from him, put another ache in his joints, sapped a little more spring from his step. And Ned learned the hard way that there were worse things than dying.

There was dying over and over again.

Ned didn't have much interest in living, but he did his damndest to avoid perishing again. Not until he could do it right. Not until he knew with absolute certainty that he would stay dead. For a soldier, fearing death was usually a career ender, but Ned found a position in the bookkeeping department of the Brute's Legion. It wasn't much. Just counting coins. It didn't pay well, but it was relatively safe. As safe as it ever was when your supervisor had a strict policy of devouring anyone whose books were out of balance more than three times a month.

War was the Legion's business, and business had been good until four hundred years earlier, when the various species of the world had finally managed to put aside their differences. The Legion's accountants had predicted a swift and irreversible downward spiral in profits. And sure enough, the following three decades had been rough. But what everyone should've known was that paranoia doesn't vanish with peace. Soon every kingdom, every country, every hamlet with two pieces of gold to rub together suddenly needed a military force. For protection, of course, and to deter the benevolent military forces of their neighbors from getting any ideas. Never mind that most had gotten along just fine without an army before. Never mind that most didn't have anything worth taking. The Legion was only too happy to lease its armies to the world. War had been good for business. But peace was far more lucrative.

Gryphons never stopped growing, and Tate, well over three hundred years old, was a giant beast. His impressive black wings spanned twenty feet when spread, but he didn't spread them often in the confines of his office, a literal nest of ledgers dating back to the very beginnings of the Legion. Back when it had been a handful of orcs, a few dozen mercenaries, and a pair of dragons with a vision. Back before it'd become the most successful freelance army on three continents.

Tate spoke. He rarely looked at who he was speaking to. This was a blessing, since his cold, black eyes focused with an unblinking, predatory stare. They always made Ned worry about becoming lunch, even when his books were perfect. He wasn't interested in coming back from the dead after a trip through anyone's digestive system.

Tate glanced through the ledger slowly, methodically. He turned the delicate pages with his long, black claws. He missed nothing, not the slightest detail. Especially since he was always hungry. His sharp beak bent in a frown. His great black wings flapped once.

"Very good, Ned. Impeccable as always."

"Thank you, sir." Ned adjusted his spectacles. He didn't need them. In fact, they blurred his vision, but they made him look bookish, which was a look he very much wanted to cultivate.

Tate handed back the ledger. He swept the chamber with his gaze, never quite settling his eyes on Ned. "For a soldier, you make an extraordinary bookkeeper."

"Thank you, sir." Ned adjusted his spectacles again in an effort to look even more bookish, but he

flesh wore the reminders of forty-nine grisly ends. The scars crossing his arms and face, particularly the long, nasty one across his right cheek down to a red slash around his throat, made a far greater impression than his eyeglasses. And of course, there was his missing eye, his cauliflower ear, and his bad arm. All the marks of a man who should've been dead long ago. For a bookkeeper, he'd made a barely adequate soldier.

The gryphon cleared his throat, and Ned took this as his dismissal. When he turned to leave, Tate spoke again.

"When you were first assigned to me, I assumed you would be my dinner within the week." He ran his black tongue across his beak. "Instead, you've become one of the most trusted members of my staff."

"Thank you, sir."

"Pity I have to lose you."

Ned, taken aback, stared into those merciless eyes. Tate's gray and black feathers ruffled, and he sneered.

"I've just gotten the news today. You're being transferred."

"Transferred, sir?"

Tate nodded very slowly. He smoothed his feathers back with a talon. "I tried to talk them out of it, but this comes straight from the top. Upper, upper, upper management." He rummaged through his nest of paperwork and pulled out a blue scroll.

Ned swore under his breath. Blue scrolls were irreversible, unstoppable. As inevitable as death came in Ned's case, even more inevitable than death. Tate handed over the blue scroll, but Ned refused to unroll it and take a look at his new orders just yet.

Tate cocked his head to one side, then another. His lion's tail swished lazily. He cleared his throat again, and again. Before Ned could leave, the gryphon spoke up.

"It's a promotion. You've earned it."

Ned snapped his teeth together softly, as he often did when irritated. "Thank you, sir."

"Congratulations. Upper management must have a great deal of faith in you."

"Thank you, sir."

He held the blue scroll tightly in his right hand, while his bad left arm tried to pry it free. In one of his more unpleasant demises, the left limb had been severed. The arm had come back to life without him, and though a medic had stitched it back on, it still had a mind of its own, with obnoxious tendencies in tense situations. Given a chance, he knew the bad arm would throw the scroll at Tate. That might get Ned eaten, and he had enough worries already.

He turned to leave once more. Tate cleared his throat, and Ned stopped.

"Sir?"

"You're dismissed. Send in Yip. Very sloppy work lately. I suspect disciplinary action is in order." Tate clicked his beak with a grin. "And tell him to stop by the commissary and bring up some bread, cheese, a bottle of wine, and a dinner salad. Something zesty, but not too filling."

Ned walked from the office, feeling very much like a condemned man. A blue scroll was supposed to be a good thing. It meant upper management had taken special notice of him. But it was like being noticed by the gods in the heavens. More often than not, it was a one-way ticket to a tragic fate. Up to now, he'd done a fine job of being unexceptional. Except for not staying dead, but that wasn't his doing.

His fellow bookkeepers avoided looking at him as he walked through the halls. And everyone averted their eyes from the blue scroll clutched in his hand. Rumor had it that blue scrolls were enchanted to strike all but their intended reader blind. This was mere conjecture, since almost no one had actually ever seen a blue scroll. But no one was willing to take the chance of looking directly at it.

Ned returned to his office, a small chamber he shared with two others: Yip, a ratling, and Bog, the

slime mold. Yip was counting a stack of gold coins. He'd shove one in his pocket once in a while. Ned and Bog always pretended not to notice. Neither liked the ratling, and they weren't about to discourage anything that might get him eaten. Bog was busy weighing bars of silver. Yip glanced up from his work just long enough to grin and chuckle.

"Tough luck, Ned."

"Have you read it yet?" asked Bog.

Ned shook his head.

"It could be good news," offered the slime mold.

"Betcha it's a transfer to the wyrm farm." Yip clinked two coins together. "Up to your neck in dirt and manure all day. And those wyrms stink. Oh, boy, do they stink."

Ned sat, laid his head on his desk, put his arms over his head. His bad arm yanked at his hair.

"Glad I'm not you," said Yip.

