

“Bitrig,” Desire addressed the goblin without even facing him, “You know that it makes Leslie nervous when you carry your spears about in the main hall.” There was a sudden clatter of wood and metal on the floor as goblins disarmed themselves.

CEO



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The nervous Lord Donovan was escorted down the hall by a brace of fire giants. Twice the height of a man and well armored, they were meant to be intimidating, and their massive forms met every inch of that requirement. The corridor also played its part, narrow and tall, its only lighting was an occasional flaming torch. The trio ended its journey before a gilded door that could only be described as opulent even in an oriental setting. The entrance opened on its own, unbidden.

Slender polished braziers beckoned from obsidian columns, they lit up the reception hall and covered it in enticing shadows. Salacious illustrations seemed to dance in the flickering light while sculptures and marble icons glared down upon the marvelous inlaid floor. A jet-black bear rug splits apart the room while pennant banners with gold burnished tips dangle from the walls. Between each banner, stood the most attractive and sensual statuettes of dancing girls.

For lack of a better term, a dark sanguineous throne sat beneath two statues of crouching and snarling leopards. It was adjoined by smaller and less elaborate benches for esteemed guests. This ornate chair is covered in an elegant smoky black cloth carefully blending into the decorative legs formed in the shape of a viper's head. Thin atrous pillows are scattered about, each adorned with gilded embroideries.

Lord Donovan, First Secretary of the privy council, gulped audibly as the fire giants pushed him forward. He could see Desire sitting on the throne. No one living knew her birth name, they only knew her as Desire. Fortunately, Donovan had never been summoned to see her in person, so few of those who did returned to tell the tale. She appeared quite young and attractive for someone so steeped in power. Desire's name was fitting. What little gown she wore was cut in such a way as to expose copious amounts of ... we'll yes, expose *was* the right word. Still, he tried to avoid liking at her, instead of keeping his eyes focused on the floor. What he could see through the corner of his eye reminded him of the pleasure baths of ...

"Lord Donovan," she addressed him, her voice a mixture of pleasant small talk and regal authority with a tiny hint of distaste. "I understand you have ..."

"I haven't due anything mistress, honestly," he interjected.

"Except interrupt me," He gave her a meek smile that was more disturbing than heartening. "As I was saying, you attempted to interfere with the Empress's household."

His face turned pale and dry. "I merely informed her Majesty that the privy council wished her to change her household staff, to more correctly reflect the specific parties in the council. It is by no means breaking the law."

Her assured voice told him that she already knew the correct answer to the next question, but she uttered it to be polite. "The law?"

"The law stating that the Empress is required to show full support for the privy council so that they might rule effectively in her name." Donovan sputtered.

Her tone was that of a solicitor in the imperial courts. "Only the Empress is required to do this?"

"Yes, mistress."

She grinned the smile of a cat with cheese in her claws. "Are you now elevating the Empress' ladies in waiting to the role of Empress. Perhaps you plan to have one of the usurp the throne?"

Donovan squirmed even harder as if such a thing was possible. "No, mistress, of course not, that would be," he gulped, "treason."

Delighted, Desire beamed at the little man, uncrossing and crossing her impossibly well-formed legs. "So ... the Empress has no reason to change her household staff as they have nothing to do with the Empress' position regarding the ministers of the government. Unless you intend to raise them to the same status as the Empress. Isn't that true Mr. Donovan?"

"I'm not sure I understand, mistress." The sweaty little man shifted on his feet.

"Then let me explain." Her tone was somewhere between a kindly children's storyteller and a threat. "Only the Empress is required by law to support the privy council. Her ladies in waiting are not the Empress, ergo, no one cares what their opinion is. And just to make matters clear, they don't work for any of the council's political parties, they work for me."

He wrung his sweaty hands together in a gesture of complicity. "Yes mistress, I see your point. I will address this with the other privy council members at once."

"See that you do." Desire waived him out. To facilitate his exit, the fire giants picked him up by the armpits, lifted him into the air and walked slowly back to the door, bowing as gracefully as someone of that size could. "Thank you, mistress, thank you" Donovan projected meekly as his eyes darted from side to side.

Appearing from behind the throne, Craving, wearing an even more revealing outfit, if such were possible, spoke to Desire in the tone of a cat. "Do you think he'll do it?"

"Of course not," she replied. "Like all men, he'll dither and delay, hoping the situation will resolve itself. That's why I assigned Brutus and Vissag to him. They have instructions to break a bone for each day he delays in convincing the other privy council members to mend their ways."

"So, the Empress will owe us," sounded pleased.

"She already does," Desire smiled. "In so many ways."

Craving clapped her hands and the naked statuettes of dancing girls left their platforms and twirled to the beat of an unseen drummer. They were not statuettes at all but carefully painted young performers. Lord Donovan would have been less worried about the fire giants had he known each of these girls was also trained as skilled assassins.

