

## CHAPTER FIVE

"Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck," said Drue, his eyes wide and staring around.

"That's not helping," complained Ledrith, watching as the encircling undead slowly shambled toward them.

"I can't help it, I'm scared beyond the capacity for reasonable thought right now," he said in a high and quavering voice.

Nix, standing between them, vigorously nodded his agreement and made a little whistling noise as his head moved around looking for an escape, his wings twitching with the desire to simply fly away.

Mynti, standing on Drue's other side, rolled her eyes and exchanged a smirk with Fidio who stood on her left. She was obviously scared too, but had been in enough scrapes with the big serpentfolk that she wasn't paralyzed with fear.

"This isn't a good place for us to be. Can you make us a hole big guy?" she asked him.

He pulled out one of his little clay-pot bombs from his satchel and said, "I thought you'd never ask."

"Okay guys, get ready to move," she told the other three, nudging Drue's hip with her elbow, and nodding to Fidio.

The alchemist produced his little sparker and lit the fuse. He tossed the bomb to the skeleton nearest to him and said, "Catch!"

The skeleton ignored the bomb, which lodged itself between two ribs. The explosion blew it apart, and sent the two skeletons on either side of it flying away from the blast, staggering those nearby.

"Okay, GO!" shouted Mynti, grabbing Drue's sleeve and guiding him toward the opening. The others followed quickly and soon the five of them were outside the circle of undead creatures.

The halfling however hadn't moved.

"Shit," said Mynti, her big eyes wide. "We've got to get him out of there."

She started to move toward him, but Fidio put a hand on her shoulder. "Hold up there a second sugar-buns," he told her. "Check it out, he remains unmolested."

And even as they watched, the undead corpses turned to follow them, but flowed around the twitching little halfling like he wasn't even there.

"Well now," said Fidio speculatively. "Isn't THAT interesting?"

"Yes, but um..." Drue gestured away from the mass of skeletons approaching them and said, "Perhaps this would be a good time to maybe, I don't know, RUN AWAY?"

Mynti glanced over her shoulder at the three of them cowering and shuddering with fear, and backing away from the grotesque creatures.

"Run where?" she asked. "We can't go back to the cave, we've been banished. As far as we know there's no other safe place for us to go." She pulled her trident off her back and gestured to the halfling with her head. "He's our ride. We go with him, or we get killed by undead monsters. Here or somewhere else, makes no difference." She took up a fighting stance, and

faced the skeletons down as they approached, now in a ragged uneven line. "Drue, would you mind setting the mood for us?"

Drue hesitated for only a moment, then swung the lute around his body, his eyes wide and frightened, but resolved. "I know I said life was pointless, but I'm not ready to give mine up yet." His fingers flew over the strings of the lute in a complicated rhythm that seemed synchronized to their heartbeats, wild and complex, yet ordered and steady, then suddenly he broke into swift and powerful chords that sent a thrill of electricity through each of their spines.

"Fuck this!" said Ledrith in a quavering yet determined voice, and electricity suddenly sparked between her hands. "We're gonna live!" She let loose a bolt of lightning into the tightly packed horde of undead, which traveled from corpse to corpse stunning several of them, but seemingly doing very little damage.

"HELL YEAH!" roared Fidio. He slithered forward and whipped his tail out at two of the the nearest skeletons sweeping their legs out from under them, then coiled around a third, pulling it back from the group. It dug bloody furrows in his scaled and pebbly skin with it's bony fingers, making him grunt, but he took his time crunching the undead creature down, breaking its bones. He tore the arms free of their sockets and used one of them to knock the skull free of the body.

Mynti whirled her trident around, breaking bones and knocking limbs away. A few grasping claws managed to reach her, and she could feel some vile kind of magic draining her strength, but she knocked them aside with contempt, then stuck the tines of her trident into the ribs of the creature and sundered the spine with a wrench, then with the top half of the skeleton still attached, she swung it into another skeleton, shattering both in the process.

