



THE TOMB GUARDIANS

A Tale of Grossly Underpaid Workers with No Time
Off

Ernest and Bertrand had been on guard duty at the tomb throughout the long night. Well, it seemed like night to them... for the rest of the world, it had been 400 years of sunrises and sunsets. But then who's counting. Of course, being undead helped.

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The lich was beyond death. By the same token, he was beyond life. Then came the time he was beyond caring. He ventured down into the pits, traversing the ageless gloom. He wandered into the deep shadows, laying his bones upon his once-mighty throne. There he stayed. There was no place for him beside death. And death ignored him. The carcasses of his armies collapsed into disassociated piles of bone and grey clouds of dust. All except for two, where his necromantic enchantment still lingered.

Shadows of undying candles licked the walls. The tomb smelled of the grave, but the two guards lacked noses with which it might have made any impact. Bertrand drew the Ace of Hearts. Only it wasn't your usual Ace of Hearts. This one had an arrow through it... and it was still beating. He anted up a coin and Ernest drew the Two of Clubs. Not the most promising of starts. Not even if the club on the card came complete with spikes... which it did. Bertrand stared at the deck of cards. It didn't do any good, as his empty eye sockets contained no orbs with which to influence them. The half-rusted armor on his arms creaked as he reached for the deck. He turned over the card. Six of Diamonds. The red gems danced and spun on the card like paleolithic dancers. Ernest's card was the Jake of Spades. The dwarf on the card swung his shovel in the air as if swatting down a fly. More coins were added to the pile in the center.

Both skeletons were encased in the finest armor, although a bit old fashioned. Underneath, Ernest's livery had faded from a bright red to a dull orange color. While Bertrand's gold shirt had yet to lose its lustrous color. The two used their empty eye sockets to stare at the other, but nothing in their fleshless faces gave a clue as to the contents of their hands. "Call," Bertrand announced, throwing two final gold coins on the growing pile.

Ernest's jaw clenched; his teeth rattled. "A pair of sevens and my Jake of Spades."

Bertrand tossed his pair of sixes to the ground. "I hate your guts."

"I don't have any guts, I'm an animated skeleton," Ernest sneered.

"Yea, well, I hate where they used to be."

Their revelry was disturbed by the action of the crystal ball on the mantle. Green-blue mists swirled inside the ball. Deep inside the mists was the figure of a shadow. "Looks like a member of the Guild of Material Acquisitions," Bertrand offered.

"You mean a thief," Ernest corrected him.

"Or a salesclerk," Bertrand joked, "I can never keep the two straight."

"Is there a difference?"

"Point taken."

"You take the right, I'll take the left," Ernest offered.

"I wanted the left this time," Bertrand protested.

Ernest lowered his head in disappointment. "You can be so hard to live with."

"That's why I'm dead."

“Fine, you take the right, I’ll take the left,” Ernest replied.

“That’s more like it. You’re finally listening.” The two moved into positions flanking the entrance door. Ernest with his long spear and Bertrand with a sword which had perhaps seen too many uses, but still maintained a keen edge. In a moment, they froze in place, as if they were long dead... which, of course, they were. They remained like statues as a black-cloaked figure entered the chamber.

His movements made no more than a whisper as he crossed the room towards the throne. Throwing back his hood, his eyes stared in amazement at the vast piles of jewels, gems, and coinage laying randomly strewn across the chamber floor. The young man’s eyes drifted to an ancient relic. A skull with warm, glowing eyes. His attention was so riveted, he didn’t even perceive Bertrand as he lowered his sword.

The animated skeleton warrior had no trouble slipping the blade in between the back of the thieves’ ribs. Bertrand was impressed with the young man’s professionalism. True to his training as a rogue, he hardly made a sound even though the wound was mortal. He trembled slightly, waves of spasms running up and down his spine. Then, at last, his form went limp. Bertrand pulled out the blade and the thieves’ remains fell to the floor with a quiet sigh.

“You get to clean this one up,” Ernest wheezed.

“What? I cleaned up the last one,” Bertrand protested.

“You know mom’s rules. You make a mess; you clean the mess.”

Bertrand groaned. “Why do you always have to bring mother into this?” Grabbing the thieves’ hood, Bertrand pulled the corpse towards an empty corner of the room. He pulled on a wooden handle which extended up from the floor, opening a trap door. Flames instantly shot up through the opening in the floor. Grunting with effort, Bertrand kicked the body down into the hole in the floor. “You can thank me later,” he shouted down as he closed the trap door. “Now, where were we?” Bertrand demanded.

“You were losing at cards.”

“Oh, yeah. I’d almost forgotten.” The two sat back down and Ernest had to move quickly. Before Bertrand spotted the Ace of Spades that had fallen out of his sleeve as he sat down.



