

The Twelfth Century
by
The Dark Lord Insidious
(just call me Sid)

**A New Beginning:
Zombies
&
Skeletons
&
Not So Elvin Princesses,
Oh my!**

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**### Chapter 21 ###
Graveyard Shift ###**

The graveyard is pretty this time of night -- perhaps pretty does not do it justice. It's magic, mystic, and majestic with just a hint of malice thrown in for good measure -- a bit of pure unadulterated evil if you will (not that I'm sure how one goes about adulterating evil, but whatever).

All in all, it is quite delightful.

I -- we -- are down by the old ruins, the creek. The water goes babbling by, but I cannot hear it. There is too much noise in the air -- music, laughter. (Who knew zombies laughed? Or had a discerning musical ear?)

Of course, S-Kelly and the gang are here. Everyone who partook (or wishes to now partake) is smoking, drinking, and laughing the night

away. If this is a celebration, I suppose we are celebrating our failure (zombies, one and all).

But down here is not where the real action is tonight.

High above by the foot of the old tower (so maybe not that high above), Abby and Ned plot their next move.

We (which probably just means I in this particular case) might as well join them.

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One moment I (so I guess it was an imperial we, that is to say a solitary I) am at the bottom of the hill down by the creek, the next moment I am standing beside (well, OK, more like behind), Abby and Ned.

I am the Crypt Keeper.

I am the Crypt.

This is my domain. I hear all. I see all. And I am all. This is consecrated ground; and I am the one who did (and continues to do) the consecrating.

So, my sudden appearance should not surprise them (as they should know all this), but somehow, all the same, it does.

For the briefest of moments Abby is startled (almost scared?), but she soon regains her footing and goes on the offensive. “So, this is what you had planned all along?” Zombies?

“I wanted to taste a good glass of wine for a change,” and even here, I must waive off a Kibber holding a tray of the same. In their minds, the balance of power has shifted once more, and therefore, so has their loyalty, if one can call such a tentative allegiance loyalty. I mean, “Is that too much to ask?” a good glass of wine?

“I liked the fried chicken,” Ned offers a little off subject, which of course, probably indicates some sort of further explanation is in order. “When I was under the spell, I thought I’d gone back, that I’d never left,” to those (pre?) fateful days way back when. “And the fried chicken, I can still taste it. If I close my eyes and lick my lips,” and here he does just that, “I can still feel the grease on my lips.”

“Chicken? Wine?” Abby asks -- perhaps incredulously, but I question how many times a girl, person, Apprentice can ask the same question and their demeanor still be considered incredulous; despite current appearances to the contrary, the girl just isn’t that slow on the uptake.

But then, there probably is no sense going down that road (whichever road that might have been), because as if by quirk, chance, fate, divine intervention, or the subtle influences of the ghost riding around in his back pocket (lucky ghost, that Gloria), Jack suddenly arrives on the scene and adds his two-bits to the conversation at hand, “Soda. Coke. Orange Crush. Grape NeHi. Dr. Pepper. A&W Root Beer.” I suppose Jack could go on. I suppose Jack does go on. “Oh, if I’d known it wasn’t going to last...”

“What?” Abby asks testily, “You would have enjoyed it more.”

Jack shrugs. “It was great to feel alive again. No, that’s not it. It was great to be alive -- with no thought of death. To be young and immortal...”

“You’re not going to die, now,” Abby observes dryly.

But she is wrong, there is always the dust -- though, I suppose, some of us feel the pull more than others as of late.

And lately, I must say, I’ve been feeling the allure of the Dust -- to let it all go, simply blow away, to curl like the smoke from yonder bonfires (hash pipes, bongos, and so on), and simply drift away, let the current take me where it will... where whatever wills, where there is no will...

###

I must have drifted off.

My senses are aroused by a troop of Dwarves passing by, rolling a gigantic wagon size barrel in front of them. “Practice,” they explain (as if that explains anything). An unenlightened observer might view it as some sort of teamwork exercise for the coming big game...

“We’re still having a game?” Jack asks.

“Yes, Jack,” I reply lazily, as if (as exactly if) from a great depth (of despair, no doubt).

But, “The game must go on,” Abby snidely remarks.

“Though, I’m guessing it’s now the Zombies versus all comers,” Ned keenly observes.

But I believe I was explaining the barrel. To start, I should probably reiterate that it’s not some 55-gallon drum. I think regulation size is closer to an even ton. But the Dwarves call it a DD-12 Barrel, in as that’s how many Dwarves it will satisfy... in theory, at least (I suppose it matters how long it is supposed to satisfy them). Or maybe, it’s how many Dwarves it takes to move.

