

Homework

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Esther M. Friesner is no stranger to the world of fantasy, having created, edited, and written for the Chicks in Chainmail series. Her son, daughter, husband, two cats, and warrior-princess hamster treat her with accordingly appropriate awe which has nothing to do with the thirty novels she has had published, the two Nebulas she has won, or the over one hundred short works she has written.

PRINCE Gallantine slowly came out of his drug-induced slumbers, his head feeling as though a thousand *suntoos* had just staged their annual mating dance on the floor of his cerebellum. The last thing he recalled was his most recent interview with Morbidius, Lord of the Ebon Empire. It had been less than fully satisfactory. Although he had been able to maintain his justly high reputation for possessing a wit as sparkling as his teeth and as smooth as his bright golden hair, Prince Gallantine had not been able to draw out Lord Morbidius as much as he'd hoped. Thus, while the Dread One had terminated their little *tete-a-tete* by stalking out of the dungeon in a huff as anticipated (brought on by Prince Gallantine's oblique reference to the sexual preferences of the Dread One's mother), he had left before revealing anything of his incipient plans for the overthrow and conquest of Prince Gallantine's own realm, Placidia Felix, to say nothing of the Lands Yonder.

Bold Prince Gallantine knew better than most that it was imperative for Lord Morbidius to 'fess up to some small scrap of preconquest information. How else might it be turned about and put to use against the Dread One after the prince's inevitable escape? An evil secret plan shared was an evil secret plan as good as thwarted, but an evil secret plan that remained a secret was thwartproof. Good hero that he was, thwarting evil was Prince Gallantine's life. He was still brooding over this thwartless turn of events (and the unsettling possibility that perhaps the Dread One was beginning to catch wise) when one of Lord Morbidius' corps of debauched eunuchs brought him his supper. It was the usual: stale bread and slimy water with a side of rat poop.

Well, that and a cookie.

"Poison?" Prince Gallantine murmured as he picked up the anomalous object. Chocolate chips glistened like maiden's tears. "No, no, it can't be. Morbidius would never kill me outright; not so soon. He's barely had the chance to taunt me, let alone subject me to a series of tortures that would break a lesser man in body and spirit. What the hell, it's food." So saying, he gobbled down the cookie (after ascertaining that those really *were* chocolate chips) and was just setting his teeth to the hunk of rock-hard bread when the dungeon began to swirl and tilt around him before finally plummeting into darkness.

He awoke to find himself shackled to the wall, which was to be expected, and to sunlight and fresh air, which was not. Lord Morbidius prided himself on ruling over keeps and castles without number, each possessed of dungeons famed for their airless, lightless, hopeless atmosphere. The only source of illumination permitted was the fitful glare of smoky torches or, in the cells of the dissident poets, the lone flame of a badly guttering candle. It was even rumored that Lord Morbidius' purchasing agents-in-the-field had commissioned artisans to manufacture candles guaranteed to burn with an especially pathetic and possibly suicide-inducing flame. Prince Gallantine would not put it past him.

But *this* place—! Shackles or no shackles, Prince Gallant had to admit he'd been in elfin palaces that were drearier. Pale buttercup-yellow walls decorated with splodges of botanical murals surrounded him, the relentlessly cheerful vista broken only by ample windows that opened onto a view of extensive rose gardens. Double doors gave onto a golden-pillared balcony where a family of chubby squirrels was enjoying a picnic lunch of acorns.

The acorns were pink. They were set out on a teensy-weensy red-checked tablecloth. There were matching napkins. It was the last straw.

"Gods of all heroic goodness, where in hell *am* I?" Prince Gallantine cried.

"Lo," said a voice.

The prince turned his head this way and that, but could not find the source of the greeting. "Who are you?" he demanded. "Where are you? Show yourself, recreant fiend, if you're half a man!"

"Kay."

The air before the prince's dazzled eyes shimmered. A form took shape, a form dark and sinister as the Dread One himself, provided that the Dread One had been washed in hot water and improperly dried. As Prince Gallantine stared in disbelief, a black-garbed boy of about nine years' growth materialized fully. His face was partially shadowed by a deeply belled hood, an amulet of unutterable power gleamed with a fierce blood-light from the iron chain around his neck, a demonling of hideous aspect perched upon his shoulder, and a finger of dubious cleanliness was thrust halfway up his left nostril.

"Lo," he said again.

Prince Gallantine scowled. "Who are you?" he repeated.

