

Be'askaas

(Chapters 1 & 2)

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Chapter 1

He didn't want to apprentice for a Necromancer; who would want that? All death and dirt and decay – grave digging, organ harvesting. It wasn't right. In the south it was nearly outlawed. Every respectable city had morticians, not necromancers. No temple would let one attend because no god would listen.

But now the family had lost their land – nothing else was left. His father once proud, torn from his livelihood and broken completely; a farmer without a farm. He'd grown the best Red Thistle in the county – now merely an amateur drunk. Family bereft, his sons soon dispersed. The eldest to the army. The second to the city. Thirteen-year-old Rafe and his younger brother Gywn apprenticed to an old necromancer two counties away. Of his three sisters: two were anticipating the nunnery, while Rochelle, the eldest and prettiest was promised to a local blacksmith. She'd moved into town until the wedding. Father gave up the last family money for a dowry in hopes that a decent merchant-class marriage, having a tradesman in the family, would give his other children more opportunities. But the blacksmith never came out to the farm, never accepted their invitations, stayed remote and only called out Rochelle a few times before the wedding – a ceremony held many miles away, to which they were not even invited.

Their last hope misspent, the family disintegrated completely.

Departure day came quickly for the boys. Rafe and Gywn woke up early before the heat and prepared to set out on foot, having no ride and no money. They left a dour yet restrained farewell in the kitchen of the ramshackle farmhouse soon to be repossessed. No one wanted to acknowledge they'd likely never see each other again. Rafe kissed his mother and shook his father's hand; they bundled up a few pieces of hard cheese and dry bread with some extra clothes and that was it. His older brothers were gone already and his sisters were leaving tomorrow.

No one cried; such was fate.

Out onto the dusty highway, into the glare of a bright and rising day, Rafe and Gywn

began their trek, trudging single file, not speaking, heads down. Many miles to go with nothing to think about except sadness and worry. An uninvited journey into an unpredictable future. Nothing to do but follow the path under their feet. Carriages and riders cruised past on occasion. But no one would pick up two poor dirty orphans. They camped each night off the side of the road; picked wild radishes – snared the occasional rabbit, but were generally hungry. It was not a new feeling; no reason to complain aloud.

Only one night when they found a bountiful patch of wild loperberries behind a nearby hillock did they actually feel content enough to talk about their favorite subject: the tales of Anthelisis, the legendary hunter and adventurer whom they both admired. Now they were on an adventure of their own, but there was no glory in simply walking all day companioned only by worry and hunger.

The summertime highway was notched and uneven. Too many storms the previous winter and no repair since; carts cutting grooves in mud which later hardened. They walked on the grassy shoulder, accompanied occasionally by a stagnant and meandering canal.

Troops of men on horseback would occasionally storm by at speed, forcing Rafe and Gywn to retreat into the reeds to remain untrampled. Conscripted soldiers and mercenaries marched their way to marshal jobs in the East or battles in the South. Merchant caravans loaded with vendables moved slowly past, protected by armed escorts. Wanderers and migrants came by on occasion looking more ragged than even the two poor brothers.

Rafe felt weak and exposed, as though his strength was retreating from him; like a season without rain, he felt the lack – the pain of a vital absence. He had no home now, and no reassurance. Like a fresh wound just beginning to throb as the initial shock subsided – realizing the pain was here to stay; your attention not easily distracted. Hunger, sorrow and fatigue slowly grew atop the pile of worry. But he fought the oppression of ill thoughts, forcing himself to think of escape and opportunity. By the third day he had to talk about it, figuring (and hoping) that Gywn, who was two years his junior, would be feeling likewise or worse.

“We could leave within a month,” he suggested. “When we find better work. We can run away. There’s no reason we’re forced to stay. Father gave him no money.”

“I guess...”

“We don’t have to stick around, if we don’t want – is all I’m saying. Once we know the

area we'll know where to go. There's lots opportunity in the East, so they say."

"Because it's captured land."

