

### The Haunting of Belfer

The Guildmaster of the Malleus Monstrorum drew the coarse woolen folds of his cloak around his stocky frame, a futile attempt to ward off the damp cold of the morning. In their prime, his brawny hands had wrestled sea serpents. Crumbled golems. Toppled giants. They now struggled to fasten the delicate ends of the cloak's iron clasp around his neck, delicate bones throbbing with the decades of exposure to the supernatural. Percil Warhammer devoted his life to the Imperial Capitol of Botania. Sacrificed his strength to keep the populace safe. But as he sat atop his rooftop terrace, watching the blanket of fog roll through the cobbled streets below, he wondered if it had been enough. If any sacrifice would ever be enough.

He raised a shaking porcelain tea cup to his lips and sighed, "The monsters of yesteryear recede into the darkness, but what billows forth to take their place?"

The click clack staccato of steel toed boots brought Percil back to the present. He turned to greet the approaching figure with a smile framed by a delicate web of wrinkles and scars.

"Good morning, Sire," chimed the youth. He strode across the terrace with a resolute gait, his pace undeterred by the mountain of rolled parchment and leather bound volumes he carried in his lean arms.

"Alex, my boy! You are certainly up early. I do not believe I even heard the first bells yet."

"I was hoping to catch you before everyone else woke up. I wanted to discuss my journeyman assignment with you, if you had time."

"Of course. You are my star pupil, after all. Take a seat, take a seat," Percil insisted. At the delicate turn of his thick wrist, the empty space next to him puckered inward and solidified into a mirror image of his own wrought iron chair. He waited for Alex to place his pile on the side table between them, and get comfortable in his seat, before continuing.

"I remember my first assignment as a full-fledged journeyman. I was ready for anything, determined to make my mark in the world of monster extermination."

"Oh? What kind of assignment did you receive?"

"Had to track down and dispatch a muck wraith damming up the city sewer system. Wretched creatures. They build a nest out of sewage and sludge. But that is just the standard fare in this line of business, you will soon learn."

"Actually, that's just what I wanted to discuss with you, Sire. My education. You see, what could I learn from exterminating a small hive of brownies in the business district? Even if the local storekeepers have declared them a public nuisance. I must have been given the wrong assignment. You see...", trailed off Alex, rifling through the sheafs of parchment. The right corner of his mouth ticked upward into a smirk as he extracted and pushed forward a long list of barely legible scrawls. He ran his right hand through his short auburn hair, and began his pitch.

"You see, I compiled a list of all the graduating journeymen and their assignments for the summer. Ashmore, guppy imps stealing from the open marketplace. Riverside, gnomes uprooting trees in the central park. McCalister, a garbage troll eating from the landfill. And the list goes on."

"I'm not sure I see your point. These sound like typical assignments for a newly minted journeyman."

"And they are. And I am wondering why my assignment is just that. Typical."

"Alex...," trailed off Percil, his left eyebrow cocked upward in an open question.

"Sire, I completed my training with the highest marks. You yourself commended me on my thesis on the regional sound patterns of banshee cries. What can I accomplish in this city by chasing down every little minor magical pest to burden the pampered behinds of the Botanians. Sorry... I just meant, I'm ready. To go out into the world beyond the city. To grapple with real magical creatures. To make a difference. I want to make my mark in the world, just like you did..."

Percil waved down Alex, who had stood up, and in the span of his short oration, already laid down copies of his examination materials (arranged to display the red hammers and shields stamped in the upper left corner, the signs of a high pass) and several volumes on monster history and classification, to which the youth both pointed to in evidence and pounded for emphasis.

"Calm down, Alex. Journeymen these days, I swear. All losing your heads over your first assignments. They are your first, not your last... But I understand."

"But if you just look here... Huh?" Alex paused, and looked up from a map of the Botanian Empire that spilled over the sides of the table.

"You are one of the few members of our guild gifted with magic."

"Well... yes."

"And with Masters Taylor and Bentham bedridden with numos poisoning...."

"Sire?"

