

What Rough Beast

Frederick could never decide what was his favorite part of an excision mission.

All aspects of a successful excision mission had their own particular pleasures. In the preparation phase you had the intellectual joy of knowing that you were going to disarticulate a lot of zombies; in the action phase you had the physical joy of disarticulating zombies; and in the mop-up phase you had the emotional joy of looking at the places where you had disarticulated zombies and knowing that you had disarticulated them well. All in all, it probably wasn't as important as recognizing that it was all about finding whatever joy existed in the moment handed to you. Provided that said joy was intimately related to the disarticulation of zombies, of course.

The Demon of Chainsaws kicked through a hitherto-unopened door. His smile widened as he saw the cowering figure within.

Then again, maybe the best part of an excision mission was the phase where you lucked out.

...

"Hey! I got a prisoner for you!"

The two demons looked up curiously as Frederick casually dropped his trussed-up captive at their feet. The one dressed in the leather trench coat favored by fashion-conscious Gamesters smiled as he recognized the prisoner: the other simply stepped back, an inquiring look appearing in the eye not currently covered with a fresh bandage.

"Is he particularly important, Captain Musanios?"

The Gamester nodded. "You could say so, my Lord Baron. The miserable pile of angel dung we have here" -- a jackbooted foot languidly kicked at the faintly-moaning demon -- "was the research director of this misbegotten facility." Musanios leaned over. "Hello, Akriel, and how are you today? What, I'm not worth talking to? How rude." The Gamester theatrically hit his head with the palm of his hand. "Of course! Silly me: you have a gag in your mouth." He sniffed. "A gag smeared with alum. Well, that wasn't very nice of whoever did that to you."

Frederick shrugged. "He kept whining about how Dread

Lord Saminga" -- the form of the honorific was perfectly polite; the tone was not -- "was going to have all of our skins for drums if I didn't let him go. I didn't think that you would thank me for making you listen to such tripe, Captain."

Musanios made a clicking sound with his teeth and tongue. "Now, why would Dread Lord Saminga care about the Game's involvement in excising a notorious nest of officially disavowed Renegades? But you're right, Sir Frederick: I wouldn't have thanked you. Your diligence is duly noted. Is he otherwise inconvenienced, besides the obvious?"

"Empty of Essence, I'd guess. But otherwise, he's 'alive -- and unspoiled'."

The quick look around by all three demons at the quote from a work on the Forbidden List was no less reflexive for being largely unnecessary (rank having its privileges, not least of which was being allowed to ignore the Forbidden List).

"A pity... about the Essence. I'm feeling quite parched. Preparing the package for the return trip Down will take a few minutes: do give our esteemed Technological guest a

preliminary report, would you? He's very interested in how things worked out here, and you're the only one he hasn't talked to yet." Musanios opened up a black knapsack: various barbed wires and chains glittered, well, evilly, in the flickering fluorescent lights. "I think that a #5 Restraining rig would be in order. What do you think, Akriel? It's somewhat abrasive, but it gets the job done. What, no opinion? Oh, bless me if I keep forgetting about the gag!"

The two demons moved a polite distance away. The Baron looked on Musanios with some interest.

"I am somewhat surprised that he is doing the preparation himself."

Frederick shrugged. "Well, my Lord Baron..."

"Our ranks are sufficiently similar that the full honorific is not required, Sir Frederick."

"Oh, all right. As I was about to say, Baron Sparky..." -- an actual smile is rare in the Horde, but Frederick seemed ready enough to briefly display one -- "Captain Musanios takes these sorts of missions very personally. He's not one to like the Undead, so when he gets a chance to put

the boot in, he takes it. Not afraid to get his hands dirty, either."

Musanios looked up, sporting a trademark Impudite grin. "I also have very good hearing. Talking about your supervisors behind their back is no way to get promoted in the Game, Sir Frederick -- even when you're saying nice things about them." He looked thoughtful. "Or possibly *especially* when you're saying nice things about them."

"I have all the rank I need or want, Captain Musanios, and I like what I'm doing now."

"You are hopeless and perverse, Sir Frederick; but I persevere nonetheless. We'll make a proper Gamester out of you yet. Now, Akriel, where did I put those pincers? Ah, yes."

Sparky noted the byplay with no little amusement -- but thought it politic anyway to change the subject. "I can safely assume that there are no more Undead to be found on the premises?"

The Demon of Chainsaws nodded, his face settling to a

more Calabite-like scowl. "We went through the entire facility, checked every room. We captured or killed all the researchers and used the usual 'steel, silver and salt' on all the experiments. We'll burn this place to the ground when we leave, of course. Right now, it's just a matter of checking the inventory lists from the main computer with what we discovered -- but if we missed something, it's because it wasn't here when we showed up."

