

The Last

Lucas glanced down at the steely knife in his half-hand and then, shaking his head, looked up at the beast. The beast filled the room, and to all indications this was a dining room for upward of thirty people. How the creature had even entered the room was only known to the cursed building itself.

Beyond the beast Lucas' staff rested against the wall where he'd propped it upon entering this seemingly innocuous chamber. It was of no use there. Again Lucas flicked his eyes to his dagger, the blade was clean and the hilt was comfortable even when grasped by the two fingers he had remaining on that hand. Lucas had used this knife for years, to eat his food; now it was the only weapon he had left.

A multitude of cuts and wounds littered the beast's body but not one wound bled, as if the beast was impervious to the touch of steel. The mercenaries' dead and mangled forms lay still on the ground, testament to the strength and cunning behind that animal face. Lucas glanced behind him, to make sure the boys were safe. Marcus held his knife so tight his knuckles seemed to glow white, he still hadn't cleaned it; Trevi crouched wide-eyed behind his brother, a wooden club held gingerly in his grubby mitts.

Lucas *had* told them not to go to Frostgrave.

Out of nowhere, he laughed, a throaty call straight from the heart. He and two pre-pubescent boys were all that stood against this beast the size of five oxen. The words of the old campfire song come unbidden to his mouth.

"All alon' a' th' en' of a n'evenin'..."

This ludicrous situation had started at Last.

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The village was so small it barely justified having a name, it couldn't even lay a hundred percent claim to that— it had to share its name with the inn and, quite frankly the inn had it first. It was however the last bastion of civilisation before the waste that surrounded the former glory of Frostgrave. There were some buildings between the village and Frostgrave, even a tavern, but they weren't part of civilisation weren't part of the Empire. The village may not have looked it but it was true civilisation: most people there knew the Emperor was named Jorgun. Over ten people knew he was Jorgun the Third and one person even knew his inside leg measurement (although the less said about the tailor the better). A circuit judge arrived every two years to hold the assizes and deal with the last twenty-four months of misdemeanours, unjust actions and bitter resentment. Once or twice a year a mendicant priest would arrive for similar reasons. Increasingly these priests left in the direction of Frostgrave rather than back to the cities. They left, yes, but as yet no priest had returned.

The inn wasn't refined enough to have a painted sign, instead hanging from a pole poking out from under the thatch was a (used) cobbler's last. Probably this was as much indicative of the local population's literacy as the innkeeper's artistry.

It might have been some form of joke, if it were none of the locals thought it in the slightest amusing to refer to the establishment as The Last Inn and to simply refer to both it and the village as 'The Last'.

Truth be, it *was* the last piece of civilisation before the waste that surrounds the city of Frostgrave, although calling it civilisation was nearly a slander to the rest of the civilised world.

The boys arrived at the inn early one cold and windy morning. All skin and bone they looked as if they hadn't eaten for days.

They stumbled along the main, and only, road in Last, bleary of eye, chapped of lip and sore of foot, finally realising the only place that didn't appear completely inhospitable was the inn. So the proprietor had done something right.

They pushed the door open and stumbled into a large badly-lit room that was filled with tables and chairs, most of the latter being upended on the former to afford the one moving body space to work in his thankless task of sweeping the floor.

A fat, balding man pushed the broom around. He wore a plain linen smock with a leather belt round his middle, tied not buckled. Wooden shoes poked out from under the long smock as he shuffled around the room. He had the blood-shot eyes of a man who didn't get much sleep and whose blood pressure was well outside of his doctor's recommendations.

"Shut that door, you're letting the leaves blow in!" were the first words the boys heard, and they were too true, the wind seemed rather keen to get the last few autumnal leaves out of the street to the chagrin of Bruno the innkeeper and vocal possessor of broom.

Bruno stood up straight, happy to pause his travails and eyed the two youngsters with a critical eye or two, "What do you want?" he enquired of them, 'I'm guessing you've not come for the ale?"

The two boys looked up at him, their mournful gaze nibbled at his soul as the eldest spoke, "We're looking for our Uncle." At the silent response from Bruno the younger boy whispered into his ear and then the elder continued "He went to Frostgrave to earn his fortune."

"Went to earn his fortune in Frostgrave, did he?" Bruno said, making time to ponder his next actions, nearly ready to throw the boys straight back out into the cold where they came from, "Lots of people fail to come back from there." He sniffed loudly, "and you two are a mite young to go traipsing off to somewhere that dangerous on your own."

"Uncle Matthias is all we have," the boy said, his eyes meeting Bruno's, his mouth fixed in a flat line. Again the younger boy leaned up and whispered in his ear, causing him to shake his head and whisper to his brother, "No, Aunt Mintrude doesn't count." The younger whispered again and the elder nodded at him.

The elder boy stood up straight trying to show his strength of character, then his shoulders slumped and the last vestige of strength fled from his voice, "We're hungry, do you have anything we can eat?"

Before he uttered the words, Bruno knew the answer, “Do you have any coin?”

Synchronised the boys shook their heads.

“Well, you look strapping young lads,” he said, taking his weight off the broom and held it out, “Sweep the floor well and I’ll see if I can find something out the back,” turning to leave he spun back and eyed the younger boy, “Don’t forget to pick the leaves up! “

Bruno pushed the door open to the kitchen, his haven. He focussed on managing drink and food and was popular with his patrons for both. A huge pot bubbled on the stove – there was always a huge pot bubbling on the stove, it may not always have the same content, sometimes it was a little thin on actual meat, and some would say nutrition, but it was always hot and always spicy and, should someone want a bowl of something that filled those criteria, was just what the farmer ordered. Every few days Bruno would give the pot a half-hearted wash, but within a few hours it would be back to the soup-cum-stew mix that was known and loved for miles around.

Bruno’s father had been the original cobbler that had given the inn its name, but the place had not really thrived until Frostgrave began to thaw and people realised that wonders and riches could be found within. Being the last point of civilisation at the edge of the Empire meant that a lot of folk passed The Last and most of them seemed to pop in for a quick mug and bowl of civilisation until they carried their hopes off to the crumbling spires of Frostgrave. Fewer returned this way, sometimes because they had not yet found their fortune and were still delving into the frosty dungeons and icy ruins, sometimes because they had left in a different direction – to the wildlands of the north or the jungles of the south, but most often because Frostgrave was a dangerous place and death stalked its rubble-filled streets.

One service that Bruno offered to the explorers of Frostgrave is that he would accept the coinage they dug up as payment for his services. He didn’t exactly accept the coins at face value but then again that practice stopped as soon as you were out of shouting distance from the frozen city. The innkeeper accepted the gold coins from Frostgrave’s vaults as being equivalent to the Empire’s silver and the silver coins from ancient Felstad as being sufficient to cover the value of a copper coin bearing Emperor Jorgun’s rather ungainly visage. This was not quite as daylight-robbery as it appeared at first value – the coins were not ‘Of The Realm’ and so would be highly taxed by merchants in any Market Town or City, the squanderers of Frostgrave’s wealth were most often more interested in returning to the city well stocked than they were converting the coinage into something technically legal. So once a month or so Bruno would hitch a ride at Tinker’s Bridge into the depths of civilisation to a goldsmith he knew. Together their partnership has been proud of the new jewellery that they sold and so, slowly, the ancient coinage turned back into legal currency.

Bruno spooned two bowls full of his stew and, pocketing a pair of small wooden spoons, returned to the tap room. The boys were by the door, the one sweeping dust out of the portal and the other vainly attempting to throw loose leafs out, only to have them blow back in again a few seconds later.

“Grubs up!” Bruno called, “You can finish up later!” He placed the bowls on the nearest table, slid himself onto the opposing bench and placed the spoons carefully next to the food.

The boy dropped the broom and turned, only just remembered to pull the door completely shut, then rushed over to the table with his brother.

The boys seemed to slide onto the bench, grab the spoon and shovel the first few mouthfuls down in one motion. There was a little spillage due to their enthusiasm. Only a small amount of the spillage was wasted as they wiped up the large drops with a spare finger and sucked that dry.

“Hungry?” Bruno asked redundantly as the bowls quickly emptied themselves down the young gullets. The elder boy stopped eating just long enough to nod and then bent back down again to reduce the space between bowl and lips. “Have you two come far?” They boys were in no state to answer until the bowls emptied.

