

## An Evening's Honest Peril

by Marc Laidlaw

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7,000 Words.*

Sitting at the entrance to the Tomb of Abomnis, dangling her legs like tempting morsels over the dark and moaning stony mouth, Jinrae thought she saw the head of a black-haired man rise into view at the crest of the hilltop behind her. She leapt to her feet with her sword drawn and ready.

Echoing her startled cry, a raven swept up and over her, flapping twice and then gliding toward a distant tumble of faint brownish buildings in the middle distance.

*Stop jumping at shadows!* she told herself.

Settling back down, she watched the black fleck merging with the evening sky. The sun had just gone down beyond the town of Cowper's Rest, pulling daylight after it, triggering lights in the villas. The ravenspeck circled and landed somewhere in a farmer's field. Scattered red flowers nodded in unison, bowing to a breeze she couldn't sense herself. In the far, far distance, an olive smudge gave little hint of the horrid marsh it heralded.

Groans came from the tomb, groans and the rattling of chains to greet the coming night, but they struck no answering note of fear in Jinrae. Once the sound would have chilled her, a weirdly welcome pang, but these days, even in the worst places, she rarely found anything strong enough to cut through the numbness that enwrapped her. Vague dreads wrestled in the back of her mind, ones she didn't care to name. She felt she was seeing the seams of the world tonight.

Someone was coming. A silvery glint on polished mail faintly limned a figure stalking across the plain at a pace that would have maddened her if she'd had to tolerate it. Thankfully, they would not be travelling any great distance on foot tonight—although if it came to that, she had sufficient scrolls to quicken even the slowest feet. Aye, she carried boots of speed and hasty syrup and portalismans; besides which, numerous powerful friends would come to her summons, although she intended to rely on no resources besides her own at this point. It was hard, alone, but better in the long run. The last few days had taught her a great deal about her vulnerabilities, skills she had neglected through too much reliance on others. Or, at least, on one other. Hard lessons, late in coming, but not lost on her.

Now here was a fresh face, an adventurer in unblemished silver armor. It was Aynglin, just as she had seen him last, a bright orange plume bobbing from his helmet's crest. He had not put by his violet trousers, nor the green slippers with curling toes; and she couldn't fault him for it, since it lent him a quite distinctive (if not distinguished) appearance. She would be able to pick him out in almost any crowd.

His coat, however, was another matter: dark and oily, clearly stripped from a greater gullcock, but with patches of long greenish fur still clinging to the seamed hide.

“Hi,” said Aynglin as he came to a stop at the entrance of the tomb. His eyes were the same shade of violet as his pants. “I mean, hail. Hope I’m not late. You said to meet you at twilight, right?”

“Well met,” said Jinrae. “You’re right on time. You’ll have to lose that gullock hide, though. It would only bog you down where we’re going.”

The ends of Aynglin’s mouth turned drastically downward. “Really? I heard this was the best.”

She couldn’t suppress a laugh. “I hope you didn’t pay a great deal for it.”

“No, I...I found it.”

“Well, that should tell you something of its value. Someone didn’t think enough of it to lug it along or even throw it on their mule. A perfect hide is well worth its weight, but that one’s imperfectly tanned. See the hunks of fur, never quite scraped away? It’s the work of a not particularly promising apprentice. In the hands of an expert, this would have made a coat I wouldn’t mind wearing myself.”

He mumbled a glum, “Oh.”

“Anyway, let’s see what I’ve got that you can use.”

She reached into a pack she’d dropped on the terraced hillside, and pulled out a cloak of sheer material, supple as silk but silvery as the scales of some freshwater fish swimming in light. She leapt down next to Aynglin, eliciting hungry moans from the lurkers in the tomb. Aynglin took a backwards step.

“Don’t fear,” she said. “They’re bound within. Now put this on. It’s meadowshark.”

“Really?”

“You can keep that. And I’ll give you matching pants later, if you accompany me back to Cowper’s Rest. They’re not violet, though. They won’t match your eyes.”

“That’s okay! I—these were just temporary till I found something better.”

“Everything’s temporary. Don’t get attached to anything. That way you won’t suffer when you lose it. Which you will.”

“Okay. I guess I’m ready.” The gullock coat lay in a heap on the gravel path. “Is this it? Just the two of us?”

“It’s for the best,” she said. “You’ll progress much faster.”

