

THE IMPERATIVE ONE

A Fantasy Short Story

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“Oi! Mate! Over here!” I yell at the oaf currently trying to force his way into the dungeon. “You might wanna reconsider your plans, mate!”

On the other side of the heavy wooden door, a hero awaits. Well, I calls him a hero, really it’s more of a wet behind the ears nooben adventurer. He’s been bangin’ on the gate for the last thirty seconds and frankly the noise is doin’ me head in. It’s no life, being the Impkeeper of the Unholy Portal.

The adventurer looks up at me, fist still raised. “Blast! I’ve been spotted!”

“You’re banging on the door, mate! Of *course* you’ve been spotted, ya ninny!” I yells.

“Prepare thyself, unholy blight of Gorgoth!” he cries, and pulls a rusty sword out, preparing to... what? Hit the door with it?

“You probably dunt want to do that, mate,” I says.

He ignores my friendly warning and swings for the door. The Dark Seal of Mork kicks in immediately and flings the hapless fool into the middle of last week. Guess we won’t be seeing him again. Can’t say it’s a great loss. Hammer on the door with fists? Fine. Annoying, but fine. Try hittin’ it with a weapon? Ain’t going to end well. The boss’s a fair man, aye, but don’t push yer luck. Can’t have potential visitors being thrown frew time every time they knocks on the door, right?

I drop down from my position at the Unholy Portal’s sliding hatch, tucking the chair I used as a height aid back under the table in my little cubby hole. Just off to one side of the entrance hall, it is, carved into the stone walls. Lovely and cosy, Boss did a good job with that, so he did. Knows the importance of a proper doorman, so he does.

Remember I said it’s no life being Impkeeper of the Unholy Portal? Yeah, that was a total lie, I *love* my job, yep. Now, being an imp, *that’s* no life, and no mistake. But Impkeeper? Aye, mate, that’s the stuff, right there. Get to keep my own hours, laugh at silly heroes trying to get in the front door, free to roam around the dungeon. Good times, good times. Does mean I need to show new guys around occasionally, but that’s a small price to pay for all the other perks.

Anyway, guess I should get on with ma day. Being Impkeeper is a position with responsibilities, what I might call being a Management Con Sultan.

Checking in on the jail cells, making sure the boys down in the labs ain't about to blow us all to Kingdom Come, ensuring the berserkers have a steady supply of chickens, that sort of thing. It's not all about keeping an eye on the front door and showing noobs around, nosirree!

Mostly on account of heroes being bloody stupid. Try all sorts of fings, they do. Tunnelling into the dungeon? Oh, yeah, that's a classic. Dressin' up as a zombie and trying to blag their way in? Doesn't happen so much now, but I still see it occasionally. Normally just let 'em in and see how long they last. And my personal favourite: the Bloody Charge of Righteous Idiocy, as I likes to call it. Always amusing, seeing half a dozen heroes trying to batter down hewn stone walls with their heads.

But today... well, today's special. Showing a new lad around, aye. A warlock, no less. Don't get them all that often these days, what with all the prejudice against men wearing frocks. Dun see what all the fuss is about mesself, I wear tattered shorts with half my green arse hanging out, you don't see *me* complaining.

From what the boss tells me, this new lad's run away from home with the intention of becoming a necromancer. Startin' out as a warlock's not a bad plan. Get a hang of the ol' magic and sorcery, then go from there. 'course, necromancy's all about the conjuration, bit of a side step from regular magic, but not a bad thing to dabble in.

Knew this one lass who could raise half a graveyard with a single incantation, no messin' about. Never did, though, not on purpose anyway. Preferred animals, she did. Hell of a sight, seeing a horde of zombie rabbits chewing their way through a town.

Then there was that stylish young fella up in the mountains, what was his name? I forget now. He was a riot, hah! Ended up being nicknamed the Necrodancer due to his penchant for undead choreography. If you thought a horde of rabbits was scary, try three-hundred skeletons doing the Moon Walk.

A gentle tap at the Dread Portal snaps me out of my pleasant reveries. Seems the new guy's arrived. Notice the difference between this lad and that

hero from before? *Manners*, that's what. We may be monsters, but that don't mean we're *uncivilised*.

Opening the door in the special way that means it doesn't squeak—a technique only known to Impkeepers, very proud of that—I take my first look at our new recruit. Long dress in a rich purple colour, shaggy hair what looks like it was grafted on from a dog with terminal halitosis, and a friendly expression. Yeah, he's a warlock, all right.

“Oh, good morning! Are you, uh...” the young lad stares for a moment, then finishes with, “Arse?”

I wave him inside with a rolling of my eyes. “Yeah, I'm Arse, nice to meet'cha and all that.”

