



The LIVING dead

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“The prophecy!” howled the little old woman. “Your coming was foretold!”

Every head in the crowded, smoky confines of the Silver Goblet tavern turned to peer at the goggled-eyed, humpbacked crone. She jabbed her index finger at a tall, young elf woman in golden robes and a man with a lute slung over one shoulder. The two swiveled in their seats, regarded the harridan with equal degrees of puzzlement, glanced at each other, then tried to concentrate on their drinks. Although the pair sat on adjacent stools at the bar, they seemed not to know one another. The elf woman sipped self-consciously from a glass of white liquid while the man guzzled his second mug of ale.

“It is you! The lute and the—the hair! The wild black hair! It is prophesied!” She let the last word end in another good screech for emphasis, but undercut herself by asking, “Or is that ‘prophesized?’”

The elf woman was obviously a traveling wizard—her waist was hung with leather bags and scroll pouches, her shoulders were crisscrossed by packs laced with pockets and sleeves, and a black

wand tipped with a flame-colored stone was thrust through her belt. She opened her mouth to ask if the old woman might accept a copper coin and leave, but the lutist held up his hand. He was curious to hear where this was going. The wizard, Mialee, held her tongue but could not restrain a smirk. The bard had finished a set of ballads half an hour earlier. It had been impossible not to notice him staring at Mialee while he sang. Happily, his attention diverted the moment the first mug of ale hit the table in front of him.

His stare was not that surprising, she supposed. His softly pointed ears betrayed his partial elf blood. Other than him and Mialee, there were no other elves in the place. He probably thought she'd be a pushover to his brooding musician act.

The man grinned and ran a hand through a thick head of black hair. As the shriveled creature argued with herself about word choice in public prophecy, he broke into a melodious laugh that boomed throughout the smoke-filled tavern.

Mialee sipped her milk and rolled her eyes.

"It was a message," the woman whispered. "A warning, of black days and horrors to walk the earth." She sidled up to their stools and rather rudely stuck her nose between them. The woman might have been four and a half feet tall, but she looked even shorter than that because a grotesque hump and twist in her spine forced her into a bent stance. Mialee wondered how the woman could walk without a cane to support herself. The old body was bent down as if tremendous weights were hung about her shoulders. She wriggled her backside to the bar and sat on the wooden foot rail below the counter.

The tiny woman peered up at the pair with twinkling, mischievous eyes. "You don't believe old *gakkakkgek*—"

Mialee blinked and turned back to her glass of milk. This was not the woman's name, but a sound the hag made when preparing to spit something truly monstrous onto the bar floor.

“—old me! Listen up!”

She jammed her fingers into either knee that sat a few inches from her tiny, cauliflower ears, and cackled as the pair jumped in tandem. The old woman hacked and spit once more for good measure, then launched into a singsong ditty that made no sense whatever to Mialee.

“One and one and one is three,

“One for the elder, one is for me,

“The Buried walks beneath thee,

“The Buried walks beneath thee,

“Elf on my left, lute gold and prudent,

“Elf on my right, black-haired student,

“Elf yet to come, guardian true,

“One elf is the teacher,

“The last one is his muse.

”Death beneath the sleeping mount

”But wait they must for the day he counts.”

Something about the way the old woman looked at Mialee made her uneasy, and it wasn't the smell, the twisted hump, or the bug-eyed stare directed somewhere above her right ear. The old woman smelled of illusion. She also had terrible grammar.

Mialee spoke the soft elvish words of a minor detection spell to take a closer look at the cackling little creature.

“What?” said the man on the stool next to hers.

Mialee faked a few coughs. “Nothing. Prophecies. Never had any use for them.”

The woman raved about flame, death, and the end of the world as Mialee focused the spell. The old crone was wearing an illusion all right, it was all over her. Mialee couldn't make out what sort of creature was hidden beneath the magical energy. Whatever she was, the crone had not actually threatened anyone, but only warned them about the end of the world.

“Old woman,” Mialee said, “or old man, why do you disguise your true appearance with illusion? I admire the strength of the spell. Who are you? What is your true shape?”

“Wha—er, arr! Fire, and doom, dead walk the earth! Await the one in the garish robes with the silver hair! It is foretold!” the crone babbled quickly, suddenly sounding much younger than she looked, and much less sure of herself.