“But where’s your partner? Isn’t he...?”

“Not anymore. Let me see your sword.”

Aynglin unsheathed his blade and held it out to her.

For a moment Jinrae felt painfully disoriented.

The pommel held a faceted orange gem, inlaid with a rune of fire. The curved white blade was gnarlphin horn, lightly glimmering with imbued magic.

She knew this sword. It was, if not unique, then one of a very few.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“From a stranger,” he said.

“Masked? Anonymous?”

Aynglin nodded.

“May I touch it for a moment?”

Aynglin hesitated, and she couldn't tell if it was indecision or merely ignorance that held him back.

“I only need to touch it in order to divine its properties,” she said. “You needn't fear handing it over to me.”

“I trust you,” he said simply.

She put a gloved hand on the hilt, and turned so that the twilight gleamed along the blade. There was no inscription where she had feared to find one. But that meant nothing. Engravings melted away with the proper words muttered over them. Entire histories could be erased that way.

Still, it hinted of something more than chance, and she knew the mystery would haunt her until she solved it.

At that moment, the first star pierced the deepening twilight. A wolflike wind began to wail through the hills and the moaning in the tomb grew louder.

She nodded at Aynglin and took her hand from the sword. “Keep that out,” she said. “You'll need it. I'll enter first and make sure there's nothing nastier than I expect.”

“Right behind you.”

She stepped through the tomb entrance, into darkness deeper than at first seemed possible. Her eyes adjusted slowly to the distant flicker of torches. Aynglin shouldered past her before she could stop him and kept going, blundering on without yet realizing that she had come to a halt. She hurried up behind him in the narrow passage, in time to see him hesitate before turning to look back for her.

“Oh, there you are.”

“Go on,” she said.

At that, he rushed forward. But there were already things rushing to meet him.

They came on in a cluster, sliding and jostling in the passage that seemed too small for them. Wicked yellow eyes abulge, catching the torchlight; flattened catlike faces with venomous fangs and exposed claws like hypodermic needles. Aynglin raised his sword and slashed, first at one, then another. He hardly seemed to feel the claws that tore into him. Jinrae knew that as yet he had no concept of his own frailty. After twenty seconds, he was on the edge of death. By twenty five he would be gone, unless she intervened.

With a quick word, she raised her hands and cast a sphere of healing and protection over him. A second

incantation, and Aynglin's sword flared with a sharp red light. He was like a mercurial spirit now, slashing his way through the denizens of the tomb as if they were wraiths without substance, offering scarcely any impediment to his progress. Jinrae followed in his wake, sidestepping littered limbs and dislodged eyes, continually hurling potent protective devices at her protégé's silhouette. This close to the surface, they had little to dread. She tried to find a rhythm that would serve her well as the evening's onslaught grew more dreadful.

It was in a chamber on the second level, where the ceiling was encrusted with encysted shapes of winged sleeping things, that Aynglin, in the midst of slicing through a hoary tomb spider, suddenly stiffened and flared, casting off brilliant showers and spirals of light. When the seething fires had subsided, he seemed to stand taller, fuller and brighter in every detail. He barely nicked the next spider and it curled up instantaneously into a ball of ash, hugging itself with its wiry crisping legs. The arachnid dissolved into ashes and crumbled away.

"Congratulations!" Jinrae called. Aynglin turned and raised his sword, victorious, thereby scraping the ember-colored chrysalis on the ceiling. His upturned face went green, flooded with the sickly radiance of unfolding wings. The hatchling dropped straight down onto him.

Jinrae leapt forward with her blade out, slashing through the larval demonid. It expired with a putrid belch, but not before its myriad kin had been roused from their hibernation.

"What now?" Aynglin asked, struggling up from beneath the crackling membranous corpse.

"This is good," Jinrae said. "Keep your ground and I'll watch over you. We're lucky to have found such a chamber this early."

"Are you sure?"

But there was no time to answer; the awakening was too swift. She barely had time to form her own shield of immiscibility, which would hold for as long as she remained immobile. From that vantage, she began to cast spells upon young Aynglin.

The first wave of demonids clattered against her hastily erected barrier with the scraping sound of chitinous iron-taloned wings. They swarmed the young swordsman, who stood waving his blade as if carving patterns in the air. In this case, the air was solid with wings and claws, and as he carved he could hardly help but open demonid veins. The room began to fill with a churning bloodcloud, as if he had tapped some atmospheric source of scarlet gore.

