



DOOMFANG

Things did not go well with the Doomfang.

Firstly, it did not fall for the bait. One glance at the putrid mess that was previously a human arm, and it had howled in revulsion and fury. This was unexpected to Baleric and Ozzy, particularly Baleric, who had earlier insisted there were reliable records of Doomfangs having a fondness for human flesh. When Ozzy glared, Baleric defended himself by claiming the arm they used was too decomposed. They should have gotten one from a fresher corpse.

“Oh, so now it’s a gourmet,” Ozzy snapped.

“Well, he was once the town’s richest merchant ...”

They scampered as they bickered. Meanwhile, the Doomfang pursued relentlessly, occasionally vanishing into a side passage, or leaping to some ledge up above, always to moments later emerge ahead of the duo. That, incidentally, was the second disappointment. The records were totally inaccurate. Obviously, Doomfangs retained a good degree of human intelligence and memory after turning; Baleric and Ozzy didn’t need to look into the beast’s jaundiced eyes to understand that the monster knew the ruins better than them. And they were the ones with the map. A map, which like the part about human flesh, Baleric was confident would be their edge over the monster.

“Enough!” Ozzy wheezed, darting into a crevice to avoid another boulder the Doomfang had sent tumbling from above. Like most mages, he wasn’t athletically inclined, although he did fare reasonably well in the deadly chase-and-avoid. “I’m ending this now,” he raised his right arm. “Recentio Agarati ...”

“No!” Baleric yelled. Loud enough that even the Doomfang froze. “We are not to kill it!”

“It’s bent on killing us! Have you not noticed?”

“No! I ... I got a way to distract it.”

Later on, Baleric would insist, for days, that it was not just pure luck. That he actually had a plan, a clear idea of what he was doing. Reaching into his satchel, he wrenched out everything, then held up high the intricate Fool’s Gold medallion he had brought along from the manor. During the brief moments of the medallion captivating the Doomfang’s attention, the actual plan formed in his head and without hesitation, he hurled the medallion towards the creature. It worked as intended. A victim of its own instinct, of its own lifelong greed, the Doomfang hurtled from its ledge in attempt to seize the medallion with its jaw. There was, of course, nothing before it but air. Doomfangs are incapable of flight too. Accompanied by a shower of rubble, it plummeted to the rocky flat before Baleric and Ozzy. There was a sickening crunch. As the dust cleared, the two humans saw the rear left limb of the Doomfang twisted to an unnatural angle. Its jaw also drooled blood.

“Recentio Agarati ...” Ozzy mouthed. One finger towards the spot between the Doomfang’s eyes.

“No,” Baleric blocked Ozzy’s intended fire spell with his hand, which brought on another glare from the mage. “It’s broken. It can’t harm us now.”

“You don’t know that! Nothing you’ve said so far has been right.”

“It’s broken,” Baleric insisted. “It’s injured, can’t you see? It’s no longer a threat.”

As if in defiance, the Doomfang howled. It came out chortled, thin.

“Come on,” Baleric tugged. “We can still do this right. Just ... just keep that spell on the tip of your finger.”

“Why don’t I just ...”

“Come on!” And he was off. Sprinting down the passage that led to the largest vault of the ruins.

* * * * *

“You’re sure it’s to do with these ... these treasures.”

The serf swallowed. His eyes never dared to meet Baleric’s, and now they looked towards the ground. “Everyone knows it’s those, those things,” he whispered. “Cursed objects. Ancient things. Dark spirits came when the master brought these things back.”

“Nonsense,” Ozzy said coldly. Since the start of the conversation, he had regarded the serf derisively. Now, he highlighted it in his tone too. “Doomfangs are victims of lycanthropy. In the southern lands, they are called werewolves. One is only created by the bite of another.”

The serf didn’t argue. Lifelong subservience had taught him other ways to defend his viewpoint. Better, safer ways. “The master seldom leaves the manor,” he said softly. “These, these things, he pays for sellswords and sorcerers to obtain them. Even when the master does leave the manor, he is heavily protected. You have met those men. I’m sure you do not doubt their capabilities.”