The half-elf beside Mialee gaped but said nothing. Mialee heard him hum a short refrain without touching the lute, then gasp. She didn’t need to look to feel the subtle, magical vibrations of his detection spell. Interesting. She knew some performers could harness arcane sorcery with harmonically sensitive energy, but she’d only met a few. Most were con men, or worse.

The crone straightened and grew by a foot as she spread her arms and backed to the door. The little woman turned and bolted out the swinging doors of the Silver Goblet Inn.

Mialee returned to her milk. The bard stared at her for a second, then tipped his ale glass.

“Can I do something for you?” Mialee asked.

The man with “lute gold and prudent”—had the little troll really said “gold and *prudent*?”—laughed. “Not right now, miss. By the way, I wouldn’t recommend ordering much more of that milk. I know where Gurgitt gets it.”

Mialee eyed her milk queasily and pushed it away. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

The elf woman reached into a pack and removed a small, leather-bound book embossed with silver runes that stated simply “Spellbook” in Elvish and a magical quill that never needed dipping. She scribbled a few equations and notes in arcane script. Occasionally Mialee ducked her head to the bar with frequent, furtive squints at the yellowed pages. She was not keen on her bad eyesight becoming public knowledge.

Life in the cold, northern forests could be dangerous for a traveling wizard, and she'd done plenty of exploration over the past decade or two. Trickier to explore were the secrets of earning a living, which usually involved delving into some hole in the ground or setting up shop in a place like Dogmar. The knowledge she gained was worth the trouble, though. She'd learned that from old Favrid. Now she sat in this stinkhole because of him.

An old teacher of hers, Favrid had summoned her to this olfactory gauntlet of a tavern. He was a day late. And he wore garish robes. Whoever the strange little woman had really been, Mialee was not surprised she'd known the old man. Old Favrid knew a lot of people stranger than that.

The wizard woman found the entire city of Dogmar distasteful. The place simply smelled. Thousands of dwarves, half-elves, humans, halflings, and gnomes, maybe even half-orcs, were crammed together in a seemingly random jumble of wooden buildings on the edge of the only decent harbor for miles. The roads made no sense, and Mialee had gotten lost constantly over the last day and a half trying to navigate the stinking place. The odors of all these people, most of whom were in serious need of a bath, mingled with the smell of dead fish wafting in from the docks. This was smothered in the aroma of a hundred different foods coming from inn kitchens and street vendors. Under it all flowed a rich current of sewage.

If the smell was bad, the people themselves were even harder to take. Four times she'd caught someone trying to pick her pocket. Even when she threatened to turn them into toads—truthfully, an empty threat—criminals continued to plague her.

The front doors to the tavern swung inward, and Mialee cast her gaze over the smoke-filled room again, hoping to see her old teacher, the wise and ancient Favrid. The man was impossible to miss. He was almost seven feet tall, had flowing white hair to his

waist, and a tendency to outrageously mismatch the colors of his silk robes.

Mialee wasn't at all surprised when the old man didn't stride through the doorway. Instead, she directed her gaze downward to see a gang of three rough-looking halflings. One strutted in an outlandishly expensive-looking suit. Behind him tagged a burly, nearly five-foot male in an undersized vest, torn pants, and a rope tied around his waist. He would call the halfling in the suit "sir" every chance he got. Bringing up the rear was a red-haired female in hand-sewn fur clothes and a fur cape. Wrapped in all that fur, Mialee half expected the fire-haired little woman to bark like a dog as she passed the far end of the bar.

The halfling dandy called out to the barkeep for a round of ales and headed to a darkened table in the rear. The redhead followed, while the halfling giant waited at the bar to carry the drinks. The Silver Goblet wasn't lavish with its waiters. In nearly two days, Mialee hadn't seen anyone working in the tavern except the bartender/owner and a few bitter, angry dwarves hauling trash and struggling to repair the soot-streaked, smoking fireplace. Every one of the dwarves looked as if he'd been rolled in ashes, and none of them were tavern employees. The whole place ran on Gurgitt, who never stepped out from behind the bar. Rumor held that there was a Mrs. Gurgitt in the kitchen, who cooked like a madwoman and liked to set rat traps. Mialee heard them snapping all night. She tried not to let her mind jump to any conclusions.

