



TEMPORAL SPHERE

Magical Power Corrupts – Magically

Using magic can be a risky business – from sentient swords who take a murderous dislike to their owners to a garden watering can whose spray only grows creatures of the undead. Lots of things can go wrong and when they do, it's never a good thing...

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From the outside, Rupert Campbell's house looked ordinary. Except for the fact, the gnome lived in a tower without any stairways inside it. The tower's design was intended to make it difficult for intruders, as there was no physical way to get to the upper floors. It was even warded against second-story men. Any ladder or rope which touched the exterior instantly shrunk to six inches in size. One of the local burglars prominently kept a collection of tiny ladders in his study.

A small roughly made sign hung above the main door. The text was carefully written in an expressive cursive hand. The letters themselves were finely wrought in silver and gold. It read:

Rupert Jamison Campbell, Umbral Gnome, and Magical Resolution Services.

The aforementioned gnome sat quietly in his comfortable upper study, reading a book when there was a knock at the front door. Despite all his other precautions, Rupert had still not found a good way to protect against traveling salesmen and itinerant cult members. He twisted his pinky ring to open a nearby portal and stepped through to the lower parlor. Opening the door, he found a very attractive looking human female on the other side. Rupert, however, had never really come to grips with what characteristics made human females attractive in the first place. They were all far too tall to suit him. He found height disturbing and could never understand why anyone would want to view the world from so high a vantage point. This one's attractiveness was probably related to the two large glands it was so prominently displaying. Especially in the dress she was wearing, or what would be more accurately described as a couple of thin strips of cloth. "Can I help you?"

She grasped both her hands together in front of her. "I understand you work in mystical remediation?"

He stared opened eyed. For a moment he was both staggered and pleased with the fact she not only wasn't a religious fanatic, but someone bringing him business. Rupert waved her in. "It's what the sign says. Can I get you something to drink?" he asked with a polite, but refined, air.

The woman smiled in the way one does in polite society so as to appear sincere without being genuine. "No, I don't think I can drink anything for a while. When you hear my story, I'm sure you'll understand why."

His lower parlor was a comfortable place with plenty of sunlight to make the guests feel welcome. But nothing of any true value... or magical import anyone would want to steal. And even if they did, Rupert had put a spell on the room to magically replace them. Rupert poured himself a glass of water from an ornate pitcher resting on a narrow shelf by the door. It instantly filled itself back up again. "Why the fuss? You could have sent me a message by pixie mail," he piped up taking a sip of the water.

The woman cringed. "I suppose, but I've always found the little blue creatures to be somewhat disturbing, don't you? All their flapping about gives me the willies. I don't know where they get the energy."

"Probably part of the training for the job. Shall we get back to your case? The reason why you've come?"

Her eyes darted about the room. Rupert noted she had the deepest green eyes. Quite rare in her species. They had the color of a deep-cut emerald. They were flecked with light green highlights. Which only made the dark green stand out more. "I was working in the laboratory. Trying to build a fish tank."

"I hear you can buy one of those at your average pet supply house. Which reminds me, I need to make a trip out to pick up some more stirges to deal with my noisy neighbors, but go on."

The young woman shrugged one shoulder. "I was trying to build a self-cleaning fish tank. Only I went one step too far."

Rupert shook his head. "You didn't."

"I did. I also made the tank self-feeding. So you don't have to be bothered feeding the fish yourself."

Don't tell me," Rupert snapped, "let me guess. A creature spontaneously appeared in the tank and ate all the fish."

"How did you know?"

The gnome gave her a wry grin. "It was a logical guess. Magical creatures are not only attracted to magic but like any animal, they can't resist an easy food source."

The woman gave the gnome a sheepish look. "But there's one thing more."

"You've got a Kraken."

"Well, yes."

"I'm not surprised. They have a well-known appetite." Rupert twisted his pinky ring. Through the opened portal stepped an oversize crow, almost as tall as the gnome himself. In all respects, the creature looked like an ordinary bird, except for the large white bag he was carrying over one shoulder. "This is Avid, my partner."

"Your partner is a crow?"

"Not exactly," Rupert remarked, "technically he's a tengu. They have the ability to see into the magical spectrum." Turning to his partner, Rupert explained. "Avid, we have a 529 episode."

