

DINNER DOWNSTAIRS

by

A. T. Breslin



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So this is hell, I thought.

There was precious little room for uncertainty. A blood-red sunless sky loomed overhead while the putrid stench of rotting flesh pervaded the acrid air and assaulted my quaking nostrils. The scattered bodies skewered on stalagmites stretching off into the horizon annihilated any remaining shreds of doubt. My own heartbeat and breath, both quickening in spite of my efforts to restrain them, were the only sounds disturbing the terrifying silence hanging thickly in the diabolic air.

I was no willing tourist in the nether realms. No, this unscheduled jaunt was courtesy of my incompetent apprentice, Fletswad, upon whose brains the maggots could not wait for death to begin feasting. I was not so overcome with terror that I couldn't hold a renewed and invigorated appreciation of his unparalleled capacity for idiocy.

A few days earlier, I had sent Fletswad out to fetch some ingredients I needed for a minor incantation. Some common herbs. A few hairs of a rabbit. A certain species of lichen. Nothing too difficult. The only item that could have presented any trouble at all was the blood of a hanged man. I was fresh out, but conveniently enough, a horse thief was scheduled to dance on air down in the town square, so I'd instructed Fletswad to go and surreptitiously scratch the corpse with his dagger after the festivities had

culminated with a cracking coup de grace. Just a tiny drop from the gibbet's latest guest was all I needed. The donor wouldn't miss it.

As near as I can figure, Fletswad brought back the blood of a rabbit and the hair of a hanged man. Magic is a fickle and unforgiving science. Making substitutions in the recipes inevitably rips and rends the delicate fabric of reality, leaving deadly vortexes and vacuums in the cosmic manna. So where did that leave me? Smack dab in the middle of an especially insalubrious infernal plane, that's where.

I'd always known that some day I'd have some trouble with unintended dimensional travel. These things happen, even to the most careful of conjurers. It's an occupational hazard that savvy magicians keep in mind and for which they are prepared. So it was not wholly horrifying, finding myself down below, as I had learned a spell to open a quick gate to the material plane should the need ever arise.

The panic didn't set in until I began to pull the materials together to weave the enchantment that would get me the hell out of there, no pun intended. I needed a pinch of sulfur, just a wee pinch. The opinion I held of my ill-chosen apprentice, already at rock bottom, began tunneling when I discovered that what he'd taken for sulfur bore a suspicious resemblance to yellow clay. I vowed that if and when I returned, I would transform Fletswad into some sort of insect and feed him to one of my many carnivorous plants.

Rocky badlands extended infinitely in all directions. I chose one of these absolutely at random and wandered until the endless plane was interrupted by a rift that stretched straight as a master fletcher's arrow as far as I could see to both left and right. Looking down, I could not see the

bottom, but I knew where it went. A little deeper into hell, and I was deep enough.

I turned around and began trudging hopelessly along, but soon came upon the endless rift again, no matter what direction I walked, always perpendicular to my path, always extending seemingly infinitely to either side, and plunging to depths too deep to fathom. It violated conventional geometry, because they do things differently in hell. They play by their own twisted, recondite rules, and this only added to my frustrations. I sighed and surveyed the unsavory surroundings. Indigenous buzzards circled directly overhead, squawking with what must have been annoyed impatience. I saw more of the foul scavengers in the distance, tearing apart corpses, which, upon more careful inspection, turned out to be those of other buzzards. It was a disgusting visage. But for a tiny pinch of sulfur, I'd have been long gone.

"Far from home, little wizard?" a voice behind me inquired.

It wasn't a pleasant voice, in spite of its refined elocution. The deep bass tones overflowed with malice and malevolence, and would have chilled the blood of any listener as sure as winter weather.

I turned around and bowed before the demon, for the aristocrats of hell demand respect. Courtesy alone will never save you from their sadistic whims, but without it, you haven't got a snowball's chance, and these are notoriously slim down there. He sat in a large, elegant scarlet chair, behind a tastefully arrayed dining table. This was set for two with plates, silverware, glasses and silk napkins. Another chair sat empty opposite him. Neither table, chairs, nor demon were there a moment earlier.

His face was shaped like that of a bull, except for the massive fangs, for which no herbivore would have any legitimate use. His iron-muscled arms ended in taloned fingers, glinting in the dim light as he drummed them on the table, sending splinters flying.

"I seem to have made a wrong turn somewhere. If you'd be kind enough to show me the exit, I'll just be on my way," I said. I looked him straight in the eye as I spoke, which was difficult, for he had 13 of them, all of them bloodshot and piercing.

The demon laughed, an obscenely grotesque guffaw. The vilest invective of the most villainous men is a sweet and soothing lullaby compared to the laughter of demons.

"Now I wouldn't want to do that!" he said, "It is so rare that I have visitors. Come. Sit." He gestured for me to take a seat, and I was in no position to refuse.

"I take it you lack the resources to return of your own volition . . ." he hissed.

"That I do, alas."