The Empire was in a terminal state of decay. It faced opposing countries that both rivaled and surpassed it in power and strength. In the final war, the navy of the royal house clashed with neighboring pirates. The royal flagship was sunk in the first minute of the engagement and a noted mystic had managed to set all the others aflame. In the end, 500 sailors and the Emperor himself had lost his life. The Imperial armies had fought well under the command of his wife, specifically the Black Talon Army, but the result was a resounding defeat for the empire.

In the past, the Empire had been ruled by a series of dynasties, with new rulers periodically replacing the old royal houses. Within the last century, the power of the royal houses had faded. After the last war, they remained in titular control of the government, but real control had moved to the guilds. The guild of assassins, the guild of trade, the association of shopkeepers, the union of tax collectors, the concord of accountants and the guild of courtesans. In the last quarter century, the first two had become absorbed by the last, until for all intents and purposes, the director of the courtesan's trade guild became the de facto ruler. The strength of the directorship became its adherence to natural ability rather than heredity.

In recent years, in the midst of upheavals, the Empire saw the emergence of a woman who would come to dominate the imperial throne. She began her career in the first directorate of the guild of courtesans. The previous director had died under mysterious circumstances. Her body was found with marks that would normally be associated with torture. Shortly after that, Desire produced a document, which none of the other directors had ever seen, naming her as the director's successor. When Desire acquired the position of First Director, she also rose to the head of the Empire and several outlying suzerain provinces.

Desire then cleverly began to gather together a group of supporters, many from races that had never before supported the Empire ... or any human empire for that matter. Some of these races had been some of the most feared creatures of the day. Powerful beings who were shunned by every walk of life, every stratum of society. She became more than the de-facto ruler, she became a power unto herself. Politically astute, she had undoubted talents for survival and deception. Her style was one of reform. Improvements the Empire was seriously resisting. Reforms that would modernize the Empire and change it from the giant, bloated elephant that other countries fed on, to a rampaging animal that crushed opposing rulers beneath its massive feet.

One-fifth of the known world's population lived in the Empire, despite famines and devastating revolts. To the outside world, it was a place of mystery and intrigue. To businessmen everywhere, it was a market to be exploited. But anyone wanting to do business in the Empire needed to first get past Desire.

Bitrig and his followers were the next to enter Desire's lair. Although they too had been summoned, Desire's was one of Bitrig's most important patrons. Desire was in deep in consultation with her personal accountant, Leslie Devious. Bitrig bowed low upon entering the room. Bending on one knee, he scraped the floor with his gaudy leather cap in a wide flourish. Leslie's Eye stalks turned to the goblins at once. Most beholders make people nervous, not because they were hideous floating eyes, but because they're damn dangerous. One look from one of the dozen or so eye stalks that rose from the body was said to be able to turn a man to stone. Although in Leslie's case, their gaze just made you feel like you owed him money. Leslie eye stalks gave the small green creatures an intense stare, although the beholder's oversized, central eye never left the house books for an instant.

"Bitrig," Desire addressed the goblin without even facing him, "You know that it makes Leslie nervous when you carry your spears about in the main hall." There was a sudden clatter of wood and metal on the floor as goblins disarmed themselves. Leslie folded up the books and floated off through a hidden door, located behind one of the hall's banners as Desire turned to meet her newest guests.

Desire laughed. It was sweet but unladylike. The sort of laugh one hears in a pleasure house when someone is being droll. "Bitrig, this is so cliché."

"Yes, mistress." The goblin replied. The next few minutes were filled with the clatter of knives, dirks, stilettos, blowguns, shuriken ... and from under Lynkx's cloak, the disassembled parts of a small catapult.

"That's better," Desire smiled. Bitrig nodded but he was fixated on the slit which ran well up the side of Desire's skirt to her waist. Or perhaps it was the plunging neckline which ran deep enough to display her belly button. Not that it mattered, her intense voice exacted his attention. "These must be your clan brothers Offal and Lynkx." She tried to pronounce Lynkx's name with a hard k sound at the end.

"It just Lynkx," Bitrig explained. "Goblins don't pronounce the letter k in a name, it's supposed to be silent and sneaky like a goblin, aye."

Desire showed even less interest than Bitrig expected. "As you know the Empire's finances are not what they should be and I understand that a member of the previous dynasty has retained a jewel-encrusted scepter. Be a dear and collect it for me."

Bitrig looked puzzled, "I thought all the members of the preceding royal house had been put to death?"

"Didn't I mention he was dead? How remiss of me." Desire's tone wasn't so much condescending as it was enticing.

"You want the proud Bitrig clan to rob a grave for you?" he snapped back indignantly.

"Mr. Wexcombe will accompany you." She added, despite his protests about grave robbing.

"Wait a minute. You mean Timothy Wexcombe ... the spectre?" The goblin's indignation had turned to anxiety. "How dead is this guy? You don't mean to infer that he's the kind of dead that still walks around thinking that he's alive ... kind of dead? The kind of dead who is really pissed off at the sight of anything that isn't dead, do you?"