While the cries of the awakened demonids were deafening, and grew worse as their injuries increased, Jinrae gradually became aware of another sound. It was sharp and shrill, hysterical—and somehow, she felt, juvenile.

It took her several moments to recognize that a third human had entered the chamber; small and quick. In a manner reminiscent of the demonids themselves, it pounced on one of the flyers and bore it to the ground, tearing off the fanged head in one practiced twist. A gloved hand reached and caught a scaly wing, pulling another demonid from the swarm. And then another. Jinrae suppressed her irritation, trying to keep her concentration on her shield. Even so, her attention had become divided, and she feared that Aynglin would suffer for it if she did not deal with the interloper immediately.

"We thank you for your aid," she called with forced politeness, "but it is completely unrequired."

Naught but a feverish laugh was heard in reply.

The air was beginning to thin of the predators, and she sensed Aynglin beginning to falter. He had been close to another metamorphosis, but now he teetered on the brink, disrupted by the new arrival. He was just becoming aware of the newcomer.

“To repeat, we do not require your aid. I am assisting this young one, and I have things well in hand.”

This time, the intruder’s response was more direct.

“Fuck you!”

Unsurprised, Jinrae drew in her shield, exposing herself to talon-blow and wing scourge. She dipped her hand into the wallet at her belt, slipping on a ring she knew by touch. It was highly polished, twisted once along its band: a moebius ring.

She raised her hand and tightened her fist, as if grasping some invisible fabric and twisting it, wringing energy from raw aether.

A violet jolt shook the room, briefly illuminating all the demonid flyers from within. Skin, scale and chitin grew transparent; skeletons leapt out clearly, luridly aglow. The savage skeletal flock swerved and locked its knobbed ends into a single mass, moving with a collective will, a shifting puzzlebeast of bone and fang.

Their exclusive target was the foul-mouthed intruder.

In a shrieking cloud they congealed around him, cutting off the shrill and mocking laughter at a stroke. An instant later they thinned and dissipated, resuming their strident attack on Aynglin, albeit without their scaly hide this time. He dispatched the remainder of the bony flock with something less than his former verve, but before he was quite finished, another lightning bolt of transformation shuddered through him. Jinrae grinned with pleasure to see him climb another notch in stature and in heft. But Aynglin seemed disoriented, odd. Instead of rejoicing over his growth, he shuffled through the mass of demonid bones and corpses, and gazed down at the fallen stranger’s clean-picked skeleton.

“Harsh,” said Aynglin.

“I gave him fair warning,” she said. “I will not tolerate his kind.”

An engraved token lay among the bones of the uninvited guest. Aynglin bent and picked it up, scanned it, handed it to her.

“p00ter,” she read aloud. “Alas, I fear poor p00ter won’t be missed. And better him than you, I might add. I expected to perform a few resurrections tonight, but this would have been far too early. I don’t wish to tarnish my reputation as a teacher.”

“But... what did he want?”

“To sow discord. To disrupt your growth and steal what he could of your glory, little though he needed it. You could see how easily he took down the demonids. There are plenty of other chambers deeper down and in neighboring tombs, filled with horrors to keep him occupied... if he were looking for an evening’s

honest peril instead of craven mischief, that is. Now, don't trouble yourself. He's inconsequential, and we've far to go."

Her pupil shrugged and tossed the token back into the bone pile, then strode on deeper into the crypt. She stood watching him for a moment without following. Something about him reminded her of another swordsman, one not so young but just as eager. She had felt something like this when she'd watched him in the midst of the swarm, slicing scaly wings with an ease that seemed more than natural: practiced.

"Aynglin," she called, catching up to him, "I never asked this before, but...are you new here? Have you traveled here before in other guises?"

He turned and faced her, his eyes shifting in the torchlight, but unreadable. She realized how little she knew of him. But that had not troubled her until now. Why was she suddenly wary?

"What makes you ask that?" he said.

"You seem too good to have just started out tonight."

He allowed himself a smile. "Well, thanks, but...I am new here. I've had practice in other realms, maybe it carries over. I knew enough to seek you out, or someone like you, and ask for help. Thanks, by the way. I do appreciate it. I'm getting a lot of experience. I wouldn't say we make a great team, because I'm nowhere near being useful to you, but...it would be nice to get that far eventually."