"The unanchoring of an island into a floating kingdom?"

"No, you're thinking of a 528."

"Please don't tell me," Avid chirped, "we've got an unlicensed Kraken wondering about."

"Okay," Rupert snorted, "I won't tell you."

Avid glared at the gnome as if he was a prosecutor at a monkey trial. "What *did* you do?"

"It wasn't me," Rupert protested, "It was the little lady here."

The tengu shrugged his shoulders and scowled at her. "Didn't anyone ever tell you not to mess with the basic rule of the universe?" Universities had been teaching the rule for centuries. Constantly relating the sad, horror-filled stories of those who attempted to circumvent the oldest magical dictum on the planet... there is no such thing as a free lunch.

"I didn't think it would hurt anybody," the girl muttered.

The oversize crow sneered. Not only was he not in a good mood, but he also appeared to be happy to be condescending about it as well. “That’s what they all say. From the most horrifying of undead lich dictators to lesser-known investment bankers. The end result is always the same... and it’s never good. You’d do better disturbing the migratory paths of butterflies.”

“Still,” Rupert interrupted the bird’s tirade, “we’d better get down there and put a stop to things before the creature founds a business school.” Once again Rupert twisted the ring on his pinky. Another teleportation portal opened in the middle of the room, filled with swirling colors and flashes of shadow and light.

“Is it safe?” the woman asked.

“Safe’s a relative term. Should you use it to escape from a sinking ocean liner... definitely. To avoid paying for a parking spot for your chariot. Probably not.”

“The city tax collectors take a dim view of a magical decrease in their revenues,” Avid remarked.

“Speaking of which,” Rupert explained, “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask for payment upfront.”

“Of course.” She passed a heavy leather bag to the gnome. He took a quick look inside and then tossed the bag to Avid. He rummaged around the inside with his dark black beak. He pulled up a gold coin out of the bag and tossed it back to the young woman, who caught it with practiced ease. “We’ll keep the gems, but you can have the gold coin back. Gold just doesn’t keep its value like it did in the old days.”

Rupert took the young woman’s arm and led her into the swirling vortex of light and color, followed closely by Avid. Transport portal tubes were apt to give the non-magically initiated a serious headache. The typical journey was like being slapped in the face by 256 different colors. Imagine your stomach being driven to the inside of your skull. Pushing out your brains and forcing it to take up a new residence in your left foot. Now imagine all this is happening while you are being turned inside out. It should give you a rough idea of what it feels like to be teleported across a spatial divide. Don’t even get me started on what it feels like to be transported between dimensions or across time. There just aren’t enough pages in the universe to write down a description of those kinds of trips. Which I suppose is probably why you’ve never read one.

The girl had to swallow hard to avoid vomiting over everyone when the portal spit them out on the other side. She stumbled before managing to regain her footing. The scene looked like the aftermath of a hurricane and tornado political convention... or perhaps a meeting of the Flat-Planet Society. In the center of this catastrophe was a huge Kraken, its tentacles flying about wildly. The fish tank was nowhere to be seen. Most likely the creature had eaten it to protect it and to continue to feed off its magical energies. It was now of such a size, even a Roc wouldn’t have been able to pick it up and deposit it in some out of the way waterless desert. It was going to be a tough nut to crack, even for the renowned founders of Campbell and Company LLP GMAIC and MRCE.

Rupert put his hand on his chin. “This is going to be risky.”

Clucking his beak, Avid gave his partner a dirty look. “Throwing dice is risky. Betting on the stock market is risky. Growing skeleton warriors in your garden is risky. This is just downright dangerous.”

On top of everything else, the noise level was getting quite high. It was sort of a cross between a screaming dragon and half a million babies crying all at the same time. The wind was picking up too. No doubt the result of all the messy tentacle waving.

Rupert didn't think dispelling the creature would be a viable option at this point. Any good practitioner of mystic arts will tell you it's never a good idea to throw spells around when large masses of tentacles are flying through the air. You don't want your spells bouncing off to who-knows-where. If you think drug interactions are bad, try mixing spells from opposing schools. They tend to make university soccer rivalries look like laid back picnic lunches. Not to mention they leave a residue behind leaving the air smelling like burnt concrete.

