

BANE

Maybe it was a mistake, coming here. The promise of riches was simply too good not to chance a short trip into the depths of this place. Maybe just the first chamber....maybe two. Maybe one step too far.

Torchlight is an odd thing, you know. The way it flickers. The way it moves. The way it makes things seem to move when they aren't, and the way it can hide the movement of cunning things. Moonlight doesn't do that, you know. It is constant, steady, sure; just like the sun, only more dim. It's the things that move in the moonlight that make it seem to shift. The shadows of swaying trees and swirling clouds...that is where the dangers lie.

It's the shadows that will get you, not in the light.

It was a shadow that attacked them, he thought. It was hard to see in the torchlight. It wasn't that the torch wasn't bright enough. It just seemed that the shadow was always behind something, hiding on the opposite side from the light. But then, isn't that what all shadows do? This one did more, though. It moved in an almost liquid way, flowing like ink from the lee of one object to another. Always moving closer, always growing larger and more solid. When it finally lunged for them, he had already turned to run. He never saw more than a black snout...perhaps a beak.

Something stabbed him. Maybe it was a claw or a bite. It was hard to tell. Things were happening too fast. He fell to the ground and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the end and hoping it wouldn't hurt any more than it already did. Cold washed over him like falling through the ice into black water beneath.

And then just as suddenly, whatever it was, it was gone. But not far.

He risked opening his eyes and looked. A cloak of feathers as black as pitch, crowned with a massive and terrifying raven mask. Wisps of flowing purple seeped out from between the plumes, the eyes, the nostrils and the mouth. That ghastly mouth. When it opened, his blood nearly froze. He knew it was no mask.

The shrill scream that burst from the freshly awakened horror rekindled every nightmare he'd ever had that The Gray Harvester had its sickle raised, ready to claim his soul. As he squeezed his eyes shut and cried, the last thing he saw was the monstrosity leaping upon the fleeing treasure hunters as their movement caught its attention. With each one that fell, the thing seemed to grow stronger.

One by one, the sounds of panic diminished. The sound of claws scrabbling on stone, the frantic panting and heartbeats like the rapid tattoo of a hammerbird looking for grubs in the bark of trees...all of it faded until all that remained was the sound of that thing breathing in every life it snuffed out. Soon, even that stopped. But there was another sound he hadn't noticed before; something terribly familiar and terribly afraid.

Himself.

His eyes opened a sliver and his breath caught in his throat as the thing paused above its last victim and slowly turned toward him. His eyes widened so far that it hurt as his gaze met the shadowy amethyst glare. It knew exactly where he was. The glow of his life must shine like a beacon in the catacomb. And yet, it paused. Instead of pouncing and drinking in his life as it had with the others, it stared at him. Stared into him.

His eyes began to burn with the need to blink, but he was afraid to. If he moved, he knew he would die to this thing. It was the embodiment of unlife; The Rot made manifest. A Bane. And yet, it merely floated there and looked at him. He blinked his eyes several times and swallowed, allowing himself to take a slow, shallow breath while trying not to choke on the taste of dirt and iron.

The Bane lifted its head ever so slightly and did something he never thought he'd see...never wanted to see. It did something that caused the cold fingers of dread to wrap around his pounding heart.

It cocked its head at him.

Had it been almost any other creature, the gesture might have been cute. But coming from this, it was even more harrowing than watching it feed. It spread its wings and began to move toward him. For the first time, he got a good look at its form. The wings and head were always clear enough. Paintings and sculptures and stories always depicted those quite well. What was less well known was beneath the shadowy shroud. How often do those who get close enough to see such a thing survive to tell about it? None that he knew of.

The neck seemed far too long to hold up the serrated, ebony beak. The body looked almost skeletal as it floated, legless, above the ground and drifted closer. When half the distance between them was closed, the dusty patter of falling gravel came from the dungeon's entrance.

One of the dungeoneering party, a ferret, had emerged from her hiding place and disturbed a pile of rock. The Bane's head whipped around to face her and let out a piercing wail. Why had it not seen her before? The open door behind the skittering ferret let in the warm, amber glow of the sun shining outside. Its light must have hidden the weasel from sight. But now, she was discovered and she knew it. She bolted for the relative safety of the light of day with the Bane erupting far too close at heel and giving chase, leaving him alone in the depths with the dead and a softly sputtering torch.

After an hour, neither the ferret nor the Bane had returned. The torch had begun to splut and pop. Very soon, it would go out and his only companion would be pain. When the rush of panic had faded, he came to a dreadful realization. Both of his legs were broken. He had no way to set the bones, no way to splint them, nothing to use as a crutch. He was certain there was a pack or two somewhere, probably on one of the bodies of the fallen. But as the torch gave a final puff and died, he could not see where anything was. His mind was slowly engulfed in resignation to the idea that this was where he was going to die. Hope faded with the last embers crawling through the torch.

As the light through the entrance faded at dusk, the pain in his legs, which had faded to a dull ache, began to itch more than anything he'd ever known. He moved aside the shredded fabric of one leg of his breeches to find a soft, purple glow from several tendrils which seemed to shift and move across his flesh.

He swallowed hard and took up a small knife from his belt. With several whimpers and sobbing cries, he tried to lance and purge the infection before it could spread further. For every cut he made, the glowing ribbons simply moved and continued their advance. All he managed to do was spill more of his blood across the floor. The wine-colored glow made it possible for him to see the small pool beside his leg, but he wasn't sure he preferred it to the darkness.

Another day passed, then another. With each setting of the sun, the infection spread further and deeper. He could remember less and less of his life before he came to this place. His strongest memory was the Bane's attack. The sudden burst of shadow and shriek as it woke, simultaneously terrible and beautiful, as a spider's web. He remembered its shrill cry. But now, it sounded far less horrific in his memory. There seemed an almost plaintive undertone, not unlike that of a baby bird when its parent returns to the nest. This place, this darkness, had been its nest; its safe haven against the pain of dawn and they had disturbed its sleep. What cub wouldn't cry out at being awakened so suddenly?

There was another memory, faint and faded like a distant and nearly-forgotten dream. He struggled to snatch it up and bring it to mind but so many elements were lost that he could only gather fragments.

Chalisa.

Chalisa, the herbalist. She had tinctures he was sure would make him stronger. He could go and see her. She lived in a nearby village called Wheaton's Field. He could picture it clearly in his mind, glowing like a welcoming hearth at suppertime. She would make him stronger. They would all make him stronger.

He turned his gaze to the entrance of the dungeon and watched as the last, stinging light of the sun faded. He rose and moved toward the doorway, shaking some dusty tatters from himself as he burst forth into the night with an echoing cry. He turned and drifted East toward Wheaton's Field.

The scent of Life was thick in the air. Yes, these people would make him stronger. From codger to cub, he would feast.