"And the Host?"

"Beats me how it happened, but they somehow missed our 'own-goal' op completely. Weird, huh?"

"Indeed."

Behind them, Musanios straightened, stripping off his rubber gloves and tossing them on the floor. "That should keep him nice and snug. What am I forgetting? Oh, of course. Renegade Akriel, you are under arrest. The charges are: one count of going Renegade, one count of unauthorized possession of Discord, two counts of unauthorized possession of dissonance, one count of unauthorized operation of a corporeal facility" -- Musanios took a stone tablet from off one table, dropped it onto the ground, and crushed it to powder beneath one heel -- "one

count of creating Undead without a license, seventeen counts of failure to assist the Game in an investigation, seventeen counts of resisting arrest, twenty-two counts of verbal assault, twenty-five counts of physical assault, thirty counts of metaphysical assault, one count of unauthorized heresy, five hundred counts of failure to provide paperwork, seven hundred counts of malicious intent to falsify paperwork, three thousand counts of attempt to destroy paperwork, ninety counts of malicious destruction of paperwork, seventeen counts of conduct unbecoming agents of the Prince of Death, seventeen counts of active treason against the Prince of Death, sixteen thousand counts of unauthorized experimentation, and one count of being a natural-born Damned fool."

Sparky tried to raise an eyebrow, winced, and raised the other one. "That's one I haven't heard before."

Frederick nodded. "We just started using it. A nice way to wrap things up, don't you think?" He turned and snapped fingers. "Skinner! Get your ass over here with the release forms!"

A smallish demon hurried over. "Here you are, Sir Frederick. My most humble welcomes, your Excellency." He handed Frederick a bulky clipboard and a steaming

cup of coffee. "Three sugars, two salt and one cream, as you required."

Frederick peered into the coffee. "Did you spit into it?" Skinner looked startled. "Ah, no. Was I supposed to?"

Frederick sighed. "Excuse me, Baron Sparky." The Demon of Chainsaws casually whacked Skinner on the head -- not enough to knock him down, surprisingly -- with the clipboard. "Yes, you were supposed to. You want to be more careful about admitting when you haven't sneaked a peek at a muckety-muck's personnel file. Now scram." The demon fled. "I don't know what they're teaching the new crop of demons these days."

Sparky nodded in perfect commiseration as he retrieved the clipboard and started riffling through the papers on it. "Indeed. If I have to squash one more 'foolproof way to destroy life on Earth', I'll start nuking the training pits again, I swear... oh, **anime**."

Frederick blinked at the swear word. "A problem?"

"No, a problem is when one or two experiments marked for destruction aren't found. 256 experiments gone missing is an unmitigated disaster. Excuse me." Sparky

walked over to Musanios, casually reached down, picked up Akriel and slammed him against the wall, heedless of the barbs and spikes cutting his hand. The other hand ripped off the Renegade's gag, then lashed out.

Sparky's voice was low, angry and quite devoid of humor. "We'll not waste time with the usual nonsense. I know that they're not here, you know that they're not here, and I have a memory reclamation team on standby. I **will** know what you did with the Rough Beast project, and if you don't think that I can make sure that you'll be in even more pain than is already slated for you, you are indeed a deluded fool. Talk."

Akriel attempted to spit, but only succeeded in dribbling on his chin. The Baron sneered, reached in one pocket for a gun-like spray injector and fired it into the struggling demon's gut. The two Gamesters noted the resulting screams with some professional interest.

"That was Essence of *Elan Vitae*: the settings go up from 1 to 11. You just got a dose rated intensity 1. Talk, or I turn it up to 2."

Silence, then a scream.

"Talk, or intensity 3."

Silence. Scream.

"Intensity 4."

Scream.

"Intensity 5."

The screaming now had fragments of speech in it. Sparky paused.

"What was that? Sorry, but I don't understand you. Intensity 6."

The screams from Akriel redoubled: pleas for mercy could now be heard.

"I want information, not begging. Intensity 7."

The scream that seemed ripped out of the Renegade filled the room. "I DON'T KNOW!"

Sparky leaned back a bit. "Nonsense. Intensity 8..."

"No, no, no! I really don't know! I had it cut out of me! We all did! It was the only way to keep them safe!"

Musanios stepped forward at that. "Keep who safe, Akriel?" The Renegade's eyes swiveled to him.

"You know who, you bastard. The parents..." Akriel screamed again; Sparky thumbed the injector forward one more setting.

"Never swear at your betters, Renegade. It's up to intensity 9 by now, so watch yourself. Now, tell Musanios what he wants to know."