“Let’s assume,” Baleric raised a finger. “That your master was indeed transformed the way you said. What was the relic that did it? Was it a weapon, an accessory? Some sort of scroll or potion?”

No answer from the serf. And something about the way he kept his body still and his head down told Baleric that it was pointless to expect any answer. Eyeing Ozzy, he sent the mage into the unlocked treasury. While awaiting his companion’s return, he attempted a different route of questioning.

“Tell me about your master. About Sir Wilhelm. How was he to you?”

“The master is a kind and generous man. He cares and looks after those who serve him.”

“Really? That’s not the impression I got from the village. From what I was told, your master was a miser. And a bully. He valued his gold and treasures more than human life.”

A slight shudder of the serf’s shoulders. But again, he refrained from arguing. “The master’s temperament changed of late. After those two sellswords brought back that chest from the Sightless Sea. He became ... irritable, impatient. And then he was very ill for a month, only to recover miraculously. After that, the ... the murders began.”

The serf left it as that. And Baleric didn’t need him to continue for he already knew the rest of the grisly story. The bloody deaths around the manor. Wilhelm’s own wife and daughter ripped to pieces. Then the random killings around the village, frequently in open sight, with shreds of Wilhelm’s robes still on the Doomfang. “Something bothers me,” Baleric said. “Why the castle ruins? Why not somewhere else, like the iron mines across the farmlands? Or the forest? Did Sir Wilhelm have any connection with that castle?”

“I am unaware. But the master owns many lands. Perhaps he owns the castle?”

“He couldn’t have. That’s left over from the Spectre Wars. It’s empire property.”

“The master does have some connection with ...”

“Nothing,” Ozzy said, emerging from the treasury. “Plenty of things inside. Mostly valueless. None remotely magical too.” He held up a handful of chains, pendants, trinkets, and medallions, and for the first time, the serf stood upright, his crinkled face horrified. “These aren’t even of archaeological value,” Ozzy continued. “Trust me. I aced that class.”

“Noble mage,” the serf blabbed. “You can’t, you can’t ...”

“We must,” Baleric said gently. “But we wouldn’t take all as payment for resolving this ... predicament of yours. We would just take ...” Randomly, he selected two chains, three trinkets, and the largest medallion. “These would suffice.”

The serf didn’t look gladdened. But he knew better than to bargain. “Would you really be able to ...”

“I have taken down worse things than a man-wolf,” Ozzy said. “Single-handedly. Without weapons.”

“And would you have to ... to ...”

He couldn’t say it, but Baleric knew what he meant. “We would try not to,” he assured. “But this is not your master anymore. It’s a feral beast. Bent only on murder and carnage. If it comes

to that, we will slay it. But I promise you, as much as possible we will try to keep him alive. Then we'd find a way to return your master to you."

* * * * *

"Have you figured it out?"

"Figure out what?"

"Why here?" Ozzy glanced around the vault. "Lycans might be aberrations of nature. But they still prefer to be in the wild."

"How should I know? Maybe he always wanted this place. Wanted to be his own king and everything. You heard what the villagers said about him."

"What about ...?" Ozzy mused, nuzzling his nose with a knuckle. "What turned him. Surely you didn't believe that nonsense about cursed relics."

"That is indeed something that warrants further investigation. But you know I wouldn't be the one doing it. That's not my job."

Ozzy faced him, his eyes suspicious as well as critical. "I never did figure out what exactly you do at the Wyvern's Tongue. Something tells me, though, you're not one of those churning out the accusations and scandals."

"Hey, we call them features. Everything written is based on facts and discoveries. We don't, churn out stories, the way you just implied."

Ozzy had a lot to say about that. But their conversation was cut short. A rumbling echoed from the lone passage leading into the vault. After near an hour of hesitation, of suspecting it would be walking into a trap, the Doomfang finally decided to enter. Growling, foams glistening around its misshapen fangs, it plodded into the vault. At the sight of Baleric and Ozzy, its growl deepened. Its back also flexed, as if in readiness to pounce. But ultimately it remained well away from the duo. Its eyes burning with hate. With fear too.

"Let me handle this," Baleric said. Slowly, he moved forth, both hands before him. "Sir Wilhelm. We mean you no harm. We're not here to kill you."