Percil stroked his white beard and peered down at the growing throng of shopkeepers and tradesmen on their way hither and thither throughout the city. By the time the first bells sounded the waking hour for the guild, his thin lips were set in a firm line. He clenched his empty right hand, the throbbing of his bones temporarily overshadowed by a delicate tingling, and held out a weatherworn envelope besmirched with a dubious shade of brown.

Alex took the envelope and held it aloft by a corner. Percil stifled a chuckle, amused by how his student's expression shifted between genuine excitement and utter disgust, no doubt due to the envelope's pungent odor of earth and sulfur.

"Alex, do you know why we assign journeymen rather benign monsters?"

"I think," began Alex, as continued to eye the envelope, "to make sure we do not bite off more than we can chew. Not all journeymen would know how to deal with a giant or poltergeist, so it makes sense. For most people."

"In a sense, yes. But monster extermination is more than about know how or experience. We are the front line, the infantry, in a war against the supernatural. But more specifically, against the dire effects of exposure to their vital essence. The stronger the creature, the stronger the essence, and the stronger the hunter must be in turn. Do you understand?"

"I think so..."

"Then open the envelope."

Despite his initial wariness, Alex eagerly tore open the soggy casing. He paused and held aloft the sole content of the package: a scrap of parchment with a name.

"Belfer?" he queried.

"The Imperial Principality of Belfer."

Alex glanced over the map of the Botanian Empire, but remained puzzled. "I do not think I have heard of that particular place..."

"Most people have not. A bit beyond the mental geography of an urbanite, on the Eastern frontier of the empire. But one nevertheless in need of our services."

"Sire?" Alex yelped, his blue eyes gleaming with excitement.

"You will go to Belfer, Alex. We are not sure why they have sent a missive, so you will investigate the situation and report back to us. You will not, I repeat, not, intervene directly, unless we have given you approval. Do not get yourself killed, or I will raise you back myself and strangle you..."

But the old Guildmaster's words were lost on the youth. Alex stared off into the distance, beyond the urban sprawl of the Imperial Capitol, beyond the horizon. To Belfer.

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"What a shit hole."

Alex grimaced at the ragtag collection of hovels beyond the bend in the muddy road. His right hand reached inside his overcoat to thumb the sliver of soiled parchment still folded and tucked safely away. His first official appointment from the Malleus Monstrorum. His invitation to the Imperial Principality of Belfer. His passport to hell.

He could still recall how his mind had zeroed in on the word, “Principality.” Even though he had never heard of Belfer, he came to the conclusion that it was in all likelihood one of the many unsung principalities tucked away in the bucolic countryside. A nameless but quaint kind of place. The kind of place he could sweep in, remove an ill-mannered ogre or irksome wraith, and make a name for himself in the ballads of the bards.

He had thus left the Imperial Capitol and Guildmaster Warhammer with his head held high with dreams of fame and glory. But the thirty miles of marshland to Belfer gradually chipped away at those dreams. Endless days filled with swarms of mosquitos and the stench of rotting vegetation. Damp nights spent without a fire to ward off the yips and yelps of the shadows prowling in the darkness. He had finally broken down in tears after he lost his bearing in a deceptively shallow pool of bog water from which he emerged with an unforgiving odor reminiscent of the musk of a mountain troll in heat. But he thought of the glorious assignment that awaited him, pinched his nose, and trekked onward to where he now stood.

*Thwack.*

Alex drew back his hand slowly, and sighed at the all too familiar sight of yet another bog fly mired in its own sticky entrails.

“The welcoming party, I presume.”

He wiped his hand against the seat of his pants, and cautiously through the outskirts of the “principality,” lined with wooden shacks and skeletal oak trees. The sound of human voices vying for dominance drew him ever further into the thicket of

mud-splattered hovels, and he was soon upon a gaggle of equally mud-splattered men and women gathered around...

    Around an antlered man twitching in the mud, his skin lacerated and oozing gore. Alex reeled from the sight, and was about to turn away, when the reddened left eye of the skeletal man suddenly found him.

    And then the world spun around and around and plunged into darkness.

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