"Yes, how astute of you." Bitrig was stunned. The goblin crossed his arms and shook his head in refusal. "But if you can't do it, I suppose I can ask the Leech brothers to undertake the assignment."

"Harrye and Arthur Leech ... really ... hobgoblins," Bitrig shouted, "They couldn't steal the bottle from the grasp of an abandoned baby in the middle of a dark alley."

"Like I said," Desire beamed, "if you're not up to the task ..."

"There's no goblin born that can't steal the ring from a bank manager's finger," he yelled, "in broad daylight, no less."

"So, you'll do it?"

"Of course, I'll do it." The goblin's face turned to a scowl. "What a minute. What did I just agree to?"

"That you'd steal a jewel-encrusted scepter from an undead lich," answered Offal, a distressed goblin brother who wasn't at all surprised that his leader had been taken in. "Did I ask you?" Offal tried to respond, but Bitrig silenced him with a kick to his rear and a classic twin eyeball finger jab. "Oh, shut up."

“Oh, and Bitrig,” Desire interrupted the goblin’s internal disciplinary measures, “There is one more requirement.” She paused for effect. “You can’t kill anything.”

“What?” he screamed so that the sound echoed off the walls.

Her eyes had enough sparkle in them to outshine a diamond. “If you were to kill anything, the lich will simply add the corpse to his undead following and that wouldn’t be any good, now would it?”

“Great,” Bitrig muttered, “walk into a lich’s lair and steal a prized possession. Don’t die and don’t kill anything either. Did I miss anything?”

“That should about cover it,” finished Desire.

Bitrig’s two companions started picking up their weapons when the goblin leader kicked one of them into the other, knocking them both to the ground. “Didn’t you hear what the devious, conniving little lady just said? NO WEAPONS. Stupid morons.”

Bitrig’s hands were near bleeding from brushing away the sand. The tomb of the royal family had been buried, not by a sandstorm or to prevent it from being found, but to prevent it from becoming a shrine of worship. Digging sand was a job for the unclean, but no one cared if a goblin performed unclean work. Bitrig began to appreciate Desire’s sly intelligence. She’d had never gotten the Leech brothers to do this.

“It just a little farther now.” Timothy Wexcombe voice was hollow and morose as if he were a bell chiming at midnight.

“Why don’t you help dig then?” Bitrig responded snottily.

Timothy shapeshifted across the sands. He was a bit grey and blurry as if he were a floating column of ashes driven into the air by a sudden gust of wind. “I’d like to help you out, but I’m a bit indistinct. No hands you see.”

“Don’t give me any excuses, you lousy puff of brimstone-smelling hot air.” The goblin complained.

“I’m afraid my primary task was to lead you here since no living being would know the location,” Wexcombe explained.

“Great,” Bitrig snorted, “Just another tourist then.”

“Speaking of tourists, have you ever been to the great city of Naggos Tor? Such fine monuments and statues. Of course, everyone is dead now, but that’s what makes it such a great place to visit. Plenty of sunshine with no interruptions, no one to bother you.” While the spirit droned on, Lynkx’s shovel gave the unmistakable sound of a metal blade hitting another hunk of metal. Offal and Bitrig rushed to his side.

“Well keep digging,” Bitrig ordered.

“You want it to go faster?” Lynkx protested, “Start diggin’ yourself.”

"I would, but *you* didn't bring me a shovel," Bitrig screamed in his ear.

"My other shovel had teeth down one side, like an axe." Lynkx complained, "And you said we ain't supposed to bring no weapons."

As Bitrig watch with a disapproving eye, Offal and Lynkx gradually managed to clear the sand from before the door. "Grave robbing is not a bad gig," Offal commented to his goblin brother, "maybe we should consider taking it up."

"Shame on you," Timothy Wexcombe hissed.

"No, really," Offal continued, "Look how easy and quiet it is. We haven't seen a living soul."

"That's what worries me," Bitrig lamented.

The handles on the door were tied together with a silken rope, still sealed with the wax of the royal household. Bitrig took out a knife and casually cut it as the wind howled in reply.

"Hey," complained Offal, "I thought you said no weapons."

"It's a kitchen knife, you savage," Bitrig kicked him in the leg, "It's a tool, not a weapon."

"Seems like a fine distinction to me," Lynkx added. Bitrig snatched Offal's shovel away from him. Before handing it back, he slapped Lynkx in the face with it a few times. "Moron, shut your face and open the door." Lynkx strained and grunted at the handles but the door didn't move. Finally, weakened by Lynkx's repeated heaving, the two handles broke off in his hands.

Bitrig slapped him across the side of the head. "Now we'll have to get the crowbar, dunderhead."