“We’ve been walking for three weeks,” the elder said, “Since Dad died.” His brother leaned over and whispered in his ear, the elder shook his head and told him “They don’t need to know about that,” then turned back to face Bruno. “Thank you for the food,” he said and for once in this inn the thanks weren’t ironic.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Bruno smiled, “I’m Bruno, this is my inn,” he explained.

The boys glanced at each other for a second before the eldest spoke.

“I’m Marcus,” he said, pointing at his chest, “This is Trevi,” he continued his pointing, this time at the younger.

Again the youngest, Trevi, whispered into Marcus’ ear. Marcus, again, shook his head.

“How far is it to Frostgrave?” Marcus asked, “We want to find our Uncle,” he repeated from earlier.

“Frostgrave is a very dangerous place for young boys,” Bruno explained, “It’s full of monsters and men driven to madness you know.”

“We have to find Uncle Matthias,” Marcus stated again. It seemed their only goal.

Trevi pulled Marcus’ head down and whispered into his ear, pointing at the staircase. Bruno’s eyes followed the finger. A figure stepped down into sight, a woman.

“This is Mathilda,” Bruno said, “My partner.”

The woman walked towards the table, carrying a pigeon, wearing a dark, full dress and a warm smile. It was good that she was smiling because in the wrong light she could be considered a frightening woman. Easily five foot eight tall she had short hair and an incredibly curvaceous body, like some well-fed amazon warrior in wool. Were the boys older their gazes would have stayed long on her bosom, but they seemed entranced by her entire being.

“Your wife?” Marcus asked, unsure of the way the innkeeper had introduced her.

“Oh my, no,” Bruno said verbally backpedalling himself, “My business partner.”

Marcus’s eyes focussed on the pigeon as the woman slid onto the bench next to Bruno.

“We used to keep pigeons,” Marcus said. Trevi quickly poked him in the arm and without bending to hear his complaint Marcus told his brother, “You were very young at the time.”

Mathilda glanced at Bruno, “Grey Rat and his crew will be here before sundown.”

“How many?” Bruno asked.

“He’s got five left, including, for some reason that incompetent apprentice of his.”

“How that boy survives I’ll never know.”

“Who’s Grey Rat?” Marcus asked, intrigued.

“He’s a wizard,” the innkeeper explained.

“He’s been in Frostgrave for nearly six months,” Mathilda added, “His message says he’s in need of a feast and fine bedding.”

“He’ll eat what I’ve got in the pot,” Bruno grimaced.

“And he’ll have the same rooms as usual,” his partner added. Finally, slowly, she turned to face the boys. It seemed as if she’d been trying to avoid looking at them. “And where is your father, young men?” she asked them, fixing Marcus with a hard stare whilst passing the pigeon to Bruno.

Marcus took a second to answer, unnerved by her eyes, “He’s dead,” he said quietly. Trevi pulled at his arm to attempt to gain his attention but to no avail.

“That’s terrible,” Mathilda said, “Poor things, orphaned like that.” She stretched her arms out and stroked Marcus’ forearm.

The bird chirped, more uneasy in Bruno’s arms than Mathilda’s, whereas Mathilda’s touch on Marcus’ arm made his twitch backwards.

“It didn’t set right did it,” she stated, not really asking. “How did you break it?”

“An accident,” Marcus mumbled. His brother rose up and whispered at him again. “No,” Marcus told him, “They don’t care about that.” He seemed unnerved by the questioning. Bruno noticed the boys’ nervousness and decided the subject needed to go away from broken bones.

“The boys have been sweeping up for me,” he told his partner, “I was thinking of offering them a job helping out around the place.”

“It would be nice to have some help,” Mathilda said, smiling softly at the boys, “Although I can imagine they would like a fair rest after such long travels.”

“We don’t need a job,” Marcus stated clearly, “We’re going to Frostgrave to find our Uncle.”

“Frostgrave would be too dangerous for boys of your age,” Bruno said as kindly as he could.

“I’m nearly thirteen!” Marcus stated with pride, “I’m nearly a man.”

“Lots of men go to Frostgrave,” Mathilda added, “A much smaller number return.”

“He’s got to be there,” Marcus said his voice a touch petulant, his head bowed, “He’s all we’ve got.” He looked up, “Maybe that Grey Rat knows him!”

“You should stay here and talk to him then,” Mathilda stated, “He can help you decide what to do next.”

Trevi scooped up his last spoonful of stew. He seemed to have enjoyed it, or at least the amount that he managed to get down his throat rather than over his face.

Mathilda clucked. "You come with me young man, and we'll find a cloth for that face," she said standing up and holding out a hand to Trevi.

"I'll finish the sweeping," Marcus stated as he stood, "As payment for the food."

"If you finish the sweeping and tidy up," Bruno smiled, "You can eat and stay here tonight."

Marcus just nodded in acknowledgment and returned to the broom.

With his brother being pampered by the large woman, Marcus quickly got to work with the broom. He was making swift work when he got to the back of the tap room and saw a bundle of rags lying on a bench, hidden behind one of the benches. He propped his broom up and squeezed in past the table and grabbed hold of the rags – they looked like garbage and definitely looked within his remit of 'tidying up'.

As his fingers reached out the rags suddenly spun round and an arm darted out of the pile and a hand, missing half its fingers grabbed at Marcus' arm.

A face appeared, dirty, unshaven with wild hair and one wide eye.

"Don' go t' Fros' gra'!" the words came misshapen from the shocking face. If Marcus hadn't been so keen to pull his arm away from the recumbent figure he may have noted the way the man's jaw fitted so badly his words slurred.

Bruno appeared, "Now then Lucky," he said in a calm voice, "Leave our poor boy alone. He's only trying to tidy up." Bruno's fat fingers grabbed at the hand holding Marcus and peeled away the fingers.

With a little difficulty the man sat up. It was probably a man anyway, it did appear to have two arms and legs, a head and torso, but in addition to his missing fingers his arms and legs were bent. A dirty rag was wrapped around half of Lucky's head covering his left eye.

"Don' call me tha'," the figure spat the words out of his deformed chin, his one eye glaring at Bruno, then spinning back to focus on Marcus again. He leant his head forward.

"Don' go t' Froz' gra'," he repeated, "Ya won' fin' yer nuncle there," he added, shaking his head and finally, "Iz danger'uz." 'S' sounds came from his damaged face as 'Z'ds.

Marcus shuffled behind Bruno, whilst the innkeeper chastised the tramp.

"We give you a good bench here and a warm place to sleep at night," Bruno stated, "There's no reason to go round scaring the boy."

Lucky looked up at Bruno, "He zoo'd b' zcar'd," he growled, "Froz' gra' is no' a niz'e plas'."

Bruno reached a hand out and patted the tramp gently on the shoulder.

"It's ok," the innkeeper said kindly, "The boys aren't going to Frostgrave, and we won't let them get hurt, will we?" The two men stared at each other for a moment, chubby innkeep and scraggly tramp. Lucky finally twitched his head away and, with obvious pain, stood up.

“I’ go’ zum knittin’ t’ do,” he stated and shuffled across the floor and out into the street.

Bruno sighed as a couple of handfuls of leaves blew in through the doorway.

Shaken by the strange encounter, Marcus accepted Bruno’s hands on his shoulders as they turned him towards the fresh detritus.

“Let’s see those leaves gone,” Bruno suggested, pushing Marcus gently back in the direction of the broom.

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Come the evening, Grey Rat and his retinue were holding court at The Last. They had arrived just before sundown and had quickly commandeered the tap room, pulling three of the benches together and the Grey Rat taking up the space at the top of the table. The tap room was full, this seemed to be the go-to place for the whole town of an evening.

The ‘Rat was expounding forth on the adventures he’d played an, always, major part in since time began, or so it seemed.

Sat to his left, perched on a couple of stools and being kept away from the beer were Marcus and Trevi.

“Why are you call Grey Rat?” Marcus asked, not considering the character’s dull apparel and his long nose to be enough reason.