She felt herself withdraw from him a little, and a chill set in. "Well, keep at it and I'm sure you can go as far as you want—as far as I have anyway. But you'll soon reach a point where I'm not much use to you. You'll want to pick other partners if you wish to keep advancing at speed."

"Who says I want that? Isn't it nice to just find a point that's good enough and forget about forging ahead? Isn't it good to find friends and journey with them, helping each other, even if it means you won't get the full glory all to yourself? Didn't you do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you had a partner. I mean, I heard back in Cowper's Rest, they said you were always with someone named Venix. Actually, I was expecting two of you tonight."

Ah. The source of the chill.

"We formally disbanded," she said. "I travel alone now, when I'm not in great need. And I have plenty of other friends I can call on when I am in need."

"And the same goes for Venix, I suppose?"

"He no longer inhabits this realm."

She realized that they had been standing a long time in an open chamber without attracting enemies. The dead time had lengthened beyond the usual bounds. Perhaps that was why she found herself wanting to end this conversation. Her eyes continually darted to the shadows among the splintered beams and stone pillars that seemed to support the uneven ceiling mined of greenish rock.

Suddenly Aynglin laughed. The sound nearly brought her back to herself.

"What is it?" she said.

"It just occurred to me...the reason you're suspicious. I mean, if he left and then I suddenly showed up

out of the blue, you might think....”

Grudgingly she said, “It’s not inconceivable.”

“I know, but...”

“And it doesn’t help that you’ve found yourself a sword the twin of his.”

“I told you, a stranger gave it to me.”

“After you announced your intention of joining me tonight?”

“No. Before. In fact...well, perhaps your suspicions aren’t so unfounded after all. It was the same man who told me to look you up when I was asking about a teacher.”

“Ah, Gods,” she said, and turned away from Aynglin. “Damn it all.”

She didn’t need his help, his patronage, or any more reminders of his presence. He had meant it as a farewell gesture, no doubt, and it ought to have comforted her, since it was a sure sign he had no intention of returning. He would never have given away the sword otherwise. But the end result of his farewell was that he might as well never have left. Because of his damned gift to this beginner, she was stuck with him after all. There could be no more blatant continual reminder.

She felt betrayed, and it didn’t help that her student wouldn’t have known he was being used to get at her. She could turn away Aynglin, but she’d contracted with him for the evening. She must keep her word or suffer harm to her reputation. She might be able to convince Aynglin to discard the sword, but he was unlikely to find a better one at any price, and she had nothing equivalent which he would be able to wield. And she wasn’t yet ready to plead and bargain for her peace of mind.

She was snarled in the possibility of duplicity. More vague suspicions. It was maddening. Nothing was overt enough for her to subdue with any certainty.

“Come on,” she said, shoving past Aynglin, wishing to immerse herself in action. Battle was the one thing over which she could still exert her mastery, a dynamic she completely understood, where nothing was hidden and all threats were in plain sight.

“I’m sorry if I—”

“Just come on.”

But as she forged on, she realized that somewhere along the way, in the last few minutes, she must have let Aynglin lead them around an unfamiliar turning. They had come into a wide chamber she did not recognize, one where the crypts themselves lay shattered, slab lids cracked or cast aside, the open vaults full of broken skulls and scattered bones, completely plundered. She had expected the tomb to be more densely defended; the quiet was ominous. Once again, the rhythms of danger felt strange tonight.

But action was what she needed, and there was nothing here that would take her mind off her troubles. A quick survey showed that of four passages heading out of the room, two led sharply down.

And it was a sure formula that danger always lay deeper.

“This way,” she said.

“Lead on!”

She reminded herself that it wasn't his fault. He'd been played into this, just as she had. But his enthusiasm now threatened to become an annoyance.

At the bottom of the ramp, the passage forked. The path to the left was unlit, so she headed right. At the next fork, torches lit the left hand path. She chose that one, although she had a growing sense that this was too obvious and could be an attempt to lure them into a trap.

Before she could reconsider, or retrace her steps, she heard whispers and scrabbling, then a sharp squeal. She turned to see Aynglin with a large rat impaled on his sword. Several more were coming down the corridor behind him, gliding along as if impelled by wheels hidden beneath their shaggy flanks.