Rupert wiped the sweat from his brow. "Hand me the book." He held out his hand to Avid.

"You sure you've got a good idea there?" the tengu replied.

The young woman not only appeared distressed but confused. "What are you talking about?"

"There's one thing crows and tengu have in common," Rupert observed, "They like to collect shiny things. Wellspring Tengu's are expert collectors. Inside the bag my friend here as a multidimensional book collection which would put any library on the planet to shame."

"It must be heavy," she shouted over the din.

"You have no idea."

Avid raised one eyebrow. "Are you sure you want the book, boss?"

"Unless you have a better idea."

Reaching into his bag, Avid pulled out a small leather-bound volume. It was a slim work, barely enough pages to be considered a pamphlet. There was no title on the cover, only a small embossed fish painted in gold. The tengu handed it over. Without even opening it, Rupert threw the volume at the maddened Kraken.

The creature swallowed the book like it was a dolphin catching a fish tossed in his direction, but nothing happened.

"What good was throwing the book at the thing?" the woman yelled.

"Give it a minute."

Before you could say underwater spearfishing, the Kraken began to shrink. Its size reduction continued exponentially until it became too small to hold the fish tank in its belly. The creature exploded and the messy, gooey bits were sucked back into the tank. Out popped three medium-size goldfish. Everything quickly shrank down to the size of the head of a pin and then disappeared out of existence with a loud pop.

"What alternative universe do you think it went to?" Avid enquired.

"I couldn't care less," Rupert replied, "as long as it's not this one."

The girl leaned her head to one side. “What book was it?” she asked Rupert.

“A Fish Out of Water.”

The girl made a move to give Rupert a rather seductive hug, but the gnome stopped her with a raised hand. “Don’t even think about it, toots. You’re way too tall for me. Besides the last thing I want is to have my head hugged like I’m some little kid. After all, I’m old enough to be your great-great-grandfather.”

Avid snorted. “I think we undercharged for this one, chief.”

“It’s one of the risks involved with getting our payment upfront.”

Twisting the ring on his pinky, the two disappeared into the open portal. When they got home, a man was standing outside his front door with a woman hovering around him. And when I say hovering, it was more like floating. She had long, flowing dark hair and she was completely naked. This wasn’t particularly astonishing; Rupert had seen this kind of thing before. But this woman looked as if she’d had a serious accident with a huge vat of bleach. She had a set of ice blue eyes capable of making a glacier jealous and smelled as if everyone was taking a stroll on the beach. Other than her ultra-pale complexion, she was quite painfully beautiful. Yet, they both appeared quite distressed.

“Are you Rupert Campbell?” the man asked with a disenchanting tone. He was dressed in an artist’s smock. In between the chalky marble dust clumps were several stains of still drying clay on his apron.

“That depends,” Rupert replied cautiously, “do I owe you money?”

“I want to hire you... if you are as good as they say.”

“I’m better,” Rupert insisted. “Why don’t we go inside and discuss the matter?”

Rupert showed them both into the front parlor. The gnome had designed the space for guests. It was filled with several overstuffed chairs, flanked by a few small tables. A large trunk was tucked away against one wall, under a window. The rug was a fine carpet of the Rosanian type, a stylish mix of dog fur, cat hair, and camel coats. It practically screamed, relax, you’re a guest. “Can I get you something to drink? Perhaps some caffeine-laced Ox milk, or some Troglodyte bubble juice?”

“No, thank you,” the man turned the hospitable gnome down politely. “My companion here is a Nymph and since she is a water-based creature she views drinking as a form of cannibalism.”

Picking up the cup of water he had been drinking from when his last client arrived, he noted the pained expression of the Nymph’s face. “Oh yeah, right... sorry.” Rupert put the cup back on the mantle. “What can I do for you?”

The man cringed. “This is rather difficult to explain.”

“Love potion?” Rupert suggested.

“How did you know?”

“If her eyes were staring at you any closer, we’d have to do a corneal transplant.”

"It's rather embarrassing to admit," the man blushed, "I mean, don't get me wrong, she's a great muse. One of my best models. But... you know... we can't even be intimate."