“Well,” the Rat expounded, “I didn’t use to be a Rat, I used to just be a Mouse, back when I was an apprentice.” He smiled at the memories, his thin lips together and twitching, “My master and I came to Frostgrave when we first heard of the great thaw, we knew there were fortunes to be made.” Again a smile, this time some of his teeth showed, “Oh yes there are fortunes to be made in Frostgrave, my lads.” He took a swig of his beer, sloshing only the minimum that was considered polite in these parts, “In our first foray into the city we were ambushed by a Northern Barbarian and his woman as we attempted to pry some jewelled eyes from an idol’s face. My master was felled in an instant – none of the wizards were used to using their magic in combat when we first came to Frostgrave, but I was younger and lithe, in those days,” smiling, the Rat slapped his paunch, “I shot an elemental bolt at the woman and disintegrated her, the barbarian lost all control and came slathering at me like a lunatic, waving his axe in wild circles. I slid in under the axe and slipped my knife into his gullet.” Another swig was quaffed, “That was when I became the Rat, mouse no longer. I stripped the barbarian and his woman and my master of all their worthy goods and bade a hasty retreat out of the city.” The man bent down to bring his eyes level with the boys, “And that’s why I keep my apprentice on a short lead!” He sat up again and readied another quaff before he realised his mug was empty. “Mouse Droppings!” he called and his apprentice, an underweight lad of about twenty with hair that looked never washed and the faint fluff of a man’s first beard upon his chin, rushed up.

“Get me another drink!” The Rat bellowed. With the sigh of the oft-put-upon Mouse Droppings took the proffered mug and pushed off through the crowd to locate the elusive bar staff. Marcus turned to watch the apprentice go, he was amazed that anyone could be called Mouse Droppings to his face and not respond, but maybe that was the apprentice’s real name, he thought.

“Your apprentice knows Lucky!” he said, seeing the tramp accost the young man.

Grey rat turned round, just too late to see money pass from Lucky's half hand to Mouse Dropping's, "Lucky, Lucky, Lucky," he called out with some small malice in his tone "I didn't realise you were still allowed to live here you useless excuse for, I can't even bear to call you a wizard and I think you'd be a useless excuse for any group of mammals you found yourself among!"

Lucky turned his rheumy eye to the Rat, and just glared. The tramp's eye slid to note Marcus and Trevi and the rapt look on their faces as they watched the Grey Rat verbally tormenting friend and foe alike. Lucky shook his head and slid through the crowd and out the front door before any more words could be passed. The Grey Rat laughed out loud, a guffaw that was part forced, part natural.

"There's not a beast on this world as unlucky as old Lucky there," he said turning back to his audience, "No one has entered Frostgrave that many times and come back poorer and more wretched every time!"

As he hobbled out of the door a hand touched his shoulder and the tramp turned his head.

"Mat'," he said by way of greeting to the landlady. She fixed him with her eyes, a hard stare. In reality she was probably a good few inches shorter than he, but his legs and back were bent from old injury so he looked up at her, her wide eyes imploring him: "Help them, Lucas" she encouraged. It was the first time in months he been called anything other than his eke-name, "They'll slip out tonight, I know it - after hearing all the Rat's stories." In response, Lucky, or rather Lucas, shrugged an it's-not-my-problem shrug. "Their mother died giving birth to Trevi," Mathilda said in a low voice tinged with danger, "Their father was a drunk. He hit them; anyone can see that the break in Marcus' arm didn't heal properly."

"We've all brok'n bon'z," Lucas said through his bent jaws. His eye stared at her with a steely glint, "Zom'on fail'd th'r faml'y oblig'tion," he spat.

"And what have your family obligations done, Lucas?" Mathilda accused, "How many soldiers died while you failed to find your inheritance?"

"Oblig'tion," was all Lucas said, his brow furrowed and he met Mathilda's stare. Finally the landlady sighed and bowed her head, Lucas thought he saw a tear slid down her nose, but it was dark and he could have been imagining it.

"They're just boys," Mathilda forced the words out, her head still bowed.

Lucas' turn to sigh, "I try," he said in a resigned voice, "Bu' 'member ho' 'ell my laz' trip wen'." He waved a hand at her, "I go an prepa'," he told her, turning back and shuffling off into the dark.

Mathilda pulled the door and slid back into the tap-room, she scowled as the first thing her eyes alighted on was the Grey Rat telling stories to the rapt brothers.

"She had raven hair and ruby lips, and sparks flew from her finger tips," the Grey Rat said, describing some encounter with a witch he'd had at some unspecified amount of time in the past. Mathilda scowled, most of his stories were like that - they never involved any of his current crew and all seemed to have a nameless apprentice at his side, and given how he tormented Mouse Droppings - someone should really find out his real name before he dies, she made a mental note - he'd have made it clear if the suffering apprentice was also his current one.

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At some late hour in the night, potentially even an early hour in the day Bruno pushed the last drunk out of his door. A number of the locals had waited for the Grey Rat and his retinue to take to their beds; they were good entertainment, worth the price of a few pints to hear the wizard's tall tales of life and death and weird happenings in Frostgrave.

Marcus and his brother were already dozing on a bench, heads together, so Bruno shook them gently, he only needed them half-awake. "I've made up a couple of pallets in the kitchen," he told them, "It'll be warm in there all night – I don't let the stove go out." He helped the boys up and they walked eyes only barely open into the warmest room of the inn. He pulled their shoes off, immediately wishing he hadn't and shaking his head at the bad workmanship of them, and then tucked them into the small cots he'd set up, "You get a good sleep, boys," he told them in a warm voice. "Don't worry your heads about Frostgrave and your Uncle, that's a problem for another day."

Bruno shut the kitchen door as quietly as he could and made the best of tip-toeing up the creaky stairs. He needn't have bothered. As soon as the door closed Marcus sat up, fully aware and completely awake. He touched his brother on the lips. Trevi opened his eyes in response and understood the signal.

Quieter than church mice, given that the ones in Frostgrave have been known to party before now, the boys slid their legs off the low beds and to the floor, their feet questing for their too-recently removed shoes.

The stove gave off a warm red glow which made their escape from kindness all too easy. Marcus quietly counted the creaks of the stairs and listened to them recede into the distance, at some point where he decided that they'd quietened enough he stood up and slid quietly over to the kitchen's rear door.

The noise the bolt made being slid back seemed loud enough to wake the dead and Marcus held his breath for a count of ten before gently pushing the door open.

Gently didn't help. The door still creaked, but by this time Bruno's head had reached his pillow and he was making more noise than this. In her room, sat at a writing desk Mathilda looked up as if she'd heard something, shook her head, finished writing the sentence and dusted the page down with some sand. She flicked through the diary, she'd obviously been keeping this for a long time because the handwriting on the pages at the beginning was quite different to the words she'd penned tonight. She sighed then took herself off to her bed, saying a quick prayer to all the gods whom might be listening to look over the boys before sliding into a fitful sleep.

The boys stepped out of the door. Bruno and Mathilda had been nice to them, but they needed to get to Frostgrave, "We have to find Uncle Matthias," Marcus said as if by rote. "He'll know what to do."

Wary of making more noise the boys left the door ajar and navigated round to the front of the building and the main road. This being Last the road officially ended at the edge of the village, as far as the Imperial Census was concerned, but unofficially the road continued in the direction it had for the past thousand or more years.

The sky wasn't too overcast, so there were some stars glowing, although a moon would have been more welcome. When a road hasn't officially existed for a millennium there is no one to fund maintenance, and so the boys found the way quite difficult.

Trevi looked back wistfully at the Inn before it totally disappeared into the cold night. Marcus heard his sigh and didn't know how to respond. The people had been nice to them, but they needed *family*.

They continued on the rough excuse for an unofficial highway. For once Trevi spoke aloud, there was no one else here and so he didn't pull Marcus' ear or whisper, "I wish there was a light," was all he said.

"Li' thiz?" said a voice just behind them, as a low yellow glow illuminated the boys and the roadway around them. The two boys spun, a small but still dangerous looking knife appeared in Marcus' hand as if from nowhere, Marcus pushed Trevi behind himself. "Z'only me," said the tramp they'd met earlier, he stood behind them, resting upon a staff, the tip of which was glowing, creating the light Trevi had wished for. Beside him, wrapped up against the cold, was a man, probably anyway, he was very wrapped up.

"Why are you following us?" Marcus demanded, waving his knife at the two figures.

"'m not followin' anyone," the tramp said, "'m goin' to Froz'grav' m'zself."

"Who's that with you?" Marcus was full of questions tonight, "He wasn't at the inn."

"'z my frien'," the tramp said. He turned to look at the figure, six-foot tall and broad as the day is long, the figure stood silently, swaying gently as if drunk, although he didn't swear and cuss the way their father had when in that state.