"Tate wants to see you." Ned didn't have the energy to raise his eye to glimpse Yip's face, but he heard the ratling swallow hard. That made Ned feel a little better.

Bog's eyes bobbed in his transparent flesh, floating to look at Ned from slightly different angles. "You should read it before you start panicking."

"I'm not panicking."

"He's moping," said Yip.

"It's probably not as bad as you're imagining," replied Bog.

"Probably worse." Ned held the blue scroll down on his desk as if it might jump up and attack him. "I don't have a very good imagination."

"Give it to me." Yip bounded from his desk and snatched the scroll. Ned held fast, and the two commenced a brief tug-of-war.

"Just give me the damn thing already!" The ratling snapped at Ned's hand, and he let go.

"You'll be struck deaf," said Bog.

"Blind," corrected Ned.

Bog adjusted his eyes with his tentacles. "I suppose that makes more sense."

With the same fearless stupidity that was soon to make him a gryphon's dinner, Yip unfurled the ominous document. Both Ned and Bog lowered their heads (or head-like protrusion in the slime mold's case), expecting something terrible. But there was no flash of lightning, no torrent of shrieking phantoms, no unholy blackness to fall upon the office. Not even a single cackling imp or cold snap.

"Well?" asked Bog. "Are you blind?"

Yip rolled up the scroll and set it back on the desk. "Sorry, Ned."

Ned opened the scroll. "They've given me a command."

"That's not so bad," said Bog with feigned enthusiasm.

"It's Ogre Company."

Quiet descended, a silence so consuming that even the drafty corridors ceased whistling. Bog wasn't certain where to look, so he solved the problem by plucking out his eyes and sticking them in a drawer.

"Tough luck, Ned." Yip strolled from the office with a frown, stopping in the door on his way to the belly of a monster. "Glad I'm not you."

TWO

GABEL THE ORC slammed his mug against the table. "I tell you, it's racism. That's what it is."

Regina slammed her own mug twice as hard because Amazons made it a policy to do everything twice as well as any male. "The Legion has nothing against orcs. Hell, it's built on them."

Gabel remained adamant. "Sure it is. Angry, hot-blooded, grumbling orc idiots. But exhibit a little intelligence, bathe regularly, avoid dangling participles, and suddenly you're not orc enough."

"That's ridiculous." Frank the ogre slammed his mug as well because it seemed the thing to do.

"Is it?" Gabel leaned forward and whispered so none of his fellow orcs in the pub would overhear. "All my life I've had to deal with this. Do you have any idea how many promotions have passed by me? Meanwhile, every mumbling, malformed, drooling moron gets to climb the ladder."

"Maybe it's because you're short," said Regina.

"Goblin short," agreed Frank.

Gabel glared ruefully at his mug and took another drink. "Still racism. Not my fault I was born a little short."

"Goblin short," reasserted Frank.

Gabel narrowed his eyes. He'd gotten used to this. Orcs and goblins, despite their size difference bore a passing resemblance. It was mostly in the shape of their skulls, their sloping foreheads, the wide mouths, and the ears that sat high on their heads. Scholars hypothesized that the two species shared a common ancestor. Both goblins and orcs found the notion absurd. But Gabel, having wrestled with this handicap his whole life, had little tolerance for it.

"I'm not a goblin."

"Are you sure?" asked Regina. "Maybe the midwives had a mix-up."

"In the first place, orcs don't have midwives. In the second, I'm not a damn goblin."

Frank bent close and squinted. "It's just that you look an awful lot like a goblin."

"Orcs and goblins look alike. They're related specimens."

"Yeah, but every orc I've known was grayish blue. Whereas you're more of a grayish green."

"And your ears are very big." Regina illustrated the size with her hands apart.

"Not to mention there's not a hair on your body," added Frank.

"I shave."

"Well, that's not very orcish either."

Gabel jumped on the table. Even standing on it, his five-foot frame wasn't especially impressive. Though he was in fine shape, his was a lithe muscularity. Orcs generally had great, dense bodies. And not one stood under six feet.

Gabel put his hand on his sword. "The next one who calls me a goblin gets run through."

"Is 'through' a participle?" asked Regina. "Did he just dangle a participle?"

"I don't know," admitted Frank.

"'Through' is a preposition." Huffing, Gabel hopped off the table. "Not that I'd expect anyone else in this pub to know."

"It's not racism," said Regina. "It's sexism. I should be in charge, but men are too threatened by a powerful woman." She flexed her bulging bicep, then drew her knife and jammed it handle down through the thick wooden table with one strike. "It doesn't help any that I'm flawlessly beautiful. That only threatens them more."

Frank and Gabel chuckled.

She sneered. "Do you disagree?"

"Oh, you're beautiful," said Gabel, "but I think it's a little much to say you're flawless."

"Someone's got a high opinion of herself," Frank pretended to say to a passing soldier who had been privy to the conversation.

Regina's cold, black eyes darkened. "What's wrong with me?"

The orc and the ogre glanced at one another. "Nothing," they said in unison.

"It's just, well, you're a bit ... how do I put this?" asked Frank.

"Manly," said Gabel.

Regina threw her mug at him, but he ducked out of the way.

"Do these look manly?" She arched her back to emphasize her ample bosom. "Or this?" She undid the knot atop her head, and a golden cascade of silken hair tumbled past her shoulders. "Or this?" She pulled back her skirt to show her long, perfectly proportioned leg. Some of the nearby soldiers leered.

She grabbed the closest orc by the neck and drew him close to her snarling lips. "Am I not a vision of feminine magnificence?"

He nodded and gulped.

Her sneer deepened. "Would you not give both your eyes for a single hour alone with me?"

He hesitated, and she tightened her grip.

"Maybe one eye," the orc answered.

"Only one?"

He winced apologetically. "I prefer brunettes."

Regina tossed him across the pub. She shouted to the room. "Who here thinks I'm the most beautiful woman they've ever seen?"

The pub fell silent. Finally a soldier dared raise his hand. She stalked over, thanked him, and knocked him out with a brutal uppercut.

Frank chortled. "Not manly at all."

"I'm an Amazon warrior, not some barmaid to be ogled."

"First you get upset that we don't notice how beautiful you are," said Gabel. "Then you get upset when we do."

"Now that's more like a woman." Frank snorted. He helped himself to a leg of lamb being carried past the table, and as he was very large, even for an ogre, no one protested. "You're half right, Gabel. There's racism at work here." He bit off half the leg, chewing with loud crunches. Bits of mutton and bone spewed from his mouth as he spoke. "If you think orcs have it bad, try being an ogre."

