

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 12 ###
Breakfast at Mine'irva's ###**

Ah, what to do after a long night of virtual partying in the near-afterlife? That's what I always ask myself come the morning... or not really. Typically, I like to walk the grounds, make sure everything and everyone is in their right and proper place --or if not, that the new place seems right enough to everyone and everything is happy -- enough -- with the exchange -- but then, seriously, there's no pleasing some folks (things, whatever), so why try?

Anyhow, like I said, I typically do a walk-about come the morn'. Check the fences (more for keeping critters out, dae'ogs, demons, dragons, and whatever) than keeping folks in, you know, on account of the 'fixing spell' used during the burial process, well that, and then (even if one were to break free), not only does that whole dust to dust

thing come about all the faster the further one travels from their place of burial, the outside world isn't always that welcoming (see any number of horror movies if you require clarification on this last point).

Of course, I say I do a walk-about, but most of my tenants (clientele if you prefer) might beg to differ.

“Snooping again, sir,” is the alternative interpretation offered by the Kibber that opens the door to the Chaos Elves' abode (the Crystalline Crypt, I think they're calling the place, these days -- Chaos Elves being keen on bestowing names on almost everything... and then changing said names as soon as anyone else starts to gain the slightest understanding as to what -- exactly -- they might be talking about, but I digress as I so often do).

The main thing to keep in mind is that the Kibber at the door is but a servant, an object, a decoration, and a meaningless accessory easily done without.

“As you say, sir,” the oversized toad (stool?) might beg to differ, but everyone knows, the good ones (the good servants, like good authors, I might add) know how to blend into the background.

“Whereas the great ones are the background,” the insufferable Kibber corrects. Eh, but I'm probably being a bit...

“Testy, sir.”

Well, “Yes.” Especially considering the foregoing was a bit of a compliment: the first notice (or hint of appreciation) for my extraordinary talents as a storyteller. I do believe that might just call for a toast.

“Wine, then? Sir?”

“I see you're serving the last of my private reserve?”

“Nothing but the best for the occasion, sir. Besides, we knew you were coming,” And then, in reply to the unspoken, how? “You left your story notes in your dresser, sir.” In, not on, you will note. Carefully hidden away. But no worries. The important stuff is in my head. But as for the wine? “It would be rude to arrive for breakfast -- as an uninvited guest, no less -- without bringing a little something as a welcoming, so we took the liberty on your behalf, sir.”

Yeah, sure. They are serving my wine because they knew I was coming. I came because I knew they were going to serve my wine. ‘Compliments of Sid, he sends his regrets,’ I can almost hear the little toadstools saying. (And let me tell you, Kibbers more than anyone or anything else have caused me -- on more than one occasion -- to consider taking up dissection as a hobby. But, I fight the urge, for I feel it would send the wrong message to my patrons and be hard rather to explain my actions to the board despite their obvious provocations. Besides (and perhaps most importantly), the whole business sounds rather disgusting; but then again, a few disemboweled footmen walking about might send the appropriate message to the rest of the community.

“And what message would that be, sir? Shape up or ship out?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Then you will be leaving, sir? Of course, we are sorry to see you go. But if there is anything we can do to help on the occasion -- say pack your bags and carry them to the front gate -- you have but to say the word, sir?”

Like I said, a slow evisceration sounds better and better all the time.

“But you won’t, sir.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Biscuit, then, sir?”

“With wine?”

“It’s all you had, sir.”

###

Anyhow, I think I’ve exchanged pleasantries for long enough with the Kibbers. For whatever reason (perhaps because, as a species, they are amazingly good at sensing what side their bread -- or any bread -- is to be buttered on in the future and so routinely picking the winning side in all manner of wars, revolutions, and other power struggles of the sort; so maybe it goes deeper than a mere ‘sensing’ and there is a deeper level of activity involved; but without deconstructing that thought any further -- or dissecting it as the case may be, a course of action which is

sounding better and better all the time -- the fact remains), the Kibbers have most obviously aligned themselves with the House of Chaos, so it would seem that they are the early front runners as we move forward and see whose fortunes the Fates favor on the football field in the foray to follow in a few fortnights, or sooner.