Lucas smiled, as well as he could, to try to offer a kind and gentle outlook to the scared boys, but his lips weren't all there and a few too many teeth showed through the gaps, which made his gentle smile look rather scary to young children. Pity. "Well," Lucas continued, "'m goin' thiz way," he pointed towards the far-off Frostgrave, "Y' ca' wal' wid me an' share th' li'," he offered, "or y' ca' sta' there."

He started walking, resting heavily on his staff, his friend didn't immediately follow so he turned back, "C'mon Zam Bee," he ordered, "Thiz wa'."

Marcus was getting used to Lucas' speech by now, "Your friend's name is Sam?" he asked as the two men walked past, "And you're Lucky."

Lucas stopped, "Lucuz," he said, "M' name's Lucuz. No' lucky." He said something else under his breath that sounded to Marcus as if he was cursing the Grey Ray. Lucas was now ten paces beyond the boys. He turned back "Ar' y' goin' t' Froz'gra' or no'?" he asked.

Trevi pulled Marcus down, they were in company now, and whispered in his ear. Marcus thought for a second, then slipped his knife away, took Trevi by the hand and rushed to Lucas and Sam, eager to get back to the circle of light.

They walked on, in verbal silence through the night, Lucas hobbling, Sam shuffling and the two boys striding so as to keep up. There was the occasional exclamation of pain when one of the boys stubbed their toes on the uneven ground, but the men seemed perfectly happy to walk in silence and the boys had nothing to say. Marcus' hand rarely strayed far from his knife; he wasn't sure why these two adults had turned up and why they were interested in having the boys for company so was wary of their presence. Internally he did concede that having someone about who knew about Frostgrave might help the find their Uncle.

The eastern skyline began to show signs of dawn, and it brought to Marcus' mind the old rhyme the boys' father had used to sing:

Red sky in the morning,
Shepherds warning.
Red sky at night,
Your curtains are on fire.

Marcus was never sure why his father laughed at that point, possibly it was because they didn't have much in the way of curtains on their windows, only shutters.

The silence was broken, Lucas turned to the boys and asked, "Bre'faz'?"

The boys both made noises of agreement and soon enough Lucas had got a fire going and had pulled a pan and a jar from his backpack. Sam sat on a nearby rock, you would have said he was just staring into the distance, but he wore a wide brimmed hat and had a woollen scarf wrapped so much round his face you couldn't even see a glint of his eyes.

"Sam doesn't like the cold does he?" Marcus asked.

Lucas thought for a moment before answering, "He doezn', na'." He poured the contents of the jar into the pan and rested the pan carefully on the fire. "D' y' t' li' beez?"

Marcus peered into the pan, "Beans?" Trevi was next to him in a trice, peering at the cooking, he tried to pull Marcus down but Marcus just smiled and told the tramp, "They are Trevi's favourite." He smiled, "Even I can cook beans."

Marcus and Trevi had never eaten beans from mugs before, but Lucas hadn't packed a full dinner service. Marcus and Trevi got spoons, Lucas used a fork.

"Doesn't Sam want any?" Marcus asked, pointing at the fourth member of their party.

"He' n't hungry," Lucas said, not looking up from his mug o' beans.

Suddenly Sam stood up and pointed down the road. He didn't say anything, just pointed. Lucas stood and peered in the direction indicated, the direction of Frostgrave.

"Pe'pl' r' comin'," he said, "Ea' up." Lucas bolted the last few mouthfuls down and the boys followed suit. By the time they'd kicked dirt over the fire to still its flames even Trevi could see the four men walking towards them.

The men wore armour, the one trailing at the back had metal plates whereas the other three just thick leather. They walked with obvious sadness, heads bowed looking at the ground. The metal-armoured one at the back was the only one whose eyes even rose from the ground.

"Shall we hide?" Marcus asked.

Lucas squinted his eye and, after a moment's thought responded, "Yez, y' tw' hi'," he told them pointing at the most conveniently-sized rock a few yards back up the road, still within earshot.

Lucas told Sam he could sit down again and he stood in the centre of the road, leaning on his staff.

The men spotted him and they raised their heads and approached with hands resting on sword hilts. The metal-armoured one walked past the other three and, motioning for his men to stop, he made the last fifty yards alone.

“Cap’n,” Lucas said by way of greeting, “Fr’m Froz’gra?”

“Yeah,” the soldier said as confirmation. Lucas had seen the look in this man’s eyes before.

“Bad?” he actually managed a whole word.

“Wizard disintegrated,” the man responded, “Four of my men dead.” His voice quivered in his pain at the deaths of his comrades in a way it hadn’t when he’s mentioned the wizard.

“Ar’ y’ lookin’ f’r mor’ w’rk?” Lucas asked, aware that this could be an indelicate question to a man who’d lost half his troop.

“Hang on,” the soldier said, “You’re the one they call Lucky? What are you doing going to Frostgrave? I thought you’d given up on your futile quest?”

“Nam’s Lucuz,” Lucas insisted, although he wasn’t sure he’d be able to make it stick, “And I’ ‘ookin’ af’er a coup’ kidz.”

“Kids?” the soldier asked incredulously, “You’re taking children into the City?” Lucas could tell he’d been to Frostgrave more than once and been burnt more than once by the way he could hear the capital ‘C’.

Marcus rushed out from his hiding spot, “He’s not helping us,” he insisted, “We’re looking for our uncle and these men,” he waved a hand in the general direction of Lucas and Sam, “are just tagging along.” He looked at Lucas, “We don’t want your help,” the boy told him. The insistence of the youngster impressed the soldier, he made an executive decision that his troop might not want to back him on; he wasn’t going to let two children this young go to Frostgrave unaided.

Lucas looked at the soldier, who in turn looked at the boys then held out his hand to the tramp, “They call me Captain Turnip,” he said, “Please don’t laugh, my grandfather invented some stupid crop-rotation idea and changed the family name to suit.” He looked at Marcus and Trevi but spoke to Lucas, “We’ll travel with you for a bit, back to the City,” he said, “Usual shares,” he added.

“Us’l shr’z,” Lucas nodded gripping the man’s hand in his half-hand.

The captain turned Lucas’ hand over in his and stared at the gap where two fingers were missing, “You really did nearly lose life and limb didn’t you?” Lucas gave a one-shoulder shrug, then nodded towards Sam.

“C’ll h’m Zam,” he told the captain, “He’ m’ fr’n,” he added with meaning, pushing another glance towards the boys.

“Zam, oh Sam,” the captain responded, a small smile on his lips, “I take it he’s not the talkative type?”

“And he’s not very hungry,” Marcus added to the conversation, the nuances of the adult’s conversation passing him by. Marcus then remembered he had an objection, “But we don’t need these men,” he said to Lucas and then added, “We’re just looking for our Uncle,” to the captain.

Trevi was pulling at Marcus’ arm, and he feverishly whispered something pertinent.

Marcus stood up straight. “If you’re coming with us, you have to remember that we’re in charge, we’re looking for our Uncle, we’re not looking for anyone or anything else,” he said to both men. Then to the captain he added, “Can Trevi see your sword? He’s never seen one before...”

Following a small bout of sword examining, Captain Turnip went back to his men and Lucas finished packing up the breakfast site.

“Is it far to Frostgrave?” Marcus asked, realising he’d never asked that one important question and wondering exactly how much longer it would be before they found their uncle.

“Sh’d be th’r b’ ni’fa’,” Lucas said, wrapping the dirty cups up in a cloth.

“Nightfall?” Marcus confirmed.

“‘f we don’ daw’dl,” Lucas added.

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By mid-day they could see the points of the highest spires of the city. As the party, except Sam, “enjoyed” another meal of beans Marcus squinted into the distance trying to make out the shape of the city. He was enjoying the beans, but was a tad concerned that their only foodstuffs for the near future would be legumes covered in bland tomato sauce. Even his father had cooled meat on occasion.

For now, the internal warmth was welcome; as they approached Frostgrave the weather had turned quickly from autumn to winter – the trees by the roadside were now bare of leaves and the temperature had plummeted since yesterday. Marcus quizzed the men about this and, in deference to Lucas’ jaw, Captain Turnip responded.