One last halfling entered, slamming the wooden slats of the swinging door back a little too conspicuously, and the bard beside her jumped a little too high. She frowned at the man beside her, lost in his third ale, then decided to frown at the halfling instead. He was a fat, bearded little fellow wearing a cloak sewn together from semi-tanned animal hides much rattier than

the redheaded female's. Next to a brown eye patch, one monocular orb studied Mialee for a split second, then followed his companions into the tavern.

Another thief, Mialee concluded. This was where Favrid had to meet her? Why in the name of holy Elohnna did it have to be in this lawless hellhole? Why did that halfling stare at her just now?

Mialee had been stared at plenty of times in her hundred years, but something about the halfling's gaze made her check for her purse. The small, leather bag hung safely from her belt. Mialee had been traveling for years since she struck out on her own, but generally tried to avoid cities if she could help it. She'd take open tundra over a place like Dogmar.

Favrid actually loved places like this. During her apprenticeship to the old elf, he'd consistently found ways to arrange their lodging in the most crowded and malodorous section of the biggest city around. Lacking a city, he'd make do with a large town that thought it was a city, as was the case here. Favrid claimed to revel in the diversity of experiences and people. The old man insisted it taught him far more than any book he'd read or any lecture he'd witnessed.

But Mialee also knew the old man's sense of humor. He knew she hated staying in cities. He was probably just trying to teach her a lesson about humility, or observation, or odor control.

So she waited.

Mialee hadn't drunk anything stronger than milk in decades. She'd tried wine a few times in her youth, and the result had always been headaches and general disaster. Some elves had the constitution to consume alcohol as freely as humans, more were completely immune to its intoxicating effects. A few, like Mialee, had an almost allergic reaction to liquor that greatly enhanced the effect of intoxication, but also accelerated it through her metabolism at dizzying speed. In short, when Mialee drank, she became twice as drunk in half the time and finished the experience with

ten times the hangover. Her mother told her to enjoy it, at least while Mialee was young. It ran in the family, evidence of “royal blood” or some similar nonsense.

Mialee respected her mother, but sometimes wondered if the woman was insane. Waiting for her old teacher to show up in the chaotic, smoky tavern, she speculated that insanity might be something that happened to every elf in old age. Elders probably kept it from anyone under five hundred.

Maybe her old mentor had been trying to teach her a lesson by meeting in the tavern under the Silver Goblet sign. Or maybe Favrid had simply forgotten their appointment—*he* was over a thousand years old. Mialee sighed and stared at the door, willing Favrid to walk through.

The doors remained still. Mialee waved to the barkeep, who was busy pouring golden liquid into a fluted glass. The hulking man nodded and waddled over to her with the glass still in his hand.

“Gurgitt, do you have any water that I could actually see daylight through?” asked the elf woman.

A wide smile cracked the man’s thick, black beard, and he set the fluted glass on the bar in front of her. “I can do better than that, mistress elf,” the barkeep rumbled conspiratorially. “This here is from the gentleman.” He jammed a finger in the musician’s face and added, “and it’s coming out of your pay.”

Mialee recognized when someone was paying too much attention to her. She supposed that all those years staying in cities with Favrid had taught her something, after all. She pushed the glass back to the barkeep.

“Save it for someone who will appreciate the vintage. Maybe a cup of tea?”

The barkeep shrugged, nodded, produced a funnel from somewhere beneath the counter, and waddled off to return the liquid to its bottle.

The bard shifted to look at her, and Mialee readied herself to disappoint him. She had hours of study remaining tonight if she was going to finish her spellwork.

“Ow!” Her barstool squealed as the half-elf’s hand moved behind her with surprising speed.

Mialee whirled in her seat, very nearly falling to the floor. To her surprise, the bard’s hand steadied her before she went over. She shrugged off his grip.

The bard held a halfling ear in his other hand. The ear was attached to the halfling with the eyepatch. Mialee noted with mild disgust that the patch looked like the dried ear of some large canine. The little man clutched something tightly to his breast. Something, Mialee noted, with two familiar leather straps.

“Ow! Devis, what are you—OW! Ow, ow, ow, ow!” the halfling cried. The little scoundrel had nicked her pouch of spell components. She arched an eyebrow at the smelly, pint-sized thief.

The halfling snarled and recovered some grasp of his vocabulary.

“Devis, what the hell!” he boomed in a surprisingly deep voice.

The bard simply stared at the little man, and Mialee actually saw him make a slight, rolling ‘get on with it’ motion with his finger. He was scheming all right. The halfling and half-elf were blatantly in cahoots.