Wow!

That's good -- nay, great -- writing, if I do say so myself.

Savoring the syrupy serendipity of my stupendous salutations (whatever that might mean, but why stress it, I'm obviously on a roll), I sip on some of my finest wine (the wine that the Kibbers are being so kind as to serve on the Elves behalf, which won't have any effect, of course), munch on a delightful pastry (as dry and tasteless as cardboard), and sit in a delightfully comfortable velvet chair (which oddly is delightfully comfortable) as I unobtrusively listen in on the elves as they plot their strategy moving forward.

"I'm going to crush them on Saturday," Strathmore brags. Like I may have said of the lot back at the beginning of this endeavor, the Elves are consummate professionals. I set the scene up, clearly indicating that I am to be an unseen observer (a fly on the wall, if you will), quietly listening in as the story unfolds, and what happens? Strathmore immediately bounds over, breaks the fourth wall (or fifth, I can never keep them straight) and remarks with glee, "I can't wait to gut an orc!"

"Gutting isn't allowed," I mention, sort of casually, not being keen on his continual destruction of the fourth wall, which incidentally has a way of gutting (if you will) that most sacred of story time traditions, the suspension of disbelief.

"Right. Right," Strathmore agrees most heartedly with a wink of the eye, "No gutting, big penalty for gutting. But we did agreed that there would be none of that sissy yardage penalty crap during the big game."

"Language," Bey'linda reminds her charges (she being the Momma Elf, in case you didn't recall); and let me just say, she's looking every bit the Elvin Princess she once was.

“Always will be in my heart,” Neo’lander reminds her (me, anyone, and everyone -- doing his best to kill that pesky fifth wall until it is ‘Dead! Dead! Dead!’ -- as dead as the proverbial doornail or most folks in these parts); and then, the pair (sensing that they should cut it short and shut up) sort of fade into the background, which in the case of Chaos Elves means that their features become even more non-descript than usual. Truthfully, not that they do, but I can almost see them talking off their skins when they’re all alone -- hanging them up by the door like so many cloaks of invisibility or displacement when they get home -- and underneath it all they are hollow and empty, like so many flour sacks (or gunny sack constructs, if you will), lucky to have a bit of black threaded stitching for eyes. And, heck, for a gag, maybe we’ll do that someday. But not today. Today (it would appear) is dedicated to Strathmore going on about how he is going to single handedly overrun the orcs, destroy the dwarves, disembowel the assemblage, clobber the cobalts, and so on and so forth

Ah, if only the Kibbers would field a team, then we could, ah, um, well, the only alliterative phrase that comes to mind is Kill the Kibbers, but that seems a bit harsh. So rather, let’s all just pause for a moment to imagine the Kibbers being drop kicked one by one through the goal posts, up and over the trees, and deep into the old forest. Perhaps we can linger around long enough to see if they are able to keep their cool as they fly through the air, perhaps on the way they might say, ‘Will that be all, sir,’ ‘Very good, sir,’ or more than likely, as my cup is refilled, one might sarcastically comment on my musings with a dry as a bone (usually wishful thinking that, the ground does get soggy in these parts), “As you say, sir.”

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Whatever. As he prances around the room, reenacting scenes that have not yet taken place, one thing is abundantly clear: Strathmore is more than a bit of a glory hound and it doesn’t necessarily matter whether said glory has been earned or not.

“Enough! It’s not like you’ve scored a single touchdown, yet,” Mata reminds her brother.