Offal took the heavy iron bar out of the tool sack and shoved the flat edge under the door. Pushing on the bar with all his might, didn't even move the bar even an inch, so he started jumping on it. The leather earpieces of Offal's cap flapped wildly as he jumped on the iron tool. At length, a blast of air shot out from under the door. The tomb's seal was broken. The escaping air reeked of death and decay.

"Ah," Bitrig breathed in the aroma, "smells like home."

"I hear that Naggos Tor was a wonderful perfume of death about it," Timothy waxed. Bitrig kicked sand at the spirit's face, but they passed right through him.

Now Lynkx joined his brother jumping on the crowbar and together they were able to open the door a crack. Bitrig forced a shovel into the widening space and, at long last, the door creaked its way open. The air was putrid and stale, but it did have a certain fragrance to it. The goblins proceeded into the main hall. The walls of the chamber were covered in crude paintings. Scenes of men with the heads of animals all being served by legions of slaves. Bitrig could tell they were slaves because each creature's neck was chained to another. The whole effect was that of a mural depicting the evolution of some long-forgotten civilization ... or perhaps merely one of the last imperial royal family's dinner parties.

Scanning the images with a discerning eye, Bitrig found a portion of the mural were a group of goblin prisoners were being kept in a kennel and treated as if they were dogs. He began to scrape off the

painting by hitting it with the edge of Lynkx's shovel. The plaster that held the image fell off in great chunks as the goblin clattered his spade against the wall noisily.

"Tsk-tsk," The shadowy form of Timothy Wexcombe complained.

"Oh, shut up. You agitated because I'm defacing some great artwork?" Bitrig inquired, the clanging of his heavy tool echoing down the tomb's corridors.

"Not at all," Wexcombe responded casually, "I was more concerned that your incessant banging would wake up whatever undead occupies this tomb."

"Oh," Bitrig rejoined, "right." The angry goblin spit on what remained of the image and they turned to face his clan brothers. As an afterthought, he slapped the painting one last time with the shovel and addressed his companions, "Let's get going. Wexcombe, which way do we go?"

"How should I know?" The shadow replied sarcastically, "I'm dead, not a member of the royal family. I've never been *inside* before."

"A lot of good you turned out to be," Bitrig hissed.

"Sticks and stones ... will actually pass right through me, I'm a phantasm." The ghostly form announced cheekily.

"That rhyme is supposed to be about you not being hurt by names, not sticks and stones," Bitrig keenly observed.

"Yes, well, I not fond of being called names, so don't even attempt it," the spirit called out.

Bitrig pointed at one of the corridors, "Let's go that way."

"Why that way?" Offal inquired.

"Because it'll give me a good look at yer backside," the goblin barked. He followed up his command with a swift kick to his clan brother's rear. Bitrig pushed Offal ahead of him and down the hall. "You first," he spat.

The hallway was a long and narrow triangular affair, with ancient cobwebs filling the peak over their heads. At some point, the webbing ceased and the group found four or five oversize spiders on the floor, drained dry and weathered like prunes. Bitrig gingerly pushed them aside, with his foot, and proceeded.

"I don't like the look of this," Timothy Wexcombe sounded apprehensive. "Don't get me wrong, the silence is wonderful, but ..."

"Why, were those spiders relatives of yours?" Bitrig snorted.

Wexcombe ignored the crude jab, "No, I was thinking, I should remain unaffected, but that you might find losing all your bodily fluids uncomfortable." He jibed in return.

Both Offal and Lynkx swallowed hard, especially Offal who led the way. He slowed his pace, and Bitrig gave Offal a jab with the point of his spear. "Don't listen to this sad sack piece of protoplasmic crap,"

Bitrig remarked, "he's just disappointed *he* can't sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids. Bit of professional jealousy there Wexcombe?"

"Hardly," the spirit replied vexed.

"Well, you *bitter limes*," Lynkx used the colloquial expression the goblins clans used to refer to each other by their skin tone, "I figure this is it - combat toe to toe with the undead ... the spirits of those that passed before us. And royalty, no less. I'm not much of a hand at making inspiring or-rations, but I got a pretty fair idea that something wickedly important is going on up ahead. And I got a fair idea the kind of personal emotions that we're all thinking. Heck, I reckon you wouldn't even be goblins if you didn't have some pretty strong personal feelins about the living dead. I think we should remember one thing, the folks who paid us is counting on us and by golly, we shouldn't let 'em down. Unless, of course, someone pays us more ... or it doesn't look too safe."

Bitrig turned about and smacked Lynkx over the head with a shovel. "Shut up, or I'll make *you* go first."

The dust covered floor and stonework walls gave way to a roughhewn floor and an arched ceiling. Grime covered some portions of the walls where torches once burned long ago to light the way of those carrying the dead to their final resting places. Only, Bitrig thought offhandedly, that didn't work. Nothing worse than some low life scum who simply couldn't accept that their time had come. Why couldn't he just have ingested mercury, like every other dumb, son-of-a-bitch monarch seeking immortality and be done with it? Oh no, this one had to hang around and cause trouble.