“She’s just begging to be robbed. Look at her!”

“I am,” the bard replied, “and I don’t think she’s very happy with you right now, Hound-Eye. You see,” he said through clenched teeth, “my new friend . . .” (he twisted the halfling’s ear at the word “friend”) “. . . and I just happen to be named together in a prophecy. Big, local legend. She and I, and some schoolteacher. And maybe we should just be left alone.”

The bard waggled his eyebrows. If they weren’t targeting her, the pair’s incompetence might have been funny, but now they simply irritated Mialee.

The bard, still clutching the halfling's ear and Mialee's shoulder, turned to the elf woman.

"Miss, meet Hound-Eye, the sharpest pickpocket in Dogmar. Or at least the sharpest one in the Silver Goblet," he added, casting a look around.

"That's my sp—" Mialee caught herself before she revealed the pouch's true nature. She'd learned long ago the danger of casually revealing the source of one's power, and she'd nearly blurted the secret. "—my pouch full of birdseed. Birdseed," she finished lamely. "I have this bird, and . . . Look, I study magic, and prophecies are a load of —"

"Hound-Eye, I believe you have something belonging to the lady," the bard said, twisting the halfling's ear a bit. Hound-Eye let out a yelp and dropped the familiar leather pouch to the tavern floor. The thief kicked the bard hard in the shin, wriggled from the half-elf's grasp, and scrambled out the swinging doors.

The bard watched the thief leave and reached down to rub his shin. He hooked the pouch with one finger and tossed it up over his shoulder to Mialee, who snatched it from the air. "Your birdseed?" the bard grunted, then straightened.

Mialee tied the pouch into place at her waist, tucking it safely under her wide, leather belt. "Thank you . . . Devis, is it?"

"The one and only," the bard said, bowing with just a little too much flourish. "And please, don't mention it. We don't see many elves around here. Perhaps in return for my good deed," he continued, settling into the empty stool next to hers as he signaled Gurgitt with a wave of his hand, "You might join me for a glass?" The barkeep caught the movement and waddled to comply.

"No, thank you, really." Mialee reached instinctively for her purse. "I have no head for wine or ale. Let me give you something." She fumbled for a silver piece. Devis leaned onto the bar, turned to the elf woman, and held up a palm.

“Please, you wound me,” he said, “I’m not looking for money. Just a few minutes with the most beautiful girl in Dogmar.”

Was he serious?

“May I ask your name?” Devis pressed. He flashed her a lopsided smile she suspected was meant to be utterly disarming. Despite her irritation, she had to admit he was on to something there.

“Mialee,” she replied in surrender as Gurgitt arrived with a small pot of minty-smelling tea and a foamy brown ale. He placed the former before the bard, the latter in front of Mialee, then lumbered back to his work.

“I wouldn’t think of forcing liquor on someone with no taste for it,” said Devis, nimbly swapping the drinks. “Don’t see many elves around here,” the bard said over a gulp of ale.

“I’m not surprised,” she said, pouring tea into a small, ceramic cup. The elf woman glanced at the man’s ears and added, “How do you stand the smell?”

“You get used to it,” he laughed. “Besides, mother was human.”

“Lucky,” Mialee said. “Mine was a lunatic.”

She resigned herself to the conversation and sipped at the tea. To her surprise, it was quite good. Mialee grinned despite the unpleasant atmosphere. She had a weakness for musicians.

“Mialee, you’ll pardon me for saying so, but you don’t fit in here.”

“You’re right, Devis,” said Mialee, “I’m not looking to. I’m here to meet a friend.”

Devis took another slug of his ale. “I can help. I know this town pretty well, maybe I can help you find your friend.”

“I doubt it,” Mialee replied. “He’s not from around here, either. In fact, I have absolutely no idea why he wanted to meet me here.”

Mialee, have you found Favrid? A voice reverberated in her temple.

“No, Biksel, I haven’t, and I’m busy being prophetically wooed,” she blurted to the air. Normally, she would have communicated

silently with her familiar, but the raven's sudden, mental intrusion caught her off guard.

"Pardon?" Devis asked.

"Nothing," said Mialee.

You locked me in the bloody wardrobe, Mialee, the voice reverberated in her head. It smells, and there's nothing to eat. And I can see what you're doing.