“It’s still winter in Frostgrave, mostly. It snows there even when it’s summer back in the Empire. Remember, a few years ago it was completely covered in ice and magic that strong doesn’t fade quickly. I’m told that people have found areas of the city that are miniature deserts and other places that aren’t cold, but most places I’ve been there are still icicles hanging from the roofs and thick enough snow on the ground to make snow men,” then remembering his audience, his eyes suddenly widened, “But don’t,” he added quickly, “Make snowmen that is,” his head shook, “I’ve seen stranger things come alive in that city, there’s no reason to make it easy for the magic. The last thing you want to see is a six-foot round ice-monster coming at you!”

The afternoon’s trek would have been utterly miserable and the cold would have been soul destroying if every step didn’t bring them closer to the city. Every rise in the road meant they could see more detail and Marcus helped Trevi practise his numbers by counting the towers; but they quickly passed beyond Trevi’s mathematics capability.

“We’ll arrive at the North-East Gate round about nightfall,” Captain Turnip told the boys, “We’re not travelling as fast as we could. Lucas and Sam go slower than you or I can, but we’re not leaving them behind – it’s always fatal to visit the City without a wizard.”

“Sam’s a wizard?” Marcus asked, both credulous and incredulous in one go, and wasn’t pleased when Turnip laughed.

“No, Luck... Lucas is a wizard,” the captain caught himself, then added with a grin to himself, “Sam’s... not a wizard, not by a long chalk.”

“I’ve never seen Lucas do Magic,” Marcus stated, “Are you sure he’s a wizard?”

“I’m sure,” the captain replied, “Oh, I’m sure.”

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Captain Turnip removed his helmet and scratched his head, he looked behind him at the party. The going had not been as fast as he’d expected or rather not as good as he hoped. Lucas’ legs had suffered great injury in his past sorties into Frostgrave and so he hobbled fairly slowly along the rough road. The “man” called Sam stumbled along in a shambling walk, and the boys... Turnip shook his head, the boys ran forwards, they ran sideways and backwards, investigating every strange looking rock or dip in the land to see what wonders were hidden there. The boys were an absolute nightmare and likely to get the party killed.

Technically they were the patrons of this journey, although Turnip has been promised payment by Lucas. Turnip only just trusted the wizard, the stories of his multiple attempts at Frostgrave were widely circulated, but all the stories said that he was good at covering his debts.

Turnip slipped his helmet back on and glanced over at the setting sun. Yes the journey had taken too long. The wizard came close enough for the captain to call, “Are we staying the night out here, or shall we find somewhere sheltered to rest inside?” Behind him the city rose in drunken majesty, the towers of Felstad were a thing of legend, most of them hadn’t survived the thousand-year freeze and of the ones that had survived the majority leant at alarming angles, seemingly ready to topple at a moment’s notice. Only a hundred paces away the city gateway loomed, the gates long since crumbled to dust, the walls either side barely full enough to keep out a stiff breeze let alone dangerous animals, but the exquisitely carved gateway stood proud, a monument to ancient brick and concrete works.

As if on cue a wolf howled in the distance. The two boys stopped their meanderings and sped to catch up with Lucas and Sam. Turnip’s men stood to attention at his side, the animalistic howling worrying them far less than the memory of their last visit to these walls. Their captain had assured them that this was a quick visit to scare the children more than anything and to then accompany them back to civilisation and the warmth of The Last’s beds. The latter sounded a worthwhile proposal.

Lucas hobbled up to the captain. “Le’z ge’ inzid’ the wallz, th’re lo’z of plaz’z we c’n szt a fire an’ ge’ zome cov’r f’r the’ ni’.” In the distance more howling could be heard.

“Can we get somewhere warm please?” Marcus asked, the temperature had dropped dramatically as the afternoon has passed and they approached the city. The ground had a sprinkling of snow. Here it was Winter when only a day away in Last it had still been Autumn.

Lucas looked down at the boy, "We'll tr'," he mumbled.

Captain Turnip raised his arm in the air, "This way!" he commanded. The party followed.

Passing through the gates the boys felt a magical change in the air, where it had felt like Winter a few steps away here it felt like they'd been wrapped in ice, whist outside the walls the wind and wolves howled, in here there were many more and stranger sounds. The buildings themselves seemed different as soon as you crossed into the city, windows showed as black holes where in the distance they simply glinted with glazing, doorways held mist rather than wood and the snow underfoot crunched with a noise like the breaking of a thousand tiny bones. Trevi's hand slipped into Marcus' and they clasped them tight, the whole place seemed unwelcoming, except...

"What's that building over there?" Marcus asked, pointing towards a multi-storey edifice that seemed to have avoided the ravages of the ages.

"We call it the Hotel," Turnip said, "It looks like a high-class inn, but I don't know anyone who's ever managed to get inside."

"But there's a light look!" Marcus said, pointing to a high window that glowed with the imagined warmth of a roaring fire. Trevi pulled at his hand and they looked at each other and gave the smallest of nods before rushing off in the direction of the Hotel.

"Oh Fu'," Lucas sighed, watching the boys disappear round the corner.

"It's ok," Turnip said, "There's no doors." The ground floor of the building was, as far as could be seen, just solid brick. The second floor and above had plenty of glazed windows and yes there was a light on the third floor. To Turnip the light boded ill. "That light bodes ill," he told Lucas, "Come on!" he called, motioning his men to follow the boys. Lucas and Sam hobbled after.

Lucas turned the corner and, against his expectations, was greeted by a huge pair of solid wooden doors, set securely in the walls. The rest of the party were nowhere to be seen but he deduced that he may find them inside the previously impregnable building.

Lucas threw the doors open and he and Sam stepped inside, "I tho' y' zed th' w'z no wa' in?" he enquired.

"Doors weren't there last time we passed here," Turnip said, "And that was three days ago."

They were all stood in a small lobby, corridors led off to the left and the right and a desk sat at the end opposite the doors. Above the desk hung a sign, inscribed with words in the old tongue. A dozen torches burnt brightly in their sconces, illuminating the room as bright as day.

"Can you read that?" Turnip pointed at the sign, looking at Lucas, whom shuffled forwards to get a better look.

Lucas huffed, "Th' Dezer' Kin'z Oaziz," he deciphered for Turnip.

"The desert king's oasis?" Turnip deciphered for the rest, "Silly name for an inn."

"I can read this!" Marcus said, pointing to a scribbling on the wall, below a plaque. "It says 'You Can Not Leave!'" he frowned, "What does that mean? You just walk out the doors." He turned back to the others and his face dropped as his arm raised. "Arh?" he exclaimed rather less than coherently.

Captain Turnip didn't want to turn round. He was not interested in realising the dread that the boy's exclamation had injected into his stomach. However, his mind went at speed, it could be that the boy was pointing at a strange monster that had arrived behind them through the very solid doors he walked through only a moment before. Wincing, the captain turned and looked at the solid wall that had previously held the doorway. He took a step in that direction but Lucas beat him to it, the wizard ran to the wall and began to bang on it, begging the walls to give way and open as they had to let them in.

A few hard thumps against the wall later Lucas turned to the party.

"Fu'," he said, with feeling. The mood had immediately changed thanks to this overt display of the capricious nature of the frozen city. The boys stood side by side, hand in hand. The soldiers stood to attention, alert and ready for anything, the captain had a look on his face that spoke volumes, none of which would be suitable for children of a nervous disposition to read.

"What now?" one of the soldiers asked; someone had to.

Turnip fixed Lucas with a stare then took the opportunity to look as if he was in charge, every moment knowing that the only entity in charge around here was the city itself.

"We investigate the building and look for a way out. There must be stairs up to the higher levels and if we have to break a window and abseil down the outside we will do." Relief flooded the faces of his men and the boys reacted with a positive sigh to his pronouncement.

Lucas smiled, "Tha' wa'?" he pointed to the doorway to his right. Turnip nodded in agreement, knowing it probably didn't matter which way they went.

"Boys behind us," Turnip ordered, "Lucas and Sam take the rear."

The captain carefully pushed open the door and peered down the corridor, it was well lit by torches again, torches that seemed to lack smoke; the best kind, and the floor continued the marble tiles of the lobby.

"Is that food?" one of the soldiers said, sniffing the air. His suggestion affected the boys more than anything as they hadn't eaten anything since lunchtime and that's a long time for an active growing pair to go without nourishment, they pushed through until they stood just behind Turnip, he held a hand up behind himself.

"Let's just be careful," he said in a low voice, "It smells like cooked meat yes, but that doesn't mean it's food."