Gabel eyed the lumps of meat floating atop his ale. With a shrug, he drank it down. It wasn't bad, although he could have done without the ogre spit.

Frank ran his thick, black tongue across his thick, gray teeth. "Do you know how many ogres have command positions in the Legion? None."

"Surely you don't think you deserve the promotion?" Regina struggled to put her shimmering flaxen hair back up.

"And why not? I'm the highest ranking ogre here. And this is Ogre Company."

"Only ogres can command ogres? Is that what you're saying?" asked Regina.

"That sounds a little racist," said Gabel.

"It's not about that." Frank belched, and something sailed from his throat to land across the room and slither away into the darkness. "It's about demonstration of advancement opportunities."

"Let's just agree we're all getting screwed." Gabel sighed.

They banged their mugs together.

"So who's the new guy?" asked Frank.

“Never Dead Ned.”

“I thought he was just a story.”

“Apparently not.”

Frank grumbled. “How are we supposed to kill a guy who can’t die?”

Regina gave up on her hair, letting it fall back down. One scarred soldier couldn’t help but stare at her beautiful locks. She rose, walked over, and broke his nose, then sat back down. “He can die.”

“Are you certain?” asked Frank. “I mean, it’s right there in his name. First two words: Never Dead.”

“He’s a man.” She spat out the word. “All men are mortal. Hence Ned must be mortal.”

“Not to fault your syllogism,” said Gabel, “but I’ve looked over his file.”

“What’s a syllogism?” asked Regina. She was in a quarrelsome mood and not willing to overlook a chance to be offended.

“A syllogism is a deductive scheme of formal argument consisting of a major and minor premise and a conclusion.”

Frank squinted skeptically at Gabel. “You’re making that up.”

“No, I’m not,” said Gabel. “It’s basic philosophy. I read it in a book.”

“Reading,” said Frank. “Not very orcish.”

Gabel pretended not to hear that.

Regina’s hard eyes glinted. “No man, mortal or immortal, is a match for an Amazon. He’ll die. We’ll find a way.”

The officers shared a chuckle.

Gabel stood. “I better get going. New commander arrives in fifteen minutes. His trusted first officer should be there to greet him.”

They shared a chuckle over that too. After he’d left, the remaining officers ordered another round.

“Syllogism, indeed. I still say he’s a goblin,” remarked Regina.

Frank shrugged. “Some people can never be comfortable with themselves.”

“Poor fools.”

Then the Amazon knocked a troll flat on his ass for daring to glance at her breasts.

Putting harnesses on rocs and using them as transports was an experiment in Brute’s Legion with mixed results. Gabel would’ve used titan dragonflies. They were easier to tame, easier to ride, even a little faster. The Higher Ups, whoever the hell was in charge of such things, wanted the regal, reptilian birds with their vibrant red and gold plumage, their fearsome shrieks. And that was how a perfect good idea had gone to hell.

Rocs just weren’t tamable. The most that could be done with them was to keep them fed and try not to irritate them. When they weren’t hungry or annoyed, they mostly behaved. Unless it was mating season. Or they heard a loud noise. Or something shiny drew their attention. Or they smelled a chicken. Or they thought they smelled a chicken. Or they just felt like stomping something under their tremendous feet. For such immense creatures, they were terribly jumpy.

Gabel glanced through the sky. The flight was ten minutes late. Might be a normal delay. Might mean the transport had gotten hungry and stopped for a snack. This wouldn’t be the first new officer to be devoured before he reached the fortress.

Goblins staffed the roc program and nearly every other project that required personnel equal to their fearless and expendable. Their bold obtuseness was fortunate. Otherwise, the way they bred, they would have overrun the world long ago.

Gabel stopped a goblin passing by. This one wore a helmet with the crest of a pilot squadron. Gabel

didn't recognize the design. Either *The Flying Branches* or *Stubborn Chewables*. This particular pilot had three scratches on his helmet, signifying he'd successfully flown a roc into the air and back again three times without perishing. That qualified him as a seasoned veteran.

"Yes, sir!" The pilot saluted sloppily, but Gabel ignored that.

"Any news on the commander?"

"No, sir!" The pilot shouted. "But I'm sure he's fine, sir!"

Gabel looked to the pens. Four rocs paced about. Their long serpentine tails whipped up clouds of dust. Their merciless eyes glared. The biggest bird, about thirty-five feet high, nipped at another. The attacked roc shrieked and nipped back. Instantly all four monsters were busy shrieking and tearing at one another. Stains of dried blood and immense feathers from previous squabbles littered the pen.

Three goblins rushed into the pen with their long barbed sticks. "Calmer Downers" in roc-handler terminology. One handler was crushed beneath a bird's clumsy step. A second was snatched up and swallowed. Several more handlers replaced them, and after about a minute of furious screaming and terrified yelping, the rocs relaxed. The two goblins that hadn't been eaten or mashed in the process exited the pen with wide, satisfied smiles.

They'd never get Gabel near one of those damn things.

The pilot sensed his trepidation. "One day, roc flight will be the safest form of travel, sir!"

There wasn't the slightest trace of doubt in his words. Gabel admired the eternal optimism of the goblins, even if he hated being mistaken for one.

"I wouldn't worry about the commander, sir! Ace is our best pilot, sir!"

Gabel stepped back. The goblin's shouting was beginning to bother his ears. "How many flights has he had?"

"Seven, sir!"

Gabel was impressed. "He must be good."

"Yes, sir! He really knows what he's doing! Plus, rocs don't really like the taste of him, sir! Swallowed him three times, sir! Spat him out every time, sir!"

"How lucky for him." Gabel waved the goblin away. "You're dismissed."

The pilot saluted again. "Thank you, sir!"

By the time the ringing had gone out of Gabel's ears, the roc finally appeared in the sky. Its flight was surprisingly smooth, its tremendous wings beating with power and grace. But the landing was the hardest part. Its grace in the air was countered by its clumsiness on the ground.

The pilot whipped the reins, spurring the roc into a sharp dive. Just when it looked certain the bird would crash into the earth, it pulled up and set down without a stumble. Handlers threw a rope up to the pilot, who tied it around the roc's collar. He slid down the rope with a grin.

Ace was short, even for a goblin—a little over two feet. Nonetheless, he cut a dashing, carefree figure. Almost heroic. He raised his goggles, threw back his long scarf. One of his ears was missing, probably having been snipped off by a roc. Or maybe something else. Goblins lived dangerous lives.