So what? You can always see what I'm doing. I've gotten over it. You're locked in for your own safety, Biksel.

Mialee had had it. She flashed a mental image to him of the previous night, when the little raven had very nearly been hacked to pieces by the innkeeper's wife after trying to make off with some food from the kitchen.

If you're really hungry, I can have Mrs. Gurgitt bring something up, she added as she swallowed a mouthful of tea.

No, that's all right, Biksel replied, and Mialee could have sworn she heard him sigh. *But I'll be keeping an eye on you.*

Fine, Mialee told her familiar. She saw the bard looking at her quizzically. *Just keep quiet for a while, could you? I might have someone here who can help us find Favrid.*

Is that a musician?

Shut up, Biksel.

Her familiar did not reply, which Mialee took as compliance with her request. Sometimes, you just had to know how to think at the bird.

Still, she knew Biksel would be using their connection to keep tabs on this conversation. He was getting impatient.

"All right," Mialee said, "Maybe you can do something for me." She swiveled in conspiratorially. "I'm looking for a thousand year-old elf named Favrid. About five and a half feet tall, mostly bald. Talks to himself a lot. Terrible short-term memory. Likes garish robes. Probably has a raven on his shoulder."

Devis bit his lip in a show of concentration, but Mialee could see he didn't recognize the name.

"Sorry," he explained, "doesn't ring a bell. Do you think your friend might be in trouble?"

"I don't know what to think," Mialee said, and frustration overcame the pleasant effect of the tea. "It's ridiculous! I received a message to meet him at this tavern. And it had to be this week."

"Is he a scholar?" asked Devis.

"A wizard like me," Mialee replied, the calming tea and charming bard making her abandon her usual reticence. "He was one of my teachers. But I haven't seen him for ten years. Last I'd heard he was researching some tomb he discovered in the southern desert."

"Maybe he was simply delayed," Devis suggested.

"He was only specific about one thing—the date I was to meet him here," Mialee said, shaking her head. She took another sip of tea. "That part seemed important."

"So what will you do now?" the bard asked.

"Keep waiting. I guess I can give him another day, then I'll begin looking for him." Mialee assessed the bard. "You know, you might be some help there, too. If I have to find Favrid . . . there's a name he mentioned. I don't know whether it's a person or a place."

"You don't know where to start looking," Devis said. "I would be honored to help."

"I am certain you will be," Mialee said. "There were two names, actually. They sounded familiar, but I can't seem to find anyone who wants to talk to me about them. The words seem to spook a lot of people."

"Morkeryth?"

"It's Mork—" Mialee blinked. "How did you know that?"

"It's a ruin, not far from here. Maybe a couple of days' foot travel on the road, then a day or so to get through the forest of Silath. I know a few trails," Devis said.

“Silath? The other place was called “Silatham.”

“Silatham!” the bard exclaimed. “Heard of it, but it’s a myth. Ancient elf village, supposed to be loaded with treasure and weapons. Every few weeks someone comes into Tent City—that’s a halfling camp on the Morkeryth ruins—and announces they’re going to find, or have just found, Silatham, ‘lost outpost of the elves.’”

“What are you, some kind of ranger?” Mialee asked.

“No, just a wandering bard with a half-empty ale glass, I’m afraid.” He signaled Gurgitt for another round. Mialee refused more of the tea.

“So, tell me about this ruin.”

Devis slapped a coin on the table and took a swallow from his refilled glass. “It’s a ruin, but it’s not uninhabited. Morkeryth spooks most people here in Dogmar, but that makes it a good place for people to—well, hide.”

“What kind of people?” Mialee asked.

“People who don’t want to be found,” the bard explained unhelpfully.

The elf woman opened her mouth to ask another question as the wooden door slammed inward with a loud crack.

A skeletal, purplish-gray, humanoid shape hunched in the low entryway to the Silver Goblet. Its leathery, gray skin was covered in the remnants of tattered traveling clothes so colorful they would not have looked out of place on a court jester had they not been caked with gore and mud. In one gnarled fist it clutched what looked like a small, hairy foot. Blood ran down onto its bare chest from its open, toothy mouth. The thing’s empty eye sockets flickered red as it flung its jaws wide and screeched. Lightning flashed, casting the skeletal figure in silhouette.

“And those kind, I’m afraid,” Devis said softly over Mialee’s shoulder.