

## Chapter 2

".....hhhhhhhhHHHHhhhhh....."

That ragged wheeze that was my first breath was no way to start a day.

My body was numb when I awoke, my skin cold and clammy, and my muscles were stiff like that of a corpse. It was a terrible way to wake up, wholly unnatural. A wombless birth.

Those twitchings of my fingers and shifts of my legs told some addled part of my brain that I was, in fact, alive in a way. My eyelids flickered, and slowly a warmth spread into my limbs. I felt the first dull beatings in my chest as my heart kicked into gear.

I gave a soft moan and rolled over. My back ached from the cold metal slab I had been laid on, and that first breath I spoke of did its work to jump-start my senses. The smell of metal, the stink of preserving fluid and formaldehyde, and the scent of blood and flesh were like a cheese grater against my senses. The lighting was dim and my vision blurry, but here and there I could hear the shuffling of feet and the creak of dry joints.

And that's when that slow horror began to grip me.

Zombies. I was surrounded by the walking dead. My breath froze in my lungs and I could taste the rotting flesh on the air. I froze, hoping they didn't see me.

"Hey, chief. You okay? You playing corpse or you putting the blinds on the Dusties? I thought you were a deader for sure."

I looked up to the voice, and gaped as I came face-to-face with a floating skull, gray-green eyes rolling in their dry sockets. I took a moment to sit up and slide off of the slab. His voice was strangely comforting, and his crooked grin, which he somehow managed without lips, took away the tension.

"Wh...? Who are you?" My throat was dry, and my voice came out in a bit of a rough croak.

"Uh... who am I? How about you start? Who're you?"

I rubbed my temples, "I... don't know. I can't remember." The croak lessened a bit, but my words still came out rough and deep, a bit of a rumble sounded in my chest. Perhaps this was just how my voice was supposed to sound like.

"You can't remember your name? Heh. Well, NEXT time you spend a night in this berg, go easy on the bub. Name's Morte. I'm trapped here, too."

Great. So apparently I got stone-drunk the night before and now I don't remember anything. Suddenly what Morte said registered, "Trapped?"

The skull bobbed in a nod, "Yeah, since you haven't had time to get your legs yet, here's the chant: I've tried all the doors, and this room is locked tighter than a chastity belt."

"We're locked in... where? What is this place?"

"It's called the 'Mortuary'... it's a big black structure with all the architectural charm of a pregnant spider."

I shook my head and almost chuckled, "'The Mortuary?' What... am I dead?"

"Not from where I'm standing," I didn't bother to point out that he had no legs to stand with, "You got scars a-plenty, though... looks like some berk painted you with a knife. All the more reason to give this place the laugh before whoever carved you up comes back to finish the job."

I look down at my arms and legs, gray and covered with puckered slashes, layered one on top of the other so thickly I was amazed I still HAD skin. I winced, "How bad are they?"

Morte floated around me and I tried not to twist to keep him in sight. It was a bit annoying to have a head just bob about as it wished, "Well... the carvings on your chest aren't TOO bad... but the ones on your back..." he paused, "Say, looks like you got a whole tattoo gallery on your back, chief. Spells out something..."

"Tattoos on my back? What do they say?"

Morte chuckled, "Heh! Looks like you come with directions..." he made a

sound as if clearing his throat, "Let's see... it starts with..."

'I know you feel like you've been drinking a few kegs of Styx wash, but you need to CENTER yourself. Among your possessions is a journal that'll shed some light on the dark of the matter. Pharod can fill you in on the rest of the chant, if he's not in the dead-book already.'"

I mentally filed away the details. So I guess maybe I wasn't drunk after all. But why did the hell did I allow whoever left me this message carve it on my back? And the name seemed unfamiliar. "Pharod...? Does it say anything else?"

"Yeah, there's a bit more," Morte continued, "Let's see... it goes on..."

'Don't lose the journal or we'll be up the Styx again. And whatever you do, DO NOT tell anyone WHO you are or WHAT happens to you, or they'll put you on a quick pilgrimage to the crematorium. Do what I tell you: READ the journal, then FIND Pharod.'"

I shivered as I became suddenly and acutely aware of the scores through my flesh, "No wonder my back hurts; there's a damn novel written there. As for that journal I'm supposed to have with me... was there one with me while I was lying here?"

Morte shook his head- skull- er, himself, "No... you were stripped to the skins when you arrived here. 'Sides, looks like you got enough of a journal penned to your body."

I was thankful someone at least left me some clothes. The kilt, sash of bone, and boots were comfortable, but not enough to block out the cool chill of the Mortuary. Ugh. A mortuary. I tried to ignore the fact that I was surrounded with bodies in all stages of dissection by focusing on another subject, "What about Pharod? Do you know him?"

"Nobody I know... but then again, I don't know many people. Still, SOME berk's got to know where to find Pharod... uh, once we get out of here, that is."

I nodded, "How do we get out of here?"

"Well, all the doors are locked, so we'll need the key. Chances are, one of

the walking corpses in this room has it."

"Walking corpses?" I had avoided looking at the zombies until now, and out of the corner of my eye I took notice of them shuffling about, light, dessicated limbs moving in an obscene dance, clumsy fingers at work preparing the bodies.

Morte turned to follow my gaze, "Yeah, the Mortuary keepers use dead bodies as cheap labor. The corpses are dumb as stones, but they're harmless, and won't attack you unless you attack first."

I was hesitant to do what Morte half-suggested in that, "Is there some other way? I don't want to kill them just for a key."