Ernest peered in the swirling globe again. “Who do you think it is?” he asked his partner.

“Red turban,” Bertrand muttered, “long sword engraved with glowing runes on the blade. Must be a...”

“Demon hunter,” the two announced in unison.

“He’s going to be disappointed,” Ernest remarked.

“No demons here,” Bertrand agreed, “only us undead.”

Ernest cocked his head to one side. “How do you want to handle it?”

“Axe,” Bertrand replied.

“Oh, you are a devious one.”

Bertrand chuckled. “I learned from the best.” He walked over to an unadorned chest and pulled out a jewel-encrusted berserker axe. The shining metal of the double-headed axe glowed a dull blue in the dim candlelight. Bertrand placed it at the foot of the throne. “I’ll take the right this time, you take the left,” Bertrand insisted.

“If it’ll make you feel better.”

“It won’t. I should have been on the right last time,” Bertrand grumbled.

“As you say.”

The two bickering partners resumed their usual positions by the entrance door as if they had always been there... and always will. They stood silently by the entrance. Ernest didn’t even move as a beetle scurried up the side of his face and decided to make a nest under his helmet.

The demon hunter entered, holding his sword at the ready. The runes on the blade glowed brightly. Glancing about his eyes fell on the berserker axe. He could hardly help himself, even if he never used the weapon, the jewels themselves would be enough wealth to buy a small kingdom. Approaching cautiously, he reached out his hand toward the hilt.

Perhaps it was the glow which warned him, but he drew his hand back with a start. Bertrand remained silent, even though he was rapidly growing impatient. This one was going to waste his time. Bertrand had a sixth sense for such things. It gnawed at him. But he could be patient. The undead learn such things over the ages. Bertrand could be patient. As long as it didn’t take too much time.

Building up his nerve, he reached out his hand and touched the hilt. As soon as his fingertips stroked the wooden handle, the axe rose into the air. The demon hunter moved back and placed both his hands on his sword’s hilt. He moved to a ready stance. In his head, he could hear the voice of the axe. “Such a fine sword you have,” the voice echoed in his head, “And I am nothing more than an upgraded cleaver, such as a butcher might use.”

Before the young man could react, the axe flew through the air and buried the hard blade in his skull. “A butcher’s tool for a butcher’s work,” the axe announced as the demon hunter slid to the floor. The berserker axe clattered to the floor to join the corpse of the demon hunter as it slid softly to the floor. Ernest stepped forward first. “You get the body this time,” he piped up.

“What do we do about the demon hunter’s sword?”

“Nice blade,” Ernest remarked, hefting the weapon. “Good balance.”

“What do we do with it?”

Ernest handed the weapon to Bertrand, the runes on the steel still glowing brightly. “Just throw it on the pile with all the other ones,” Bertrand grunted in agreement as he dragged the body toward the trap door.

“Time for second breakfast,” Bertrand yelled down as he opened the trap door in the floor. The body landed with a sickening thud. This was followed by the loud crunch of bones breaking between massive teeth.

“No sense of decency,” Ernest complained as Bertrand shut the door. “Raw meat. At least he could have cooked it before devouring it.”

“No character,” Bertrand agreed.



Ernest picked off a piece of moss he found growing on his right wrist. It was one of the things you had to deal with when living underground, in the damp. Some of his associates had the moss growing on what remained of their flesh and this created other problems. Fortunately for Ernest, he'd been dead long enough when the necromancer raised him that carrying around rotting flesh wasn't an issue. Ernest saw Bertrand was busy trying to scrape off the rust on his sword. “You shouldn't do that,” Ernest commented, “it's bad luck.”

Raising his head, Bertrand clacked his teeth together. “I don't believe in luck.”

“They say that if you scrape the rust off a magical sword, you release some of the magic into the wild. Free-roaming spells are never a good thing,” Ernest insisted.

This stopped Bertrand in his tracks. He sat staring at the cleaning cloth and the rust on his blade. “Which would just be typical for me,” Bertrand retorted. “If anyone has had ages and ages of misfortune heaped upon him, it'd be me.”

“You know what they call that?”

“What?”

“Bad luck.”

Bertrand sneered at the suggestion and then went back to polishing the metal. “I guess it's just an old habit. Thousands of hours listening to centurions bark about how you had to keep your weapon clean. Spent all my life listening to one or more of them whine about weapon maintenance.”

“But you're not alive... and neither are they.”

Bertrand threw the cleaning rag on the ground. “Good point. Maybe the gods just hate me.”

Ernest consoled his partner. “The gods don't hate you, Bertrand. The gods don't care if you live, die, or spend an eternity trapped between the two.”