“But I will,” Strathmore smugly counters. And then, sidling up to me (because it can’t hurt to butter all sides of your bread, if you know what I mean, so perhaps he has been hanging out with the Kibbers for too long), Strathmore asks, “So, how many touchdowns do you have me slated for in the Big Scene.” And since I don’t answer right away (as not being a fortune teller, I don’t know), Strathmore merrily (if a bit delusionally) concludes, “See, too many to count. It’s got to be a record or something. Hey!” he suddenly says, having just gotten a great idea, much like the other great ideas he’s been rattling off this morning so far, like -- hiring crack-shot archers shooter to pick off the opposition from the sidelines, unleashing a wyvern in the opponents end zone (nasty creatures, them wyve’s), or simply paying the fools (and if they dare oppose the Elves on the field of battle, or, er, the field of football, they most assuredly are fools) to throw the game (not that Strathmore would need the help, mind you). Of course, the idea I liked the best was after Strathmore scored, like, his thousandth touchdown, he’d have scored so many points that the system can’t take it and the scoreboard literally explodes (yes, literally, I think I used the word right, explodes), blows a cog or some such nonsense. I mean, when you get down to it, it’s actually not a bad visual (sort of fun in a comic book way, actually), but the fact remains, “The game isn’t decided,” and this isn’t a comic book, if it was, Strathmore would be wearing tights and a cape. OK, fair enough, he wears tights (or tightish trousers) on the football field, but the cape is only a towel intended for wiping off sweat. I really can’t be held accountable if he drapes it over his shoulders and runs around pretending that he’s Super Elf -- or that it comes to pass that he does this during the halftime show. But then, in truth, I do not believe that any of this is really going to happen -- just a moment of (not so) quiet bragadillo and playful musings.

Of course, not everyone feels the same way.

“No son of mine is going to be doing anything like that. Need I remind you that you are bound to honor?” Neo’lander asks in response to most of what Strathmore has been saying this morning -- that thing

about the exploding scoreboard from too many touchdowns excluded, as that is exactly (like exactly) the type of performance Neo'lander expects (demands and deserves) from his own flesh and blood (and a representative of the Courts of Chaos); but as to the suggestion that they hire ninjas or assassins, 'It's just not done,' while hiring willfully willing wenches to wile away the wee hours the night before, however, is an entirely different matter, as that has to do with weakening the willpower of weary warriors in a wicked sort of way.

(Again, let me say, 'Wow! Much writing of style!')

"Besides," Mata observes, doing what she can to get this show on the road and perhaps being the single most perceptive person in the room (outside of me, of course, 'And the Kibbers, Sir. Do not forget the Kibbers, Sir,' I can almost hear them say), "All you've really done for the last two hours is list off all of the tricks, traps, and, um, tactics (I guess) that your opponents are going to use against you. Seriously, I'd like to see you outrun a steamroller," which probably isn't so hard, but I think you get the idea. Strathmore's sister is questioning his strategic acumen. And it's exactly (like exactly) the sort of slight on an Elvin Lad's Honor that requires a serious response, but not just any sort of serious response, but a suitable serious response of the well-formed strategically thought-out cleverish variety (and not some stupid, silly, or inane reply); so, of course, Strathmore thinks long and hard and comes up with a slammer.

"Oh, yeah?" (See, I told you it was good.)

And then, Mata being equally witty and verbose at times counters Strathmore with a "Yeah!" of her own.

And we're off and running.

Strathmore quickly counters with a "Yeah?"

Mata deflects a blow with a "Yeah," of her own.

Strathmore returns a, "Yeah."

Mata comes back at him with an, "Oh, yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

It's neck and neck, down to the finish, a double-triple, "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" and it's too close to call. We're going to have to take it up to the booth, folks to see who won.

Seriously, such witty repartee ('Oh, yeah?' 'Yeah!') I could sit back, sip a glass of fine wine, munch on a tinned biscuit (as dry as sawdust and just as taste), use a Kibber's fine livery and coattails for a napkin to wipe my hands and face ('Thank you, Sir. I shall treasure this moment forever.') and literally listen to this sort of banter for-ever. No, seriously, for-ever. I've probably given a full century of my afterlife listening to idiots (Why am I surrounded by idiots?) senselessly going back and forth with their 'Fag'/'Fag', 'Are not'/'Am too', and of course, my favorite, 'Yeah?'/ 'Yeah'. One day we will all turn to dust, but the Yeah-Yeah-Yeah will live on. It is with a tear in my eye that I consider that this will be my legacy. Oh, joy.

'Is too!'

'Is not!'

'Too!'

'Not!'

