

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 27 ###
Dungeon Crawl ###**

“It’s got to be around here somewhere.”

No it doesn’t. I mean it is. And I’m sure Abby (with a little help from Ned) will find the entrance to the secret passage that they are looking before too terribly long (p.s. it’s behind the bookcase). But none of that means it has to be there. Things change. And that map is old.

“Where did you get that map, anyhow?” Trust Ned to come up with the good questions.

“Um,” and for Abby to falter ever so slightly when it comes to the good answers, “I found it lying around.”

“Where?”

Yes, where?

“I borrowed it from, Sid.”

“Really?”

Yes, really? News to me.

“Well, Sid left if lying around and... if he didn’t want someone to borrow it in his absence, he wouldn’t have done that, now would he? Besides this is an emergency. Even your father’s eyes were looking a little dim and vacant when we left.”

Which is true, the zombie thing has gotten way out of hand. But that’s not a fact that is going to help them here and now.

“Where’s that door? Maybe we’re in the wrong room.”

And saying things like that are often a mistake -- leading to a sudden decay in the troop’s morale and all that, you know, upon learning that their leader might be lost. (Trust me. This, this I know.)

“Maybe?” See, never a good sign. “Let me see that map.”

And so, Abby does. Not that it helps. I’m not much of an artist, never went to cartography school, never wanted to study the subject, don’t have much of an interest in the subject, and my sketches are to laugh at, not even mediocre, sort of pathetic really. And then, a map is supposed to fit on one page, scroll, whatever. And so even if you fold it up (this way and that), one is bound to run out of room (this way or that), have to draw things here (that are in fact there) with only an arrow, note, or addendum by way of explanation. And then, well, there’s the multi-dimensional dynamic nature of the place, so it doesn’t really translate well onto two-dimensional papyrus.

“Why are the lines moving?”

Because the map and the graveyard are one, which sounds a lot more ominous than it is (or implies that the map has a lot more power than it does). It’s just a map... of a dynamically shifting amorphous place. And we need not get into the details as Abby relates them to Ned, because she certainly is not going to do any better of a job at it than I can.

And besides, in the end, Ned sums the situation nicely, “So, we’re looking for a moving target?”

Yep, that’s pretty much the way of it.

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But then, “Sometimes that’s a whole lot easier than it sounds,” Strathmore says from the doorway -- the one doorway, the only way in, the only way out. Oh, and I might mention that he has his sword drawn, and carries a look in his eye that means business... or should that be, with his eyes drawn tight, Strathmore has the business end of his sword pointed at Ned... eh, probably doesn’t matter. Either/or, both or neither, perhaps we should let it go and simply get down to business.

So, straight to the facts, after Strathmore walks through the door, so does Mine’irva with Mata bringing up the rear. And after a smile from the former (Mine’irva), Mata informs all present (but Strathmore specifically), “We’re all friends, here.”

A comment to which Strathmore only shrugs as he lowers his sword, but perceptive readers will note that he does not sheath it (we are in a potential battle-zone, after all). “So, what are you looking for?”

“Us? What are you doing here?” Abby retorts.

“Following you for the most,” Strathmore replies sort of offhandedly as he wanders about the chamber, poking at a pot, wiping the dust off a shelf (making a show of the dirt, but actually to gauge its age), and in general making himself at home. “Which wasn’t all that difficult. We started looking for Sid, so we followed his tracks. The latest tracks led out, of course, but they followed the same path from when he’d gone in. And you were following them...”

“You can see his tracks?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t really need to after a bit, you know, once we caught up with your voices. Oh, and that flame torch-boy is holding, that really flickers from a distance, sort of gives the game away.”

“And Sid tracks led you here?”

“No, I thought I explained this. For the most, we’ve just been following you.” But at a look from Mine’irva (don’t ask me how he even noticed that, what between his poking at this, lifting that, and in general moving and touching everything in reach that wasn’t nailed down), “Yeah. He came this way. It’s been a while now, months? Probably where he made the drip, right?” But getting no answer from Abby, he continues, “And then, he left. You can see Bones’ tracks,

too... right there. His boots are larger. Well, perhaps I should say, you could see Bones' tracks, as well, but your torch-bearer is doing an excellent job of destroying all trace, so maybe you'll just have to take my word that Bones and S-Kelly followed along."

Of course, Ned would have liked to have said something important (handed the torch to someone else or come up with a witty comeback about how lighting the way and providing illumination to others was an important responsibility and so on, something that Strathmore would clearly know nothing about), but he was sort of (kind of) too busy looking at (but then, not exactly looking at) Mine'irva to be of much use at the moment. Boys get that way sometimes... girls too if Gloria is any indication (not that she's here at the moment, I'm sure she's with Jack wherever he is, acting silly and stupid).

