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It won't be like this for ever.

That's what I keep telling myself.

However bad it might be now, working from dusk till dawn in a mouldering old castle in the middle of the sea, one day it will all be different. It has to be.

One day I'll make my master proud of me. One day he'll give up his experiments and leave his laboratory and come outside again. Maybe he'll even smile at me the way he used to and ruffle my hair and tell me I'm like the son he never had . . .

'Brat! You useless, malingering fool, where are you?'

Judging by the high level of burning rage in his voice, I'd say today is not going to be

that day.

I shove the huge pile of rotten meat I've been chopping into the wheelbarrow and hurry towards the door, my arms straining from the weight.

'BRAT!' My master roars again, and I can imagine the vein on his forehead bulging with fury.

'I'm coming!' I shout back, acid bubbling in my belly, wishing I wasn't so slow and useless and pushing the barrow even faster.

I'm almost at the door when I remember I need my keys. They're not on the table where I left them, or on the sideboard. It doesn't make any sense unless . . .

'Sherman!' I shout. 'Sherman, have you stolen my keys again?'

I get down on my knees and poke my head under the oven.

Sherman sits in his nest of old rags, his big heavy turtle shell covering his squat bristly boar's body and mismatched lizard legs.

'I need my keys, Sherman.'

Round eyes blink slowly at me from his wrinkled lizard face.

'Please Sherman, I'll be late,' I plead.

'Brat work too hard,' he says, gruff and stubborn as always.

'I do not! I'm fine,' I insist. 'And I'll get in trouble with Lord Macawber if I'm any later. Please!'

Sherman grunts and shifts his heavy body so I can see my ring of keys hidden in his nest. I breathe a sigh of relief.

'Thank you, Sherman. I'll see you later when I finish work. We can play then, all right?'

He snorts. I've made that promise before but I'm always so tired by the end of the day I end up falling asleep in front of the fire.

'BRAT!'

I jerk at my master's summons and bang my head on the metal oven rim. Swearing under my breath, I snatch up my keys, clip them to my belt, grab the wheelbarrow, and half run along the hallway and through the open door that leads down into the basement.

The sloping path is made of rough stone and twists around the centre of the tower in a narrow spiral. My overloaded barrow wobbles

and squeaks on the way down.

‘Where are you, boy?’ Lord Macawber bellows again from his laboratory below. ‘I need you here now.’

‘I’m just going down to feed the creatures on level four,’ I call back.

‘You mean you haven’t fed them yet? Great giblets, boy, could you be any more useless?’ His voice is loaded with disappointment.

‘I’m sorry, my lord. I’ll be as quick as I can, I promise.’

He doesn’t bother replying. He knows as well as I the consequences of letting the monsters on level four get too hungry.

I pass his laboratory as quietly as possible. The path beyond grows dim, the torch lights in the walls gutter, growing weaker all the time because Lord Macawber is too busy to recharge them with the magic they need.

I’m forced to make my way in the near dark, heart thumping, nerves stretched and thin . . .

‘RAH!’

I scream like a startled banshee as sharp claws rip into my shoulder and the barrow tips over, dumping its contents all over the

slope. My feet slip and slide in the mess as I try to escape and I scrape all the skin off my knee on the rough wall.

It’s almost a minute before my mind stops panicking enough to pick out the sound of Tingle’s laughter and I come to a dizzy halt.

‘Tingle! What are you doing, you great barnacle? You nearly gave me a heart seizure!’

Tingle claws her way up my back and settles on my shoulder.

‘Yay! Tingle be very scary,’ she tells me, puffing out her chest with pride.

‘Tingle be massive pain in the bum,’ I snap. ‘Look at the mess you’ve made. And I’ve hurt my knee now.’

Tingle’s furry little cat face peers at me with downcast eyes.

‘Not Tingle fault. Sherman be saying Tingle not scary, so Tingle must prove she is very scary, no?’

‘No! Tingle must ignore Sherman and stop being naughty.’

Tingle’s long monkey tail wraps itself around my neck and she rubs her cheek against mine.

‘Tingle not naughty Brat-Brat! Tingle never naughty. Sherman be very naughty for saying all those bad things about Tingle.’