"Yeah but--"

"If war starts again, we'll be living in the streets."

"But we could get city jobs and city rooms. We'd make money, and stay in a boardinghouse or an inn, with cooks and people who wash your clothes for you."

"We know nothing except farming. What jobs would we get?"

"We'll become tradesman. We'll get trained at something – ironwork or wheels or tanning."

"Dad tried to find us real apprentice trades. There was nothing. No one wanted us. Butchers and blacksmiths have their own sons. Or they go get kids with some schooling. Not like us."

"But there's loads of jobs in the cities. That's what everyone says," replied Rafe, though he really wasn't sure himself, and had no great rejoinder for Gywn, who was probably right. But Rafe wasn't going to give up his hopes so easily – he could imagine his life in town quite clearly: working in a shop with his home above it, looking out over some bustling, exciting city street full of energetic city-people. Having a cook maybe, and a maid! Buying stuff. Like new clothes and copper lamps, knit rugs and maybe even a tapestry like that one he'd seen once in a tavern: plump happy people looking over green fields full of sun – exactly like that – he could imagine the good life so clearly.

Rafe remained busy daydreaming as the long road inched by, stomped down step by step as the brothers plodded their way across each potent sun-filled afternoon. When they needed a break they slid down the grassy sides of the canal or sat in the shade of the occasional tree. The weather was quite hot, though bearable, and life would've been alright if they'd had a bit more food and weren't forced to concentrate on their circumstances – which they did, unrelentingly.

By the end of the week there was nothing left of their food but one tough heal of bread, which they shared, along with a few wild carrots happened upon that morning. They sat and munched away in silence. The effort of chewing the dry bread and thin roots seemed to take more energy than it gave, but it was comforting simply to produce saliva. Rafe figured they'd reach the

house of the wizard by tomorrow evening – hopefully they'd be fed.

All his short life Rafe had been worried about food. Although the heart of the Red Thistle was edible, the plant was primarily grown for its fiber. The twenty acres of it surrounding his home were of no use to his belly until harvest – that single dreadful month when the whole family ate nothing but thistle-hearts for every meal. The hardest time of the year, when they toiled long days in the field reaping the thorny plants for sale at the market. All nine of his family out in the sweltering heat, every late summer he could remember, reaping and bundling the dry prickly bushes until their hands bled.

They grew a small vegetable garden next to the house, but the more land they devoted to thistles, the more money they made. If the price of Red Thistle was high that year, the winter would go by alright – enough blankets, enough lamp oil, enough meat and firewood. But the price never seemed high enough – at least according to their father; and it was all he ever talked about.

The breakdown began when Rafe was eight years old. That terrible year of early spring flooding, followed by a long summer drought. That was the only year the price of Red Thistle actually was quite high – the year their entire crop failed.

In order to survive, their father was forced to sell his land to a local baron, who allowed them to remain in their house and farm it, but took their profit ever afterward.

Rafe's father had originally acquired the land through a homesteading grant when the king opened up that area to settlers following the war. His father had been very proud to own land, as no one in his family ever had before. And after he lost his ownership of it, hardships only seemed to increase. Rafe and his siblings ate less and worked more, while bearing their father's increasingly poor spirits and quickening temper.

The only fun Rafe knew was in a brief period between the work of the springtime planting and the arrival of the autumn harvest. There were two months when the weather was nice, the garden was fresh and plentiful; the young thistles were growing, and there wasn't much work to do. He'd play in the river with his brothers and their dog, trying to forget the rest of the year during which he was either too exhausted to play, too cold to think, or too hungry to move.

The next day Rafe and Gywn found the turnoff, veering from the main road onto an

overgrown and neglected narrow lane, which turned them away from an upcoming town. Rafe, having slightly better eyesight than his brother, could just make out the church steeple in the distance and felt he could nearly smell the marketplace – though it might have been more desire than reality. As they turned away from the main road he felt it was the same ruinous turn their lives were taking.