“Thanks.”

Ernest grinned. “It's people who hate you.”

Before Bertrand got the chance to reply, the mists on the crystal ball started stirring again. “What is it this time,” Ernest moaned.

The two peered into the shimmering glass orb. Inside, there formed the image of a man in brilliant white robes, holding a long staff. “Damn,” the two skeletons croaked, “a priest.”

Ernest ground his teeth, “Just one touch and you’re done for with those idiots. You’re dispelled.”

“I wonder what happens to you when you get dispelled?” Bertrand murmured hopefully.

“You remember Brimnoc?” Ernest reminisced.

“Yeah.”

“He got dispelled by one of those bastards. A witch gathered up his bones and turned him into a sweeper handle. Now he spends eternity as an animated broom, sweeping up rooms.”

“Cheeky witches,” Bertrand grouched, “Never minding their own business.”

“It gets worse,” Ernest announced.

“How so?”

“Brimnoc had serious dust allergy problems.”

“Right,” Bertrand sounded determined, “No mercy for this one.”

“That’s the spirit. Get out the holy symbol,” Ernest advised.

Bertrand shook his entire body. His bones clattered. “I hate touching those holy relics. It always gives me the willies.”

“Put it in front of the chair.” Bertrand stepped up to lean the symbol against the throne. “No, not there,” Ernest complained, “move it up some.”

There was a look of recognition in Bertrand’s eye sockets. “Oh, I get it. You want it over the reserve trap door. Clever.”

“Now get into position. You take the right side; I’ll take the left.”

“Not again.”

Ernest spat back at him. “You want to argue about it in front of the priest?”

When the man in the white robe entered, the two skeletons were frozen in their usual places. As soon as the priest entered the room, it took on a whole new odor. The air smelled clean and bright. Both Ernest and Bertrand found the aroma repellent. The priest observed the holy relic closely, but with a detached eye. As if he expected to find the treasure covered with unsightly warts or something.

Ernest realized he suspected a trap. He was a clever one, this one was. Ernest had to move very slowly, creeping up on his target. If he moved too quickly, his old bones would no doubt creak and it would give the whole show away. Once the priest detected what they were doing... well, the gig would be up. His finger bones gradually closed around the wood. He casually tightened his grip. All at once, he pulled the lever and the trap door opened under the priest’s feet.

But nothing happened. The white-robed man merely stood there, floating in mid-air. “The cheeky bastard can levitate,” Ernest hollered. Without moving his legs the priest turned around to face the two tomb guards.

“A curse on everyone’s ancestors, I hate magic.” Bertrand snapped.

Ernest lobbed his spear across the room, aiming directly at the priest’s chest. The holy man waved his arms and adroitly pushed the flying weapon aside. “You really should have known better,” the priest remarked. He took in a big breath of air and lifted his arms wide. A soft blue glow began to envelop his body. Ernest could tell the priest planned to dispel them both in a single blast of mystical energy. There was no point in running.

Then it happened. A burst of red-yellow fire shot forth from the depths. Now priests are divinely protected from the attacks of the undead but against flames... not so much. His entire outfit burst into a conflagration. He struggled to put the flames out, but it was no use. He lost concentration and fell through the open hole. Just as he was about to disappear, the priest’s fingers caught the edge of the opening. They held on tight. He threw one hand up on to the floor and started to pull himself out of the hole. Until something grabbed him from below and yanked him down. There was a crunching noise, followed by some slurping.

“You see,” Ernest yelled downstairs, “It’s what I’ve been telling you all this time. You must cook the meat first. This way you don’t get as much indigestion.” Ernest brushed his hands off and then retrieved his fallen spear. “The plan worked better than I expected it would,” he announced with more than a little bit of pride in his voice.

Bertrand grumbled to himself. It was as close to a compliment as he was willing to give. He knew Ernest would be insufferable now for at least a week.



Weeds kept finding their way into the tunnels. They’d creep along the edges of the passageways, making their way down into the tomb proper. The mystical energy emanating from the tomb attracted them in the same way as sunlight. Branches and vines choked the entry corridors. But they never made it into the final room, the master’s inner chamber. When they entered, they withered and died. Shriveling to a mass of darkening miasma. The arcane arts filling this room was like walking into a blazing oven to a creature as simple as a plant.

Ernest noted this tended to be the way of the tomb. Everyone was attracted to the pretty things buried in the chamber. Attracted to the power radiating from the very stones of the walls. But the journey never ended well for those who ventured this far into its depths.