"But we saw S-Kelly," having the time of his life/death, "as we snuck in," Abby says, and don't ask me why. Truthfully, looks to me like she lost her place in the conversation.

But Strathmore doesn't notice or care. He's a Chaos Elf, after all, and a consistent train of thought just isn't a priority for them. So without batting an eye, he takes the ball and runs with it (if you know what I mean), "I don't know why you bothered... sneaking." And then, because Mine'irva is enjoying Ned's attentions (beauty being in the eye of the beholder and Zombies not being big on that whole beholding thing, she's not been getting as much attention as she'd like as of late), she instructs Strathmore in that secret way Elves have to behave. "Yeah, well. We snuck past the Zombies, too. But I don't think it mattered. No one cares," he says more to his sister and high princess than anyone else. (And it is true, no one cares. Sure, the Drip is running out, but it's usefulness is coming to an end -- long past it's end, actually, so no matter. But I digress.) "Sid, Bones, S-Kelly, and no one else, as best as I can tell, came in and out a few months back. It's got to be where they made the drip." See, Strathmore knows. "Unfortunately, someone's spread a bunch of dust around, so I am as helpless as can be to follow their trail," he says in a lilting sort of way that indicates that there might be something about Gwyneth (the gay witch) that he finds, um, compelling, attractive, and/or worthy of notice (or maybe that he tires of

that whole Macho Elf Hero thing and longs to be a Helpless Elven Maiden and perhaps will toss his fairy hat into the ring should the opportunity ever present itself). Or maybe, he's just having a good laugh (mocking the world and all who are in it). Because at the end his performance, he reaches into a jar, throws a handful of dust into the air (and Ned's face, I'm sure it was an accident), and then sort of slip, falls, steadies himself, and as he's regaining his balance, pulls the right lever (quite by accident, he would assure you) and Walla! The bookcase he is standing before slowly creaks opens.

"How'd you do that?" Abby asks, while Ned for his part is too busy coughing, acting nervous, and trying to decide what to do with the torch, now that he feels sort of super-stupid holding the thing, what with the glow from the Elves swords (all three of them) and Mine'irva's hair, which I'm sure he sees as some sort of golden angelic halo rather than the glowing blue aura I see. Eh, to each their own. Anyhow, point being, Ned does nothing and says nothing -- much like a statue.

While as to Abby's question, Strathmore merely smirks, "Wouldn't you like to know as he steps forward and through the open portal."

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"See, tracks," Strathmore declares when they've reached a sort of open spot. Don't see how you could miss them. Probably been a hundred years since anyone else has walked this way. One set in and one set out. So, there's hope," he says, turning to Ned all serious, "They made it out," voice cracking, "but we... we may not be so lucky."

"Don't listen to him," Abby advises.

But it is Mine'irva who does the trick, placing her hand on Ned's shoulder, almost causing him to faint from excitement, but calming him down the same, nonetheless. He might not be much of a hero, but for the moment, he's all she's got. And she wouldn't be much of a standard bearer (if that's the right word for it), if she could not rally the troops in time of need. (Eh, so maybe a mascot is the proper way to describe her, but that seems sort of demeaning -- and highly inaccurate -- so perhaps a

symbol or point to rally around is the more appropriate way to look at her.)

Whatever the case, fully revived, Ned glows (not literally), walks on air (once again, not literally), as he joins Strathmore at the front.

“It doesn’t matter if you walk on the tracks now,” Strathmore observes. “Stay behind me. And keep that flame away from me,” and then, lightening up a little, “We’ll make a proper torch bearer out of you yet.”

“Wizard,” Abby counters. “Well, not a Wizard in the formal sense, but a spell caster, spell slinger, something like that.”

“Really, do something, spell slinger,” Strathmore commands. But Ned hasn’t learned anything, yet.

“Not yet, idiot,” Abby informs Strathmore, as she grabs the torch from Ned and walks past the two of them, taking the lead. I mean, who needs an Elf when the tracks are this obvious. How did she not see them before? “But he will be, someday.”

“And you’re going to teach him, I suppose.”

“I don’t know, maybe I will.” And then, straightening up, throwing her shoulders back, and looking Mine’irva dead in the eye, Abby declares, “He’s going to be great at the arts one day, that’s what math class was all about, and you’d know that if you were paying the least bit of attention. But you’re Elves, so what do you know. No go back, slink in the shadows, and follow twenty steps behind with your heads hung low like the good little followers you are. We have a dragon to find.”