"Sir." He didn't salute, only drew his knife and cut another notch into his helmet. The pipe clamped between his teeth stank of some foul herb Gabel couldn't quite place. Whatever it was, it reeked of rotten flesh and spoiled fruit. Little wonder rocs didn't want to eat him.

A voice called from the bird's back. "Excuse me? How do I get down?"

"Well, you could jump!" shouted Ace. "Or you could use the ladder! Your call."

A rope ladder descended one side, and Ned started down. He was halfway to the ground when a scampering squirrel darting past startled the roc. The beast twisted, lost its balance, and tumbled over. Gabel and Ace were well out of squishing range, but Ned wasn't so lucky. The crash of three tons of bird flesh cut short his fearful yelp. The roc took some time before wobbling to its feet.

Gabel approached the crushed commander. "Damn, what a mess."

“He looked like that before,” said Ace, “except his neck didn’t bend that way.”

“Sir?” Gabel prodded Ned. “Sir?”

“Pretty sure he’s dead.” Ace kicked the corpse.

“But this is Never Dead Ned.”

“Guess they’ll have to change his name to Distinctly Dead Ned.” Ace booted the body a second time, hopped on its chest a few times, and waggled the broken neck. “Yep, that’s dead a’right.”

Gabel frowned.

Then he smiled. It was nice when problems solved themselves.

THREE

COPPER CITADEL DIDN'T have a proper graveyard. Its population consisted mostly of ogres, orcs, and goblins, all of whom considered a corpse, at worst, something to trip over and, at best, ammunition for a stimulating game of Catapult the Cadaver, a popular ore drinking game. But a few humans were stationed at the citadel, and as it was official policy of Brute's Legion to respect all cultures, even the absurdity of humans, there was a rudimentary cemetery set aside in a useless patch of dirt.

Two ogres, Ward and Ralph, were the official gravediggers. The position added a few coins to their wages. They could've done a poor job of it, and none but the dead would've cared. But Ward took some small pride in his work, and that rubbed off a little on Ralph. They were both typical ogre specimens: tall, wide, ruddy, hairy creatures with broad mouths and tiny, close-set eyes. Ralph was a little hairier than Ward, and Ward was a little taller. That was the biggest difference between them.

Ralph scooped out another shovel of dirt and glanced at the setting sun. "It's getting dark. That's deep enough."

Ward shrugged. "I don't know. Doesn't look as deep as the last commander."

"That's because I liked that guy."

"You might've liked this guy, Ralph."

They studied Ned's corpse with its bulging eye and purplish tongue hanging from blue lips.

Ralph frowned. "Looks like an asshole to me."

"They all look like that when they're dead."

Ralph picked Ned up by one leg and dangled the corpse. "Yeah, but what kind of idiot calls himself Never Dead Ned, then goes and dies?"

"Asshole," they said as one.

Ralph tossed the body in the hole. It didn't take long for the heavysset gravediggers to finish the burial. Dark clouds spread overhead. A few heavy drops of rain fell. Ward jammed a simple tombstone into place.

"That's nice," complimented Ralph. "When did you make it?"

"Soon as I heard the new commander was coming. Didn't think I'd have to use it so soon."

In the unadorned cemetery, ten graves stretched beside Ned's. Each stone bore the name of a dead human commander of Ogre Company. There'd been other casualties of the job, but only the humans needed to be buried. The orcs had been used as roc chow. An elf had been burned on a pyre. There'd been a dwarf too, but he'd been torn to so many pieces that no one wanted to bother picking them all up. So Ralph and Ward had never learned how dwarves liked their corpses handled.

"Is it me, or are we going through these guys faster than we used to?" asked Ralph.

"It's you. Although this one's got to be the record. Hold on a second. I've got to fix something here." Ward pulled a chisel and mallet from his belt and chipped an X through the "Never" in Never Dead Ned.

"Should we say some words?" asked Ward.

"Do we have to?" asked Ralph.

"Humans seem to like that kind of thing."

The approaching storm thundered. "Fine. But let's make it quick." Ralph's nostrils flared as he sniffed the air. "I smell rain. And magic. Dark magic."

Rare ogres were born with a talent for smelling magic. The gift had never been proven to any of the other races, but ogres accepted it as fact.

“What’s dark magic smell like?” asked Ward.

Ralph drew in another snort. “Strawberries and cream.” He wiped the rain from his eyes. “Get on with it.”

Ward started to say something, then stopped. He started again and stopped.

“Well?” asked Ralph.

“I didn’t know the guy.”

“I’ll do it.” Ralph sighed. “Here lies another human. I didn’t know him, but he didn’t do anything for me so I guess he was all right. He was still a human though, and most of them are jerks. Except for one guy whose name I can’t remember now.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Ward, “the fat one.”

“Not that one. I’m talking about that short one.”

“They’re all short.”

“True, but this one was especially short.”

“Oh, yeah, the short one. He was a good guy,” agreed Ward. “Too bad about that guy.”

“Anyway,” continued Ralph, “I doubt this guy was as good as that guy, but maybe he was. Probably not. Probably was an asshole. But maybe not.”

A clap of thunder ended the ceremony.

“That was beautiful, Ralph.”

The two ogres loped their way toward the citadel to escape the threatening rain. The rumbling clouds swirled in the blackened sky. The wind howled, but the downpour never came, only a few drops.

The woman stood by Ned’s grave. She might’ve appeared there. Or just as possibly, she’d walked up unnoticed. She was a small, wiry figure with a bent back, dressed all in red. Her cloak was crimson, her dress a sharp scarlet. Her long hair was sanguine, and her skin a pale cerise. A vermilion raven perched on her shoulder. She clutched a gnarled maroon staff in an equally gnarled hand. She raised it over her head and gathered the magic necessary to raise the dead.

Ned had been raised so many times that it was absurdly simple. One day, he might even rise without her help. For now, he still needed a nudge.

“Get up, lazybones.”

It wasn’t much of an incantation, but it was all that was required. The Red Woman stamped her staff on Ned’s grave. The clouds dissolved, and the air grew still. She waited.

An hour later, she still waited.

“He’s not coming up,” said the raven.

“He’s just being stubborn. He’ll get tired of sitting in the ground soon enough.”

Another hour later, he did. Ned had some experience digging himself out of graves, and it didn’t take long once he finally decided to claw his way to the surface. He wiped away the moist earth clinging to his clothes.

“Took you long enough,” remarked the raven.

Ned rubbed his sore neck. There was a crick in it now. That’d probably never go away. He always ended up with some such reminder after dying. There were so many now, one more didn’t make much difference.

