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## Brutus and Stern

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**B**

rutus shifted on his knees and brushed off another sliver of the wood he was carving, revealing a new surface of the dark wood. He dug deeper into the wood with the sharply pointed talons at the end of his fingers. The blacked and stained cherry grains tended to look like small veins as if the table was bleeding as he carved into it. The sight appeased Brutus. He hoped the Elder Gods would be pleased with it as well. If only it would scream as he carved, his artistic desires would be satisfied. Oil lamps flickered about the room, casting an eerie glow. The feeble light they provided was punctuated by an occasional blast of lightning. Outside, rain fell dismally in black, oily clumps, spitting on the ground with blasts of steam as if from some demonic kettle. The top material of the tower, which masqueraded as a roof, barely kept the rain at bay. Drips leaked down through the smashed and cracked wood supporting the ceiling.

Above his head, Stern wiped the surface of the table with a greasy rag, lovingly caressing its surface with hands whose total number of digits seemed to be strangely fluid. His withered fingers worked the cloth around the thousands of tiny spikes meticulously carved into it. The deeply decorated surface was covered in teeming archaic letters and labyrinths of primitive glyphs. The whole device appeared intensely uncomfortable. He looked forward to seeing their naked victim stretched across it, her blood slowly running down the specially constructed groves lining its apex as she suffered. He preferred the metal altars, where the hardened spikes could be covered in an inky coating, creating a delightful torment in the victim as they struggled, but the incantation they were using called for a wooden table, so the scratches of these wooden splinters would have to do. Still, he enjoyed covering them with a noxious and painful concoction he had created.

Brutus leaned back to get a better angle on the base of the table leg with its cloven-footed bottom. Leaning back his twisted horns crashed into a nearby workbench. For most beings, this would have been painful, but for Brutus, pain meant nothing ... unless it was the pain he caused in those who attempted to impede his work. Still, he found it annoying.

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His partner grumbled in response and reached over to check the incantations in the book. Brutus turned the tan skin pages with his claws, pages flayed from the living bodies of unwilling victims. He checked the blood-dried crimson inked writings and the accompanying exhaustive and vile diagrams. He found the sections that read place tab “A” into slot “B” to be most wantonly malevolent. But he confirmed the enchantments he was carving into the alter were correct. It had been a slow and exhausting experience, but everything had to be done according to the inscriptions. Whole empires had been born and died during the table's construction. He only hoped the rats, who had gnawed the first basic shape of the table, had done their job according to the instructions contained in the fiendish work’s leathery pages.

But if everything worked, the Ender Gods would finally be released from their prison, to wreak havoc upon all of creation. Both Brutus and Stern had a deep dislike for all the miscreant creatures they were instructed to torture, but they also harbored a secret hatred for those who had made themselves their overlords and masters. Cruel, hideous monsters who had no appreciation of their skills and absolutely no understanding of arduous work. But of all their sins, the one which infuriated Stern and himself the most was their total lack of any sense of humor. But the Ender Gods would change all that. They would

reshape the universe to their liking and raise those loyal subjects who had been instrumental in their release. Both he and Stern dreamed of the day when the Elder Gods rose from their slumber to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of their master's puny realms amidst universal pandemonium.

"Are you done down there yet?" Stern was impatient. He looked at Brutus through a disjointed and a crudely shaped semi-circle of luminous, alien eyes.

"This is not just an altar," Brutus explained, "It's a work of art. You can't rush art."

"Oh, well then," Stern sneered mockingly, "take your time then."

Brutus blew into a rag. He had to be sure no spittle came out of the skeletal ram-like skull making up his head. He couldn't afford to desecrate the altar at this stage. When he was confident he would expel only dry air, he blew on the table leg, puffing away the last of the residue from the carved letters.

He stood up on his massive, tree-trunk-like legs and glanced with artistic admiration at the table. He enjoyed watching the scenes of endless slithering, dark formless shadows playing across the altar's surface viscous chasing each other across the ensanguined exterior. The entire device was a ghoulish and horrific tomb for tortured and trapped souls. Those who had committed unspeakable and unnamable crimes.