The boy removed his probing finger and studied the results, then wiped it on his sable-trimmed black cloak. The hood fell back, revealing auburn hair, green eyes, and a round, freckled face that would not have looked out of place on any farmstead in Placidia Felix. "Count Androphagus Doomdreamer of the Raven Keep. Mom calls me Andy."

"Mom'?"

The boy nodded. "Yeah. Only Uncle Morby made her stop it. He says that Dread Ones don't have nicknames. It makes us less dread or something. I dunno if that's true or not. I figure that if you kill enough people and lay waste to enough kingdoms and despoil the countryside and stuff, you can call yourself Binky and people will still wet themselves when they hear it."

Prince Gallantine licked his upper lip slowly, digesting what he had just heard (as well as seeking out the last few crumbs of chocolate chip cookie. He reasoned that they were too tiny to contain enough soporific to do him any further harm and besides, drugged or not, chocolate was chocolate). *So, the whispers are true*, he thought. *Much has it been bruited about the Lands Yonder that Lord Morbidius possesses kinfolk, even as any ordinary mortal man. This child, then, must be his sister-son and as such the heir to all of his dark powers. No doubt he has apprenticed him to follow in his own tainted footsteps. Apparently, I have been drugged and brought hither much as a mother cat brings a half-dead field mouse to her kittens, that they might hone their hunting skills by stalking the hapless creature. Thus Lord Morbidius must hope to give the lad a taste for human pain and suffering by whetting his appetite with my own impending torments. So be it. Perhaps this is something which I may yet turn to my advantage. The boy is young and, as such, impressionable. I will use this as best I may.*

"My lord," he said at last. "My lord, you speak with a wisdom far beyond your years. Your dread uncle would do well to heed you."

The boy's expression did not change at this flattery. In fact, the boy's face could hardly be said to bear anything resembling an expression at all, for there was nothing actually being *expressed* by that flat-eyed stare and that gape-mouthed regard. Doormats showed more animation, road-kill more vim.

Prince Gallantine tried again: "My lord, for what dire purpose have I been brought here? What shall become of me at your all-powerful hands? Tell me, that I might tremble before you." It was pure, blatant banana oil, liberally laced with hogwash, but experience had taught Prince Gallantine that villains ate up such stuff with a spoon.

"Oh," the boy said. "I dunno. Uncle Morby said he was gonna kill you pretty soon, so I figured it wouldn't hurt nothin' if I did it."

That brought Prince Gallantine to attention. "You mean—you mean it was *your* idea to bring me here? Not Uncle Mor—Lord Morbidius's?"

"Uh-huh." In the way of ordinary children his own age, Andy crossed his eyes experimentally a

couple of times while speaking, just to see if he could do it and if they really *would* freeze that way. "I mean, 'kay, so he's gonna be kinda unhappy with me when he finds out, but I don't care. I'm sick an' tired of just killin' stuff on paper."

"On paper?" Prince Gallantine echoed. He glanced down at his feet. The floor of this sunny chamber was covered with a thick carpet in summery tints with a pattern of jolly hamsters in sunbonnets. "I—I suppose that would be to prevent any blood from—from staining—" He faltered. It was difficult to speak of any means of preserving a carpet that so obviously could only be improved by bloodstains.

"Huh?" the boy said. Then: "Naaaah. That'd akshally be *fun*. For a change. Uncle Morby doesn't know about fun or else he doesn't care. He says I'm not ready to really kill anything yet, except in my stupid textbooks." He shooed the demonling from his shoulder, then clasped his hands primly before him and in a nasal singsong recited: "If you have fifty elves chained in Dungeon A and twenty dwarves shackled in Dungeon B and it takes 0.5 seconds to slit the throat of each elf and 2.5 seconds to saw through the throat of each dwarf and the Armies of the Ineffable Effulgent Light are battering down your stronghold's oak door (which is five inches thick and reinforced with bands of steel) and you have dispatched seven of your elite trollish bodyguards to execute the prisoners using standard issue military daggers, how many elves and dwarves can die before the Armies of the Ineffable Effulgent Light burst in and spoil it all? Include standard battering-ram-to-door-resistance ratios in your calculations. Be sure to allow for the fact that the trolls will need to fetch step stools in order to reach the elves' throats and that it takes four trolls to hold one shackled dwarf still for long enough to have his throat cut. Show all work."

Prince Gallantine realized that his mouth had dropped open somewhere around the point where the boy had described the dimensions and specifics of the stronghold door. He scarcely noticed when the demonling decided to alight on his head. "*That's* what he has you do?" he demanded, incredulous. "*Examples?*"

Andy nodded. "All day. It's boring."