The group turned right and left, following the maze of corridors, hallways, and galleries that make up the tomb's interior. At one point, Offal stopped dead as a huge hole appeared in the floor. Bitrig looked down and observed the bodies of a group of earlier tomb raiders. They had obviously crashed through a section of false floor and now lay below, impaled on a forest of sharpened spikes. "OK boys, wall crawl." Bitrig pronounced.

Offal and Lynkx lay down upon the floor, one next to the other, in the position they would be in if one was to be carried on the other's shoulders. With Offal's feet on one wall, Lynkx extended his arms to press against the opposite wall. Bitrig finished tying a rope around Lynkx's waist when the two scurried off down the corridor like an acrobatic centipede, wedged between the two walls. Once they reached the other side, Offal attached his end of the rope to a wall as Bitrig did the same.

Bitrig readied himself to use the rope to climb hand over hand to the other side. As the goblin finished his preparations, the spectre Wexcombe picked him up and carried him to the other side, as if he were an acorn in the arms of a flying eagle.

Bitrig brushed himself off when he arrived on the opposite side. "I thought you didn't have hands?" The goblin demanded an explanation.

Timothy wasn't impressed. "What? So, I could dig in the sand ... How unclean."

"You little ..." Bitrig lunged forward to strangle the shadow.

"Go ahead," Timothy laughed, "Hit me. I'd like to see you try."

“Wait a minute. Why didn’t you just fly us over the hole in the first place, you moron?” The goblin still sounded angry.

“You didn’t ask.” The spectre countered.

“Stupid undead,” Bitrig muttered. “I knew I wasn’t going to like this job.”

“The one you volunteered us for?” Offal rejoined.

“Shut your rat hole.” Bitrig insisted, “or I’ll make *you* go first.”

“You already did,” complained Offal.

“Good,” Bitrig answered, “then you already know your place.” He pushed his clan brother forward. “Get going.”

“Join the tribe of the Bloody Lances, me mum said,” Offal mused at a favored memory, “and see the world.” He sneered as he stared forward. “Should never have trusted mother. Especially right after she gutted dad like that.”

The corridor made an abrupt turn and opened into a large chamber. Two lines of warrior statues stood at eternal attention, indicating the way forward. At the base of each was an open chest, filled with gold and silver coins as well as gemstones of every description. At the end of this granite, honor guard was a great chair. Sitting, enthroned, was a skeletal figure dressed in fine silk robes, multicolored dragons embroidered on its surface. On top of its bleached skull, it wore a golden crown. In one hand he held a crook and in the other a jewel-encrusted scepter.

“The Ohohcanter,” Offal murmured in awe.

“What?” Bitrig snorted, “What the hell is an Ohohcanter?”

Offal face resembled one that was viewing an eighth wonder of the world. “It’s a famous scepter. I thought it needed a name, so, I’m calling it the Ohohcanter.”

“You’re an idiot,” Bitrig snorted, “You must have fallen off the idiot tree and hit every branch on the way down.” He kicked Offal for good measure. In the meantime, Lynkx made a beeline for the nearest box of treasure. It was filled to the brim with gold coins. He started dragging it toward the exit, the box loudly scraping the floor as he tugged on the handle.

“Perhaps you should retrieve the scepter first,” the spirit Wexcombe interjected. “The lich seems to be in a state of meditation.”

“Medication?” Bitrig shouted, “Why would I care if the crazy bastard is using drugs ... he’s frigging undead.”

“Meditation,” the spirit corrected him, “A state of deep concentration, of thought, a journey to the sublime plain of intellectual stupor.” A deeply sadden look crossed the spirit’s face. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Lynkx,” Bitrig commanded, “Go get the stupid scepter while the overdressed freak up there is high on drugs.” Lynkx stopped dragging the gold-filled box he was struggling with and headed for the throne. His companions followed closely behind.

“Mediation,” Wexcombe sounded both frustrated and annoyed. Then, after a long pause, he continued, “oh, never mind.”

The three goblins approached the throne slowly, with the utmost care. As they proceeded, Bitrig stabbed one of the guarding stone warriors in the thigh with his knife. The weapon shattered against the stone surface, bright shards of metal drifting fluidly to the ground. Bitrig dropped the now useless handle. “OK, we at least we know they are real statues.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to kill anything?” Complained Lynkx.

Bitrig kicked him in the shin, “It’s stone, you moron. Besides, you can’t kill someone by stabbing him in the thigh. Didn’t anyone ever teach you this? It just hurts them enough so they scream. What’s the matter with you anyway?”

“Petty sound,” Offal added.

“What?” Bitrig rejoined.

“Screams. Pretty sound, it is.” He explained.

“Gods,” Bitrig sighed, “You’re as bright as a shopkeeper.”