The Red Woman smiled and walked away.

He called after her. “Why don’t you just let me die?”

She turned her wrinkled face in his direction. Her red cheeks glowed in the faded twilight. “Because, Ned, I’ve had a vision. One day, some far-off tomorrow, the fate of this world and every

creature that walks its lands, swims its waters, and soars through its skies will depend upon you and the decision you will make.”

He hadn't expected the answer. She'd never given him one before. He felt a little better hearing her say to know there was a reason for his suffering. He puffed out his chest with a proud smile.

“I'm just screwing with you, Ned.”

Ned's chest and ego deflated, and he slumped.

“Some people knit. Others play cards. I raise the dead,” she replied. “A girl's got to have a hobby. Otherwise I'd sit around my cave all day talking to zombies. Have you ever tried having a conversation with a zombie? They're very dull. And it doesn't matter how many times you tell them you don't mind the smell, they just keep apologizing. Over and over again. They're so bloody self-conscious.”

“Sorry.” He wasn't sure why he apologized. “But I was hoping you could just stop.”

“Give them the silent treatment, you mean?” She scratched her nose with a long fuchsia fingernail. “Hardly seems fair to discriminate against them just because they're dead.”

“No. I meant I was hoping you could stop bringing me back to life.”

“That's a fine thank-you,” she said to her raven. “Most men would consider themselves fortunate to have cheated death as many times as this one.”

“It's just ...” He struggled to find the right words. “Look. It's not natural for a man to keep dying.”

She leaned on her staff. “What are you saying? You'd rather be dead? Is the grave so appealing?”

“It's not that. But a man shouldn't have to die more than once.”

She shook her head very slowly. “That's your problem, Ned. You keep mentioning the dying. As if that's the most important part. Has it occurred to you that perhaps you'd do better to think more upon the time you spend among the living and less upon those brief moments in the company of the dead?”

“Certainly not,” taunted the raven. “Ned isn't a very bright boy.”

Ned reached for the dagger on his belt. It was gone. Over the years, he'd stabbed the woman with a variety of blades in a variety of points, but so far, she'd never seemed to care. He hadn't tried to kill the raven yet. He didn't imagine it would work. Even if he killed the damned bird, she'd probably just resurrect it.

“All things die, Ned,” said the Red Woman. “Everything must molder in the ground sooner or later. You are no exception ... probably. But while we live, whether by nature or magic, we'd do well to appreciate the experience.”

“I don't know why you bother,” squawked the raven. “Clearly he's an idiot.”

“Perhaps.” She stepped into the night. Despite her bright rubecundity, the blackness absorbed her. “See you around, Ned.”

She was gone. He couldn't say whether she walked away or vanished into nothing. For a moment, he considered her advice, but before he could give it much thought, a faint odor of strawberries and cream reminded him how hungry he was. Returning from the dead always gave him an appetite.

Copper Citadel was a dim beacon in the gray night, and he headed for it. It was an irksome journey. He couldn't see well and kept tripping over the uneven, rocky ground. He'd had a lightstone in his pouch when he died, but it was gone along with his knife and money. He'd been robbed. Dead men have no use for gold. But now he wasn't dead, and he was broke and blind, stumbling through the dark. He half expected to fumble his way into a booby trap and perish again. He was even more annoyed by the time he reached the citadel, and his teeth were positively grinding.

The front gates were open, and the ogre sentries were asleep at their post. The light wasn't much better inside the citadel walls. The only illumination at all came from a few sizable lightstones that had yet to be stolen from their fixtures. Soldiers slept on the ground. Others milled about in drunken gangs. None noticed or cared about one stranger walking through their fort. Ned had heard Og

Company was undisciplined, but this was an absurdity of a fortress. He was glad he didn't have worry about dealing with security.

He found the pub without any trouble. He just followed the sounds of carousing. The harsh blare the bonehorn, a vile orcish instrument capable of producing only three notes, assaulted his ears. The player kept tooting those notes in the same sequence. Ned recognized the tune: "Skullcrusher Boogie." Not his favorite orcish composition, but it beckoned him.

The pub was dark, musty, and crowded. Mostly ogres, as Ned expected. He kept his eye to himself and strode purposefully to the bar.

He caught the barkeep's attention. "Doom stout."

The barkeep, a short ogre easily a head taller than Ned, pursed his lips. "You sure you want that?"

Ned nodded, and the barkeep went to fetch a mug.

"Excuse me, but are you Never Dead Ned?" asked a goblin on the next stool.

"No."

Ace leaned forward. "Are you sure? You look like him."

"All humans look alike."

Ace frowned. "Yeah, but this guy was distinctive, even for a human. He was full of scars. Like you. And he had only one eye. Like you. And his left arm, it looked a little gangrenous. Like yours." He squinted. "Yeah, you're him a 'right."

Ned admitted defeat. "Yeah. I'm him."

"Thought so. I flew you in. Remember that?"

"How could I forget?"

The barkeep set a mug of thick, black liquid before Ned. "I'd advise you not to drink this, little guy. Likely to put you right in your grave."

"Wouldn't be the first time," said Ned.

He gulped some of the doom stout. He had to chew to get it down, and swallowing was a feat of will. His gut burned. His tongue sizzled. His throat constricted so tightly that it cut off his oxygen for about a minute. His eye watered. After all that, a cool pleasantness filled his head. In an hour it'd be replaced by a crushing headache and a bloody nose, but an hour was a long way away.

"Never knew a human that could stomach doom stout." The barkeep smiled. "That one is on the house."

It was a good thing, because Ned didn't have any money. But he was commander here, and he'd just risen from the dead. That should've been worth a free drink at the very least.

Ace lit his pipe. A fly caught in the toxic yellow cloud retched audibly and fell to the floor dead. "Guess they call you Never Dead Ned for a reason, eh, sir?"

"Guess so." Ned bit off another gulp of ale.

"Hey, Ward, Ralph!" shouted Ace. "Look who's back! Guess you didn't bury him deep enough!"

Ned swiveled and scanned the pub. His gaze fell across the only two ogres who couldn't look him in the eye. Both held a mug in one hand, a shovel in the other. Ned rose and stomped across the room on wobbly legs. Ace, grinning, followed. The pub fell quiet.

"Did you bury me?"

Ward nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You're not supposed to bury me." The muscles of Ned's bad arm tightened. His hand balled into a fist.