“Your name's really... Arse?” he asks, incredulous.

“I hopes you're not impugning my name, young man? Been passed down from one Arse to the next for generations, it's a name with distinction, pal!” I say, trying to maintain my sunny disposition. Ain't easy, having such a great and noble name.

“Sorry, I didn't mean offence! It's just that I'm used to human names. They're kind of boring in comparison.”

“Yeah, well, humans is humans. Now then, let's go get you settled in. Speakin' of names, what's yours?” I say, leading the way along the hall further into the dungeon. This end of the hall's all nice and airy, gives visitors the wrong idea, gives 'em a false sense of security. Can't wait to see this boy's face when we get to the *other* end.

“Warlock,” he replies.

I stop and stare at his knees. “What?”

“My name. It's Warlock.”

And now I'm wondering if there's just been some sort of weird mix up, and this lad isn't actually a warlock at all. “You having me on?”

“I don't think so?” he says, shaking his head with an expression I'd call wet.

“You *are* here to train as a necromancer, right?”

He nods. "Oh, yes! Absolutely. I'm looking forward to it. Mother always told me I'd never amount to anything, but when I raised her corpse a month after she died, I sure showed her!"

My face splits into a big grin reminiscent of a crescent moon made of mouldy cheese. "I fink you'll fit right in, lad."

As we continue our stroll up the passage, Warlock regales me with a tale of his downtrodden life. "I never felt like I fit in with other humans, right from when I was a little boy. I think Mother only kept me around because an extra pair of hands was useful for scrubbing the floors."

Blimey, we've got a right old Cindy Rella here. Poor Cindy, spent half her life being mistaken for some bimbo in a fairy tale who coincidentally had a similar name. Never caught a break, 'cept maybe the one that snapped her arm in half. Poor girl.

We're nearing the dungeon proper now, and I can already see the change in expression creeping across Warlock's face.

"My goodness..." he murmurs.

The grin on my face widens further. "No worries, lad, you'll get used to it in no time."

At this end of the entrance hall, the walls are... well, if you took a jaunt up a dragon's back passage, it'd probably be more pleasant than this, let's just say that. I'm especially fond of the sloughing skin and dripping puss. By the looks of Warlock's face, he ain't so enamoured.

Warlock shakes his head. "Would you look at the state of this floor? How often do you people sweep? Once a century? I should be off back home to get my broom, if the house hadn't burned down in mysterious circumstances I had totally nothing to do with."

"Uh..."

"What's wrong?"

"No, nuffin', lad, don't worry yourself," I say, shaking my head. 'course, the lad's into the necromantic arts, makes sense he wouldn't be fazed by a mere tunnel of gore.

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First stop for the new lad is the bar. Just as soon as he stops asking me to tell him all about the dungeon. That happens *after* initial orientation! Gotta get a couple of drinks in me first or I'll go stir crazy.

"Why do you have so many skeletons roaming around?" he asks.

"Because skeletons don't ask me stupid questions."

"Is there a problem with me asking questions?"

"No, not at all, lad. Ask anyone anything you like. Just not until we've visited the bar."

"Aren't you the doorman, though? I thought showing people round was part of the job?"

I stop and put my hands on my hips. "*Impkeeper*, lad. Don't make me introduce you to Ludolph."

"Who?"

"Head torturer, by which I mean he tortures people's heads. There's a man who knows how to get people talking. His nose gets a bit red in winter and makes him look sort of silly. You'd do well not to mention it to his face. Or any other part of 'im, for that matter. Short temper, old Ludolph. *Very* patient, though, people sometimes talk to him for *hours*."

Warlock shudders. "I'll stick to raising the dead, thanks. At least they're not aware."

"Some interesting effics there, lad," I say, continuing our little trek to the bar. Showing new lads round is part of the job, Warlock's right there, and I mostly enjoy it, but... weeeell, when you've done it for the fiftieth time, it loses a bit of shine. A distinct lack of lustre, is what I'm saying. Now, the *bar*, that place never loses its shine.

Unlike the welcome tunnel, this place is nice and dank and smells faintly of cheese. No one's ever figured out *why* it smells faintly of cheese, mind you. Just seems to be one o' them things. Maybe whoever lived here before us brewed cheeses or something?

Anyway, this is the first stop for all noobs, to get ‘em accustomed to life underground among the downtrodden members of monster society. If you ain’t an alcoholic when you arrive, you will be by the time you leave. You comes in vertical, you goes out horizontal, one way or another.

“Mornin’, Toots,” I say, nodding up at the succubus who runs the bar. Lovely lass, always up for a bit of fun, so long as you remember that she charges by the minute.