At the fork there was an ancient Kwoti statue, as was the old tradition. Travelers were meant to say a specific incantation at the shrine and if they spoke it correctly, with an earnest heart, they were rewarded with a coin from its stone mouth.

“I’m going to do it,” said Rafe, because he thought he knew the incantation.

“What a waste of time!” said Gywn, “I’m starving and the sun is going down. I don’t want to spend another night on the road.”

“I’ll do it quickly.”

“It won’t work.”

Rafe knelt in front of the icon. Weeds were overgrowing it, for people did not often pray at the Kwoti anymore. He brushed aside the vines and ripped up the long grass. Then he began the chant. He tried his best to concentrate, to enunciate the older words clearly. The incantation was short but had to be repeated ten times. Gywn sat down with a sigh and waited, throwing pebbles into a ditch. Rafe visualized his future, a bright path through the world; all his dreams and desires. Kwoti heard the hopes of travelers best – someone searching for a new adventure or a comfortable rest – or simply a fresh start.

At the end of the tenth recitation Rafe opened his eyes. Nothing had happened, but he tried to stay focused on his desires: the happy life, a city life, a productive trade and money. He stared into the carved oval eyes of the little statue in front of him. It looked like a cross between a person and a lizard. Its pockmarked stone skin was worn by years of rain and snow, hard summers and cold winters. He didn’t move. A fly alighted on one of the Kwoti’s blank eyes. It’s not working he thought to himself... but then quietly and slowly the lever mouth did slide open. Rafe was ecstatic, he yelped, jumping up to get the coin. But when he felt inside the little recessed area, it was empty. There were only cobwebs. He poked around with his finger, but nothing.

“I told you,” said Gywn.

“It opened, didn’t it?”

“But it’s supposed to give out a coin.”

“Well, it’s old. But it opened! I said the prayer right, and that’s good luck.”

“Whatever. Let’s go.”

“Alright,” said Rafe, happy for a sign of even small favor.

They turned down the overgrown sideway toward their own new and unknown fate, not expecting much reward.

Chapter 2

They found the house just after dusk. Coming upon it after the final bend, on the last of three more forked paths, between mixed brush and trees: a low ramshackle cabin of wood, thatch and stone, partly disintegrated yet running along laterally, window after window in the darkness, lit by the occasional candle – it seemed nearly a mansion, a long and broad rampart of decrepitude set amongst acres of dark and empty fields.

They crossed a small bridge over a bog full of weeds and muddy water. Toads and tiny drakes sent up a rowdy chorus. Lightning bugs sparked vertical trails amongst the reeds and hungry mosquitos rose up with the evening cool, hunting the scent of flesh.

Rafe and Gywn became quickly busy brushing the bloodsuckers from their faces as they approached the house, following a loose gravel path lined by rounded stones up to a sagging collection of gnarled old wood which they presumed to be the front door. A small brazier to one side held a single smoldering bit of tinder, flickering with occasional fire and casting brief shadows. They halted, realizing they were finally at the precipice of a different life, unsteadied by nerves.

Gywn knocked. A low muted thud on the old rotten wood of the door. They waited, silent and still, while the mosquitos called out for reinforcements. The night was humid – noisy yet

stagnant. Rafe scuffed one foot on the ground, looking about curiously. Then he paused, puzzled at the uncommon sound his foot produced and bent down to check.

“This isn’t stone,” he said, picking up a piece. It was bone, thousands of fragments – worn down and rounded pieces of rib, arm, and leg. That’s when he noticed two large and complete skulls in the darkness a few feet from either side of the door, propped against the house. Definitely not human – they were long and with horns, like the heads of giant bulls. Rafe drew in a quick breath of surprise. But Gywn wasn’t moved by the sight, or at least didn’t show it. “What’d you expect?” he said frankly. Then he knocked again. “He’s gotta be here. All these candles are lit.”

“Maybe he’s deaf.”

“If I knock any harder I might break the door.”

“Maybe this isn’t the front. There’s so many other parts.”

“It’s where the path led.”