She didn't believe the rats would give him much trouble, but it was impossible to be sure. They could harbor unexpected wickedness. She put a warding spell around him, flung some extra potency into his blade, and watched him dispatch them handily. They gave out muffled squeaks as they died.

As the fourth one collapsed with a high-pitched wheeze, something enormous and not very far away let out an answering squeal that was more like a bellow—like something a rat the size of a haywain might produce under duress. She cursed her poor perception. The unlit passages should have tipped her off earlier. Down the corridor, beyond the quivering rat corpses, the torches began to go out one by one, paired with the snuffling advance of a lumbering blackness whose only details were the even blacker gleams of liquid eyes that drank in the darkness as the torches expired.

“Back!” she cried. “Behind me!”

Aynglin barely made it; but once he was behind, he kept on going. She heard his slippered feet padding away down the passage behind her, while she stood fast to face the oncoming horror. She glanced back to see if he was safely out of range, and discovered that behind her the passage forked again. Both paths were pitch dark, hiding her protégé completely.

“Aynglin, stop!” she cried.

Then the rat mother struck her.

She turned to give it her full attention, spinning a swirling shield of stars around herself, and driving ice magic into her blade. The torches behind the monstrous rat were extinguished now. If it hadn't been for the radiance of her aura, the darkness would have been total. Her blade clashed against bared teeth. A fang fell and hit the stone floor; blood streamed over black rubbery lips. She attempted a sideways slash across the whiskered muzzle, but the cramped passage shortened her stroke until it was a hacking blow more suited to an axe. Resorting to stabbing, she plunged her blade into one of the inky eyes, and this time the rat recoiled with a scream.

Less concerned about finishing off the rodent than with finding Aynglin before he lost himself completely, she turned and ran, leaving the rat hunkered in a pool of blood, shaking its head and wheezing.

“Where are you?” she called.

His reply came echoing from nowhere in particular. “...*dark*...”



The tomb proved an absolute honeycomb of passageways, dead-ends, claustrophobic cells. There was no point in trying to ask him to retrace his route, especially not in the blackness. She tried to recall if she was carrying anything that might help him—something which would allow her to reach out and pull him to her side. But she had left all such tokens back in Cowper’s Rest, along with her mule.

The horrid wheezing of the injured rat came closer, and she realized that although it posed very little hazard to her, it was potentially lethal to her student. She couldn’t tell at this moment if it was truly near by, or if the acoustics of the tombs created a false impression. She held very still to avoid attracting the rat’s attention, while trying to pinpoint its location.

“Jinrae!” came a panicked call.

“Quiet!” she called back. She wanted to communicate the importance of silence at this moment, but there was no way to explain in detail...not without risking further harm.

“Jin—” And then a scream.

It was horrible but it didn’t last long. Barely enough time to allow her to determine the rat’s location with certainty. She hurried down two short lengths of corridor and burst into a silk-shrouded vault in time to see the mammoth rat burying its bloody snout in the remains of her pupil.

While the rodent was distracted, she plunged her sword into the back of its neck beneath the skull. The creature slumped into an immense slack bag of bloodied fur.

As the creature died, the torches in the room came alight, replacing the faint glow of her aura. With a sigh, and a booted foot, she shoved the carcass aside and retrieved Aynglin’s copper wristband from the gnawed pile on the floor. Apart from his flesh, everything was intact. She held the band aloft and slipped a resurrection ring onto her right ring finger, speaking the words that went with it.

The air churned with diamond light. A shadowy shape thickened. An astral arm materialized inside the battered copper band, gaining density. Jinrae released the band as Aynglin reappeared, now fully fleshed and formed. Her young pupil, completely restored, although far more modestly dressed.

“Whew,” he said, with a dazed expression. “Thanks.”

“I apologize,” she said. “I should have been paying better attention.”

He stooped and reclaimed his gear and weapons. “I didn’t know rats came that big.”

“Oh, they come bigger, but not usually this near the surface.” Jinrae cleaned her sword on a dusty silken tatter that draped the stone wall. “This place seems strange tonight. I have a feeling changes have been made to this tomb since I last visited. I should have scouted a bit before bringing in a novice. Finding our way out again is going to be hit or miss, I’m afraid.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “I have most of the night. Unless you want to turn back now.”