"He can't understand you," Ozzy couldn't resist saying. "He's ... gone. This is, this is now a ..."

"A big dog," Baleric said. "Who needs to be shown its new master. Its new owner."

That incensed the Doomfang. Incensed whatever remnant of miserly, arrogant Sir Wilhelm left in it. Snarling furiously, its hind legs contracted and it pounced. It was a failed jump, though,

because of its earlier injury, and also because of Baleric's sword. Baleric didn't slash with his weapon. Instead, he smashed the flat of it against the Doomfang's snout, relying on brute force to send the monster tumbling towards the heart of the vault. To ensure it stayed down, his left leg also lashed, kicking squarely into the Doomfang's underside. As the injured monster foamed and writhed, Baleric gracefully leaped back to where Ozzy was. He barely broke a sweat.

"If you could, wondrous mage."

Ozzy's eyes rolled and he lifted two fingers and a thumb. The caging spell he chose, Arcurus Infarnatem, had one of the longest incantations in containment sorcery. But there was no rush. No danger too. Even from where he was, Ozzy could tell Baleric's kick had crippled the Doomfang. Moreover, so as not to repeat the farce of earlier, Ozzy had sprinkled the ground with Solar Dust as a precaution. Whatever the truth behind Wilhelm's turning, he was still a Doomfang. Like vampires, they burn under the light of the sun. Already, the beast's fur was sizzling as the containment circle glowed into existence around it.

"... Infarnatem, Agaratio."

The cage took shape. A polyhedron with edges of sorcerous fire. The Doomfang, Wilhelm, howled mightily for one final time as it threw itself against the shimmering walls. Then it was whimpering, cuddling up, licking the burns on its paws and snout.

"Why Agaratio?" Baleric demanded. "You looking to make roasted leg of wolf?"

"It's to keep it quiet," Ozzy growled, not too unlike the Doomfang. "The flames do not burn it. They only inflict the impression of burning. I don't want it howling all the way back to the village."

"We're not going back to the village."

Ozzy blinked, confused.

"We're returning to the capital, silly. To headquarters. Why do you think we came in such a large carriage?"

"You ... I ..." Ozzy composed himself. "You told the villagers, and the manor attendants, you'd be bringing Wilhelm back to them. In one piece."

"So I did. But it's obviously not going to do them any good with him still in this form," Baleric gestured with exaggerated distaste. "He'd be useful elsewhere. Such as with us."

"I do not ... Explain yourself, Bale."

"Erikus and I discussed this. I didn't tell you earlier because I knew you'd protest. Our readers are getting bored, you see. Sceptical too, especially about events happening so far from the

capital. We need to show them proof. Proof beyond just words, or those crystal illusions of yours. For that, we need Wilhelm as a display. Later on, we'd investigate his story further. Do more digging for what actually turned him."

For a moment, just a moment, the rage from being deceived flared in Ozzy's eyes. And it was threatening enough for Baleric to tighten his grip on the hilt of his sword. But it faded, quickly. Ozzy reverted to his usual self. Only a trace of revulsion lingered over his face. "I'd expect double payment. For having to transport this, magically, all the way back to Ceris."

"I brought the gold."

"And if you do find anything behind his turning, I expect to be informed."

"That, I cannot promise you. You'd have to discuss with Erikus."

Ozzy glanced at the Doomfang. Now a pathetic, whining creature locked within an arcane prison. In many ways, it did remind him of a dog. The battered pariahs that loitered around impoverished villages. "He was once a good man, so I've heard," he said. "I was in this county years ago, when I was still an apprentice. The story goes, he got obsessed with collecting relics from the wars. He believed there was potent magic to be found. An obsessed man becomes uncaring, callous, quickly."

"Are you telling me this so that The Tongue can include it in the feature? Sorry, that, you have to talk to Erikus too."

"So you're just in charge of capturing it," Ozzy raised both arms. And the containment cage glowed purple, putting the Doomfang to sleep with a slumber enchantment. "At least I now know what you do for the Wyvern's Tongue."

"I find the stories, splendid mage," Baleric smiled and sheathed his sword. "I find the stories, and I bring them to the Tongue."

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