"But your misfortune affords me the pleasure of your company," he said, an evil smile creeping across his face like an opening wound. In the menacing lull that followed his remark, I began to lose my nerve and moved to break the silence.

"On what shall we dine?" I asked politely, though I anticipated that the answer wouldn't suit my appetite.

"For my entrée, I thought that I would tear the flesh from your bones, and then devour your soul for desert," my dining companion informed me.

“But it suits me to have for appetizers that upon which my meal would feast. That and stimulating conversation with the dinner-to-be. It improves the taste immeasurably.” The tip of his forked tongue emerged and dragged slowly across the bottom of his mouth, releasing a single steaming drop of saliva before returning.

Dogs have oft been celebrated for their ability to smell fear, but a demon’s olfactory sensitivity would shame and humiliate a champion bloodhound. It’s always best to act toward them in the most civilized manner at all times. Show no fear, nor disrespect. With demons, it’s all a matter of *savoir faire*.

“A tempting offer,” I said, forcing a smile, “but what have I to gain, aside from the pleasure of your company, by entertaining you before you devour me?”

He snarled slightly, “I should hope that pleasure should be sufficient in itself. Am I such a droll and lifeless host?” he asked.

I trembled, thinking perhaps I’d insulted him, and my mind raced for the socially correct answer, but he continued, indicating that the question was rhetorical. The insult was slight, and not serious enough for him to deny himself the pleasure of playing with his food before he ate it.

“You have a last opportunity to save your skin and soul, my dear enchanter,” he said, “How many of your fellows in your magicians’ guild can boast that they have tricked or charmed a demon? Not that you will succeed, of course, but what is the harm in trying?”

I smiled in reply and reached into my sack for a few items, including a pair of candles, used in many of my incantations but still appropriate for

pleasant dinner lighting. These the demon lit with a flick of his fingers. I also brought out a freshly baked loaf of pumpernickel bread, which, having planned for an uninterrupted stretch of work in my laboratory, I had already assigned to the role of dinner.

The table was set with wineglasses, and I inquired as to the availability of beer steins. The demon grinned and when I looked down, the glasses had been replaced with two mugs of highest quality pewter, decorated with exquisitely carved scenes of diabolical cruelty and excess. I recited a simple brewing spell, and the mugs filled with a dark liquid.

The demon raised his glass up. "To my most resourceful guest," he said. We clinked the mugs and drank. He smiled and his tongue, long, thick and barbed, emerged again. It circled in reconnaissance, gathering lingering drops of fluid.

"Delightful," he said, "based upon a centuries-old recipe from the monks of Nehreheim, if I am not mistaken?" the demon asked. I affirmed his suspicion and complimented his cultured palette.

"It is almost indistinguishable from that brewed by the monks themselves, by hand. How did you acquire such a spell?" he asked. "The Nehreheims guard their recipes as if they were sacred relics of power."

"You have already toasted my resourcefulness," I said. "Perhaps you might be interested in an exchange? The spell for my life and soul?"

Again the demon shrieked with unholy laughter. My facade of relaxed urbanity began its inexorable crumble.

"All your dabbler's magic together does not interest me!" he screeched, still cackling, though with a whiff of annoyance. I had again come

dangerously close to insulting him, though he'd apparently deemed the offer too absurd to cause offense.

He tore off a hunk of bread from the large loaf and shoved it into his mouth. His elegant manners were, for the moment, banished. With a snap and a few quick words, I refilled his mug with porter. He nodded in thanks and washed down the bread.

I made no further attempt to bribe him, and instead allowed the conversation to wander as it would. The sunless sky began to dim, and the candles flickered and threw capering shadows all around us while we ate, drank, and conversed. The stars of hell appeared, and in them one could make out horrifying constellations.

The demon was again erudite and graceful as the conversation meandered from the mundane to the arcane. We talked of art and music and dance, and his perspective on their evolution through the centuries was uniquely educational. We spoke of the true names of things, and tongues long since forgotten. The demon spun sublime yarns of ancient heroes and mythical beasts. We exchanged ideas on the fabric and structure of magic, and discussed the politics of hell.

And then, the demon broke wind, released a foul cloud of noxious stench. If you have never smelled a demon fart, all attempts to describe the mephitic miasma could never convey it. It must be experienced directly, but take my word for it: you don't want to.

I repressed my welling nausea, and quickly picked up the candle, performing the motions of the gating spell. I wove the movements into my discourse with the demon, and he didn't notice anything unusual until I began

chanting the words of the spell. At first he simply looked at me, confused, but at the last moment realized what was going on.

The sulphurous nebula of flatulence glowed with the power of the spell. I dove into the cloud, only by an inch avoiding the razor claws of the enraged demon's swipe. I found myself rolling on the floor of my own workshop, the gate closed behind me. Safe, and by all available evidence, sound.

I brushed the dust off, caught my breath, and took a quick inventory. I had dropped the candle, but found myself still clutching the beer mug. It would be a functional souvenir, and an excellent conversation piece.

My next order of business was to find a certain idiot.

"Fletswad!!!" I bellowed.

There was going to be hell to pay.

THE END

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