Both Rupert and Avid chuckled. "Of course not," Avid explained. "She's an amphibian. At some point, she'll lay eggs and you can attempt to fertilize them. I'm mean... if you're into that kind of thing."

The man shook his head.

"I didn't think so."

"Besides," the man's voice cracked, "I have to keep going out to sneak a... you know." He mimed drinking a glass of water. "If this keeps up, I'm going to die of thirst. Can you help me out?"

"Well, I'll tell you," the gnome shook his head, "Breakups are hard to do, but they are a walk in the park compared to magical separations."

"Tell me about it," Avid snorted.

"Can I get you a muffin?" Rupert asked. "I've got some blueberry ones around here somewhere."

"No, No. It's okay, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" the Gnome asked continuing to rummage around the room. "They'd be perfect for you. My aunt bakes them. They're quite dry."

"Look I don't want to be too difficult, but can we stop talking about food and get back to my problem?"

Rupert gave up looking for the muffins. "Alright straight to business. You look like the starving artist type and well, my fee is rather steep. Breaking a love potion is no simple matter... and there are the repercussions. Believe me, it's not pretty. You'd do better trying to break up over pixie mail."

The man threw a heavy leather bag at the gnome. "Can you afford this?" Rupert asked.

"Dad's loaded. This won't even make a dent in his weekly expenses."

Rupert open the bag up and poured a portion of the collection of gems onto a nearby table. The stones glittered in the sunlight. "Your father need any magical services? Spells cast? Wards installed?"

"Can we get back to my problem, please?"

"Yeah, okay." Rupert took out a piece of parchment from his leather vest and unfolded it. "I'll need you to sign this." He passed the paper over to the young man.

"What's this?"

"Just some standard paperwork. Magical intersession between two adults is a complex question." The gnome passed and ink well and a quill over to the artist. "This just says I'm not responsible for any relationship difficulties as the result of my intercession."

"But it's a blank piece of paper."

Rupert gave him a wry smile. “Not to worry. It’s a magical contract. It’ll fill itself in after you sign the bottom. It’s boring legal stuff anyway, you wouldn’t want to read it unless you were having a bout of insomnia.”

The young man grimaced, but a moment later he was scratching his signature across the bottom of the parchment. He handed the paper back to the gnome. “Okay,” Rupert snickered, “now we can get down to business.” The gnome started rummaging through the trunk. Finding what he was looking for, he handed a jar to the artist.

The man stared back at him impatiently. It was a nice blue glass jar with a thick cork top. Because it was glass it was easy to tell the jar was filled with sand. “What’s this?”

“Sand,” Rupert replied. “You see, Nymphs are water-based creatures. They don’t do well in the desert.” The nymph moved away. Giving herself some distance from the jar of sand, but never letting her eyes wander too far.

“What do I do with it?”

“Open the container and throw it on her.”

“Or don’t,” Avid added. “It’s strictly up to you.”

The artist stared for a moment at the jar. “Do you mind if I ask you a question? Why do you do this?”

Rupert raised one eyebrow. “For the money.”

“No, I didn’t mean... why don’t you live in town? Why do you live out here, in the middle of nowhere?”

The gnome released a big sigh. “What do you mean? I don’t like all the hassle and bustle in town. I just prefer to live out here with all my friends.” Rupert hesitated awkwardly. His forehead wrinkled and his face broke into a distorted frown. “Fine, you caught me. I don’t have a boatload of friends, okay? What I have are colleagues, acquaintances, rivals. Magic doesn’t lend itself well to building relationships. If you stay with someone long enough, you get to read their thoughts. Trust me, people aren’t too fond of letting other people roam around inside their heads.”

“What about the crow here?” He turned to the tengu. “Sorry, no offense.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not offended,” Avid offered. “If I was, you’d know it because I’d be pecking your eyes out.”

“Avid is the one friend I have,” Rupert admitted. “Tengu are resistant to magic.”

It occurred to Rupert; the artist wasn’t interested in his answer. He was just trying to distract the Nymph. She now returned to his side and the artist took the opportunity to open the jar. He flung the sand at her with some serious wrist action. The nymph was drenched in a rain of sparkling sand grains. She shook it off. From the look on her face, it was as if he’d just thrown a pile of manure at her.