“I think we’d better, at least until we get our bearings again. I’ll need to find something I remember from before...a landmark.”

Her doubts proved well founded. All the passages were fully lit again after the death of mother rat, and they were just as confusing as they would have been in total darkness. She fell back on following the left hand wall, and kept this up for quite some time without encountering any ascending passages. Every intersection led to downward tending passages. It was very strange. She was positive they had descended to this level, but she could find no steps leading up again. It was as if the place had altered since they entered it.

She didn't think that physical alteration of the tomb was likely, but there were sorcerous ways of making a victim think the world had changed, which had the same effect. But that would require a mage of some power, and who would want to target the two of them with vexing spells?

Who indeed?

As if reading her thought and answering it, Aynglin said, "Uh oh. It's him again."

That shrill childish cry, like the laughter of a hyena, echoed around them. They walked forward into a vast room, its dimensions and its ceiling hid in shadow. Directly above the entryway was a broad stone balcony incised with a gruesome frieze. The laughter fell from above, and its maker capered and gestured obscenely in the heights, emoting malice and mischief.

"Looks like p00ter came back with some of his pals," Aynglin said.

True enough. He was no longer alone. Four figures stood flanking him, wrapped in dark robes, their faces veiled in fog.

At first she saw no reason this should worry her. She took a few steps away from the wall, to get a better view of her adversaries, and at that moment she saw the archway vanish as if it had never been. She ran to the wall but hit solid rock. No seam, no keyhole, no latch, no sign that there had ever been an entrance.

Somewhere off in the shadows, she heard the sound of rusted iron grates and chains, and a ratcheting noise of gears. Skittering footsteps teetered on the edge of audibility, bony and chill. It could have been any sort of skeleton ambling toward them, but instinctively she suspected the worst.

"I'll show you, bitch!" came the hissing voice above her. "You and your freshmeat are bonefood!"

p00ter's face fairly glowed with gleeful evil, but his companions betrayed nothing. She assumed they were mages of some skill, judging by how easily she had been befuddled and led into this trap. Only potent mages could have summoned the undead legions now imminent. How p00ter's ilk managed to gather powerful friends she had never quite understood, but it was not an uncommon alliance. From the fact that p00ter's associates were unreadable, only barely visible at all, she had some glimmering sense of their power—and the trouble she was in.

As the first of the skeletal stalkers strode into the weak fringe of torchlight cast from the balcony, her worst fears were confirmed. It was a Foulmost Banebone, fully armored but with empty hands—which meant it would rely on magic only, hurling attacks all but impossible to anticipate.

Behind it, in rank and file, were more of its kind. And some similar number was coming upon them from the opposite end of the chamber.

She turned to Aynglin, grateful that she would have someone to watch her back, since she could wrap them both in a spell of deflection and add his power to her own. But it would require some quick study on his part.

“Now quickly,” she said, “you must do exactly as I say.”

But Aynglin wasn't listening.

“Uh, sorry, I gotta go,” he said. “Later.”

Putting his hands together in a posture of prayer, he vanished.

p00ter's laughter went up the scale, but she scarcely noticed.

Abandoned, betrayed... what next? She slipped a shortcut ring onto her finger and held it up to see if she could escape that way. It gave off a dull grey light, signalling its uselessness. They had sealed her in. Once she had fallen in battle, it might take hours to win back her remains, and she would need help to do it—especially with Banebones posted above her corpse.

With that thought, she realized what she had to do. As the foremost Foulmost Banebone rubbed its fleshless palms and began to mold a spiral of smutty light, she threw back her head and sent out a Clarion Call. Two answering Calls came almost instantaneously, and moments later she thought she heard a faint third response. But by then there could have been a symphony of Calls and she wouldn't have noticed. She was too deeply caught up in battling for her life.

The first of the bony attackers sent its whipcord spiral swirling around her, a barbed line of wicked light that attempted to entangle and immobilize her. She stepped free of it, slicing the lines with her charmed blade.

Whiplight wasn't a terrible spell in itself, and one Banebone was no more than an irritant. It was the sheer quantity and variety of attacks that would soon, inevitably, draw her down. For while the first Banebone followed its attack with another of the same, it was joined by its opposite, who had chosen a completely different attack.

