

THE LIGHT OF ISHRAM



Nancy K. Harmon

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Rakell Taznakie pounded on the elf's door loud enough to wake the dead and then ran off, blithering like the imbecile everyone knew him to be.

In fact, the racket *had* woken the dead. That damnable skeleton clan, the one Grig had taken such pains to tuck under the stairway, refused to go back into their closet no matter what he did. "I only keep you thieving blokes about to help with chores," he yelled. "So, do what you're told!"

About the time Grig thought he had the blighters rounded up, Taznakie came back, screeching more gibberish.

"Go away!" The elf launched a searing bolt of blue flame toward the village moron. "Just rewards to you." He shook his fist in the air.

But Grig's aim went astray and his skeleton clan ignited on the spot. They ran hither and yon like torches with legs. He managed to douse the whole lot of them with a shower of conjured rain, but not before they set his beautiful tree house on fire.

"You buggers are useless, no more than a mess of stinking ashes." With a sigh, Grig swept them away in a magical blast of hot air.

He spied Taznakie lurking by the well and shook his fist again. "Thanks to you, I must journey to Grecolix's bone yard straight away to find another clan. You know as well as I the skeletons are the only ones who can enter the Mutant Forest without losing their skins."

Neither did the corrosive vapors of the Nemrak trees affect their nonexistent brains. The long barbs that poisoned humans glanced off the skeletons without effect. "Lucky for them! And it's your fault, Taznakie," he shouted for good measure.

Taznakie blew a raspberry and ran into the woods.

Too irritated to wait for breakfast, Grig donned his leather jerkin

with more zeal than necessary, drew his hair back and wrapped it with a thong, grabbed his staff and set out for the bone yard.

"Foul tempered, evil smelling, cantankerous old troll," he grumbled. "Wouldn't you know Grecolix has the only decent pickings within two day's walk?"

The last time Grig had the misfortune to conduct business with Grecolix, the coward had tried to steal the eyeballs right out of his head.

Grecolix specialized in performing thievery on his very own rock-stoop. Eyes were always high on the list of ingredients for the bone yard's patrons. If the supply ran short, the first body, dead or alive, to come along sufficed to replenish his supply.

It had taken all of Grig's stealth and cunning to escape the snare set by the double-crossing troll. A healthy dose of magic conjured at the last possible moment had laid the brute low with a giant headache. No doubt about it, Grecolix would be waiting for him with open arms and deviltry in his minuscule brain and even smaller heart.

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Grig took no notice of the sun peeking over the treetops, nor the birds calling to him as he marched from the village. He'd seen the wall of flowers on his left and the sluggish stream on the right every day of his life, and they held no interest for him that fateful morning. Tallying the eccentricities he wanted in a good skeleton clan on one hand, he failed to see the dark, flapping blackbird of a druid square in his path until it was too late.

Grig had no use for druids, even if they were part of the human race. Nose and eyes smarting from the impact with solid flesh, the elf drew back ready to hurl an oath of disfiguring enchantment when he took stock of the situation.

To his reckoning, he stared the druid in the bellybutton, or maybe a fraction above. Either way, he didn't care for the odds. These men of the cloth were known to strike first and ask questions later, should it please their fancy.

Grig sketched an apology in the air and stepped to one side to allow the black-caped figure to pass. Like a great hulking bird of prey, the druid moved to block the way again. Worse yet, he stared holes right through Grig with strange copper eyes, sending shivers down the elf's spine.

"I beg your indulgence, good druid, but I must pass. I have much to do and the morning flies quickly. A freak accident has robbed me of my clan, and I journey to the nearest bone yard to replace them."

"You have no need of a clan," the druid replied with a soft brogue, never really looking at the elf.

Grig disliked the man on the spot. Temper held in check, he straightened to his full three-and-a-half feet. "Do you presume to tell me my business, you death knell of ruin?"

The druid gave a maddening half smile and a shrug, but said nothing.

A dark cloud formed above Grig's head. Wind whipped about his legs. He crossed himself in the sign of warding.

"Calm yourself, elf," the druid said. He waved his hand in the air and quiet returned. Then he gave that maddening half smile again.

"Where you hail from, I do not know, nor do I care," Grig said. "I ask only that you allow me to pass in peace, lest I be driven to violence we shall both regret. I warn you, you will not be pleased if you incur my wrath."

Those strange, copper eyes continued to stare through the elf. Again Grig squirmed, feeling like an errant child. "Out of my way," he commanded with less bluster. "Time is wasting, blackbird. I do not fancy standing here all day. Out of my way—"

"Theron Raurk," the Druid said.

Grig stared in surprise. "Wha . . . What?"

Taznakie burst upon the scene, yet again. "There he is. I found him and delivered your message."

Not to say that Grig understood a single word.

"Will you pay me?" Taznakie beseeched the druid with outstretched hands.

With a flick of the wrist, Raurk tossed a gold coin to the man. "You did well, Taznakie," the druid said. "Do not stray far. I may require your services another time."

Grig stared, mouth agape. "What did he say? No one, not even his very own mother, understands a word Rakell Taznakie utters."

"I understand him quite well," Raurk said.

The elf flapped his hands in dismissal. "Why in the world did you give him a coin? The village brats will only steal it from him."

Raurk eyed him with disdain. "Do you not pay your servants?"

"Servant?" Grig gawked from Taznakie to the druid.

"Servant," the druid confirmed. "He has performed a task for which I've paid him. I would have it no other way."

Grig shook his head in bewilderment. "I pay my servants, but Taznakie is a fool. He doesn't have the sense to pour piss from a boot with the instructions written on the bottom. Bah! You throw your money away. Better yet, you should toss it upon the fire."

Raurk's eyes crackled. "As would you, should you insist upon

purchasing another skeleton clan."

"So you say, druid." Grig moved to turn his back on the man, and then thought better of it.

"You doubt me, but the wisdom of my words will soon become apparent. Our journey is to be long and arduous. Mark my words, Grig Andrious Dothrie, a clanking, gabbling clan of empty-headed cadavers will only be underfoot."

"Never pronounce my given name aloud!" Grig snarled. "Even a funereal specter such as yourself knows better. I would not have my soul besmirched in the mouth of yon fool. He hasn't the wit to keep it to himself."

"I see you are superstitious." Raurk gave an amused smile. "However, I assure you that your given name is safe upon my lips." Raurk bowed low. "Nor shall you suffer injury from the man you name village idiot."

Grig huffed. "Call it superstition if you will, but I call it good sense."

Raurk's eyes seemed to focus on something in the distance. "You, Grig Dothrie, have far more to worry about than yon fool. If you do not proceed upon your journey to Grecolix's bone yard posthaste, a howling pack of banshees will overtake your progress anon. I, for one do not intend to stand here quarrelling while danger approaches."

"I don't hear any banshees." Grig cast a wary glance over his shoulder.

Raurk wrapped his voluminous cape tighter. "Good day to you, sir. I do hope you take my advice and retire from the immediate vicinity at once."

The druid vanished, leaving behind the acrid smell of smoke and something else Grig couldn't identify. He gawked, open mouthed, at the spot where the infuriating stranger had accosted him.

"Bah! He speaks in riddles. First he says I don't need a new clan. Then he says I should hasten to the bone yard? The man's daft. I'd smell a banshee within a league."