Anyway, in a competition, two opposing teams of Dwarves from different towns, mines, or homesteads would drag, push, carry, or pull this barrel to the town center, smith yard, or whatever (which is all a bit vague; so suffice, in lieu of balls in their sporting events, Dwarves tend to use Barrels -- of various sizes depending upon the game). Anyhow, this particular game (couldn’t tell you its name) has two principal variations. In the first (and presumably the original variation), the goal is to get the barrel back to your own town by whatever means at your disposal. Casualties are common; it being easier to move a barrel when everyone is trying to move it in the same direction (and the opposition is licking its rules). If there are either rules or those murky things known as fouls, I am unaware of either. I don’t even think there is a referee. What self respecting Dwarf would listen to one if there were? Though, I have witnessed more than one match being declared a draw on account of their being too few Dwarves left standing to move said barrel -- this despite a more than ample starting line-up.

Once the barrel has been brought home (the goal made), the keg is tapped and the party begins. Now, I don’t know if I made this clear or not (probably didn’t), but these contests tend to be a big thing amongst Dwarves, and everyone from the surrounding hillside is sure to witness the event (as a player or bystander, though once again, the distinction between the two is unclear -- and not just to me). The point is, even a gigantic-oversized DD-12 Barrel is never enough to satisfy the thirst of everyone in attendance, so it’s, like (exactly like), the first round of a

great big party. And the second round it traditionally procured (and/or liberated) from local establishments, beer cellars, private homes, and the like at little to no (almost always no) compensation to the owner. So understandably, in time the game was revised, and for purely economic reasons (if nothing else -- cost of beer, cost to repair the town after ensuing drunken brawl, cost to nurse the fallen warriors -- and spectators -- back to health, etc.), somewhere along the line the object of the game switched around and the goal became to push the barrel into your neighbors village and have the party there. That'll show 'em. Often these contests are impromptu affairs, with groups of Dwarves deciding to 'throw a party' for their neighbors, and said neighbors upon seeing them coming, quickly form a 'greeting party' to change the destination - - often to a third or fourth (now vastly outnumbered) village.

All in all, good times.

So, long story short, the Dwarves are here, taking a breather at the top of the hill as they say 'Hi,' 'Howdy', 'Hello', and all that, before lining up the shot and letting the barrel roll down the hill (through the zombies and assembled others -- ghosts, ghouls, ghastrs, and anything else that starts with a 'gh') before it splashing into the creek (like it had always been there, cooling off and waiting for Dwarves all along, before the mass of milling mongrels (call them Dwarves at this point only if you must) charge down the hill (in full battle formation, no less) and lo to the fool who gets between them and their ale.

But, lo, though they may walk through the valley of death (or charge headlong, weapons at the ready), there is (or I have) no fear of any of them turning into zombies. Dwarves have been known to turn into stone dead good for nothing drunks (yes and often); but Zombies? Never.

Besides, Dwarves don't do Drip.

Well, there was the one, but that was a long time ago, and I haven't seen him for ages, eons, and/or entire lifetimes. And I doubt our paths will ever cross again.

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Anyway, while the Dwarves where here, there was some talk of the class project. Grim stuff that, not really worth repeating here, things like rotary bladed lawnmower contraptions with adjustable height blades (for taking out the zombies during game play). But like I said, grim stuff. And exactly the sort of stuff Trent won't allow on his 'Field of Honor', so it was really more of a case of Dwarves being Dwarves than anything else.

And then, Jack might have explained how he was out for a walk this time of night on account of how he had been up late reading (Wuthering Heights) and had suddenly thought it might be romantic to go for a moonlit walk through the moors, and that's where he was headed when the spell wore off. (And just so we're all clear, the Mass Delusion spell has run it's course, the Zombie Effect gathering all the free magic available in the area.) But, since he was up and out and it did sound sort of like a good idea, he was off to the swamps (i.e. the back forty) anyway.

And just between you and me, there are some old spirits that dwell there that give even me the creeps.

So, um, good luck with that, Jack. Better him than me. And I can only hope Gloria knows what she's doing. Though, I doubt it. I mean, I certainly don't... double-entendre intended (meaning I am ignorant in more ways than one).

All the same, no sense being rude. So, "If you see anything of interest, let me know, I haven't been down there in a while," and I'm not planning on going again anytime soon. Though truthfully, I'm thinking the only thing Jack's going to learn of any interest on his walk is that Gloria has, like, this gigantic-oversized (bigger than a DD-12 Dwarf Barrel) crush on him and that she's planning on haunting him, like for ever. Hell, may hath no fury like a women scorned, but that might be because ghosts don't generally speaking wind up in Hell (it's sort of what makes them ghosts in the first place). So although Hell may hath no fury like a women scorned, a graveyard likely hath no fury like a love-struck ghost who's feelings have been hurt. So if I were Jack, I'd watch my step in that quagmire to which he is headed.