The gravediggers gulped. Even sitting, they were taller than Ned, and there wasn't a human alive who could take an ogre in a bare-knuckle brawl. But any man who could return from the grave and drink doom stout was worthy of some respect. Since ogres weren't used to either respecting or fearing humans, they weren't sure precisely how to feel. They ultimately decided on awkward unease.

The doom stout bolstered Ned's courage, lessened his reason. He had no fear of death, merely general dislike for it. He was capable of anything right then, and even he wasn't sure what he might do.

"My money."

Ralph dropped Ned's pouch on the table. "We didn't think you'd be needing it anymore, sir."

Ned belched loudly enough to nearly knock himself off his rubbery legs. "My knife. My sword."

The knife was given over.

"Someone got to the sword before us," said Ward.

Ned hunched over the table to keep his balance.

"We were just following orders," said Ralph. "Sir." He grunted that last word with obvious disgust.

Ned's bad arm swung out hard and fast and collided with Ralph's thick jaw. A terrible crack filled the air. Whether it was Ned's hand breaking or the ogre's teeth slamming together, Ned couldn't tell. But he knocked Ralph out of his chair and onto the floor. Ned spun around on the followthrough and if not for a steadying arm from Ace, would've ended up beside the ogre.

The pub cheered. Every one of these soldiers appreciated a good, solid punch as an art form. Ned would regret it in the morning. His knuckles were swollen and red, but he didn't feel the pain. The stout kept him nice and warm.

Ralph stood. He rubbed his jaw. A trickle of blood showed on his lip. Not much, but more damage than any human had ever done. Actually he'd never been punched by a human. The peculiarity of the situation took away his anger, leaving him with only profound confusion.

"Here's a new order." Ned jammed his finger into Ward's chest. "Don't ever bury me again."

He turned and tripped his way back to the bar. When he'd settled back into place, the pub filled with noise again. The bonehorn player launched into a rousing rendition of "Broken Bone Blues," a tune consisting of the same notes in the same order as "Skullcrusher Boogie," but a little slower.

"You've got guts, sir." Ace slapped Ned across the back.

Ned's bad arm seized the goblin by his ear and tossed him into the bonehorn player. He hadn't meant to do it, but his arm always got extra nasty when he drank. The patrons chuckled with much amusement. Ace dusted himself off and found a seat at the gravediggers' table.

Ned swallowed another drink and wiped the sweat from his brow. The higher the fever, the better the stout. He ordered a steak, bloody rare. Nothing else agreed with a tall mug of doom stout.

A woman slid beside Ned. "So you're our new commander."

He glanced at her. She was pretty, not beautiful, with short, simple blond hair. She was vaguely familiar. Something about her stirred his animal lusts, and it was unusual for anything to stir his lusts so soon after rising from the dead. And a hearty stout never helped.

"Have we met before?" he asked.

"No, sir." She smiled. A dimple appeared on her left cheek. He knew her. He just couldn't place her where.

"Name's Miriam, sir." She ran her fingers up and down his bad arm. The limb warmed at her touch.

"Can a lady buy you a drink?"

Across the room, Ralph dabbed at the blood on his chin. "Told'ja he was an asshole."

"Yeah." Ace puffed on his pipe with a grin. "I like him."

FOUR

THE RED WOMAN HAD amassed a great many responsibilities over her years. Whereas men exist for six or seven paltry decades, she just kept on living, gathering tasks like a shambling sludgebeast gathered flies until the poor creature must eventually smother under the weight of a billion insects. But the Red Woman didn't smother easily, and when Never Dead Ned spoke of the peace of the grave, she understood more than she ever let on.

One of her tasks was the tending of a godling. This particular godling manifested as a phantom mountain. It wasn't much of a mountain, nor much of a god. But it was young, and gods aged at their own pace, some coming into being and passing away within an hour, others taking millennia to find form. The mountain was little more than a faithful puppy. It followed her everywhere, existing in some shadowy realm between the heavens and earth. Few could sense it. Even fewer could find it. But to the Red Woman, it was as real as anything else and never far away in the metaphysical illusion of distance. So she'd made it her home.

She stopped to catch her breath. She was very, very old and felt every bit her age on days like this. Her raven flew ahead and called to her. "Come on now. Just a little farther."

She nodded as if she needed the encouragement, as if she hadn't taken this climb countless times before.

"I don't know why you don't just move to one of the lower caves," said the bird.

"I'm comfortable in my cave."

"Maybe so, but one of these days you aren't going to make the climb."

She silently agreed. Though nearly ageless, she was still flesh and blood. And flesh, even enchanted flesh, withered beside the antiquity of stone. She hoped with a decade or two the mountain might understand enough to provide her with stairs. It'd already given her something of a path to work with. Not much of a path, and there were portions she had to scramble over stubbornly. But it was a sign that this burgeoning godling understood something of her comfort.

The Red Woman reached her cave with some effort. The mouth was deceptively small, and a bend in the tunnel gave the impression of shallowness. But the cavern was exceptionally large, and she needed all the space for her various duties. It would've been too much for her to handle if she hadn't taken to drafting the dead. Dozens of zombies milled about their appointed tasks. Some were nearly indistinguishable from the living, but most were obviously deceased. One lurched to her side and took her cloak. Another handed her a glass of brandy. A drowned maggot floated in the beverage, but she'd grown accustomed to the sight. One couldn't work with walking corpses day in and day out without a strong stomach, and she'd developed a taste for maggots and worms and flies out of convenience. She sipped down the brandy and tucked the white speck under her tongue with a pleased smile.

She went to her cauldron and checked the corpse stirring the brew. Then she reviewed the jeweler's progress in sorting precious stones. Then she inspected the shroud weaver's latest work before checking the smithy's newest batch of swords, not one of which was worthy of the slightest enchantment. So many things to do, she mused. But she limped her way over to a stool and had a seat, resting her staff against her shoulder. Her raven was right about the climb, but none of the other caverns had the correct atmosphere.

A zombie maiden stopped sweeping. In life, the maid had been pleasant-looking, if not exceptionally beautiful. Now her skin hung from her bones, unliving proof that while perhaps one

could never be too rich, one could certainly be too thin. “Did you do it?”

The sorceress nodded.

“He dies a lot, doesn’t he?”

The sorceress nodded again.

“He must be very clumsy,” said the maiden.

The raven cackled. “He’s a buffoon.”

“Death doesn’t favor idiots,” said the Red Woman. “She simply favors Ned. Oblivion doesn’t surrender her prizes easily, and she never forgets those held, however briefly, in her loving embrace.”

“She doesn’t seem to care about reclaiming me,” said the maiden, her sallow skin and yellowing eyes drooping.