"Easy, easy, my Lord Baron. I'm sure that Akriel will tell us. In fact..." -- Musanios raised a hand. There was a hum of disturbance as the Renegade's face went slack -- "... he's eager to, no?"

Akriel's voice was dull. "Yes... yes."

Musanios' voice was gently reproving. "Yes, *masters*. You have to say it. It's important. It's good for you. You **want** to say it."

"Yes... masters."

"Excellent. Now, who are these 'parents'?"

The Renegade lowered his eyes. "We weren't supposed to call them that. They were experimental subjects, nothing more. But it became a joke, and then we got into the habit. We also called them Frankensteins, after the monkeybook. One researcher even called them *Homo Apyschiae...*"

Frederick snorted -- then looked vaguely embarrassed at the looks of the other two. "It's very bad Latin: it sort of means 'Soulless man'." He looked even more embarrassed at the identical raised eyebrows. "Freaks **are** allowed to read, you know."

Akriel went on, oblivious. "They were the ones that survived every culling. They were made into mummies, then they were made to compete until we had the best of the best of the best. Then we taught them what they needed to know to survive. Then we took **those**, made them compete again... taught them how to hide and sneak and plot... all the things that they would need to succeed.

"Then we taught them how to breed."

Sparky's knuckles whitened around the grip of his injector.

"Teaching them the Song of Fruition was the easy part. The hard part was working out how to keep the results stable and ... viable..." -- Akriel shuddered, as if remembering old pain, or possibly dissonance -- "...and how to successfully bring the results to term. But we did. They did. Then we sent all of them away, and burned out where we sent them. We knew you'd come for us, and we weren't going to let you destroy them. Hell needs them out there, even if you refuse to accept that."

Sparky's voice was furious. "Need? NEED? You utter fool. Did you know what you were unleashing?"

Akriel looked at him: even through the haze of the restraints and the Song of Charm, there was a certain triumphant gleam in his eyes. "Yes. We unleashed the perfect talking monkey: no emotions, no tricks, no complications and no existence beyond this perverted place. They can exist anywhere, breed constantly, completely supplant their weaker cousins. And they'll never, ever pollute the celestial plane. They will bring Dread Lord Saminga's vision one long step closer to realization, and there is nothing you can do about it."

Sparky looked at the Impudite Gamester. "Captain

Musanios, if you wish to have this thing to further interrogate, I suggest that you have it removed now before I blow its head off."

Musanios blinked and nodded. "By your command." He snapped his fingers: two burly Gamesters appeared from a discreet distance and carried off the smiling Renegade.

Frederick was the first to break the silence. "That sounded bad, Baron Sparky."

Sparky nodded, his face settling into its usual mask of nervous weariness. "It is. There's a reason why we don't teach Undead how to reproduce. The results are useless to us: no Essence sent to fuel our Words, no belief generated to support our Tethers, no souls to eventually indulge ourselves with -- and they invariably breed and breed and breed, forcing out the humans. There's also the Host to consider: I doubt that they would find this amusing." Sparky laughed bitterly. "Stop twitching your fingers, Captain Musanios: I am immune to any report that **you** might write."

Musanios clicked heels. "A reflex, I assure you, nothing more."

"Good, because this has just officially become 'of immediate and pressing interest' to Vaputech. I bear the sigil of the Genius Archangel: I speak with his voice in this matter, and his voice says 'Exterminate'. We will liaison with the Game, of course, and provide any and all reasonable material assistance requested: requisitions are to go through my office. In return, I presume that I can expect that the Game will treat this matter with all due zeal?" Both Gamesters nodded. "And use all appropriate avenues of investigation? Yes, that means what you think it means." Musanios simply smiled lazily. "That will do. I am not interested in your secrets, gentlemen."

Sparky handed over his injector. "As a token of good faith. I saw you, ah, 'admiring' it. A single dose at 11, or multiple doses over 8, will cause dissonance in Servitors of Death. It'll run for quite a while on its present charge: I recommend against taking it apart to determine how it works, unless you have a building or two that you don't mind losing. You can have another gross or so just as soon as you get around to sending someone over to pick them up." The Baron reached for his cane and nodded. "And at that, I will let you get on with your investigation."

The two Gamesters bowed slightly as the Baron ever so slightly limped to the car waiting for him. As the

passenger door was opened, Sparky stopped for a moment to contemplate the former breeding pit. Unbidden, the image came to him of an entire planet filled with walking, silent corpses -- and a Hell filled with emaciated demons vainly trying to extract nourishment from them.

"The fools," Sparky whispered. "The blind, arrogant fools."

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