"You're not just whistling *Suntoo Parade*," the prince replied, in full agreement. The demonling gave his scalp a vicious peck, but took flight again when the prince jangled his shackles at it. This time it landed on top of an armoire painted with maypole-dancing gremlins.

"Yeah. That's because he thinks I'm still just a baby."

"Clearly." Prince Gallantine's glance swept the sunny room once more. When he blinked, he could have sworn he felt sugar crystals crunching between his eyelids.

"So anyhow, I figure that if I had you drugged and brought to my chambers and I killed you—after I tortured you some and all; you know, the usual—maybe Uncle Morby would see that I'm good enough to move on to something a lot more interesting in my studies, you know?" He clapped his hands and two debauched eunuchs came waddling out of the shadows. (For there *were* some shadows in the boy's room; they just happened to be a lovely pale indigo rather than the traditional murky black.)

Prince Gallantine eyed the debauched eunuchs askance. They were of first quality, being not only enormously fat but so greasy that their bald pates reminded the hero of a formal dinner where the butter was rolled into little balls. He felt certain that if he could press a finger down upon the top of the nearest debauched eunuch's head it would sink in with absolutely no resistance.

For their part, the debauched eunuchs were living up to the worst said about them, for they were cackling with unholy glee as they spread a black velvet cloth at the prince's feet and proceeded to lay out a series of metal implements upon it. Serrated edges glittered as nastily by sunlight as by smoky torchlight, as did cruelly pointed tines and keen-edged devices for... *scooping* things. The prince felt his throat go dry as the full horrific meaning of this display engulfed him.

"The gods defend me!" he gasped. "That's *tableware*!"

Andy squatted down at one edge of the velvet cloth and poked a grapefruit spoon until it flipped over. "Well, *duh*," he replied. "Like Uncle Morby'd ever let me get my hands on the *good* torture stuff." He selected a fish fork, his gaze shifting between the puny utensil and Prince Gallantine's massive iron thews. He bit his lip, put down the fish fork, and opted for a salad fork instead. The cackling of the

debauched eunuchs reached a pitch commonly associated with psychotic poultry as the boy approached his helpless captive. The salad fork gleamed with the promise of pain.

"Look here, young man," the prince began, trying to sound reasonable. "Those are not torture devices. They're utensils. They might make an oyster on the half shell squirm, but that's about it. If you try to use them on me, you'll only be wasting your time and mine. This isn't the first time I've been a prisoner. Your ghastly uncle put a price on my head ages ago, and his filthy flunkies have been trying to collect on it ever since. Why, last year alone I was thrown into the dungeons of Earl Plagueworthy, Baron Somberear of the Sickly Marshes, and the mad Lord Ahk-Ahk, Viceroy of Tandoori. Now *there* was a man who knew what torture's all about!" A peculiarly fond look touched the prince's eye, but as quickly vanished. "I have withstood the barbarous ministrations of some of the most direly talented torturers in all the Ebon Empire. I have been restrained by fetters made from every substance imaginable, from silk to steel, including *suntoo* fur." There was that odd *look* again. "If you want to make me suffer, then for the sake of all the gods combined, at least use the proper equipment. Perhaps your uncle won't let you near his first-rate tools, but couldn't you make the effort to steal a few second-string thumbscrews? How difficult is it to scare up a used Wreath of Infinite Weeping in a place *this* big? And by the four heavens, this stronghold has a library. There are at least ten excellent sourcebooks on how to make your own garotte, and those are just the editions that are still in print! Do the words 'be prepared' mean *nothing* to you?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't care. I got time. As long as I'm torturing you, I don't have to do my real homework, and if Uncle Morby catches me, I can show him I was doing something constructive." He tried the points of the salad fork against the ball of his thumb gently. Then he tried them a bit harder. Then he attempted to stab himself in the fleshy part of his palm. All three essays yielded the same results, or lack thereof. Andy snorted in disgust and flung the salad fork aside. This time he settled on a dinner fork, though only after pausing long enough to nip a teaspoon which he hung by its breath-warmed bowl from his nose. "*Now* you'll be sorry," he informed the prince. He took one step forward and the teaspoon dropped.