“That’s because you’re only half alive. Death is far too busy to be concerned with the trivialities of whether your corpse continues to walk about.”

“Let’s hope he can go a while longer before expiring again,” said the raven.

She smiled. Though her caretaking of Ned was her greatest duty, these journeys still consumed much of her valuable time, and she hoped Ned would stave off his next demise by at least a month or two.

The zombie maiden sniffed the air. Had her nose not fallen off long ago, her nostrils would have flared. “Do you smell that? Is that me?”

“I think it’s me,” said a gooey corpse mixing potions.

A dead knight raised his helmet visor. “Well, it’s not me.” He was a fresh addition to her staff. He was still in denial, though a spear clearly pierced his chest.

The legless torso of a deceased jeweler paused in his task of sorting gems. “It’s not me. That’s for sure. My flesh is almost all gone.”

The rest of the zombies grumbled. When all the flesh fell from the bone, a zombie’s conscription ended. A small scrap of skin clung to the jeweler’s elbow, and several flies busily worked at it. His freedom was soon at hand, and his fellow drafted dead couldn’t help but resent him. The Red Woman disliked this as well. She’d have to find another jeweler soon, yet another task she didn’t have time for.

“Then it has to be me,” said the maiden.

“No, it’s me,” disagreed the cauldron stirrer.

The raven cawed loudly. “Oh, for the heavens’ sake, it’s all of you, you decaying idiots!”

The zombies hung their heads and muttered.

“Not me,” grunted the knight. He subtly raised his arm and sniffed himself, but his creaky, rusted armor drew attention to the maneuver.

The Red Woman sipped her brandy. Frowning, she shot the evil eye at some buzzing flies. They perished, falling into her glass. She took another drink and found this more to her liking.

The mountain rumbled, and she sensed an impending arrival.

The wizard materialized slowly with a great deal of pomp. He’d always been more concerned with the form of the magic than the function. A black tower of smoke billowed in the center of the cavern. Phantom women, absurdly proportioned with impossibly ample bosoms and preposterously thin waists and welcoming hips and long lithesome limbs, spun around in the air, droning in a demonic chant.

“Belok, Belok, Belok, Belok, Belok ...”

One of the phantoms hovered before the Red Woman. The ghost’s features peeled away to reveal a shining green skull. Her flowing hair turned to scorpions. Her gown fell to tatters. “Belok has come to call upon you. May the gods grant you mercy, for he certainly shall not.” The phantom’s appearance returned to her pretty state.

The smoke sank back into the ground, and a tall, thin figure stood in its place. His eyes were two

golden pearls, his tunic a shimmering silver. He literally glowed with power. But his most striking features were a gray duckbill, a dome of short brown fur spreading from the top of his head to just below his eyes, and webbed, clawed fingertips.

The Red Woman was unpleasantly surprised to see him. She rarely entertained visitors, and this was one she could do without.

“Hello, Belok. Care for some brandy?”

The singing phantoms settled around the wizard’s shoulders. They moaned musically.

With eyes that were still as sharp as in her youth, she spied a new hair sprout on the wizard’s chin. The mountain godling brimmed with magic, and even merely breathing the enchanted air here brought on Belok’s accursed allergies.

He reached into his tunic and held up a gleaming diamond. “By this shard of the Splendid Orb of Truth, I compel you, witch! May you speak only with ultimate veracity!”

“Veracity, veracity!” sang his phantom paramours in melodious glee.

Belok’s golden eyes gleamed. His aura drew all the light to it, thus shining brighter and darkening the cavern at the same time. The gem clutched in his hand bathed the Red Woman in a pure white beam.

“Speak, witch!” shouted Belok. “I command you, speak!”

“Speak, speak, speak,” chanted the chorus.

The Red Woman supposed a wizard allergic to magic shouldn’t make such a production of it. But for all his power, Belok had never been particularly bright. She sat down again and waited for him to finish. It went on for another minute, although she stopped paying attention to the details. By the end of the fur on Belok’s face had advanced its march to cover another fourth of an inch.

“Where is he?” demanded the wizard.

It took a moment for her to realize he was done with his spell. She’d nearly drifted off to sleep.

“Answer unclear,” she replied. “Try again.”

She thought he snarled. It was hard to read such expressions on the wizard’s accursed bill. “But you wield a Shard of Truth. You can’t keep a secret from me.”

“You overestimate yourself, Belok. And your stone.” She hobbled over to his side and plucked the diamond from his hand. “May I?”

He nodded curtly.

She tossed the stone to her jeweler, who examined it for a moment. “This isn’t a Shard of Truth. It’s just a diamond. And a poor quality one at that.”

“You must be mistaken,” said Belok. “I bought the stone from an alchemist in Minetown, and he assured me—”

“He bilked you,” replied the jeweler.

“I am Belok. I am the greatest wizard in all the lands. I cannot be bilked.” His phantoms shrieked mournfully at the very notion.

The Red Woman took the stone from the zombie and gave it back to the wizard. “Fine. Just take your worthless shard and leave me be. I don’t know why we keep having to go through this. Orb of Truth or not, you haven’t the strength to compel me. These visits of yours change nothing. Nothing except you.”

“Damn you, witch. I should rip out your hollow soul and feed it to my minions.”

The phantoms licked their lips.

“Spare me your threats. I’m every bit as powerful as you. Certainly my defeat is a possibility should we duel, but I would not fall easily, and the victory would cost you dearly, wouldn’t it?” She leaned on her staff. “Have you grown that tail yet?”

He frowned. “A little one.”

“Ah, well, I see the transformation is coming along smoothly then. You know, you needn’t even worry about it if you’d stop using magic.”

“I am Belok! I am magic in the flesh! Vengeance is mine!” His phantoms howled terribly, shaking loose a few of the smaller stalactites. They crashed to the ground, shattering. The zombie maiden sighed while sweeping the pieces into a pile.

“Be off on your vengeance then, but I can’t help you. I can only offer my sympathies toward your plight.” In truth, the Red Woman had absolutely none. He’d earned his curse, and she considered it mercifully short of the punishment he deserved. But there was some irony in it, she supposed. For Belok could’ve lived a perfectly peaceful life had he the wisdom to put aside his magic. Something he could never do. The punishment was only the form of his undoing, while his own mad obsession with arcane power was the true cause. In that way, the curse was quite poetic.

“Shall we continue this discussion?” the Red Woman asked. “I haven’t the time to spare, and neither, I suspect, do you.”

“You can’t hide him forever.”