Trevi pulled Marcus down and whispered in his ear.

"Ugh!" Marcus replied.

The captain stepped into the corridor and the party followed gingerly, the scent of cooked meat coalescing into a distinct beefy smell, potentially with fried onions and there was some form of boiled vegetable too. The boy's stomachs rumbled in a rather conspicuous manner.

Twenty steps down the corridor was another solid wooden door, a plaque above it proclaimed something in the old tongue and Lucas was quizzed.

“Th’ Mazt’rz, erm, Dinn’g R’m,” he suggested, “‘R maybe Chamb’r?” The scent of roast beef, onion gravy and neeps and tatties curled under the door and into the group’s noses.

Turnip pushed the door open, revealing a large chamber, replete with refectory tables and benches and full of the delicious smell of Sunday roast.

“Let’s be care...” he managed to get out before the boys rushed past him to the table. “Oh, go on,” he said motioning his troops to enter. Lucky followed, turning to Sam and telling him to stay on guard outside. Sam must be not hungry, again.

Lucas sighed, rested his staff against the wall and walked with as much alacrity as he could manage to the table, the two fingers of his left hand had closed around a chicken wing and he was just about to raise it to his mouth when the carnage began.

The beast came from no-where, suddenly the mercenaries were being dismembered by a huge, hairy, tentacle monster. The sound of the first limbs being yanked from a live body made the boys drop their food.

The sight of the heads being ripped from the soldiers as they tried in vain to stab the beast and protect the boys and Lucas made the boys lose the scant few mouthfuls they’d eaten.

Lucas glanced down at the steely knife in his half-hand and then, shaking his head, looked up at the beast.

Beyond the beast Lucas’ staff rested against the wall It was of no use there. Again Lucas flicked his eyes to his dagger, it was the only weapon he had to hand.

A multitude of cuts and wounds littered the beast’s body but not one wound bled, as if the beast was impervious to the touch of steel. Lucas glanced behind him, to make sure the boys were safe. Marcus held his knife so tight his knuckles seemed to glow white, he still hadn’t cleaned it; Trevi crouched wide-eyed behind his brother, a wooden club held gingerly in his grubby mitts, picked up from the floor from the grip of a disembodied hand.

Lucas *had* told them not to go to Frostgrave.

Out of nowhere, he laughed, a throaty call straight from the heart. He and two pre-pubescent boys were all that stood against this beast the size of five oxen. The words of the old campfire song come unbidden to his mouth.

“All alon’ a’ th’ en’ of a n’evenin’...”

The beast’s head wavered from side to side, seemingly its first frenzy had passed and it had decided to take its time with the three remaining morsels it could see; Sam was still outside, potentially still guarding the room against all comers, not ready to worry about beasts that appeared inside the room.

Lucas shook his head and changed tunes; he had the inkling of an idea but to make any lee-way against the monster he needed to be somewhere else. The tune he sang included words of magic and a spell formed in his heart, he could feel the magic gathering at his insistence. He nearly groaned as he felt the

power begin to slide from him; the Powers That Be decreeing that his supplication was not worthy of their support. Lucas wasn't going to let a little thing like that spoil his plan and he reached inside himself and pushed his own life-force into the small spark of power he'd kindled. On his arms old wounds opened and began to bleed, the blood fuelling the magic.

He turned to the boys, "St'y 'er'," he suggested strongly, "Wav' th'm wep'nz ab't 'f y' c'n." Scared but armed the boys waved their knife and club about.

Lucas bent down, then leapt up into the air, sailing over the beast in a perfect parabola, sparks flying from his heels as he landed next to his staff. He pushed the door open "In 'ere!" he called to Sam then turned to the monster, holding his staff like a sword in his hand. The beast had been surprised by the form flying over his head and it took him a couple of seconds to spin round.

Lucas noticed something, from one of the creature's nascent knees, at low-level, it was wounded. Something had broken the spell of invulnerability that the beast seemed to hold.

Sam shambled in and stood beside him, Lucas giving off a battle-cry that wouldn't instil fear in a mouse stepped forward, swinging his staff in wild circles above his head. His arms weren't straight, with the injuries he'd suffered through the years they never would be and this made the swings of his staff completely unpredictable. His staff hit the beast and the impact-side coloured. Lucas smiled, they might survive after all. Sam shambled to the right, Lucas to the left. Sam swung his thick arms at the beast, Lucas his staff, each impact of which caused the beast to tremble and shake.

They rounded the monster and stepped next to the boys.

"Dro' th' kni'," Lucas told Marcus, "On'y w'd 'urz 'im," he explained. Marcus looked around for a make-shift weapon and picked up a broken chair. One of the beast's tentacles swung in his direction and Trevi swung his club in the way of the attack. The wood of the weapon slammed against the pseudo-limb with the strength of a small child – but the tentacle flicked back out of harm's way.

Lucas pushed a spare chair-leg into Sam's hands and then, with another warbling war-cry leapt forwards, staff swinging.

Now every impact seemed to hurt the beast and every hurt seemed to make it shrink before their eyes, before long it had shrunk to the size of a small dog and had turned the colour of beetroot; bleeding beetroot that is.

Lucas tried another spell, a flick of the wrist and a short, sharp word and a dart of ethereal bone shot from his hand at the miniature beast, the dart hitting him dead on, and not bouncing off!

At his side the boys imitated his gesture and sounds, and Lucas was very surprised to see a minute shard of ghostly bone thwap against the nigh-on defeated creature, one of the boys had cast a spell! Not very well admittedly because it didn't exactly cause the creature any damage, but it was magic nonetheless. Lucas breathed a deep breath – it had been a long time since any apprentice had dared venture with him, maybe he had one now. In any case, one over-head sweep of his staff later the beast was a small bloody mess on the floor.

"Is it dead?" Marcus asked, his chair-leg waving nervously.

Lucas kicked the remains,

“Yez,” he said nodding. He turned to the boys, “Froz’gra’ in’t zaf’,” he’d told them before - maybe they’d take notice now.

“Trevi made magic,” Marcus said, a small tinge of awe in his voice, Trevi slid behind his brother. Lucas was surprised, he’d thought that it more likely Marcus had cast the spell successfully.

Lucas tried to smile and he reached behind Marcus and patted the six-year old on the head, “W’ll d’n,” he told him.

“Am I a wizard?” Trevi asked, out loud.

“Y’ c’n be,” Lucas smiled, “Y’ c’n be.”

A putrid smell assailed the surviving members.

“Wha’ th’ ‘els ‘ta’?” Lucas said with disgust.

“Urgh!” Marcus and Trevi chorused.

Sam, as ever, kept his own council.

The table that had, minutes before, smelt of rich comfort food now exuded an odour so foul it could make hair stand on end. What had been a feast lost its glamour and now showed as rotting and foetid meat. What passed as vegetables had turned to slime and growths of slime and mould covered the rotting flesh. Insects flew aerobic sorties from nodule to nodule of the foul food.

Trevi pulled Marcus’s arm and whispered into his ear. The elder boy nodded and turned to Lucas sheepishly, “Can we go home now?” he asked, “We don’t like it here.”

Lucas nodded, he thought about mentioning his repeated pleas for them to abandon their quest to Frostgrave, but he remembered how the phrase ‘I told you so,’ had followed many of his own journeys here.

“Le’z go ba’,” he suggested, turning for the door.

“You’re bleeding!” Marcus exclaimed, and yes blood was running down the mage’s arms fairly freely. Lucas has suffered the blow-back of a nearly-failed spell so many time he didn’t pay much attention to non-arterial spray, he was rather sanguine when it came to blood. The boys seemed quite nervous at the only talkative adult left being so obviously wounded that Lucas decided that some effort should be made. He stepped over to the crushed body of Captain Turnip and pushed it over with his foot. He bent down and, rather mercenarily, rummaged in the mercenary’s backpack, finally standing up holding a roll of cloth.

“C’m on,” he motioned towards the door with his head as he started to wrap the bandages around his re-opened wounds, hampered by his general low finger-count and also the tucking of his staff under one arm.

Sam stood to attention by the door, as impassive as ever.

Lucas paused a moment to tie off the bandage on his left arm and started wrapping around his left, with the dexterity of someone who has only two fingers on his hand to start with. He kicked the door open and walked into the corridor, distracted by his self-nursing.