Her motions slowed as the second wave of spells struck her from the opposite side of the hall. This spell was like green glue crawling over her, changing every powerful sword slash into a lazy swipe. She had one ring with which to counter the Viscous Flume, but she'd not had it charged in some time, and she had no idea how long it would hold out—especially if another skeleton flung a similar attack.

As the ring took effect, she tried to make the best of it. She lunged out at the source. Her blade bit deep into bone, but it was like hacking at metal. She managed to throw the Foulmost off its casting for a moment, by sending it staggering backward.

A toothed mesh of spiralwire looped down around her head and arms. As soon as she had freed herself of that, she turned to the second skeleton again, this time barking out a powercry as she hacked at a bare bit of vulnerable vertebrae below its gleaming helmet. Her laugh as the skull cracked against the floor for a moment rivalled that of p00ter, still howling from the ledge above.

This kill had an unexpected benefit, for as the scattered bones hit the floor, Jinrae flared with inner fires bright enough to cast the shadows of the oncoming Banebones onto distant walls of the cavern. The nearest skeletons were scorched by the glare of her new-claimed power. In the accompanying rush of energy, she clove the lead whipmaster through mid-torso, and continued to spin out into the midst of the legions like a raging top, her sword like a scythe slashing dry wheat. But not a single Bonebane actually fell, and those in the rear were beginning to cast healing spells on the advance guard.

The Banebones regrouped quickly. And her rush of gleeful energy had cost her dearly. She had forgotten the need for conservation. What she had just done in a moment she would have to do again ten times over if she wished to survive...and already she was nearly drained.

“Yeah, bitch, I know what you’re thinking. You hit me when I was alone...now how do you like it?”

She looked up toward the simpering figure on the balcony above, and suddenly she realized exactly who stood mocking her from among the safety of his sinister friends.

He had taken on a new name, to suit the regression in his personality.

He had revealed himself to be a vicious vengeful child, striking out in the only way he knew how.

What was worse, she had left herself open to be hurt. She had actually allowed this battle to matter to her.

She didn’t know whether to give up utterly, as Aynglin had done, or perform some explosive suicidal act in order to take him down with her. She had the ability to touch off an intense explosion that would obliterate every creature in the room in a single burst. But have done that, Jinrae as such could never return to the realm in this guise. It would be a truly final exit from this place.

She considered the ploy, then dismissed it.

She would not let him believe his victory mattered to her. She would play the game as if it were only that—a game.

Win or lose, she would not give him the satisfaction of thinking he had made her care.

Jinrae went back to her gory work with a will, counting each blow she gave and received, calculating exactly how long she could still hold out, watching the deadline loom.

In one hand she conjured orbs of buzzing flame and sent them streaming into the healers at the rear. The nearest ones she fended off with her blade. She put her back to the wall, which meant losing sight of the hateful form above her, but that was just as well. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. She focused her attention on the skeleton army, and measured her way down the steepening slope to oblivion.

Suddenly she heard a ragged croak with some faint kinship to p00ter’s laugh.

The vile fighter’s form went hurtling from the balcony and crashed down hard in the midst of the Banebones.

Dazed, still holding her attackers at bay, Jinrae watched p00ter stagger to his feet. The fuddled form rushing in her direction, saw her sword swing toward him, then turned and tried the opposite tack. Several of the Foulmost reached lazily to snag him; there were many bony fingers already twisting in the hems of his fringed cloak.

p00ter fell quite still and bowed his head, realizing that there would be no escape by regular routes. He put his hands together in prayer, striving for a swift exit, but an instant before he could pale and vanish, his bowed head was torn from his shoulders. His body exploded in a cloud of smoke and gushing sparks that looked like burning motes of blood.

The token bearing his ridiculous name landed at Jinrae’s feet.

“Farewell, p00ter,” she told it, and kicked the tag across the floor, hoping it would fall into some dark chasm, forever unretrievable.

An instant after p00ter’s death, three figures leapt down to touch the floor where he had fallen. At first she thought them his wizardly allies, but they were not. These bore mace and massive axe and luminous staff. Their faces were bright and clear, well known to her, personas of shimmering power armed with magic weapons.

“Woohoo!” they cried.

With screams of glee they laid waste to the Banebones. Jinrae’s exertions were all but unnecessary in this final melee; which was just as well, since her resources were almost completely drained. Even if she had been fully rested, any one of the three could have bested her easily in single combat. They swung their blades and hurled devastating spells at the skeleton mages. The towering monsters toppled like tenpins, smouldered and melted, pooled into wailing puddles of dust.