“And neither can you stave off your transformation forever. Not so long as you insist on casting spells that will not work and visiting enchanted mountains.”

“I’ll be back.” He snapped his duckbill. “And next time, you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

His exit wasn’t the presentation of his entrance. It never was after one of these unsuccessful visits. He and his phantoms simply vanished.

“I thought he’d never leave,” said the raven.

A fly nibbled away the last particle of flesh on the jeweler’s elbow. The skeleton chuckled, falling into an inanimate heap. The rest of the workers glared enviously at the pile of bones.

“You’ll be dead evermore soon enough.” The Red Woman smacked the sweeping maiden lightly on the backside. “Now get back to work.”

The sorceress eyed the jeweler’s remains and shook her head with a sigh.

FIVE

CONSCIOUSNESS ATTACKED NED like a thundering beast. Given a choice, he'd have stayed asleep. Forever. It was the next best thing to being dead. But he didn't have choices. He just had things he had to do, and waking up was one of those things.

His brain throbbed, pushing against the cage of his skull. He thought for sure it must've been oozing out of his empty socket. His left arm was stiff and unyielding. Any attempt to move it met only with a terrible ache, so he let it lie. Blood crusted under his nostrils. All these he expected, but there was something new: he tasted fish.

He hated fish. Even drunk on doom stout, he couldn't imagine willingly putting it to his mouth. He ran his tongue across his lips. It was fish all right. Salty, not horribly fishy tasting, but indisputably fish.

He smacked audibly and moved the pillow from atop his head. Furious light flooded in, and he pushed the pillow back with a groan.

"Good morning, sir," Miriam purred, "or should I say, good afternoon?" Her silken voice stirred those animal lusts, but his hangover and the peril of daylight kept him from responding.

He was too achy to smile, but he remembered now. A vague recollection of a night spent with her in his arms. It'd been magic. At least, he thought it'd been magic. The stout blurred the details. Still, he'd gotten laid. That counted for something. Maybe Ogre Company wouldn't be so bad at all.

Something scaly slipped between the covers to touch his shoulder. He pulled away.

"I have to get going, sir," said Miriam. "Kiss before I'm off?"

Eye closed, he lifted the pillow and puckered. Soft, cool lips met his. They tasted like fish. Still, he tasted like fish. Reflexes kicked in, and he tumbled out of bed. For a minute, he struggled against the covers entangling him and the burning heat of daylight. When his vision cleared, he glimpsed a creature, a woman covered in golden scales, standing over him. She spoke with Miriam's voice.

"I guess this means the honeymoon is over, sir."

Ned covered his eye. "How drunk was I?"

"Very drunk, sir. But that really doesn't have much to do with it. I tend to appear to all men as the woman of their innermost desire. Hazard of being a siren."

He recalled how she'd looked last night. Pretty, yes, but nothing supernaturally appealing.

"Think about it," she said. "Is there anyone you've ever desired who you couldn't have?"

He didn't feel like running through the list right now. It didn't matter. This wouldn't be the first time he'd left a tavern with a beautiful girl and woke up to a woman with webbed toes. He swore that time it'd be the last. Although he'd sworn that the last time, so he couldn't pretend the promise counted for much.

Now that the shock had worn off, he noticed Miriam's shape was distinctly feminine. More so than he'd seen last night. She had long, supple legs, a narrow waist, and noteworthy breasts. Her face resting someplace between a cod and a woman, left a lot to be desired. But her scales glistened beautifully, and the fins atop her head were tall and regal.

"Why don't you look like you did?" he asked.

"Like this?" She whistled a few pleasant notes. His vision blurred, and she transformed into a tall, dark-skinned woman. Not the same form as last night, but still very familiar. Yet another woman on his list that he couldn't quite place.

She stopped whistling, and the illusion fell away. “Sharing a bed has given you some tolerance, sir. Now it only works when I sing. That’s why I seduced you. So we could get past it right away. Better for both of us.”

He winced and felt sick. It wasn’t Miriam. He was okay with that. Not happy about it, but okay. Remnants of doom stout congealed in his stomach, coated his throat. He felt like throwing up, but the stout wasn’t letting him off that easy.

She smiled. A nice smile, even framed by plump, purple lips. “Admit it. You had fun.”

He couldn’t really remember. A night with the woman of his dreams and all he could recall was the morning after.

“Permission to leave, sir? If I don’t take a dip, I’ll start flaking.”

He granted it. She slipped into her uniform, offered a casual salute, and left his quarters. He lay on his bed for a while, dredging up blackened bits of sludge from his throat. In a little over fifteen minutes, he’d half filled his chamber pot with a revolting brackish paste.

Someone knocked on his door. He grunted an approximation of “Come in.”

Gabel entered and saluted. “Sir, first officer reporting for duty.”

“Can I help you?” asked Ned, then remembered he was in charge here. “What is it?”

Gabel bowed. “Sorry to bother you, sir, but I was wondering when you’d like to do your first inspection.”

“Never,” said Ned honestly.

Gabel’s brow furrowed curiously. “Sir?”

“Later. I’ll do them later.”

“And the address, sir?” asked Gabel.

“What?”

“The introductory address, sir? To introduce yourself to the troops.”

“Later.” Ned yawned. “Much later.”

“Yes, sir.” Gabel coughed softly to fill the silence while he organized his thoughts. “Might I ask you a question, sir?”

Ned groaned. “Yes, I was dead last night. And yes, I know they call me *Never Dead Ned*. But I guess that’s only because *Occasionally Dead Ned* isn’t nearly as catchy. Does that answer your question?”

“It’s true then. You can’t die.”

“Actually, I die very well. In fact, I dare say I’m the undisputed grand master of the art of perishing. It’s the staying-dead part that I’m not very good at.”

Gabel coughed again to cover an awkward silence.

“I’ve never met an immortal before, sir.”

“I’ve never met such a tall goblin.”

Gabel frowned. “I’m an orc, sir.”

Ned frowned. “Are you sure about that?”

An edge entered Gabel’s voice. “Quite certain, sir.”

Ned rubbed his face and studied Gabel for a few seconds before deciding he didn’t give a damn. “Permission to leave.”

Confused, Gabel looked around the room. “These are your quarters, sir.”

“I was giving you permission.”

The first officer saluted. “Thank you, sir. I’ll alert the men to expect your address later this evening.”

Ned mumbled something that was neither an affirmation nor a contradiction and rolled over in his bed. He disappeared under his blanket, but before Gabel could leave, Ned grumbled from under the covers.

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