Offal didn’t mind being called an idiot or a moron, it was just Bitrig having a bit of fun with him, that’s all. But being called a shopkeeper ... well, at least to a goblin, that was going a bit too far. Offal reached down to draw his dirk, but it wasn’t there. Bitrig slapped him across the face. “Go get the scepter, moron.”

Offal was reaching up to grab the scepter when the creature’s faced turned to look directly at him. His eyes flashed a menacing red glow and his lower jaw dropped. The sound that came out of its mouth as a not a yell or a roar, but a moan. A moan so deep that it made the statues in the hall vibrate from the echo. The three jumped back into a defensive formation, spear shafts dug into the sand, braced against one foot. They leaned forward in unison, pressing the points of their spear to the front.

That was when they realized that they didn’t have spears. The three goblins turned and ran for the exit, filling the room with ear-piercing shrieking. The skeletal lich rose from his throne and pursued them ominously. As the three made for the doorway, Timothy Wexcombe interposed himself. The lich king swung his crook and scepter like a pair of deadly maces, but they passed right through the spirit. There were some advantages to being insubstantial, Timothy mused as the lich continued his wild attack.

As the spectre held off the lich, Bitrig grabbed Lynkx by the neck. He was back to lugging one of the treasure chests across the floor. It was too heavy a burden to pick up, but he had dragged one, halfway to the door by the time Bitrig got to him. The three had barely made it past the door when the lich gave up his attack and simply passed through the spectre ... because sometimes, it *doesn’t* pay to be a noncorporeal ghost.

As the lich approached the doorway, Bitrig popped his head back around the corner and hollered, “Nagh, nagh, na nagh-nagh...” and ducked back out again. The lich followed him with increased fervor, racing down the hall.

“Run faster,” Offal screamed, “He’s gaining.”

“I don’t have to run faster,” Bitrig huffed, “I just have to run faster than *you*.”

As they proceed down the hallway, Timothy Wexcombe grabbed the three and flew them down the corridor ... literally, in this case. However, the lich continued to gain on the three squirming goblins in the spectre’s clutches. He was within a fingernail’s reach of them. That is until he dropped out of sight. As he fell into the trap hole, to join the earlier grave robbers, Bitrig reached out and grabbed the scepter. Bitrig waved casually at the frustrated creature, his silk robes tangled execrably in the spikes at the bottom of the pit.

Wexcombe proceeded to fly them down a hallway until ... they became hopelessly lost. After the spectre set them down, the goblins turned this way and back again, but it was to no avail. Even the dust on the floor showed that they had never been in this part of the tomb before. “No sense of frigging direction,” Bitrig complained. They wandered aimlessly, trying to find a corridor with their footprints in it. At last, they found a door, but they were disappointed once Offal and Lynkx forced it open with the crowbar.

On the other side was a brightly lit chamber, well-appointed with fine furniture and statuary. Only these were the strangest statues that Bitrig had ever seen. Their flesh felt like flesh, their clothes bore an uncanny resemblance to real cloth. They seemed as if they could simply get up and walk away, yet they were eerily motionless. They were dressed in the finest fabrics, although the styles worn had all gone out of favor ages ago.

Offal poked one of them with a long green finger, “Hey, stupid, get up. I’m talking to you.” But nothing happened. Offal found himself being a little irked. He didn’t approve of being ignored, certainly not by humans. He was more used to good, honest disapproval.

“What’s going on here?” Offal inquired. The other two goblins merely shrugged their shoulders.

The unmoving figures wore gold rings and one even was adorned with a fabulous jeweled neckless. Lynkx started removing all the gold and jewels, stowing them in a draw-string bag. The goblins tested each figure as they passed, poking it maliciously with the crowbar. They approached one overstuffed chair, oddly facing away from the entrance. Offal poked at the back of its head. When he did the figure cried out. He stood up, rubbing the back of his head.

The goblins stared in astonishment. “That seemed a little uncalled for,” he remarked. Straightening up, he addressed his visitors. “The name’s Gaynesford, Nicholas Gaynesford. I’m the caretaker here. Come in, do come in, I been expecting you.”

Nicholas appeared fairly human, although he was outfitted in what Bitrig would describe as a fancy dressing gown, a bit unusual attire for a tomb to say the least. “What’s going on here?” Bitrig protested, “What’s with all the weird statues?”

“Oh, those aren’t statues.” He exclaimed, “They’re guests, they’ve been entombed here. These are all high officials of the court. The Emperor had them placed in here, just in case he needed them later.”

Gaynesford grabbed the draw-string bag from Lynkx's hands. "I afraid I can't let you keep that. Court property, you understand. But don't worry, I'll make sure they all get back to their rightful owners."

Gaynesford held his hand out to Bitrig. "Let's go, hand it over." The goblin clutched the scepter tighter to his chest. "You'll have to cut off my arm to get it." Bitrig screeched.