"Oh, for—!" Prince Gallantine rolled his eyes in exasperation and then, with a single flex of his abounding muscles, tore his shackles from the wall. Bits of pastel-colored plaster flew like confetti. The debauched eunuchs shrieked and ran, but they did not get very far. Pouncing upon the place setting of doom before him, the prince nabbed a pair of butter knives and flung them after the retreating minions with such force and precision that they lodged in the soft spot at the base of the skull, killing them instantly. They fell face-forward with a massive *thud*, underscored by the tinny **dooiiiinnnnng** of the still-vibrating cutlery.

"Wow," Andy breathed. A gap-toothed grin stretched itself out from ear to ear. "Neat." His green eyes shone with a tender and adoring light as he gazed at Prince Gallantine and begged: "How'd you do that? Wouldja teach me, huh, wouldja, huh, pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease? I mean, golly, that was just so—so—so *super*. Honest. I mean... *wow*!"

Prince Gallantine instantly recognized the force transforming the Dread One's nephew-apprentice. It was nothing new to him. He had seen it many times, on the faces of many boys of about Andy's age when they learned that the supposedly humble wayfarer spending the night in their family's wretched cottage—often with their family's comeliest daughter—was in fact *that* Prince Gallantine of whose exploits the bards all sang. (They had better; he paid them enough for their hero-worshiping warbles, the lyrical leeches.)

Now, studying the lad's dotting looks, Prince Gallantine rubbed his chin in thought as a fresh inspiration struck him. *Hmmmm. Perhaps the gods have chosen to smile upon me in sooth. Now might I readily effect the destruction of the Dread One and all the heinous abominations for which he stands. Aye, and single-handedly, what's more! No need to call upon the Resplendent Alliance, no need to pay off the legions of dwarvish mercenaries nor share the honors of conquest with those glory-hog elves. And when the bards sing about this little picnic, I won't even have to bribe them to get my name right. They'll get it right for free.* His grin was wide, but cold as an edge of

tempered steel. *They'd better.*

He let his smile warm and soften like lard in the sun as he turned it upon Lord Morbidius' nephew-apprentice. "Son," he drawled, "would you *really* like to learn how I did that?"

The boy's head bobbed like a duckling in a whirlpool.

"Good. I could *use* an apprentice."

Andy's expression went from worshipful to wary in a flash. "Apprentice?" he repeated. "You mean like with *homework*?" He pronounced the word with a loathing that grown men usually reserved for tax collectors.

Prince Gallantine waved away the lad's mistrust, his broken shackles jangling. "Heroes don't do homework," he said. "And neither do our apprentices. Textbooks are for the forces of evil. We prefer learning-by-doing."

The boy's face brightened once more. "Yeah? Swell. When do we start?"

Prince Gallantine hunkered down to eye level and tapped the balefully glowing amulet depending from Andy's neck. It hissed at him. "We start," he said, "by sharing. That's your first lesson as my apprentice, son: Heroes always share."

Sword in hand, Prince Gallantine strode through the secret passageway linking Andy's quarters with Lord Morbidius' throne room. After the compulsory chipperness of the boy's chambers, the gloom and reek now surrounding the hero was almost a relief, to say nothing of the spiderwebs and the occasional human skull or rib cage crunching underfoot. In short, the secret passageway was everything a secret passageway in a Dread One's stronghold should be. Better still, it was everything Prince Gallantine had *expected* it to be. He was not a big fan of surprises.

He smiled grimly as he watched young Andy lead the way through the satisfactorily dark shadows ahead, the amulet around the boy's neck giving off a sulky scarlet light. Prince Gallantine was pleased: his new apprentice was working out perfectly. Granted, it was the first time he'd ever heard of a hero taking on an apprentice—pages, yes; squires, yes; faithful old family retainers, yes; sidekicks, *duh*—but he was willing to go with what worked at the moment.

It wasn't as if he was going to be saddled with the kid forever. As soon as he'd used Andy to effect the utter defeat and preferable destruction of Lord Morbidius, he'd hustle the kid off to the fabulous dwarven mines of Underpinning-upon-Edgewort. After all, even with Lord Morbidius annihilated, there would still be several grand battles to be fought until the Dread One's subordinates got the message that their leader wasn't going to be backing them up anymore. An epic battle for the future of Placidia Felix and all the Lands Yonder was no place for a child.

Or so he'd tell the child in question.

Prince Gallantine sucked his teeth thoughtfully, extracting the last strings of demon flesh from between his bicuspid. As a token of his unqualified devotion, Andy had turned the power of his amulet upon his own pet demonling, roasting it with a single, fiery blast of power from the glowing red jewel so that his new master might eat and refresh himself before their confrontation with Lord Morbidius. Such loyalty was a rare thing in this sorry day and age. It was almost a pity to sell the lad into captivity as a mine worker once they reached Underpinning, but the prince needed the money. (Hiring bards to sing his praises did not come cheap, and the rapacious rhymsters *would* insist on being paid by the stanza.)