“Where are we?” asked Marcus. Again the building had turned on them. Yes, they were in a windowless corridor, well-lit and smooth floored but this corridor stretched out before them rather than from side to side. A number of rough doors lined each side. Lucas shook his head and gave the boys the only explanation he could.

“I’z magi’,” he stated in a world-weary voice, wishing he’d never been born, quickly followed by wishing his father had never been born and then closely followed by wishing his grandfather had never been born. He had nothing against his mother; her side of the family were blameless as far as he was concerned.

Shaking his head and taking hold of his staff in a more normal fashion Lucas walked to the closest door and pushed it open. It creaked and showed a very small room, containing a variety of brushes and brooms.

He let the door slip shut and walked to the next door. Behind him he heard a small boy yawn, they’d been on the move for an awful long time he realised and they really needed to find somewhere safe to rest. A gurgling laugh crept from his lips, that was exactly why there were in this situation, trapped in a malicious building.

The next door took a decent push to get moving but once open Lucas nodded. He grabbed a torch from the nearest sconce and motioned the others into the room.

This was bigger than the store-closet but nowhere as big as the chamber of the feast, the air was slightly chilly and the walls were covered in shelves, in which lay a thousand bottles.

Marcus looked critically up at Lucas, “A wine cellar?” Thoughts of his father’s drinking made a dark glare slide over his face.

“Jus’ f’r a rez’,” Lucas said, missing the nervousness of the boy as he slipped the torch into an empty slot.

Looking at Sam he pointed to the door, “Si’ wi’ y’r ba again’ I’,” he told their silent companion, “wa’ uz I’ anygthi’ tri’ t’ ge’ ‘n.” Sam complied. “Ge’ sett’,” Lucas told the boys, pulling a bottle and dusting it down. “We’ tr’ t’ slee’,” The boys squirreled themselves into a corner as Lucas wrestled with the cork.

It came off with loud pop that made the boys flinch and the wine bubbled out of the neck, “Mus’ be off,” Lucas sighed “‘z full o’ bubb’z.”

Bubbles or not Lucas filled his mug with the drink and risked a sip. “Ni’ rosé,” he said after a moment’s contemplation, “Pi’y ‘bo’ th’ bubb’z.”

The boys didn’t hear him – they had slipped off into sleep as if without a care.

Lucas didn’t quite finish the bottle; he did decide, after the first mugful, that he didn’t mind the bubbles that much.

It may have been morning when they woke. Marcus yawned and opened his eyes, the torch has burnt down to nothing, and only the faintest of light slid round the door, so it took his eyes a second to be able to make the shapes out and it took his mind a moment longer to remember exactly where he was and the sort of predicament he and his brother were in. "We only want to find our uncle," he said to himself.

"H'z no' 'n Fros'gra'," Lucas said, as clearly as ever.

"Do you know where he is?" Marcus finally asked, two or three days late.

"No' f'r me t' sa'," Lucas added, like all adults failing Marcus' hopes but not his expectations.

Marcus gave up on that line of questioning and shook himself, which had the wanted side-effect of waking his brother.

Lucas had stood up and was trying some stretching exercises. It was a pity his arms and legs wouldn't ever straighten. He kicked Sam, "Ge' up!" he told the recumbent fourth member, "Ti' t' lea'."

Lucas opened the door and his expectations were met when it opened onto a room rather than a corridor. The boys still let gasps slip from their lips, the magical nature of the hotel was still something of a pleasing surprise to them, even after seeing four people brutally murdered.

The door opened onto a large square room, tiled floor, wall and ceiling. Three other doors led off of room, one of which wasn't wooden but actually appeared to be glazed, albeit frosted because the room beyond couldn't be made out.

"z differ'n," Lucas said stepping into the room, holding the door carefully open in case it didn't lead back to the wine cellar next time it was opened and losing another companion would be frowned upon. Internally Lucas wondered why this was another room that lacked windows.

The party stepped gingerly into the room, keeping close together until they stood in a huddle in the centre of the room, the door behind had swung shut. Lucas was painfully aware that it probably didn't lead back to the wine cellar anymore. Trevi tugged on Lucas' coat and for the first time Trevi whispered something in an ear other than his brother's.

"Where do we go now?" was his pertinent question.

"So' it," Lucas said, after weighing up the possibilities for a second. Uncertain death and injury that way, uncertain death and injury *that* way. "Thi' wa'," he decided stepping towards the frosted door. Upon reaching the door it became apparent that there was a pool of water seeping out from the bottom. Lucas reached for the handle and was surprised, for an instant, that it was warm to the touch. A twist and a pull and the door opened and a cloud of hot steam puffed from the room. The door seemed less of a sensible choice than it had a minute ago.

Holding his staff before him, Lucas stepped into the room, the boys following him and then Sam following, "Sta' 'n th' doorwa'," Lucas told the rearguard, "Kee' 't op'n," he ordered. Sam halted his forward movement as the door swung against his back. He stood there, silent and impassive as the glass bounced off his frame.

Happy that the way out wasn't really blocked, Lucas stepped carefully into the steam which blocked any idea of the room's size. Low shapes were just visible on the floor ahead, something maybe two feet tall from the ground, but wide and long.

The tiles underfoot were slippery and the steam was quite wearing to walk through, although Lucas realised that this was probably the closest he or the boys had been to Being Washed for a fair time.

They reached the first shape, it turned out to be a low wall, still tiled, that bounded a pool of hot water, in fact a lot of the steam seemed to emanate from its surface. "Car'fu'," Lucas warned as he stepped sideways.

Another low shape morphed into another pool as they neared it, however this pool differed from the last; it wasn't empty.

The first they realised was a sharp cry of something bordering disgust.

"Mortals!" a high-pitched voice cried, the sound coming from a distant shape in the water, which got rapidly closer, splashing the water in all directions as it approached.

The figure was eight feet tall if it was an inch and a partial answer of how high the ceiling could be was answered by the figure not stooping at all as it rushed towards them, the figure was mostly human-shaped, two arms, two legs, head and torso but the big difference that made everyone realise the creature was not human, besides its cry of 'Mortals!' were the wings that sprouted from its shoulders. Beautiful but menacing wings with a span as wide each side as the creature was tall fluttered in the steam.

"Mortals aren't allowed in here!" the creature continued as it rushed towards them. Lucas noted that the naked creature was not exactly human in other aspects too – it appeared to lack the usual accoutrements associated with mankind. Lucas stood between the creature and the boys and was surprised that the demon didn't actually attack them, but instead rushed past them towards the door, maybe it was embarrassed at its nakedness?

Unfortunately for Lucas the creature's haste didn't make it any less dangerous than if it had attacked, there was still sixteen feet of wing to contend with as it passed them and the wizard took a solid swipe to the head, knocking him over against the pool. The wings may have looked delicate and fluffy, but they had significant weight behind them, sufficient to knock a man over.

Lucas caught himself before he plunged head-first into the steaming pool and stayed there for a second as the demon rushed the Sam-filled doorway.

Lucas looked away as the creature hit the obstacle, he winced at the sound of flesh against demon and he knew with dread how horrid the results of this clash could be.

Something glittered in the pool, catching his eye as Sam was slammed by the demon, breaking him into a multitude of pieces, the boys gave out a cry of dismay as their silent and slow, but ever-present-seeming party member literally went to pieces. Sam's body parted at the waist, his head flew off and one arm and one leg broke off in separate directions.

Their dismay was broken by a cry from Lucas, they turned to see that he was bent over the pool, with an arm reaching into the depths of the hot water, a look of agony on his face as he fell backwards screaming.

The boys didn't know where to look, on one side was the wizard yowling like an animal, on the other their compatriot had been replaced with a pile of body parts. Sam's dislocated hand twitched as if it was attempting to play an invisible piano.

They went to Lucas' side, he at least seemed in one piece.

The wizard was bent double, cradling the arm that had reached into the water like a baby being smothered. At Marcus' hand on his shoulder he looked up, "Eina," he croaked.

Behind them, the door slammed shut, the demon gone. Around them the steam billowed.

"Go'a' ge' ou' f'ere," Lucas spat through clenched teeth, struggling to his feet.

"Sam..." Marcus didn't know how to explain what had happened whilst Lucas was busy screaming in pain.