"My words," Gaynesford announced in a sophisticated voice, "how extreme. Very well, you keep it. I don't believe it's part of my collection anyway. Come, Mr. Bitrig, please, won't you and your associates have a seat?" The tall man in the dressing gown indicated three empty overstuffed chairs. The Goblins sat cautiously, keeping their eyes on their creepy host.

"Let's kill him." Offal announced gleefully, "so we don't have to share the loot."

"We can't kill him." Bitrig slapped Offal across the side of the head. "No killing, remember?"

"Oh, yea ..." Offal sounded disappointed.

Nicholas approached a table containing an odd red liquor in a fine glass decanter. He poured four cut-crystal glasses and handed them out to the goblins. "A toast gentleman, to your safe journey in the tomb of the Imperial family."

"Doesn't anyone think to ask for directions anymore?" Commented the unseen spectre, Timothy Wexcombe quietly "Lost in the middle of a tomb and you stop for a drink as if this were a bar of some sort. Perhaps, we should thank our gracious host and be about ..." In unison, the three goblins downed the red liquid in a single swallow. "... our business." Timothy concluded. He appeared disappointed, at least that part of his shadowy face that one could make out. Bitrig shot back at him a meaningful glance. A glance that had a singular meaning ... keep your unwanted opinions to yourself. "Never mind," the spirit groaned.

Mr. Gaynesford put down his unemptied glass and turned to his guests. "So, tell me, Mr. Bitrig, if you could have any wish in the world, what would it be?"

Bitrig got up and poured himself another drink. "That should be obvious," proclaimed, returning to his seat, "I'd like to be filthy rich."

"And Mr. Offal," Nicholas Gaynesford continued, "how about you?"

The little goblin gave it a bit of thought. "I'd like to be with my friends, my clan brothers," he said finally. "But I wouldn't mind being as rich as Croesus either." The three goblins laughed.

"I suppose I don't have to ask you," Mr. Gaynesford glanced over at Lynkx.

"I should hope not, you overdressed coyote," the goblin drooled. "Although it'd be a touch outa place if I don't add that I wanna be richer than these other two fools."

Mr. Gaynesford smiled brightly, "Understandable for gentlemen in your profession. As it happens I think we can accommodate you." The three goblins seemed to slow down as if moving their arms involved lifting a great weight. Bitrig raised his hand to finish his drink. The glass stopped halfway to his mouth and remained in place, appearing to be frozen, even though the liquid slowly sloshed in the glass.

“Did you have to poison them?” Wexcombe asked.

Nicholas looked confused. “As the tomb’s golem, I’m charged with protecting the court for his royal highness,” he stated flatly. He picked up Offal, who remained in his sitting position the entire time. Gaynesford took him over to a corner of the chamber where a series of treasure chests were piled high. He sat Offal down on a pile of silver coins that were spilling out of one open chest. “They are goblins, after all. Few things greedier than a goblin. If I’d have left them alone, they have cleaned the place out.” He explained as he moved the other two over to join Offal.

Gaynesford took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and used it in a vain attempt to wipe some of the dirt off the three goblins. “I’ll just take this off our hands.” The golem grabbed the scepter, still clutched in Bitrig’s other hand; but before he could gain possession of it, the goblin stirred.

“I’ll just keep that if you don’t mind,” Bitrig drank what liquid remained, unspilled, in his drink. Nicholas Gaynesford took three steps backward in shock.

“Goblins are immune to poison,” Bitrig explained. “We have a little gland in our throats which secretes an antidote when we drink some. Although I’ve got to hand it to you, yours was pretty good stuff. Took a minute for the antidote to kick in.” He slid off the pile of treasure and threw the glass against the wall as his associates began to stir.

“Offal,” Bitrig commanded, “torture the golem until he tells us how to get to the nearest exit.”

“Two lefts, then right, then left again,” Gaynesford sputtered, looking a bit nervous.

“I’m curious,” the spirit Wexcombe muttered, “Just how were you planning on torturing a Golem anyway? They’re constructs.”

“Offal whacks their heads with a ball-peen hammer,” Bitrig clarified, “they hate that. We call it de-constructing.” Bitrig grabbed Lynkx by the collar. He was busy trying to drag one of the chests towards the door. “No time for that.” He held up the scepter, “We need to get this back to Desire.”

“Can’t we just rob the place a little bit,” Lynkx complained. “Just one chest.”

Bitrig looked at his clan brother with a distasteful sneer. “If you say ‘pretty please,’ I’m going to bend this scepter over your head. Now get moving before we forget the directions.”

Desire and Craving sat in the main hall. Because the room was empty, Craving had unfolded her succubae wings. She normally kept them hidden behind her, but the folded position was uncomfortable for extended periods. When folded, they nicely blended into the black, backless outfit she wore. Combined with the deep plunging front of the dress, no one paid the back much close attention to the back anyway. A commotion in the hallway had her soon folding them behind her again.

Lord Melbourne burst in, accompanied by two scribes. Their ink-stained fingers constantly scribbling on stacks of papers as they followed the high lord. Melbourne was one of those types whose outward appearance was of a character who could not be distracted by anything. Desire preferred these types, they were by far easier to manipulate when you had them alone.