In no more than three minutes, the chamber was cleared of even the Leastmost Banebone. As for the wizards on the balcony above, they figured not at all in the final sweep, and made no further appearance. She suspected they had departed the instant the tide began to turn. So much for the friends that p00ter’s sort could assemble.

When they had finished, the rescuers formed a triangle with Jinrae at the center.

“Let’s blow,” said the one other woman, a youthful amazon with tattooed markings that made her look like a feral cat, and pointed ears tipped with a lynx’s tuft. She stood lithe and strong, wearing scarcely any visible armor.

“Right,” said the man to her right. He was completely armored. In fact, there was not the least bit of skin visible anywhere. His entire form was silver metal chased with moving figures.

The third was a short and bearded dwarf, clad in a cloak that dragged on the stone flags. He raised his staff and from its tip emitted a transport field that engulfed them all.

The dark air of the catacombs gave way to luminosity. Deep purple light with green underfoot, and a swollen orange sun shimmering up from the edge of the world.

They were standing outside, at the crest of the hill the tomb. Red flowers bobbed in the dawn breeze. Lights were just shutting off in Cowper’s Rest, as the sun’s rays groped at the distant brown buildings.

“Well, that was fun,” said the young lynx woman, Nyryx. “Can’t we leave you alone for one night without having to bail you out?”

“I was doing just fine,” Jinrae said.

“Then why the Clarion Call?” said the staunch little dwarf, Bloafish by name.

“We have troubles of our own, you know,” said the completely armored man known as Sir Candham.

“Anyway,” Nyryx pressed, “when are you coming home? You’ve been out a lot longer than any of us.”

Jinrae ignored the insinuation. She had more a pressing matter to bring up with them.

“I hope you know who was behind all that.”

“What?” Nyryx bristled. “Who?”

“p00ter... Venix... whatever he’s calling himself now. Your father hit a new low tonight.”

“What?” cried Bloafish. “No way.”

“I know you don’t like to see him this way, but I’m telling you—it was him. He set up that ambush, and you saw for yourself how it almost finished me. I should have known something like this was coming.”

“Don’t embarrass yourself,” declared Sir Candham forcefully. “It’s totally impossible.”

“I know him well enough to recognize him in any costume.”

“And we’re telling you you’re wrong,” Sir Candham said.

“How do you know?”

“Because,” said Nyryx, “we’re with him right now. We’ve been over here all night. He’s making us grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“What?”

“Well...it’s not like you noticed or anything. It’s not like anyone’s been able to talk to you. What’d you expect us to do?”

“Come off it, Mom.”

“Really. It’s time.”

“We’re telling you, he’s completely out of it. You’re imagining things. Get real.”

Jinrae stood speechless, her mind on the edge of grinding to a halt. She saw the pattern of suspicion underlying everything she’d believed that night. It was like her pain, a constant background to everything she felt. An undertow that continually pulled her in.

But if she was wrong...if her suspicions were unfounded. That meant there was a bottom to the pain. Maybe she had finally found that place. The three of them had shown it to her.

“Come on,” Nyryx said again. “It’s time to get going. Don’t you remember you said you’d pick us up in your car?”

“Oh god,” she said. “I’m sorry. I feel so...”

Sir Candham put up an admonitory silver hand. “Hey. Don’t. Just get going.”

Jinrae sighed. Nodded.

“Cool,” said Bloafish. “See you soon.”

The four of them bowed their heads, put their hands together, and stood very still. The unfelt wind toyed with the bright red flowers of the plain, but there was no one left to notice, and no one to hear the cries of dawn echoing from the mouth of the tomb.

## About the Author

Marc Laidlaw is the author of several novels and two or three stories, including this one, although not lately since he plays too many computer games in his free time, which is surprising since that is also his job at Valve Software where he was the writer for *Half-Life* and *Half-Life 2* and remains the lead writer for *Half-Life 2: Episode 1*, *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*, and will presumably retain some sort of writing role for the *Half-Life 2: Episode N* (where the value of *N* is uncertain or has yet to be announced). Yes, he wrote this. Do not go to [www.marclaidlaw.com](http://www.marclaidlaw.com).

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