“He’s in a different part of the house or he’s not even–” But Rafe stopped short as he heard a faint noise out in the darkness. A soft crunch – of footsteps not far away.

He whispered: “*Someone’s coming,*” and squinted out into the night. But with the glow of the brazier so close they could not see far. The footsteps became more distinct – clearly approaching. A shuffling and scraping sound, as though someone with a bad leg, limping in pain. They stood unmoving, staring into the blackness; anxious. The mosquitos took advantage, landing in squads.

Rafe couldn’t handle the tension. He called out meekly into the darkness: “Hello?” ...But there was no response. The shuffling kept coming, unhurried and invariant. They waited. Slowly a figure began to take shape in the night: a man, hunched and in ragged clothing, clearly lame or sick. He approached, terribly slow, straight toward the boys without looking up. They could see his neck disjointed, seemingly stuck in a downward direction and sideways, as though watching his own hip. He was leading with one leg; the other he dragged along like baggage.

“Sir? Um, we’re... ummm... here,” was the best Rafe could stammer out.

The man kept on toward them steadily, unwavering in his gate or heedless demeanor. And then Rafe and Gywn realized what he was. This was not a normal living man. His decay came into focus – the grey flesh and bulging open sores, the sagging skin and mangled joints. He was

dead, or should be, yet moving still – a re-animated person. Neither of them had seen a zombie before but knew immediately this must be one. A walking corpse. A human without a soul. A rotting piece of flesh made to move again artificially. Forced remains of tattered and ripped muscles still going, still pushing the thing forward even as they decayed into mush. Here was the walking dead. Though with a life once, a family and parents, maybe children and a job, but his body was now not his own. His corpse perhaps traded to feed his family one last time, one last useful act in death – quitting some doubtlessly hard life, to be further degraded, bought by a sorcerer (they'd heard the stories!). His body pressed once more into undignified work instead of the final rest of a peaceful grave. Toiling without consent; a hollow and rotting shell of a human walked out of the darkness right up to two stunned and very alive boys, every hair standing on end.

They didn't move, they didn't speak. The zombie ambled up, still not looking in their eyes or acknowledging them at all, and slowly it raised one green-black rotting arm and pushed open the door. Then it shuffled on inside. He smelled terrible and the boys backed away a pace as it went by. They paused at the door. Yet there was little to do but follow. Tentatively, gingerly stepping across the threshold the boys came into a room dimly lit by smoking oil lamps and tallow candles. The air was still and heavy. The space was large, with thick wood beams supporting a thatched ceiling up where motionless whorls of smoke hung throughout the rafters. The lights quivered as the three came in, disturbing the stasis. Everywhere were ominous shapes and strange objects which the boys in their anxiety and excitement could barely focus on. Numerous shelves and bureaus were crowded with bones, artifacts, devices, talismans and paintings of incomprehensible scenes. Large books lay about irregularly on every table and surface, accompanied by scores of loose parchment. Bundles of dried herbs, roots, and small dehydrated animals hung from various pegs and strings around the walls and ceiling. The boys marveled – such a room they had never seen. Their senses could not absorb it all. Every inch seemed foreign to their experience.

As they stared, mute and rapt, barely inside the doorway, the shuffling zombie continued on toward the back of the room, where it eventually stopped, swayed, and let out a low raspy moan. A rough sound like the croaking of an injured toad.

A few seconds later came a reply from deep within the house, nearly as raspy yet fully

articulate; the boys heard a voice say: “Yes. Good. Bring them back here.” The decayed zombie turned toward the boys and swayed. Now in the yellow glow of indoor light, they could see more clearly the slowly vanishing features on its sagging, decomposed head. A disgusting mix of putrid skin, patchy boils and rotting cuts where once there was a face. The thing’s eyes were so black the boys could not tell the true direction of its gaze, its neck so broken and crooked it seemed locked into its single downward position. It turned its whole body to face them, letting out another slow moan, then turned slowly again and began to shuffle down a hallway which adjoined the far end of the room.