“You little toad,” the nymph spat. Rupert could tell instantly the spell had been broken. “Stop looking at me with those roving eyes. Do you think I enjoy your leering glances? Think again you pervert. Why don’t you ever put clothes on your models?”

The artist looked insulted. “Nymphs don’t wear any clothes.”

“What? That makes it impossible for you to put your statues in a nice dress?” she shouted back. “And another thing...”

The two continued to argue as if they were angry opposing attorneys at a divorce proceeding. It was a shouting match, making Pro Wrestling look like a book reading club. Rupert casually walked over to the mantle and picked up his cup. He took a big gulp of water. This drew the nymph’s attention at once. The argument stopped and she stared at him as if her eyes were a pair of drawn daggers. Rupert made a big display of swallowing the water as she watched. “You’re disgusting too,” she remarked acidly.

“I’m sorry, is my drinking bothering you?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Then I’d avoid watching if I were you.”

“Come on,” the nymph said, grabbing the artist’s arm, “We’re leaving.”

The artist’s eyes darted about the room. He had a panicked look in his eyes. “Can’t you do anything about this?”

“Sorry, bub,” Rupert explained, “The love spell is broken. Anything you are experiencing now is the real thing. Nothing I can do. Besides, I think you’ve dabbled in more than enough magic for one day. Anything more would be seriously dangerous.” Rupert took another hefty gulp of water which resulted in the nymph dragging the artist out of the door and slamming it behind her.

Avid stretched out his dark wings and shook the feathers. When he felt they were back in their proper place, he folded them back again. “Not bad business for one day.”

“Yeah,” Rupert sighed, “but he’ll be back.”

“How do you know?”

“He forgot to put the sand back in the jar and take it with him,” Rupert snickered. “I have a feeling; he’s going to need it.”

When the sun went down, the stars looked farther away than normal. It was a moonless night, but the stars appeared dim as if the moon was at its brightest. Rupert spent some time at the window, trying to grasp the portents. He was busy, spending his time trying to determine what was going wrong when there was a knock at the door. At first, he tried to ignore it, but it continued. Finally, the gnome went downstairs.

The knocking became louder as he lit a few candles on the walls. The light was dim but adequate. When Rupert opened the door, he found Pym standing there. The gnome’s face changed from annoyance to outright disgust. “What are you doing here?” Rupert inquired.

Pym was a dark-robed necromancer. An overly tall human rival. He used his magic strictly for work with the dead. If you have a dead mother you wanted to have a chat with, Pym was your guy. The dark magic of the dead was always too risky as far as Rupert was concerned. Especially if it involved bringing the

dead back to life. Dead things were hard to control. If any part of their mind was still intact, they had a will of their own. If they had committed suicide... well, they could be downright ungrateful. And because the dead cannot be killed again, they can present a problem. Pym was famous for raising politicians from the dead at the insistence of their political party. The last thing you want as undead was someone with ambition. Without waiting to be asked, Pym forced his way inside.

“Who did you raise from the dead now? Another one of the king’s brothers? What’s the matter with you? You know they always want revenge.” Rupert glanced out the door, to make sure none of the king’s guards were running down the street. Finding the avenue dark and empty, he closed the door.

The necromancer parked himself in a chair with a loud flop. “Nothing so ordinary,” Pym explained. “I’ve been doing some work with shadows.”

Rupert frowned. “Have you lost your mind?”

“No. No. No. It’s not like you would think. They make great servants. There is no gray matter involved at all, so they have no will of their own. They simply do whatever you tell them to do... as long as it is not something overly complex.”

Smirking, the gnome sat across from the necromancer. The candles flickering on the walls created the perfect atmosphere of moving light and shadows. “Did you have them try to create new spells for you?”

“I wish I had,” Pym laughed. “It would have been better. No, shadows are good only for cleanup, fetching and carrying. Nothing more complex than sweeping the floor.”

“And the occasional political assassination,” Rupert added.

“Well, those are usually simple enough,” Pym replied. The necromancer gulped. “You know how you should only create one shadow at a time?”

“You didn’t...”

