

Project Undeath (Work in Progress)

by Rand M. Burgess

The moon bulges with meticulous sick amber fire while first night's chest heaves and sputters free infantine monstrosity from plague-wormed hovels, din mold choked grottos, and stale metal-cast labyrinth catacombs. A caravan butts through the night, an ensemble of idiot bones and cheap lanterns strapped to a poorman's carriage, cleaving shadows past splintered trunks along the wayside. Through the mask of calm and disillusioned silence comes a flare of violence. Child sized and toad-shaped a flurry of groaters spring from an all but vacant and crooked shack, whose scattered insides reeked of spilled organs and poison fungous. Liquidus groans arise from the scrabble as jagged teeth sink into spoiled horse thighs, driver, wood and dirt. Within the passenger compartment comes a cry, only to be cut short when the carriage veers and flips into the thicket, where it lie a split melon of gore to be shoveled into empty stomachs. In the cradle of the northern sky a storm of corpse ash, fat-laden with spoiled ice, creeps through the dusk on careful southbound winds, heralding the start of another harsh middle winter.

Beyond the ring of fresh carnage, slinking between spindlethorns and knitwillow trunks, drawn in by the rouse of death, come the milky stares of mindless lomen. Slowed by broken limbs and ravaged flesh, the corpses, thick with noxious disease, fell upon the feasters. Unlike spongy textures of rancid meat, greater hide's crusty-tough, making it a tiresome ordeal for rotten and blunted teeth to pull it free.

When dying chokes at last settle to marrow slurping and delicate smacking, the lomen crooned up from the stained earth and meandered back to their insidious alcove, dragging fragments of bodies belonging to parties from all sides of the bout for later

snacking. The moon wheezed onto the horizon, sat content on the back of a crooked hillock, and sunk the land into a blind second night.

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“Wot do you meen obressed?”

“In the south—oppressed in the south.”

“That's not much to talk abot, whear in tha south?”

“Around Greydiyl.”

“Bixbie...”

“Alright. Sir, as I have said we are but two scholars on our way northward and would be more than happy to take the room and let you return to your hobbies if that's fine with you?”

“Noh, noh. I woldt, but I have't many come hryuu...by here, if you'd please?”

“Alright, just a moment here, let me see...”

The room is damp, fungi and critter damp. There are two beds, bowed, mud stained and infectious. It smells of off-breed sentient jellies from acidic vaults deep below poisoned reservoirs, and although the window looks operable, it remains shut. Griver sets out two candles on a splintering scrap of table opposite the other amenities while his companion immediately uses the glow to inspect his find. Outside, second night rolls out, pressing hard on the glass panes and blotting out starlight. Along the table bubbles, smacks, and wriggles a boney-oily thing that Bixbie manipulates with an outstretched finger. Without words, the artist produces his instruments and begins to scratch-out several deft images of the spectacle. After he was finished, he at last took the seat opposite from the animate bauble with a stressed creek of old joints.

“Isn't it quite interesting? How it folds upon itself, in motion, but without direction. How it refracts the glimmer of things neither present or fully absent.”

“It is what you've been looking for?”

“Indeed. I fear any later and it would have taken not just the jaw, but his life as well. It's fortunate we happened to cross paths at such a time. May I ask of your natures?”

“Eyh. Scrithe, from Low-East, Losterdom. You've seen, I sketch. And yours?”

“Ah, yes, as I've said my origins are from around Greydiyl, actually a good length south of that area near Onnica's Catacombs, rest her soul. There I was oppressed and turned

Whist-Hollow, as you might tell by the pallor of my skin, and the runes tattooed about my eyes here and here. For how long I was contained there I cannot be sure, and many aspects of my memory have been long ago dissected by cruel motives. Aside from that I'm a scholar and alchemist of sorts, and before the Whisting I recall searching for these entities.”

“Eyh, I see. I have heard of the lattice lady's resting place—many lands I have heard of. What will become of...your entity?”

“It will travel north with me as I continue my search. What of your motives, where will Griver head in search of subjects and art?”

“If you are to continue north, I will join your path. Eyh, I was on way to the charcoal chapel in Shivner to seek employment there when we crossed at the Modale Fork. Imagery has no solace south of there, and the Fork is a childless muse of the common.”

Writing

“I would much appreciate the company, I'm certain the ways north are more foreign to me than my recollections of the south. Well then, shall we get in some rest before we alight on our morning journey? In the morning I would also like to look over your work, if you don't mind.”

“Yes, here, have a look at them now. Night must have more cycles than you can recall my friend, it is but second night out.”

“Second of three, is it not?”

“Eyh, it is not—second of six.”

Bixbie's eyes grew to opal pools, the inked symmetry at the corners of them strained, his lungs slowly crackling a wheeze in the stale air. Just how long had he been kept from the world that such drastic maneuvers had taken place? Time had left him, not behind, but completely. Whatever world must have been was no longer, whatever evils had lurked must have summoned greater malice, whatever events occurred must have evolved reality beyond Bixbie's comprehension—and such a bewilderment Griver had not seen on any face, monster or otherwise. In a quick sweeping Bixbie caged the quivering goop between his fingers and slurped it down between blue-ashen lips.

“Well then, pass here that imagery and I'll light another wick.”

(End Sample Pages)