Nix still looked worried as he watched his friends. Fidio noticed and asked, "What's wrong my feathery little friend?"

The young bird-man tried to shout, but couldn't be heard over the music and the melee. Instead he pulled out his knives and said as loudly as he could, "Nothing to stab!"

Fidio considered this for only a moment, then winked at Nix, and held up a finger to ask him to wait a moment. He flipped the skeleton over that he'd lately crushed, and discovered that the leg-bones were still intact... and kicking. He yanked the femurs out of their ball-sockets, pulling off the shin-bones and tossing them aside.

"Here," he said, as he tossed the femurs to Nix. "See what you can do with those."

Nixer caught the bones deftly and gave them an experimental twirl. The ball shaped knobs at the end seemed almost made for breaking bones. With an almost child-like glee, he circled the skeletons around to the right and started coming at them from the side, knocking skulls from their spines and popping shoulders from their sockets.

The fight was short, only maybe two or three minutes at the most, but by the end only Drue had managed not to be injured, but only because none of the others had let the skeletons get near enough to him. They fought with a terrible tenacity, the kind of tenacity that only comes from knowing that if you lose the fight, you will die. In the end, they suffered the wounds, but savored the victory.

Then Mynti rounded on the halfling, who was still just standing there twitching and shuddering, his good eye wandering around madly.

"What the hell was that!?" she demanded. "Are you *trying* to get us killed? Why didn't those things go after you anyway?"

Rather than answer, the halfling pulled a small, rather delicate looking mirror out of a back pocket. The frame and handle were decorated in a skull motif. He held it up to his face, not really looking at it and whispered in his stammering way, "S-s-s...susss-sus-s-s.. Skelletania."

And just like that, between one blink and the next the landscape changed, as if someone had blown out the sun like a candle. The room they stood in now was dark, the floor black and shiny. They could tell the room was huge, but only once their eyes had adjusted could they tell exactly how huge. The room was shaped like a church, without the seats, only much much bigger. It was almost like being the size of a mouse in a regular sized church, except most churches didn't have a skeletal motif. It looked like it had been built from the skeletons of thousand foot tall men. Gigantic spinal columns created pillars at even intervals.

At the far end, what felt like miles away, sat a gigantic skeletal figure in ornate black robes, sitting on a skeletal throne... except wrong somehow. As if the skeletal features had been superimposed on a huge humanoid body, with normal looking blue eyes sunk deep inside the eye sockets. It almost seemed like someone wearing a skull mask, or skeletal armor, except that it seemed to be a part of the creature.

And it was giving them a slow and deliberate clap of applause.

"Okay," said Drue. "That's impressively creepy."

The halfling started walking quickly toward the front of the enormous chamber.

Drue exchanged a look with Ledrith, who shrugged and looked at Nix, who nodded back, his eyes wide, and the three started following the halfling.

Mynti asked, "Does this seem like a good idea?"

"Does it look like we have much choice?" asked Fidio.

They shrugged at one another and followed along.

As they walked they started to feel the perspective of the room change. Gradually it seemed to shrink, or they seemed to grow, until finally when they were standing in front of the throne, the shrouded skeleton-man appeared to only be huge, maybe ten feet tall, rather than gargantuan. He was still clapping, and grinning broadly, though as his face was an odd caricature of a skull it was hard to tell if this was intentional.

And when he finally stopped, he said, "Now that's what I'd like to call... entertainment."

His voice was smooth and pleasant, though a little high and reedy, and his mouth moved when he spoke, as if his teeth were his lips. In fact his whole skull mask was as expressive as a human face, rather than being rigid unmoving bone, though that's what it appeared to be.

"Welcome to my castle!" He said spreading his hands in a gesture of welcome. "Thank you for coming. I, of course, am Death. I'm sure you've heard of me."

"Uh, sure," said Drue. His face wore a blank expression, much as the others in his group. Their jaws all hung open, and they stood looking at the creature who called himself Death, with a mixture of disbelief, awe, and abject terror. "We uh.... This is... Um..."