Thankfully, Bey'linda brings this all to an end (or just sort of ignores it as only a High Chaos Elf can, causing the dispute to fade into the background where it dissolves into a series of hand and facial gestures -- jutting fingers and protruding tongues being central to the exchange, I do believe), as Bey'linda sits down next to Mine'irva and asks sort of slyly (or not too slyly), "So, how are the boys." (Have you meet anyone? Made any new alliances? Tell me again why we made you the princess of this family? And that sort of thing. It's amazing how much nuance an elf -- or a mother, not to mention a mother elf -- can cram into such a seeming innocent question.)

Strathmore, of course, is only too happy to take a moment away from his near silent -- 'Idiot', 'Fool' -- feud with his sister to snitch on his step-sister the princess, "She hasn't done anything yet." And when she doesn't rise to the occasion to defend herself (but of course, being the princess there wasn't much chance of that), Strathmore adds, "In fact, half the school hates her. You should have heard what they said about her in the locker room."

And this being a family friendly story, we need not recount the comments here. But some of them were pretty darn mean.

And personally, I would have thought there would have been a little more compassion and support or maybe a little guidance or something, but all (and I mean all) Neo'lander has to say on the subject is, "We didn't bring you into this family," world, whatever, "to fail," (i.e. get with the program).

Bey'linda, however, is a little more helpful and encouraging advising that, "You have to get them on your side."

"They don't respect our ways," Mata says, jumping in and rising to Mine'irva's defense (that being her job, after all).

But Strathmore is only too eager to jump at the opening (that perhaps being his job, before all), "Our ways? What do you mean, 'Our ways?' They like my ways, just fine. I'm the team captain," well, co-captain; but truthfully, I don't think Strathmore realizes how tentative the honorific is (different captains being chosen at random every day in gym class). But, hey, when you're arrogant, you're arrogant, and Strathmore is nothing if not arrogant.

And then (here), even if I live for a thousand-thousand more years (or un-live, as the case may be), I will never have the time to recount the full extent of boasting that Strathmore indulges in (and/or inflicts upon his listeners) at this time. Though in truth, by ruthlessly belittling (and thereby pointing out the weaknesses of his opponents), he did give me some valuable insight into the sort of wagers I should make come game day. And yeah, I like to gamble, as does most everyone else around here. Probably half the wealth in these parts will be riding on the big game -- one way or another.

And it's definitely not my place to give gambling advise (because like as not, one day we'll be sitting on opposite sides of the table -- how could that not be when we finally do meet), but let me just say, it's a fool that bets on the final outcome of a game. Sure, the smart money is on Strathmore and the Humans in the Big Game. But if you make that bet, that means you'll be risking a hundred or more coins to make a single one in profit (current odds being 101 for 100 -- risk 100, for the potential of 101). Sure, it's a safe bet, maybe even easy money. But

there's no real profit in it -- only 1%. And at one percent, that's cheap rates. Heck, now that I think about it, I might offer odds at 102 or 103 for 100 and call it interest on a short term loan (that I might just never have to pay back if by some odd chance Strathmore mucks things up). And the reason I might do such a thing? Well, during any game, the real money is to be made on the side bets, the little bets -- say, whether the Charlies's will score a single touchdown or not. And the odds on something like that might be 10 to 1 (in which the payoff is 10 coins for every 1 risked). And then, I stop to think about it, and maybe I'll be able to word the bet right and take advantages of the patriotic fervor of some Giant or Stone Lopper and get them to pay me a kicker of ten coins for every TD the Charlies make. A guy (or Dark Necromancer with a willingness to get his hands dirty -- and what kind of Dark Necromancer would I be if that bothered me) could make a (literal?) killing on that sort of wager, he could easily turn a pocket full of jingle into a King's Ransom. But then, I digress. (Besides, this is a family series, betting is wrong, and betting against a Dark Necromancer is just wrong, it's darn near suicidal -- to the point that if you do it, you sort of get what you deserve. So, just a word to the wise Stormy, you've been warned.)

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Um, yeah.

Anyway, enough about the wagers.