Stern waved his multi-digit hands at a shape, crouching in the room's perverted doorway, motioning to a figure hidden in its gloom. As she stood up, her white-feather wings stretched and extended forming a backdrop for her black, blood-dripping hair. Her wings barely rustled as they floated her deceptively weak looking form into the air. Spreading her long, impossibly thin arms, which ended in daggerlike fingers, she pulled on a rusty chain. The muscles in her arm clenched, digging into the barbs circling her arms like an ancient torc. From the shadows the chain pulled in a young girl, her hands held firmly behind her back by some unknown vine coiling about them like a living serpent. The girl stood there pitifully, leashed to the winged creature by the chain wrapped around her delicate neck.

"Why does it always have to be human?" Brutus remarked disappointedly.

"The soft pink flesh I guess," Stern explained.

"... and always the innocent ones." Brutus continued to complain, "I have no problem with humans, per se, especially the innocent ones."

"The book calls for a virgin," Stern's tentacles flapped around his maw.

"So, a virgin it shall be," commented Brutus in an almost disappointed tone, "It's just so ... so ... cliché."

Brutus removed her chain leash and severed the girl's wrist bonds with the same sharp fingers he had used to carve the table. Once the girl was secured, as if placed on a rack, Stern picked up a large staff. It's massive, gnarled head was covered in the disembodied eyes of primeval animals. They looked, unblinking, around the room with a sinister gaze. Stern waved his staff like a wand.

The sounds of pre-Neanderthalish drums echoed through the tower, gaining strength until the walls of the tower began to quake and flakes of mortar shook loose and ran down the walls like a waterfall of

sand. The lighting increased, and the pelting black rain thudded on the tower like the wild pounding of tiny primitive feet dancing to a long-forgotten tune.

Brutus began chanting, in a dramatic basso profundo voice:

"Non faccio bollire questa pentola. Ma faccio bollire il corpo e l'anima. Di mortal virgineum!"

The storm turned into a violent gale. Winds swept across the tower, tearing the roof from its moorings. Splinters of wood and massive sections of supporting beams crashed to the ground. The interior of the chamber was now pounded by the slime of the black falling rain. Gusts of wind ripped Stern's purple robes into rags, yet they still clung to his mysterious features. Oil lamps on the walls exploded, showering the room with flame. The room smoldered with a smoky residue for only a brief time and then the room went dark. The table and its victim seemed encased in a white glowing orb. It rose into the air and vanished in a brilliant flash of light and smoke.

When the acrid vapors cleared, the sky was cloudless, the moon was shining down brightly onto the tower's floor, illuminating Brutus and Stern, standing indomitable. But the Elder Gods did not awake, they slumbered on insensate.

Stern was the first one to move. He grabbed the book and flipped through the pages. "You did it wrong," he bellowed.

Brutus ripped the book violently from his hands, "I did exactly what it says here."

"Yes," Stern roared, "but what it says is wrong! That G," he commented pointing to a letter in the book, "is not a G. The letter's tail is a fly that has been crushed between the pages when someone closed the book. It's actually the letter O."

"So it is," exclaimed Brutus, brushing the remains of the fly away. "What do you think we did?"

Stern took out another tome and rifled thru its pages. He stopped flipping several times but went back to flipping pages when he failed to find what he was seeking. At last, he halted, his fingers glided across the page. "I don't understand what this means."

"What does it say?" Brutus asked pointedly.

"It says we crashed something called a Stock Market," answered Stern.

"You're right," Brutus commented, "I don't understand it either."

"It doesn't sound all that particularly evil," Stern remarked.

"No, and hardly worth the investment in time," Brutus added, "or the virgin."

"Shall we start again?"

"Tomorrow," Brutus declared.

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"It is not this pot which I boil, but I boil the body and soul of a mortal virgin girl."