Still, it's no matter of mine (no more than anything and everything else).

And so, as Jack fades, so shall I, leaving Abby and Ned to discuss such things as they will.

"I still can't believe Sid raised a horde of Zombies."

"This is why no one will ever bet against him again, he cheats."

"And yet, if he really knew what he was doing, he wouldn't have to resort to zombies."

"And I thought he had made a deal with the Elves."

"And I thought they'd," the Elves, "would handle the situation better than this."

"Well, one thing I've learned over the years is that Elves are better at taking credit for solving problems than ever actually solving them."

"Still..."

"You like Mine'irva, don't you. Oh, look, you're blushing, how cute. Well, if she was anybody else," and, you know, not an Elf, "I'd say, just go and knock on her tombstone, but if I know Elves like I think I know Elves, they're going to take this whole Zombie Invasion Thing as a personal attack on their honor," which probably doesn't explain that much, or at least, doesn't explain that much to someone who doesn't already understand the situation, so let's just say, or that is to say, Abby says (after perhaps Ned asks if she's jealous), "No, it's not that, just Elves... look, Sid doesn't do much himself," we won't go into the erroneous nature of this statement, I do plenty, "rather, he has us do his dirty work," and that takes quite the bit of effort, I'll have you know.

"Well, by the same token, what was it? Three or Four Elves that went?" Now, and originally back then. "Well, that isn't that much of an advance invasion unit, unless you're counting on recruiting a bunch of allies." Still not clear? And I don't know why it should be, because it isn't to Ned (not by a long shot), so Abby lays it on the line, "If you're really interested in Mine'irva, be the ally she needs to recruit. Be her hero. You want Mine'irva to focus on you," and not flick and flicker whenever she walks by, "to acknowledge your presence and throw a smile your way when you walk into the room?"

Well, duh! "Yes."

“Then make it worth her while.”

“You make her sound mercenary.”

“She is mercenary. Welcome to the wonderful world of Elves. Besides, we’re going to take those zombies down, anyway,” so we/you/I might as well get something out of it. “I know I don’t want to share the graveyard with those shambling idiots for the next thousand years. Goblins, Orcs, and Humans...” are bad enough. “Um, sorry.”

“It’s OK. I know what you mean. So, um, how are we going to do this?”

At which Abby can only smile, “I don’t know. You’re the one who wants to be a hero. You figure it out.” But she is only teasing, “I honestly don’t know, but at least Sid isn’t going to get in our way.”

Because if I was, I already would have.

But then again, maybe I already have.

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

#

It really does echo nicely -- down here in the gully down by the creek. Of course, I guess that’s why we set-up the stage here in the first place. And now, if you’d like to stay tuned, we’ve got some up and coming (and/or down and trodden) Death Metal bands getting ready to play.

But I understand if you want to go.

Truth is: Goblin, Orc, Human, and/or Zombie Scum, I can do without the press of the crowd these days.

Maybe I’ll go see what Gloria is up to? No, three’s a crowd. (And she’ll tire of Jack soon enough... or one can always hope.)

So, maybe I’ll just float like a vapor in the air, like dust on the wind, or a soft mist rising into the night air that gently reflects the moonlight -- probably exactly like what Gloria had in mind when she decided to take that midnight stroll with Jack.

Sigh.

Eh, maybe it's time for me to take a break for a while.

I've played my hand. Now it's time to let others to play theirs... and see what they've got hidden up their sleeve (all the better to work out my strategy for next time I suppose).

And because that seems like the perfect cue (especially if one fades out the "Sound Check! Sound Check!" echoing in the distance), I do believe it is time for that final chapter ending...

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

...of the type that bounces off canyon walls and mixes in nicely with the reverb.

###

And with that, I shall finally fade and let the mists swirl as they will.

Time to find out if this Ned is really a hero... or all the talk of humans is overrated.

The Dark Lord knows they don't know how to carry a beat any better than the Orcs. So really and true, as the first guitar wails, I am out of here.

###

But seriously, you don't want to let the advice of a Dark Necromancer guide your actions. Stick around. Have some fun. Enjoy yourself. There's plenty of beer, wine, K'fr, and Drip (among other things -- endless masses of Zombie apparitions devoid of will, feeling, emotion, or restraint), so stay awhile, enjoy the music, go with the flow, and have some fun. I know, I won't tell if you don't...

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

{{{Chapter End}}}