And from there, there ensued much bickering and debate as to who was following who and so and so forth.

###

If there had been any enemies present, if anyone in the depths had wanted to give them trouble, if a trap had been laid, or a corpse had simply wanted to reach out and stop them, hold them close, and never let go, there is perhaps little they our bickering adventurers would have been able to do about it.

But oddly, they got free passage. Perhaps even the corpse walkers are fed up with the Zobmies, “They’re giving the animated dead a bad name, that’s what it is,” or some such nonsense, I can almost hear them whisper to one another, spreading the word, as those who might have prevented their passage simply drift into the background as the gang slowly walks (bicker-bicker-bickering) by.

“Ned? A great Wizard, spell slinger, worker of the arts? He’s not even worthy to shine my shoes.”

Abby just shrugs, “I’m just saying, you might want to rethink that. Or no, I mean, what do I care? Why are you even walking next to me? I thought I told you to walk twenty paces behind me.”

But Strathmore only dances ahead, skip walking backwards, ah, if only I’d laid a trap or two, “I think the Drip’s gone to your head. Ned’s never going to amount to anything. First, he’s a human. And second, he’s Ned.”

But Ned has stopped walking.

“Ah, don’t take it so hard, little guy,” Strathmore says, misunderstanding the situation. “In the scheme of things, you’re no worse than any other hordling. If only you could see things from my perspective.”

But oddly (yes, odd that), Ned is paying Strathmore no more attention that Strathmore is he. And by way of explanation as to his preoccupation status, “Dragon,” is all Ned says in a whispering sort of voice -- potentially full of awe and wonder, but more likely just pleased with himself for having figuring it out first. But when no one else seems to understand what he means by this (and/or more specifically, when Mine’irva’s eyes peer deep into his own seeking a deeper explanation), Ned elucidates (pretty sure that’s a word) on the matter a bit more clearly, “A Dragon, a Dragon was here, that dust. We’re in a big hall, an empty space. And no body and no thing wants to claim this area? Why? Because that dust used to be a Dragon.”

“And there tracks, here,” Strathmore observes. “Different ones, new ones.”

“Where?” Mata asks.

“Yeah, I am good, aren’t I,” Strathmore boasts as he shines in the glory of seeing something his sister doesn’t. “Right here, they start. Probably a conversation with the beast. They move around, he was here a while.”

“Or she.”

“A big she. No, it’s a guy, a man, humanoid, maybe, Sid. Changed his boots and came here again? He can do that, right? Just poof, and he can appear anywhere. So, he came here, to make Drip, saw the Dragon...”

“But he’d always know about a Dragon,” Abby counters.

“Maybe he forgot... or maybe it was time... or maybe the Dragon just moved in. No, that dust is old. That Dragon hasn’t moved in ages. See how the dust is caked up in the corner from its tail. So, they talked, Sid and the Dragon. And the Dragon agreed to whatever, because there’s no sign of a fight. Or maybe Sid was just waiting it out, the Dragon’s time had come, no fight left in it, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and all that. Or perhaps it was time for the harvest...”

“I don’t think Sid would do that.”

“He’s a Dark Necromancy.”

“And Sid wants something. So, who knows what he’s capable of doing?” Ned observes. And then, as all eyes turn his way, but only that one pair belonging to Mine’irva seem to matter at the moment, “Well, he does want something. Haven’t we all agreed to that?”

“He was looking...” Abby shrugs, agreeing, confirming. “A lot of energy was being focused. I think he was trying to go back.”

“But you can’t do that,” Strathmore says. He has spoken; and so in his mind, it shall be. The fool!

“Doesn’t mean he’s not going to try,” Abby observes (correctly). “And if the Dragon was ready to give up the ghost, this was recent, right?”

“Well, it’s hard to say. After they made the Drip, Sid came back,” which is a wrong attribution, but that’s usually the way things go. Mostly right, a little wrong. But somebody, “Talked to the Dragon. And then, that was it. Big Guy...”

“Or girl,” Mata observes. “Not my fault, you’re sexist.”

“Boy, girl, whatever,” Strathmore concedes.

“Girl,” Mata interjects. “There’s a difference, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Strathmore agrees. And so does Ned, as he takes the opportunity to blush a little.

“But what difference would that make?” Mata asks (sort of condescendingly, nay mockingly) of her brother.

“She would be more annoying. That’s definitely the first thing that comes to mind,” Strathmore admits.