Pym looked over at the gnome with an embarrassed expression. “Well, I just figured if one is good, two must be better.”

Rupert buried his face in his hands, shaking it from side to side.

Looking pathetically at the gnome, all the color drained from Pym’s face. “Have you ever seen what happens when two shadows run into each other?”

The gnome lifted his face from his hands. “You know, I hate to use this term because it’s kind of dated, but you’re a moron Pym.”

“Yes, I know, but sticks and bones... sticks and bones.

“Don’t you mean sticks and stones,” Rupert corrected him.

“Not in my line of work.”

Pym asked Rupert to come over and see if he could help alleviate the problem. They argued about the price for a good ten minutes. Rupert didn’t even want to get involved. He wasn’t in business to help

business rivals, he explained. But Pym suggested an end-of-the-world scenario. This revelation only convinced Rupert to jack up his price even more.

“Don’t I get a discount?” Pym suggested.

“For what?”

“You know, fellow traveler. Related practitioner of the magical arts?”

The gnome didn’t look agreeable. “Look at it this way, I’m cutting my usual fee for silence. Mostly because I intend to tell everyone what a lunkhead you are.” Rupert held out his hand.

“You want to shake on it?”

“No, I want payment upfront.”

“Rupert, you know I’m good for it.”

Rupert crossed his arms over his chest. “Business is business,” he explained.

“Suit yourself,” Pym countered, “It’s an end-of-the-world scenario, coming to a town near you.”

“Fine. We’ll go now,” Rupert snorted. The gnome took a cane from the wall near the door and hit the top of the door mantle. Pym hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a bird’s nest up there. Avid appeared in the middle of the floor in a puff of smoke.

“This had better be good,” Avid snorted. “I was having this great dream. There were eggs everywhere. And I got to...”

“We don’t have time to get into your masturbatory dreams now,” Rupert interrupted the tengu, “We’ve got work to do. Get the sack.”

Avid grumbled. Although tengu don’t grumble so much as they squawk. It’s a highly unpleasant sound. Even Pym was covering his ears. The tengu grabbed the sack of holding which kept all his earthly possessions.

The three of them walked out to Pym’s place in the moonless night. In the darkness, Rupert could see gleaming white arcane lettering float across Pym’s dark robe. Defense spells. In the necromancer’s line of work, it was important to be well protected in the darkness. Plus it was a good way to avoid bill collectors. Pym’s house wasn’t an actual house at all. It was a cellar under one of the larger mausoleums in the town’s cemetery. The lab was located a few floors below the main house. It was always more efficient to be located close to your source of supply. At least according to all the best business schools. Rupert wished he had the Deans of all those institutes walking in front of him right now.

Because they were already outside of town, it was only a short walk. The wind started to pick up as they drew near. Clouds rolled in, covering the stars. Which only managed to make things darker. Rupert stubbed his toe on a rock. They didn’t like what they found. The cemetery wasn’t a normal cemetery anymore. Pym’s mausoleum was gone. In its place, there was a hole. The wind was roaring into it, dragging along leaves, twigs, and even the occasional gravestone. The place smelled cold, like an iced-

over lake with a bad attitude. Even though this time of year was high summer. Rupert crept as close to the hole as he dared, without risking being sucked in.

The gnome had to shout to be heard over the din. "You've made a black hole."

"Well, it is relatively dark down there," Pym retorted rhetorically.

"No, I mean a black hole. An object which has so much gravity, even light can't escape it. It'll suck the whole town in, then the kingdom and finally... the entire planet." Rupert raised one gnomish eyebrow. "Wait a minute, you knew this all along. This is your end-of-the-world scenario, isn't it?"

Pym gave the gnome a wry grin. "You've found me out."

"You're despicable."

"Naturally. I'll take your remark as a compliment."

Rupert turned to Avid, who looked distressed. "What do you do with something who eats everything?"

"Burp it?" Avid suggested.

The wind picked up to a thundering roar. It was now pulling bricks out of a nearby abandoned temple, which began to collapse. As the building disintegrated, a will-o'-wisp appeared in the darkness. The faintly glowing ball of light appeared to give them a reluctant grin at being discovered haunting the temple. Its face turned to horror as it was sucked into the vortex and disappeared.

