

Dreams 2
By Tredain

The mists felt familiar now, as did the hazy figure that pranced through them. Springtome gave a soft sigh and leaned onto his staff as the thing in his dreams cartwheeled around him, turning to backflips that ended in a soft *pft* as it dove into the swirling white mass.

"You again."

A pair of wide pointed ears sprouted from the mist, followed by a squat, tan muzzle and bright red eyes. The fennec rose slowly and offered a mischievous smile over its shoulder.

"You again. And Me." It rose higher and higher, the mist streaming off of it yet never sloughing off completely to form a sort of robe hanging from the slight frame. "And you." It snapped its fingers and in a blink it became a copy of the old badger, down to the floppy hat and staff. "And you." It became the other Springtome, his red eye flaring brightly, muzzle perked in a grin as the tattered black coat flapped in an unfelt breeze. "And you."

"No..." Springtome gave a low growl.

The thing chuckled, lifting skeletal arms up to examine them, staring down with a blackened badger's skull lit from within by green flame, looking at its bony claws as it flexed them and turned them over. A burnt and tattered robe hung off the skeletal frame, the bones likewise black as ebony. The twin plumes of green flame flickered, as if the thing were blinking. It looked up and the chuckling echoed.

"Haven't you ever wondered?" the thing's voice boomed from everywhere and nowhere as the jaws clacked out of sync with the words like bad puppetry. The blackened skull tilted aside and the skeleton froze. The green flames winked out for a moment then came roaring back and the thing moved again, but it seemed more 'alive' now. Its head whipped one way, then the other, hunching its body forward and drawing its claws up. Its 'eyes' settled on the badger.

"Back." Springtome snarled and defensively raised his staff up. Its head tilted aside again and the green flames stared into him.

"SSssssssspringtoooooommmmbbb...." the monstrous thing hissed in one long, rattling 'breath'.

"No. No, you're not me," Springtome growled. He gripped the staff with both paws and set his feet apart to brace himself as he bristled.

Green fire blossomed from the bony claws until it engulfed them. The jawbone opened wide to reveal a third flame that roared to life as the thing hissed and charged forward.

"BUUUUUURRRRRRRNNNNN!"

The magus snarled back and answered with a fire of his own, red and yellow surging from the end of his staff and colliding with the green. The mist around them burned away and the fires raged between them, surging higher and higher. The thing broke from the flames, every inch of it alight, and let loose another long, gravely hiss as one black claw lanced forward.

Snap.

Springtome blinked, the sharp bones scant inches from his eyes. But the thing calling itself Springtomb hung, frozen in the air, a puppet waiting for its puppeteer. White coils slid from behind the creature. An octopus. No, a dragon. No, a snake, Springtome decided finally, as twin red eyes appeared at one end, forming a blunt muzzle and wide hood around them, the indistinct thing coalescing briefly as a great white naga.

"Another me," the badger said. The snake's mouth turned up in a smile and several scaled coiled wrapped over the blackened skeleton. "How?"

"You've wondered, I'm ssure, " it said in a soft, gentle hiss as the end of its tail ran along the black jaw line. "What would happen if you had chosen... otherwise?"

The badger's brow furrowed a moment.

“Chosen...” he considered a moment, and then lifted his head as realization dawned. He considered the skeleton more seriously. “You can’t mean... the spell?”

The naga’s features shifted again and the thing rippled as coils became tendrils of mist, the hooded head flattening back and detaching as it became a fish. It flitted through the air around the undead thing with tiny bubbles following in its wake.

“The spell that earned you your title. Yes. The spell that cost you... him,” the fish gave a little chuckle as it shrank and swam straight through the skull’s left eye socket.

The magus gave a quiet sigh and leaned onto his staff as he suddenly felt very old and very tired. Memories long buried bubbled to the forefront of his mind and he gripped the staff tighter.

“So, if I hadn’t... this is what would have happened?” he asked, eyeing the creature up and down, looking over the vicious claws and frozen flames covering the black bone. The fish wiggled its little tail before it poofed in a puff of smoke. A growl rumbled in the badger’s ear and a tiger slunk from beside him, grinning widely.

“Quite. You and the refugees would have been overrun. Your flesh eaten,” the thing smacked its new form’s lips “Your bones burned and corrupted. Just another tool of the devils.”

The big cat moved gracefully for being so big and rounded the frozen monstrosity. “If it’s any consolation, your first act after awakening was to burn the heart out of the devil that brought you back.”

The magus narrowed his eyes and only gave a curt nod. He studied the two monstrosities before him, the hazy, indefinite dream creature and the burnt husk of himself.

“Why show me this? Why show me any of this?” he motioned with his staff at the roiling sea of mist all around them. “Why speak to me in my dreams?”

The tiger melted away to be replaced with a mouse, small and slight, that raised its arms high as it swayed and began to dance to an unheard melody. It swayed and writhed, stepped forward, became a bear, turned and flashed into a wolf, paws stroking up its sides as its hips swished. It locked eyes with the wizard and became a copy of him once more. It smiled widely.

“Perspective. We should all be so lucky to know the monsters we could be.”