But having taken the dig, Abby gets the opportunity to beat him to the punch, “Eggs, if it was a girl Dragon, she would have, could have had eggs.”

“Just the one,” Mata explains as she points out the important markings and depressions in the dust where the Dragon had been and now has become, encircled by footsteps that start nowhere and lead to nothing, “But it’s gone now.” And then, after a pause, she asks, “Aren’t they,” Dragon Eggs, “like powerful spell components, you know, crack them open, say a few words, and you can release all sorts of power and energy?”

“So, if Sid had hit a snag, a wall, thought he needed a final boost...” but Strathmore lets the thought trail off, before shrugging. “Eh, what’s adding one more to the body count. Dust to Dust and all that.”

###

But it’s a Dragon -- Egg, whatever.

And I don’t know if I’ve mentioned it or not, but Abby’s got a thing for Dragons -- Eggs, whatever. And at the prospect of coming so close...

I do believe she’s readying a disintegration ray.

“You’re dead, Sid,” Abby declares from out of nowhere (unless I suppose you were paying attention when I told you about that whole disintegration ray thing).

“Technically...” Strathmore starts, but doesn’t bother to finish, as instead, he decides to jump out of the way as Abby lets loose with all her

anger, frustration, and fury. (Yes, my darling, Turn to the Dark Side. Although I kid, so often, this is how it starts.)

But in all honestly, I probably shouldn't be kidding around and should rather be taking her more seriously, because her aim is uncannily accurate. And I might have something to worry about if her choice of spells wasn't so dismally bad. (And no, I'm not going to tell you what would have been a better choice.)

Anyhow, meanwhile, Abby is screaming with rage, "Bastard!"

And she's letting the volley's fly, but, um, it's just not effective. Casting a Disentigration Ray on an Empherial Being is a lot casting a Stone to Dust spell on a pile of dirt. It's already happened. Gust of Wind on a breeze, just makes Zephyr laugh. You know, it's sort of like fighting fire with fire, and all that.

But poor choice of spells aside, Abby's got some good aim, I'll grant her that. Don't ask me how she can tell where my focus is. She hits it dead on every time. But I am not my focus (and it's pretty easy to step aside -- much like a river flowing over and around a stone placed in its current or rubber balloon being gently pushed aside by a poking finger).

So, even though the explosive bolts of death and destruction are aimed quite carefully, they all miss their mark, go whizzing past, and proceed to blast holes in the supporting columns of the roof, sending rocks tumbling down, and destroying valuable cemetery property, which I am pretty sure is against the rules, Missy!

"I'm going to get you! You're dead! You're dust! If it's the last thing I do, Sid! You're dead!"

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

Little girl. Can you hear me laugh?

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Mu-ha-ha-ha."

"Bastard!"

“Stop with the lightning, already,” Ned urges. “Come on, I don’t want to spend the next thousand years down here. Sid would like nothing better.”

Um, no I wouldn’t.

I need Abby. I need Wally. I need Mine’irva and Mata and Strathmore. And even that bastard Mog. Pains me to say it, but it has become abundantly clear to me that I need even that bastard Mog’s assistance. As well as that Dragon and Ned’s -- and neither one of them are ready, not really. And yes, I do believe I am running out of time, I can hear the clock ticking, and don’t need some puny little meaningless Apprentice mucking up the works... so, she’d be nothing but a pile of dust at this point, unless, of course, I needed her as well.

“I’m glad we mucked up your plans!” Abby screams, sensing my feelings but not my intent, so there is a limit to her power. And while I get a better feeling for (and gauge) her power, Ned and Strathmore drag/carry-push/pull her out of the collapsing hall (well, structurally unsound dungeon passage at the very least, that one of these days -- but not today -- I’m going to have to fix) as she fights them every step of the way, trying for the kill, one last time. (And like I said, good luck with that. Wrong spell, Missy.)

And maybe it’s just me, but one of the problems (one of many) that I have been running into as of late (sensing in the world about me and the cemetery at large) is that there is way too much anger and not nearly enough love.

“Oh, I hate you alright, Sid! I going to get you!”

Are you little girl?

Are you?

Well, if you mean to do me in, to be the death of me yet, just remember, that would mean you would have to give me back my life first, before, you know, you can take it away.

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Dust, Sid. Dust! Just like you did to that Dragon!”

Well, if you are saying that the two of us share a similar fate, in that at least, I hope you are correct, little girl. In that, I hope you are correct.

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

“Mu-ha-ha-ha.”

Now, if you’ll excuse me, it does indeed look like the roof is going to collapse. Goodbye.

{{{Chapter End}}}