Morte cocked his skull in a sort of a shrug, "What, you think it's going to hurt their feelings? They're DEAD. But if you want a bright side to this: if you kill them, at least they'll have a rest before their keepers raise them up to work again."

That certainly wasn't terrifically reassuring, but it would have to do. His nonchalant treatment of a violent course was oddly comforting, "Well, all right..."

The skull grinned, "Well, before you do that, arm yourself first. I think there's a scalpel on one of the shelves around here."

Suddenly aware of how vulnerable I was, I nodded, and sat up to search around for anything useful. Whoever I was, I certainly wasn't a man of any great moral standard if I felt at ease stealing and murdering. The shelves of stark grey granite, mottled here and there with black stains over the years, held precious little that seemed useful. Jars with old bandages, many bloody and stinking with pus, parchments, bottles of brine and preservative, and even a jar of cat knuckles sat on one of the shelves.

Cat knuckles? How barbaric.

I shifted things around, hoping no observant eye would notice if the jars were moved, and found on one table a faint gleam of metal in this dull, blood-hued light.

There was a happy clicking noise behind me, "All right, you found it! Now, go

get those corpses... and don't worry, I'll stay back and provide valuable tactical advice."

I goggled, "Maybe you could help me, Morte."

"I WILL be helping you. Good advice is hard to come by."

"I meant help in attacking the corpse."

"Me?" he shied away a little, "I'm a romantic, not a soldier. I'd just get in the way."

I pointed the scalpel at him. Not really threatening, just a gesture of emphasis, "Look, I don't want to do this either, but it was your suggestion in the first place. Now gimme a hand."

Morte's jaw snapped shut and he stared at me a moment, "Fine, fine. I'll go for the knees or something."

One after the other I checked the zombies wandering about, until I came to a blue-green-skinned corpse sagging in a corner, one hand closed tightly in a fist. I bent down for a closer look, and there it was, a small, twisted key in a grip so tightened with rigor mortis and preservative that it looked like I was going to have to kill it after all.

Murmuring an apology of sorts, I stood for a moment, scalpel in hand, until I was ready to strike.

In one quick slash the thin, papery skin along the zombie's belly was sliced open, and a few lumpy organs, stiffened with the embalming process and loosened with rot, spilled out of it. Much less than I expected, thank the gods.

With that, a small white globe barreled past me and cracked against the zombie's chest, and the creature toppled over with a groan before it struck.

"Whoa-ho! That thing was stiffer than a randy satyr at a bacchanal."

I was already kneeling over the remains and prying the fingers open, glancing about to see if anyone was alerted. The remaining zombies continued on with their own business, while the doors remained locked and

closed.

With that, I used the rags the zombie was dressed in to wipe off the black ichor from my hands and the scalpel, then headed to the door. With a twist and a click, we were free.

As we continued down the rooms of the Mortuary, Morte nudged close to me, "Pssst... Some advice, chief: I'd keep it quiet from here on - no need to put any more corpses in the dead book than necessary... especially the femmes. Plus, killing them might draw the caretakers here."

"I don't think you mentioned it before..." I looked him in the eye, again very much aware of the danger I might be in, trapped in this charnel house, "who are the caretakers?"

"They call themselves the 'Dustmen.' You can't miss 'em: They have an obsession with black and rigor mortis of the face. They're an addled bunch of ghoulish death-worshippers; they believe everybody should die... sooner better than later."

I shuddered, but then a subtle hint of what he said hit me, "Wait, before you said something about making sure I didn't kill any female corpses. Why?"

If he had eyebrows, they would've climbed up into his forehead as he stared at me slack-jawed, "Wh- are you serious? Look, chief, these dead chits are the last chance for a couple of hardy bashers like us. We need to be chivalrous... no hacking them up for keys, no lopping their limbs off, things like that."

"Last chance? What are you talking about?" The little revelation then was a sudden, small, squeamish jolt.

"Chief, THEY'RE dead, WE'RE dead... see where I'm going? Eh? Eh?" Morte's teeth clicked as if in anticipation.

I paused as the jitters I had about the Dustmen quickly drained from me, "You can't be serious."

Morte turned sideways a bit, cocking his head. For someone without skin or body, he was certainly doing his best to express himself nonverbally, "Chief, we already got an opening line with these limping ladies. We've all died at

least once: we'll have something to talk about. They'll appreciate men with our kind of death experience. I wouldn't mind sharing a coffin with some of these fine, sinewey cadavers I see here." He grinned.

I sighed and rubbed my temples. I should've stayed on my slab this morning.

## Chapter 3

As of this writing I still cannot believe I gave it a try.

"So, uh..." the zombie stood swaying unsteadily, "doing anything later?" As expected, it gave no response.

Morte nudged my shoulder, "Pssssst. You see the way she was looking at me? Huh? You see that? The way she was following the curve of my occipital bone?"

"You mean that blank-eyed beyond-the-grave stare?"

Morte's eyes bugged out a little, "Wha- are you BLIND?! She was scouting me out! It was shameless the way she WANTED me."

I chuckled, "Wanted you to go away, maybe. She was obviously too distracted by ME to pay attention to some stupid bobbing head with a big mouth."

"You? Yeah, right!" Morte clicked his teeth for emphasis, "Trust me, chits beyond the grave don't care about all that 'physicality' and 'I've got a body' and 'I'm all scarred and tough-looking.' They want guys with SPIRIT. That's me, chief. You? Corpses like YOU are as common as a copper."

I waved him away as we walked further down along the rooms. By now the corpses no longer fazed me... too much, at least. As in the first room I searched the shelves of this one for anything useful, and spied a musty old book.