But it won't be real captivity, he thought, seeking to salve his conscience. *It will be a valuable learning experience for the boy, a welcome respite from all those musty old textbooks Morbidius had him study, hands-on work, honest manual labor, a top-notch opportunity to get some much-needed exercise. You can't beat dwarvish mine overseers for giving a body a good workout. It'll toughen him up wonderfully, get some muscle on him.* He grinned as the ultimate comforting thought struck him: *Why, it's not captivity; it's a brand new apprenticeship!*

He was still basking in the glow of self-congratulation when they reached the end of the passageway, a wooden panel set into the stone wall of the stronghold's inner warren. Andy laid one hand

on the planks and turned to Prince Gallantine, his eager young face painted with bloody shadows from below, cast upward by his amulet.

"Kay, this is it," he said softly. "Uncle Morby's throne room is on the other side."

"Are you sure he'll be there?" the prince asked. As already noted, he didn't like surprises, and there was no worse surprise than bursting in upon one's unsuspecting enemy with a loud *Die, recreant fiend!* on your lips, only to discover that the recreant fiend in question was nowhere in sight. There was simply no way of making such a blunder look like something you *meant* to do.

Andy nodded. "He's always in there. He says it's the best place in the whole stronghold for brooding over the fate of his enemies, or laying evil plans, or gloating. He likes gloating. Used to be he left it sometimes, to eat and sleep, but ever since he overloaded the Heart of Helvorash and it blew up, he can't eat or sleep anymore. He says it's better this way, saves lots of time, which is 'specially useful when he gets behind in doing his paperwork."

"What's the Heart of Helvorash?" Prince Gallantine asked, nervously thumbing the hilt of the huge broadsword which his new apprentice had so considerately provided. Whenever a Dread One owned an object that was named the Random Body Part of Someplace No One Ever Heard Of, it boded ill for the forces of Good.

"Nuthin'." The boy twiddled with the chain around his neck. "Not anymore. It *was* a big ol' red rock twice my size, burning with a hellish and, um, uncanny radiance. He got it as ransom for releasing this real important demon prince he summoned and bound. He *says* he was a whole year younger'n me when he did it." The skepticism in the lad's voice was immeasurable. "Anyway, if he *did*, which he didn't, maybe it's a good thing he waited all that time until he tried to harness its power to blast you and all your armies and allies and stuff off the map, 'cause like I said, when he tried that, it blew up." He tapped the seething face of his amulet. "This is the biggest chunk that was left and it don't do much of anything, so he gave it to me. I mean, sure, it could maybe kill an elf at fifty paces, but what can't?"

"Ah. Well, that's all right, then." Self-confidence restored, the prince pushed young Andy aside and stated, "You have done passably, Apprentice. Now watch and learn." With that, he kicked open the door and sprang through.

It all came off like a charm. Lord Morbidius was taken entirely unawares, with the utmost ease. The only reason that he did not perish instantly was that his capture *was* so effortless. One minute he was standing on a *suntoo* skull, hunched over a cauldron full of something nasty, the next he was huddled on the floor with Prince Gallantine's foot on the small of his back, his face crushed to the basalt slabs. Gazing down upon his vanquished foe, the doughty hero felt a pang of disappointment.

Is that all there is? he mused. *I could slay him where he grovels, and yet— Curse it all, this is supposed to be the final showdown between Good and Evil! It ought to play itself out a little longer!*

Trying to save the situation, Prince Gallantine cleared his throat and declared, "So, Lord Morbidius, to this low estate have come all your wicked plots and plans for the subjection of the Free-Range Peoples! A pity that you shall not be able to hear the cheers that shall rise up from the massed armies of the Resplendent Alliance when I ride back into our main encampment with your severed head dangling from my saddlebow."

"Do not kill me, noble Prince Gallantine!" Lord Morbidius implored, thumping his forehead against the stone floor repeatedly in a gesture of abject submission. Catching sight of Andy, he cried, "Oh, my beloved nephew Androphagus, has he taken you hostage, too?"

"Naaah," said the lad. "I'm *his* apprentice now." He puffed out his chest mightily.