She gives me a warm smile with those luscious purple-glossed lips of hers, and pours a generous shot of brandy into which she drops a single cube of ice. Handy, having a frost dragon in the dungeon, I’ll tell you that for nowt. Never have to worry about food going manky or where my next ice cube’s coming from.

What, you thought I’d swill ale like some kinda *hero*? No fear! Brandy and ice, that’s the drink of a refined gentleimp such as mesself.

I give the new lad a glance and decide to be magnanimous. “What’ll you have, Warlock? My treat. Don’t get used to it.”

Warlock peruses the menu, by which I means he takes a good, long look at the various unlabelled bottles behind the wood-topped bar and wonders which one is least likely to poison him. “I don’t suppose you have any orange juice?”

Toots gives him an odd look.

“He’ll have a flagon of ale, Toots,” I say.

She pours one and hands it over... *after* I drop a couple of copper coins into her other hand, o’course. Toots has been here a long time, she knows how forgetful monsters can be on the whole subject of paying for things.

Over at a lovely window seat near the door—if windows were a feature here, of course, I’m talking metaphoric’ly—I sit opposite the lad and take a sip of my drink. I can feel another question coming on any time now...

“Who was that at the door just before I arrived?”

There it is.

“Hmm?” I murmur, hoping to put him off asking anything further while I enjoy the fragrant bookay from my glass. Brandy, it’s what’s for breakfast, elevenses, lunch, dinner, supper, and tea. Shame none of the lads or lasses

around here can distil the stuff worth a damn. Have to have Lovely Leena the Fairly Feef zip out to the human world and steal it for me.

“He looked like a hero?” Warlock adds, having a suspicious sniff of his own drink.

“Oh, him. Right. Some noob hero who fort he could bash his way into the dungeon. He was wrong.” I sigh and shake my head. “Some heroes really are dumb as a box of socks, eh? Ran into this one a while back, right, he’d been off on some journey or other. You know the sort. Muscles bulging everywhere ‘cept in his head, a talking sword, womaniser, the usual. Except this one kept tryin’ ta set light to horses.”

“Why would you...?” Warlock mutters, twitching a few times.

“Blowed if I know, mate, heroes never makes sense, in my personal and extensive experience.”

“He actually tried setting a horse on fire? You’re not just having me on, right?”

“Nah, mate, legit. Not the mos’ flammable fings, osses. Lot like cows in that regard. A distinct lack of combustibility, is what I’m saying, on account of being soggy. Make a lot of noise, though.”

“Well... at least he didn’t try to set fire to you?” says Warlock, taking a swig of his drink and making a face that’s probably similar to how a lot of his subjects look after a month in the ground.

“See this scar?” I say, lifting my stubby leg and glaring at him. He looks.

“You don’t think I walk with a limp cus I *likes* it, do ya?”

“What happened to him?”

I drop the leg back down and take a brief sip of my beverage. “Died from a case of terminal stupidity.”

“I’m not sure I follow...?”

“Tried to infiltrate a snake cult and got on the wrong side of a giant snake.”

“By *‘got on the wrong side of’*, you mean...?”

“The inside,” I say, pointing at my tummy.

“Oh dear.”

“That’s heroes for ya.” A ringing sound intrudes on our conversation. “Oh, bloody hell, not again. Third time this week! And the second just today!”

Yeah, we have gold here. Lots of it, in fact, what with us stealin’ everything the heroes have on ‘em. But you’d think after a while they’d get it through their fick skulls that none of ‘em ever returns!

Warlock gives me a funny look. “What else do you expect from humans, Arse?”

“Well... yeah, all right, I’ll grant you that they ain’t exactly the most intelligent of monkeys. Present company accepted, nat’rally.” My new mate Warlock seems to forget he’s human as well, but I suppose it’s probably just a self-defence mechanism. “I’d better go deal with it, Boss ain’t going to be pleased if they mess up his calligraphy practice.”

“Mind if I come along?”

“Might as well continue the tour, in that case,” I say, and get to my feet. Bloody heroes. Always interrupting my important work.

“What did the ringing bell mean?”

“Some idiot hero got caught in one of our many ingenious traps,” I inform him while we walk—but not too fast!—downstairs to the hero dungeon.

“Is this a job for Ludolph?”

“Dunno. Maybe we’ll just let ‘em go and see how long they last. The lads like a good hunt, especially as we know all the tunnels and escape routes. But sometimes the boss’ll send ‘em down to Ludolph. I mean, it’s not our fault, is it? If they’d just stop trying to break into the dungeon every other day and interrupting his practice, we wouldn’t need to torture ‘em.”

Warlock nods. “That’s fair.”

Another imp arrives out of breath and whispers something to me. “What’s that? The boss has finished his calligraphy practice and is now enjoying a bubble bath? Well, that’s a relief.” I notice Warlock staring at me. “He always likes a bubble bath after his practice. He sings. Loud. Meaning he won’t be disturbed by us having some fun with this hero.”