Bertrand heard them first. The siren call of the wolves. Outside, in the wilderness, the pack was hunting something. Whatever it was, it must have been formidable. The call of the wolf pack was usually short... tragically so for the wolves’ prey. The sound grew louder and skulked closer. It must have been dark outside. The skeleton guards could never tell. They had missed an eternity of sunrises down in this hole, where darkness was perpetual. Even the ever-burning candles found it difficult to pierce the gloom. The two guards knew the pack only hunted at night. But who the darkness favored, the wolves or their prey, was beyond their knowledge.

There was a noisy fall of rocks in the outer chamber. Someone had gained entrance, but it was most likely by mistake. Whoever it was, they sounded like a truly clumsy oaf. Ernest could hear rocks flying everywhere as the intruder scrambled to their feet. The mists in the seeing orb began to coalesce. Both Ernest and Bertrand examined their uninvited guest closely. He was a massive object, a thug no doubt. But with little or no clothes sense. The type who had far more muscles than brains. And if the size of his chest and neck was any indication, the space between his ears couldn't have held an object larger than a pea. The man had legs resembling tree trunks and corded arms that would put even the most massive rope to shame. He looked about with smoldering, volcanic blue eyes.

"He's a big one," Bertrand commented.

"He must be an outlander," Ernest insisted.

"What makes you say that?"

"Simple, they don't grow them that big around here."

"How do you want to handle this one?" Bertrand inquired.

"I think we'll have to play this one by ear."

"Well, I would," Bertrand snorted, "But, in case you haven't noticed, I don't have any ears."

Ernest gave his companion a snide look. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, well I'll tell you one thing. I'm not standing on the right this time. You can forget it. It's your turn to stand on the right." Bertrand sounded emphatic.

"Fine. I don't have the time to argue this with you. This time, I'll stand on the left."

"Damn right you will."

The two took to their usual places, standing astride the entrance like two giant statues who had been there since the place had been carved from the living rock. Although even a casual glance at the two of them would have disclosed an absence of dust. And dust covered everything in this room, like a carpet of the lightest snow.

Ernest noted the man's brutish appearance as he entered the room. His dark almost sinister face was that of a warlord or bandit captain. He had an air of command about him. His garments, however, could not conceal the hard, threatening lines of his limbs. He looked the very figure of a restless wanderer. Around one ankle was an iron and connected to this a length of chain. He held the chain as if it were a flail. The end of the chain was covered in blood. No doubt extracted from the pack wolves who had forced him to take shelter in the tomb.

His moves were cat-like as he crossed the room. Ernest noticed, despite hailing from one of the untamed lands bordering civilization, he was not the mindless thug he had at first assumed. He deftly avoided the trap door on the floor which had felled the priest. Circling the trap he eyed the room with caution. It was almost as if he could smell threats. He had the awareness skills of a true rogue, but he was never going to go unnoticed. He moved about the floor as if he knew this instinctively but was prepared to deal with any unwanted attention which might come his way.

Still, Ernest observed he was only armed with the chain, which should make him easier to deal with when the time came. A simple chain was hard to wield, and even less so when facing an experienced foe. He and Bertrand were certainly not guileless pack animals from the surrounding wilderness. Yet before the two of them could even entertain any significant action, the barbarian had grabbed the ancient sword which lay at their master's feet. It had been covered in cobwebs, although the spiders who had made them were long gone. Most visitors to the tomb had barely taken notice of the blade. It was serviceable, but hardly near any of the worth of the other treasures in the chamber. However, the big hulking man was now appropriately armed, which would make him considerably more difficult to deal with.

Ernest tapped the floor lightly with the butt of his spear. It was a prearranged signal between the two to allow the intruder to first become distracted by the other baubles in the room before launching their attack. With a keen sense of danger, the man moved not for the room's wealth, but back toward the entrance. They would have one final chance to smite this interloper. As he left the room, his back would be turned toward them. It would be then they would strike.

Defying expectations, the massive bulk of the outlander turned on his heels as he reached the exit and walked out backward. There would be no chance to strike a blow unnoticed from behind. Before they realized it, he was gone.

"Who does he think he is?" Bertrand inquired angrily.

"He looks to be off to settle a score with the wolves."

"Impatient cur. Do you think he'll be back?" Bertrand snickered.

"Unlikely."

"But he has the sword."

"True enough, but it's the cursed one. The Harbinger Blade."

"You mean the blade whose owner is destined to make him a usurper king but lead every assassin, plotter, and insane mage in the known world to his doorstep and those of his loved ones?"

"The very same." Ernest snorted. "I doubt he'll find it of much use."

"Its removal didn't even make the old man twitch." Bertrand indicated their lich master.

"No," Ernest agreed, "I don't think he much cares if it is gone either."

"So," Bertrand retorted, "Five card stud, Adventurer's wild."