"What? You treacherous cur! Perfidious swine! Cursed and double-cursed and thrice-cursed be the day your slut of a mother coupled with a leprous *suntoo* and gave birth to you!" Slick as a snake, he threw off Prince Gallantine's foot and leaped up, his palms filling with crackling green fire. But when he hurled the balls of dire sorcery against the boy, the crimson-stoned amulet automatically cast up a shielding counterspell that deflected them. Lord Morbidius was knocked on his hindquarters by the

rebound effect and found himself looking down the full length of Prince Gallantine's broadsword before he realized what had happened.

"Don't try that again, Morbidius," the prince drawled.

"Ha!" Andy crowed. "He better not or you'll—you'll—you'll chop off his head and—and do what you said." He was so worked up that he seemed to be having a hard time getting his words out. "You know, ride back to where the Splendid—no, wait, the Resplendent Alliance is waiting for us!"

"*Resplendent*," the prince corrected him gently.

"Yeah!" The boy began to hop from one foot to the other in a way that set the prince's nerves on edge. "And they'll cheer us so loud that it'll cause a big ol' landslide and maybe kill a few horses and stuff, but—"

"There will be no landslide," Prince Gallantine said, a trifle more firmly.

"Why not?" Andy sounded cheated. "You guys are camped in the passes of the Distant Prospect Mountains, right? I mean, that's what Uncle Morby's raven-spies said. There's *always* landslides in the Distant Prospect Mountains!"

"Silly child, don't you think we know that? Those troops are merely an illusion cast by our best wizards." If the prince wanted to talk down to Andy any farther, he would have to get up on a ladder. "The main force of our armies is actually located along the banks of the Hushamuk River, with Pigeon's Hill and the Sundry Morass at our backs."

"Oh." The boy stopped bouncing, but Prince Gallantine's relief was short-lived, for he immediately began to crack his knuckles as he said, "Well, I betcha two hundred thousand warriors can cheer real loud."

Prince Gallantine gave a deprecating laugh. "If you're going to be a hero's apprentice, your first lesson must be never to use ravens as spies. They can't count worth a damn, and they can't tell the warriors from the camp followers. We have perhaps five thousand fighters in camp, though more stand ready to rush to our aid as soon as the line of signal fires from Pigeon's Hill to Thrushmeadow Parva is lit."

"Five... thousand," Andy repeated slowly. His fingers moved in the time-honored fashion favored by children everywhere who had been told to do the math in their heads but wouldn't. "About two hundred seventeen roadstaves from Pigeon's Hill to Thrushmeadow Parva as the raven flies... one signal fire every eleven..."

"What are you doing, lad?" Prince Gallantine asked.

"Sh!" Andy scowled and resumed his mutterings: "Two ravens to carry one bucket of water between them... allow for wind resistance, spillage, weather conditions... Got it!"

He looked at a very perplexed Prince Gallantine. Then he smiled and laid one chubby finger to the center of his amulet.

After the great Battle of the Hushamuk River, it was sung by the few surviving bards that Prince Gallantine never knew what hit him. This was not true. He knew, all right. He knew that he was hit by the same blast of pure, merciless, searing energy that had transformed a demonling into cutlets, medium-rare. Whether he had any time to *react* to this knowledge, to *apply* it to some purpose, however briefly (besides shrieking with the hideous pain of it all) remained a mystery for the ages.

It simply went to prove what he'd always said: He did *not* like surprises.

Lord Morbidius stood beside his nephew on the throne room balcony and watched with deep satisfaction the never-ending line of captives trudging down the road that led them inexorably through the black iron gates of the stronghold. Their groans and lamentations were so heartrending that the Dread One himself deigned to smile.

"Very good, Androphagus," he said, patting the boy on the head. "Once we had the information about the siting, numbers, and communications system for the Resplendent Alliance, destroying them was

easy. That was a very original plan you concocted. I think that your mother will be pleased to hear that I have decided to give you a grade of—" He fell into a short bout of contemplation before concluding: "—B-plus."

"B-plus!" Andy squealed. "*B-plus!* But I planned it all! I gained and betrayed the confidence of your archenemy! I got him to reveal all that stuff you needed to know, and then I *barbecued* him! Thanks to me, we *won!* Totally! Everything! All the marbles! The Ebon Empire's spreading out all over Placidia Felix and the Lands Yonder like a big ol' puddle of *suntoo* barf! How come all I get is a stinkin' *B-plus?*"

"Simple," his uncle replied, turning his back on the boy to return to the dismal shadows of his throne room. "You failed to show all work."

He never knew what hit him.