As we make our way further into the cave network that passes for our home, our ears are assaulted by one of our resident trolls yelling, “EAT, DIE, AND SHIT, HUMAN!”

“I’m sorry?” Warlock says, his fluffy eyebrows levitating to the point where they almost touch the ceiling.

I give him a resigned shrug and point to a nearby archway into a huge room. Inside are several elephant-sized pens which hold our trolls. “We keep tryin’ to teach ‘em one-liners for combat, but it ain’t going well. Grimdall, that’s their trainer, he’s about ready to give up.”

Grimdall’s put-upon voice emanates from beyond the archway. “No, see, the ordering of the words is important, Tabitha. Let’s try this again. *‘Eat shit and die, human.’* Now you try.”

“EAT... EAT...”

“Yes, that’s right, you can do it, Tabitha...”

“EAT HUMAN SHIT—”

“No, that’s not...” Grimdall begins, then loses all hope and shuts up with a heavy sigh.

“Sounds rough,” Warlock observes.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I mutter. “Let’s go see to our own little problem, shall we?”

And on that subject, here the hero doth be. The dungeon—that is, the place where we all live—is generally quite cosy. But the *hero* dungeon, well, that’s where we puts—what else?—heroes. Half a dozen sturdy iron cages built into the stone cave walls allow us to have fun with several heroes at once, on special occasions. Today, though? It’s just a random idiot.

“Away with thee, filthy gremlin!” says the hero as soon as I get close to the metal bars.

“Gremlin? I’m not a gremlin! I’m the Chosen Imp, mate! Imp Numero Uno! An Imp among men! Gremlin... I should kick you inna fork for that, mate. Lucky for you the boss just finished his calligraphy practice, or you’d be in real trouble.”

“Cal-ig-ro-fee?” the hero says, a furrowing of his brows indicating confusion beyond the usual level for these lummoxes.

“Yeah, calligraphy! Using a pen to make pretty shapes? I know this is a complex subject for a hero, but try and understand, mate,” I reply, a sour smile on my crusty lips. Heroes, there just seems to be something about them that attracts the lowest of the lowest common denominator. Even *cockroaches* look down on heroes.

“Release me this instant!” says the hero, rattling the bars. Apparently he’s decided to revert to something he’s actually sure of. Can’t blame him.

“All right, look,” I say, pointing a finger at him. “There’s a secret tunnel just behind that rock there, this patch of sand over here is soft enough to dig your way out with a bit of effort... oh, and the lock’s barrel is kinda wonky, know what I mean? Anything else, just gimme a holler!”

The hero glares at me. “Why would you tell me this, foul spawn of Bogroth?”

“Hey, who you callin’ a spawn? I was *hatched*, mate! Big difference.”

“I... I apologise if I caused offence,” the hero says.

“Well... okay. And to answer yo’ question, it’s the rules, innit?” Scratching my arse a few times, I go through the usual list. “*All prisoners are to be given the triple-escape cell tour, informed as to the existence of the toilet and toothbrush, and in event of emergency, killed by way of a spiky object to the face*’. The boss likes rules.”

The hero stares at me with a dozy expression that puts me in mind of a constipated llama.

Letting out a sigh, I explain further. “Look, mate, I’m doin’ yer a favour by only telling you of the three escape routes! You do *not* want to know about the toilet, let me tell you. On account of it being haunted.”

“I am not afraid of mere ghosts, imp!” he declares.

“Oh, lordy, ghosts would be an improvement.”

“And uh... what about the toothbrush?” he asks with a degree of trepidation.

“You probably dun wanna know about that. What with it being used to clean the toilet.”

The hero narrows his eyes. “Why call it a toothbrush, then?”

“You ‘aven’t *seen* the toilet, mate,” I say, and wander away from the cell. Shouldn’t be long before he gets out, then the lads can have some fun putting

him out of our misery. Until the next one comes along. Who knows, maybe Warlock'll get the kill. Or not. Seems a bit wet behind the ears, but not a bad lad. I s'pose that's sort of the problem. I glance up at him. "What did you think of my performance? You could call that an... Imp-assioned speech. Eh? Eeeh? Get it?"

Warlock stares at me in much the same disbelieving way the hero had. "Don't quit the day job, Arse."

"You just don't understand my sophisticated humour," I mutter. "Let's get the rest of the tour out of the way."

Well, as days go, this one was pretty typical for the dungeon. Typical, yes, but not identical. Heroes being idiots, a new guy who'll probably fit in nicely... never the same thing twice around here. And really, that's all anyone can ask for.

I love my job. Yep.

-End-