After Strathmore is finished (takes him some time, I think I may have mentioned) Bey'linda busies herself with giving Mine'irva some of that good old-fashioned motherly advice (or if you're more cynical, making sure the clan's honor doesn't go up in flames and/or down in smoke). Anyway, she says, "You can't let this tournament be about Strathmore's honor or Sid's gambling addiction."

Hey, now. No need to get personal. And I'll have you know, I can quit anytime I want. I just don't want to. This is going to be my big break. I can feel it.

But sometimes, I think Bey'linda just ignores me, as she pretty much continues where she left off advising Mine'irva that, "What you need to do is find a way to make this entire thing be about you."

To which Strathmore mutters, "And I'm supposed to be the self-absorbed self-centered one."

But then, no one likes a mutterer, so he is duly ignored.

Besides, this is Bey'linda's big moment, her inspiring speech, so letting the emotion flow, she tries to motivate Mine'irva by reminding her that, "You are an Elvin Princess. You are the center of the universe. Everything was created for you and revolves around you. Make it spin and dance for your delight."

"But how?" Mine'irva asks.

To which Bey'linda just shrugs, Neo'lander sort of tosses his hands into the air, Mata broods (as it's actually her job to answer this sort of question, but for now, she doesn't have a clue), while Strathmore just sort of struts around the parlor and spikes a fake football into an imaginary end zone every once in a while.

One thing's for sure, "You can't let your brother upstage you in this," Bey'linda finally advises. And it is just me or does this sound less like advice and more like a suggestion that Mine'irva sabotage her brother. But before I (or Mata or anyone for that matter) can say anything, one of the Kibbers (pesky little toadstools that they are -- the lot of them -- if I haven't said so before), mentions how he had forgotten to tell me back when I had arrived (oh, I don't know, maybe, two, three, or four hours ago, now) that there was a 'disturbance' in the South Gardens that required my attention.

"And why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You had just gone on about how you like to take a walk-about. It seemed like it would be rude to immediately juxtapose that bit of information with your obvious ignorance concerning the disturbance."

"Very gallant of you."

"Thank you, sir."

"And so, what has changed, now?"

"It's getting worse, sir."

"What is?"

“The disturbance, sir.”

“What disturbance?”

“The one in the South Garden, sir.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Indeed, sir.”

Indeed. Well, another glass of wine, and I should most definitely be on my way.

“Now, sir.”

“We are out of wine, sir.”

“I do believe your presence is required immediately, sir.”

And I do believe the little wart is trying to get rid of me.

“There are your interests to protect, sir.”

“Yes, yes.” And your interests, as well, no doubt.

Oh, well. A little intrigue might do me a little good. I like to get into the mix now and again. And perhaps it will give Mine’irva... and Mata... and Bey’linda... and all the rest (toadstools included, I’m guessing) the privacy they need to device a dastardly plot (and seriously, have you ever heard of a plot that wasn’t dastardly?), while I find out what’s up...

“In the South Garden, sir.”

Yes, yes. Of course. All the way on the other side of cemetery. I could have guessed. Well, “Let me take my leave, then.” Enjoy your (dastardly) plotting and all that. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

To which a Kibber has the gall to reply, “Is that even possible, sir.”

When some folks get mad, their eye’s twitch, some folks clench their teeth. I suppose when a little toadstool of a Kibber starts to get under my skin, I start to mouth the words to an Inside Outside Spell, you know, just to make sure I still know the words, and can bring them to the forefront, should the need arise, or a Kibber be in need of rearranging vis-a-vie bringing his insides to the outside.

Despite my growing annoyance (or perhaps more likely because my annoyance is growing and said spell still -- still -- remains uncast), the Kibber stands his ground and reminds me, once more, like a broken record, “The South Garden is in need of your attention, sir.”

Yes, yes. A Kibber may work from sun-up to sun-down, but a
Crypt Keepers work is NEVER done.
And with that, I will away.

#

And you know what they say, Whilst the Crypt Keeper is away the
Elves will play.

“No one says that, sir.”

But I just...

“No one, sir.”

{{{Chapter End}}}