Both Rupert and Avid were having trouble maintaining their footing as the whirlwind around them increase to a crescendo. Rupert grabbed a nearby tree to avoid being sucked in. He saw Avid slip past him desperately flapping his wings, but to no avail. At the last possible moment, Rupert grabbed on to the tengu, but he could only grab the bird with one hand. The wind was so fierce, Avid's feet were no longer touching the ground. The tengu held on helplessly, kept in place only by Rupert's tenuous grip on the tree.

Lightning flashed in the sky. The flap on Avid's bag was flapping around wildly. Out popped a baby grand piano from the bag and it rolled toward the hole like a ball. The strings twanged wildly on the instrument like a child banging on the keys as it fell with a final crash. The whole mess was followed by a line of oranges appearing from the bag and rolling their way into the black hole. Then the tree, the one which grew the oranges appeared, following its fruit into oblivion. These were pursued by a troop of well-dressed horseman. Each one of them vainly tried swinging their sword at the growing gravity well with no effect. Finally, a procession of books began flowing from the bag into the black hole.

"Noooooo!" screamed Avid. He let go with one hand and tried to staunch the flow of literature into the hole.

"What are you doing?" Rupert howled over the wind. Avid's other hand was beginning to slip from Rupert's grasp.

"My library," Avid protested.

"Let it go."

“That’s easy for you to say,” Avid snorted. “You’re not losing a lifetime collection of priceless manuscripts.”

“If you fall into the hole,” Rupert disagreed, “then you lose them all.”

At this point, Rupert was holding onto Avid with only the tips of his fingers. As he strained to retain his only friend, a massive black shape materialized from the bag. It had a difficult time extracting itself from the sack. When it emerged, Rupert could see the creature was all eyes and tentacles... except for the large, teeth-filled maw in the center. The creature showed no evidence of being affected by the wind and the brewing storm.

“Where in Hades did he grow?”

“Who? Him?” Avid reported, “His name is Junior.”

“You keep monsters in your bag?”

“Junior’s not a monster, he’s a soul-eater.”

“A what?”

“A soul-eater. He eats darkness.”

Junior strolled over to the hole as if he was having a walk in the park. He opened his mouth and his teeth started to operate as if he was working on a well-cooked Porterhouse. He was even drooling. Rivers of darkness flowed into his jaws. Although they whipped and flailed in resistance, much the same way as Junior’s tentacles were waving in the wind. The noise reached a level where even the loudest of screams had no more volume than a whisper. The scene was like a living nightmare of epic proportions. Even the lightning from the clouds was being pulled into the gravity well of the black hole. Rupert now held onto Avid with but a single finger.

In the midst of all this disaster, the roots of the tree Rupert was holding fast to with his other hand, started ripping themselves out of the ground. The tree tottered and shuttered. By now all the leaves were gone and the upper branches broke with a snap before racing toward the darkness in the hole. Without any further preamble. Rupert and Avid found themselves on the ground, with nothing to hold them back from the orifice seeking to eventually devour the entire universe. Even though they were on grass, they might as well be sliding down a ski slope. They clawed wildly at the ground. But it was all pointless.

It was only then they noticed the wind had stopped. They could hear the rustling of the leaves in the trees. The stars were back to shining with their usual vigor. Although Rupert swore, they were just a little bit closer. Glancing around Rupert could see Junior sitting near the hole. He had a grin on his face Rupert could only describe as child-like. For the first time in the creature’s life, it was sated. It was as if it had reached some kind of personal goal, like collecting 5,000 stamps or finishing an impossible crossword puzzle. With a loud pop, it then disappeared out of existence, leaving them alone in the remains of the cemetery.

Pym, who had been hiding behind the cemetery wall the entire time, poked his head up. “Well, there’s something you don’t see every day, am I right?”

Avid stood up and started preening his feathers and Rupert brushed some of the dirt off his cloak. “I hope you have a lot of insurance,” the gnome remarked gazing over at the hole, formerly the location of Pym’s laboratory and home.

A puzzled expression crossed devious Pym’s face. “Why?”

Rupert walked over to Pym and started dragging him off by his robe. “Let’s talk about my bill.”