"'z alri'," Lucas said, "He li'd lon'er th'n I 'spect'd." Standing the boys could see what had happened to his arm, it was completely encased in some form of ice or crystal. Lucas grimaced and motioned to the limb. "Don' touch th' wa'r," he told the boys. "'z not really wa'er." Was all he could explain at this point in time. His left arm was immobile, he scabbled for his staff and leant heavily on it.

"What happened?" Marcus asked. Lucas shook his head, he could explain what happened to his zombie, but the demon's run and why his arm was crystallised he couldn't.

"C'mon," was all the wizard felt able to say, "Le'z go," he said, stepping carefully back towards the glass door, avoiding the edges of the pools with a greater wariness than when they'd entered.

He pushed the door open, before them was a corridor leading left and right. Shaking his head, he motioned the boys through and followed, taking one last look, "Bye Zam," he said to his departed friend in parts.

He didn't bother thinking, he just turned to the right and stumbled along the corridor as best he could. They passed a number of doors, but his eye was on the door at the end, he didn't want any more distractions. Although the scribble in the lobby which had promised that they could never leave weighed on his mind.

They reached the door. Solid wood, simple handle. No markings.

Lucas pushed it open and a waft of heat hit the three remaining members of the party. The door led out into what appeared to be jungle, the sounds of sharp bird cries was interrupted by a huge thump as if a building has landed and a foot the size of an elephant landed on the ground before the door.

Lucas pulled the door shut with a sharp intake of breath.

He counted to ten, then pushed the door open again.

This time it opened onto a sumptuous bedroom, a four-post bed stood opposite covered with luxurious sheets and blankets.

Shaking his head, he shut the door again, repeated his count, this time backwards, then again swinging it open enough to see what was inside.

Next was a kitchen, bright metallic and ceramic surfaces, fires, stoves and shelves full of pots and pans.

Again he pulled the door shut. If the hotel was going to play with him, he decided, he was going to play with the hotel.

Fourteen door-swinging exercises later he smiled and motioned the boys to follow him into the lobby. It was the only time they'd seen a room they recognised and despair rather than logic dictated that this was their best chance out of here.

The lobby seemed bigger this time, but then there were five less people in it.

Knowing it was useless, but also remembering times he's been taken in by the Illusionists' trade Lucas hobbled to the blank wall that had previously held the entrance doorway and he banged his good hand against the plasterwork again.

Well, at least he was sure it wasn't an illusion.

The boys were exploring the room, Marcus was behind the desk and Trevi wandered up to the wall plaque.

"I can't read this," he said, lifting his hand to the plaque and tracing the embossed lettering with his fingertips.

"Lucas told us what it meant, before," Marcus said, as he picked strange items up and pondered their purpose, "It says we can't leave."

"rrr, no," Lucas said standing behind Trevi, cradling his crystal arm, "Th' scr'bb's say th't," he nodded at the wall, "Bu' th' oth'r wrdz s'y th' opp,zit. lz com'n 'n th' innz 'n Fros'gra'. I' say' th't yer c'n ch'k out a'y tim' y' wan',"

"Check out?" Marcus asked, not exactly well versed with the practicalities of staying in inns and hotels, "What does that mean?"

"Sig' out," Lucas said attempting to elaborate, "Pay y' bi', th't s'rt thin',"

"Is that why my name is in this book?" Marcus said, lifting a wide ledger up from behind the desk, "Trevi's too," he placed the book in the counter, "Is this your name?" he asked pointing, "I'm sure I've heard that last name before?"

Lucas frowned and looked at the book, yes it had their names written in, and above them were four crossed-out names, starting with 'Captain Richard Turnip'. Above those four names were pages and pages of crossed out names. Leafing back through the book Lucas was hit by a feeling of dread, all the names were crossed out, which as he knew what had happened to Turnip and his men strongly implied that this building had taken many, many more lives than theirs. It was five leafs of crossed-out names before he found a name that hadn't been struck-through; this name 'Sir Wilberforce Spankshaft III' was

followed simply by a date and a signature, presumably the date he'd left. Wilberforce had signed out. The date was wrong, or rather not in the calendar Lucas had grown up with. Either Sir Spankshaft had been a visitor from a far-far off land or maybe even the last visitor in the inn before the great freeze hit Felstad. Lucas shivered, thinking the original name of the city gave him the same dread as when he read their names in the book.

"Can we sign-out then?" asked Marcus, "Even Trevi can write his own name."

Lucas looked up with a start, and immediately wished he hadn't because the sharp movement had pulled at the crystal encasing his left arm, and the ache he was feeling there flared into a sharp dagger-like agony. "Fa!" Lucas swore, his knees nearly giving way.

"I'm sorry," Marcus said, cowering at the face Lucas pulled, "I didn't mean anything!"

Lucas took a few seconds to compose himself, "Sn't you," he told the boy as calmly as he could, "'s my ar'," Lucas motioned with his head at his unwanted cast. He leant over the top, "'z there p'n 'nk?"

Marcus took a second to come back from the fear that had hit him from Lucas's expression, the boy had known looks like that from his father and they normally preceded a beating, then he took a second more to understand Lucas' query.

He dropped a feather onto the book, "Pen!" he said, then frowned, "No ink." He dropped a small pot next to the book, "It's dried up."

"G't som'th' th'll do," Lucas said pulling his knife from his belt, "bugg'r," he said, looking at his one free hand. "Marc'z," he said pushing a smile onto his face, "C'm 'ere." Marcus's face contorted. "'m n't gon'a 'urt, y'," Lucas flipped the knife round and pointed the hilt to the boy, "Ned' m' bl'd," he exclaimed.

Marcus shook his head wildly and backed away.

"Trev'?" Lucas asked, "C'n y'?" The younger boy stepped up, "J'z hol' th' kni'," Lucas asked, "L'k 'way 'f y' wan'."

Lucas put the knife in the young boy's hand and pressed his index finger against the blade, waiting for a drop of blood to appear before he pulled back. Trevi watched the droplet turn into a drop and then entranced as Lucas let the blood fall into the pot. "'z Marc'z z'car'd 'f bl'd?" Lucas asked the young boy.

Uncharacteristically the boy spoke aloud, an emphatic, "No."

Lucas dipped the nib carved in the end of the feather into the smearing of blood in the ink pot and wrote his name as best he could with his missing digits in the ledger, dating the line. He passed the quill to Trevi, "Y' sig'," he pointed at the place. Trevi proudly printed his name in block-capitals, spelling it nearly correctly and only getting one letter the wrong way round. Lucas motioned for him to copy the date, he did so.

Luckily his name was at the bottom because his handwriting wasn't exactly in a straight line, the letters wandered up a little before plunging off in a curve. He obviously hadn't written much in his life; if he showed propensity to magic at this age Lucas would change that as soon as they returned to safety.

"'N'w y'," Lucas said, holding the quill to Marcus, "'won' bi'e," he attempted.

Marcus came slowly round the desk and, carefully, wrote his name and added the date, in a neat cursive hand that indicated he'd managed to pick up some lessons in between beatings.

The hairs on the back of Marcus' neck bristled and he turned. The doorway appeared, replete with solid wooden doors. The three lunged at them, rushing to get out of this building of horrors that they nearly tripped over each other's feet.

Daylight greeted them, the sun was high in the sky and Lucas lifted his arm to shade his eyes from the glare. He then realised he'd raised his left arm - the crystal cast had disappeared as soon as they'd exited the hotel.

He dropped his hand and said a small, short and to-the-point swear word and examined the object he'd picked up in the pool. For a moment he didn't realise the strangest thing about the metallic feather he had in his hand, the strangest thing wasn't the translucent glow or the smell of incense that came from the feather, the strangest thing was the fact that he was holding it in a hand with a full complement of fingers.

He counted them, three times to make sure. His left hand, injured years ago on one of his first forays into Frostgrave was whole again. He shrugged his shoulder and spun his arm around. The previous day the arm ached from old injuries, the ulna not quite straight. Today it was whole, intact and looking as if nothing had ever happened to it. He looked up at the building, his mind contemplating what an actual swim in that pool might have done.

The doorway was gone, replaced with a featureless brick edifice.

Lucas smiled at the boys, "Le'z ge' ba'," he said, smiling for real this time.

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"Who is he?" Mathilda asked of Bruno.

"He's some kind of thief-taker," the innkeeper answered.

"And he's looking for the boys?" Mathilda questioned him, "They've run away from home then?"

Bruno looked sheepish, "Yes and no," he smiled in forthcoming agony, "They're wanted for murder."