I sigh and bend down to start scooping the offal back into the barrow, wincing at the sharp stinging in my knee.

‘All right, trouble, I have to get back to work now so unless you want to come with me to feed the monsters . . . ?’

As expected Tingle leaps off my shoulder with a terrified squeak and disappears up the path.

With a loud huff I pick up the barrow and start pushing. The front wheel wobbles worse than ever, my knee throbs with pain, but I ignore it all and keep going.

It won't be like this for ever, I remind myself again. And again. And again . . .



When I finally reach level four I unlock the heavy wooden door, heave up the crossbar, and shove it open. A waft of stale air, heavy with musk, dung, and ammonia, greets me and makes my eyes sting and my belly heave.

I have to force myself to enter. Every instinct I've got is screaming at me to keep out, to turn round and run away but I can't. The monsters need to be fed, no matter how terrified I am. It's bad enough the wretched beasts are locked in cages, without starving them as well.

I concentrate everything on keeping the barrow straight. It's no easy task with a wobbly front wheel and a limp but the hungry eyes peering from the cages on either side keep me motivated.

Each giant cell houses a monster. A creature that crawled from my master's unhinged imagination and was stitched together from the parts of many different monsters, before being dragged back to life using the magical art of necromancy.

Well, my master calls it art.

It's more of a sickness if you ask me. But people can be cured from sickness can't they? They can get better. I've been trying to help my master recover but it's not easy. The disease has taken hold of him and turned his brain sour.

The creatures snarl and shriek when they smell the rotten meat. A variety of scaled and hairy arms with curved talons or sharp claws reach through the bars trying to snag their meal straight from the barrow.

They'd try to snag me too if they could but I worked out long ago that none of them can reach me if I stay slap bang in the middle. The wobbly front wheel is making it harder than ever but there's no room for mistakes on level four. Two and three are dangerous enough but four, four is a nightmare made real. (I try never to even think about what's kept on level five. I just throw some carcasses down there every week or so and slam the trapdoor shut again.)

I'm nearly at the end of the corridor now, where the empty troughs are piled. I try and ignore the ravenous eyes that follow me, the soft splatter of slobber that drips from their jowls, sliding over sharp ivory fangs desperate for flesh.

My flesh.

A shiver ripples down my spine but I keep moving. The sooner I feed them, the sooner I can escape.

I fill up the troughs with scoops of offal and slam them into place through the bars of their cages. The monsters tear into their meat like they've been starved for weeks and ignore me briefly while they eat. I hurry back down the corridor towards the door with my nice light barrow.

But something flies out of the third cage and hits the wobbly wheel. It falls off entirely and the cart lurches sideways. I go with it, crashing into the bars with a strangled scream as I'm snatched up by strong arms and held tight against the bars.

Noxious, foetid breath drifts from the mouth behind me; a callused tongue licks my neck, making me shudder with disgust and horror.

'Let me go!' I yell. 'Let me go now! I'm warning you! Lord Macawber will be angry with you if you hurt me!'

The creature makes a strange noise. Is it laughing?

Panic pumps around my body, making me buck and squirm till I'm about to rip myself in two but it's no good. I can't escape his death

grasp.

'If-if-if you eat me now there'll be n-n-no one left to feed you,' I warn him in desperation. 'You'll all starve to death!'

'Not if weeee esssscapess firsssst . . .' it hisses, squeezing my chest, crushing it against the bars, one clawed hand reaching for the keys attached to my belt as if this is all part of some fiendish plan.

The thought of all these monstrous creatures being let loose sends me flailing around like a fish on a hook. I search for something—anything—to help me and my bulging eyes fall on the guttering torch on the wall, just out of reach. I twist my tortured body as much as I can to get my fingers close enough but the pain in my chest is making me feel faint and there are black spots in front of my eyes.

Just when I think my bones will crack I make a huge, desperate effort and my fingers curve around the torch handle. I yank it off the wall and thrust the flames behind me.

The creature roars back in shock and drops me to the floor. I land on my bum with a hard

thud and crawl away from the cages before finding my feet and rushing through the door to safety.