“Lord Melbourne,” Desire turned on the charm as he approached, “To what do I owe the honor.”

The high lord didn’t look too pleased. He marched right up to the throne, “I understand you are planning on introducing new members to the privy council.” His tone was assured and intense, with just a touch of annoyance.

“I assume you are referring to Ramziyya el-Kamali and Mr. Pecke,” she smiled politely.

“They ... they,” Melbourne choked back the words, “They’re not even of the same race.”

Desire leaned closer and played with his chin using the point of her finger. “Yes, but they do live within the Empire. Not only that but for a seat on the council they have agreed to protect our eastern and southern borders for us. You’ll have to admit that is a small price to pay. Think of the cost ... the taxes we’ll have to levy ... to pay the troops that guard those borders. Think of the cost savings. We currently pay the wild tribes in those areas not to attack us. A ruinous cost, I can assure you. With the Empire in its current financial state, think of all the taxes on the nobility we will be forced to instate to defray the burden of maintaining troops in that area. I also think that you’ll find that a horde of bone devils and a troop of efreet make quite an effective deterrent.”

“Do you hear yourself when you say these things?” Lord Melbourne declared. “You *are* talking about devils ... devils mind you. Devils that make it a habit of being untrustworthy.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find that they are adequately trustworthy for this task,” Desire pronounced. “They can be quite reliable when their own interests are at stake.”

“What interests?”

“Well, we can’t very well hunt them down and destroy them when they are citizens of the Empire, now can we?” Desire’s smile was like a burning lighthouse flame. Hot enough to melt even Lord Melbourne’s icy exterior. “But I suppose we’ll have to put up with them attempting to corrupt the morals of youth unhindered from now on.” She paused. “Not that the situation will be all that different from the troops who are stationed in the region now.”

Melbourne physically cringed when he heard the word citizen. “And what about the efreet?” He asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t go around making any wishes if I were you. The efreet do have a tendency to grant those wishes in such a way that it aids the efreet and not the supplicant.” Desire started gazing intently at her fingernails. This was a subtle way of letting her guests know that she was through with their conversation. Those who knew her understood that the next step was for her to become bored ... and no one wanted Desire bored.

Lord Melbourne was about to go into another diatribe when the three goblins: Lynkx, Bitrig, and Offal came smashing into the room. They bluntly pushed the two scribes out of the way, sending papers flying in all directions. Unceremoniously, Bitrig placed the scepter on the great black bear rug in the center of the room as Lord Melbourne stalked out in a huff. Not only did he have to deal with non-humans on the privy council, but now he could be interrupted by a greedy band of goblins. What was this kingdom coming to?

“So,” Bitrig announced with a grand gesture, “Are we even now?”

“Nowhere near,” Craving declared.

Bitrig looked ruffled and annoyed. “So, we don’t get paid? Is that what you are telling me?”

“By the balls of a centaur, no,” Craving almost burst out laughing.

Bitrig pompously approached the throne and looked up at Desire. “You know what your problem is? You, humans, don’t know how to reward people for services rendered.”

Desire gave the goblin one of her pleasant little smiles. “Well I could pay you, but that would make you an employee. An employee of the courtesan’s trade guild.”

“Oh, no. You’re not pulling that stunt on me. I’m nobody’s *employee*. Certainly not in no damn trade guild. So, I’ll guess we’ll just have to go back to the tomb and loot the rest of the treasure for ourselves then.” He turned and started to stalk off.

“Be my guest.” Desire waved him off.

No other comment would have made Bitrig stop in his tracks, but he abruptly smelled trouble. “You *don’t mind* if we go back and loot a royal tomb, then? Even in the state the Empires finances are in?”

“By all means, knock yourself out,” Desire smiled. It was one of those smiles that hid secret knowledge and Bitrig knew it.

“What’s the catch?” He asked impolitely.

“Nothing much. The treasure was removed years ago and replaced with counterfeit coins.” She looked at him with a glance that could set an iceberg aflame. “Don’t let me catch you passing any of that false coin around here though or I’ll tie you between the coaches that go to Mercy and Nagdohar.”

“But, they are in opposite directions,” Offal complained. Bitrig slapped him across the top of his head.

“That’s her point, you moron.” The three grumbled heartily as they left the room empty-handed.

“Has the treasure been replaced?” Craving was curious.

“I hope not, the royal tomb is a safer repository than the imperial treasury.” Desire joked. “Less thievery by the imperial treasurer and his cohorts. Everything still in place Mr. Wexcombe?”

“Everything is in order, madam.” The spirit reported.

“Good, I wouldn’t want anything to be missing, in case I need to make another withdrawal.” The sun might come up tomorrow, but even if it did, it would be no match for the brightness of the devious Desire’s smile, Chairman and CEO of the imperial privy council.