"Truer and more poetical words were never spoken," said Death gently. "Of course there's no need to introduce yourselves, I know who you are. That's why I sent for you."

Drue coughed and swallowed. "Wait, you sent for us?"

"Of course, I know everything about you all, your whole lives." Death smiled at them. "Chaos follows you around like flies on a corpse, I absolutely love it. You're like walking instruments of destruction, it's such a beauty to behold."

However before they could process that thought, the halfling stepped forward from between them.

"M-m-m-mast-t-t-ter-r-r, y-y-y-ou p-p-p-prom-m-mis-s-s-s-sed."

Death looked at the little creature with a frown. "Huh," he said. "Yeah, I guess I did."

And with those words, the halfling fell to his knees. He seemed to be aging rapidly. The sparse amounts of hair he had left withered up and fell out, his skin wrinkled, then the wrinkles wrinkled, then sagged till the skin looked stretched over his skull. He fell to his side and his body began to turn to dust. Just before his head started to decay he said, "Th-th-thank you....."

Then even the dust started to disintegrate, till there was nothing left.

"Okay then, so how ab-" started Death, but Ledrieth cut him off.

"Wait, what happened to him?"

Death looked taken aback. "He died."

"But why?" she asked sternly.

Death shrugged. "Because I made a bargain with him, and that's what he wanted."

"But who was he?" insisted Ledrieth.

Death appeared to consider this for a moment. "You know, I never bothered to find out. He was nobody. Not important. Not like you guys!" he said pointing and smiling like an old friend. "I know just about everything there is to know about you fine people!"

He pointed to Nix, who flinched back his eyes wide, and said, "You my fine little Strix, are not the *most* potent purloiner I've ever spectated, but you are damned close! And yes, I understand that you have some funny ideas about the concept of ownership from your upbringing, but I still admire your penchant for illegal acquisition.

"And you!" he pointed a skeletal finger at Ledrieth, who straightened her spine and looked affronted. "You are a capable enchantress, quite adequate and learned, and under the right conditions capable of some pretty inspired improvisation."

He turned to Drue, who tried a little too desperately to look uninterested and haughty. "You my little bardling are such a virtuoso! A bit of a diva, but that doesn't diminish your devilish disposition."

Mynti tried to sneer with derision and he turned his gaze toward her. "And the gnome!" he crowed with delight. "You spend so much time acting like a tough mean fighter girl, nobody realizes what a delightful and adorable little girly-girl you are!"

Fidio raised his hand. "I do," he said, grinning. He alone didn't seem intimidated by the presence of Death. In fact he seemed almost giddy and gleeful at the surprising turn of events.

And Death turned to him, grinning just as wide. "Oh yes my monstrous man-snake, we are going to get along *very* well. You understand what it's like to be misunderstood. Feared. Mistrusted. When all you really want is to be friends."

Fidio pursed his lips and nodded his agreement.

"See, separately you're not really all that impressive. But together, you're like mixing Potassium nitrate, carbon and sulphur in the right amounts."

Fidio snorted and smirked. "That's the formula for cannon-powder."

"EXACTLY," said Death, with an excited gleam in his eye. "Together your unstable. Volatile!" he paused for effect. "Chaotic. That's why I've brought you here. My siblings have been employing demons to do their dirty work, but demons are too inflexible. They underestimate the true destructive potential of mortal-kind."

"My Gods." It had only taken Drue only a moment to work out what Death was talking about, and when he did he visibly deflated. Then he noticed that the rest of the group hadn't realized the full gravity of the situation, as they'd all turned to stare at him.

"You're not the mythical Grim Reaper are you? The Harvester of Souls? The personification of Entropy?" he asked the being before them.

"Nope," said Death, popping his mouth on the last letter and grinning.

Then one by one they all understood, and one by one their hearts dropped into their stomachs.

Drue, in a defeated and despondent voice said, "Then that would make you..."

"Yep," said Death, popping the last letter again. "Death, the Lord of Sin."