The brothers were shocked yet entranced. This was the first time they’d ever seen a true, clear product of magic. They followed, across the room and into the hallway, walking a few steps behind the broken man, keeping a safe distance for caution and for smell.

Though the main parlor had a rough plank floor, the hallway was only dirt. It was colder, mustier, and quite dim. The zombie shuffled down the passage past multiple closed doors on either side until he approached the final one, standing open with a disquieting green light shining out into the hall. There he stopped, stood, and moved no more. The boys halted too, unsure if they should enter or wait. The zombie did nothing, becoming stolid as a statue, staring crookedly down at the floor.

The green light from beyond the door shone a little brighter. It was an unusual turquoise color, very unlike normal light, and there was a mumbling coming from inside the room. Then a sudden flash and a heavy sigh. The boys stood still, not knowing their next action, feeling the damp clammy air on their skin, but neither dared move. Another flash and a different green hue, then a crack like bone breaking. Mumbling, more sighing.

Finally after a set of long moments, as Rafe began a slight nervous shiver, from the room there came a voice: “Come in already!” it said, “Why are you children standing out there?” Though hoarse in timbre, it was resonant with authority, and the boys quickly shuffled forward into the door frame, a bit too close to the decaying servant for their comfort. They halted, shoulder to shoulder, eyes wide with wonder and fear, trembling like guilty sons before a wrathful father.

Inside the room was an even larger array of unidentifiable miscellanea strewn about on tables and chairs, trunks and cases – although that’s not what really caught their eye. For they

were stunned not only by the source of the green light, but what lay beside it: a body, prone on a table, of a small, apparently dead girl wrapped in linen glowing dimly white, and next to her a weirdly grotesque thing, a wrong thing, which they could not at first decipher; like an object in a haze, only slowly their minds put it together, piece by piece: what appeared to be a disembodied ribcage, a chunk of exposed torso without head or limbs, or skin, and propped upon a stand made of twisted ornate wood and finely polished metal. It was like a side of beef in a butcher stall – although the comparison ended quickly, for this thing was completely incongruent with normality; out of place in life, disgustingly wrong, every bit of it a conflict for the eyes and a bewilderment to the mind. Bloody and raw, meat and bones intermeshed, connected with all manner of tubes, sinews, and metal rods jutting about in various angles, implying dark and complex functions. Yet most absurd and frightening: where the heart should be, instead rested something foreign, a green swirling globe of fluid and gas radiating out aquamarine light beyond the ribs, showering the room with an uncomfortable yet hypnotizing verdigris glow.

This terrible thing was so astounding, so arresting, that they hardly noticed the thin old man sitting in front of it, outshone by the bloody green chimera pulsating behind him, and dwarfed by the cracked old leather chair in which he sat hunched, decrepit and weary, lit by the unearthly magical shine: the old wizard himself.

He was staring at the boys, while they stared at the whole spectacle, not even realizing him at first. But he cleared his throat and in the next moment they focused on him, the necromancer, just one part of this arcane and exotic pastiche which they would never forget for their entire lives. The glint in his eyes was as piercing and strange as that from the glowing green heart beside him. A wrinkled and ancient face, hemmed by thinning wispy grey hair and an unkempt dirty beard – yet all offset by a pair of translucent blue eyes.

“Come closer.” he said.

They dared not – frozen in place.

“Fine,” he said with impatience. “But here it is, your new life. This moment is your decision to either run panicking out of here like an animal, fearing what you do not understand – or stay and learn the truth about life and, more importantly, about death. I won’t force you. But your options are limited: flee into poverty without prospect – or stay, work and learn. Fate requires of you a decision, which I will not make for you – may it destroy you or not, you’re free

to choose.”

Casually he turned back to his work, fiddling with some small junction on the terrible bloody contrivance which he was busy assembling before him. The boys remained, unmoving; their minds only slowly returning to function, releasing gradually from shock. Should they run? Rafe felt the compulsion rise up somewhere along his spine, nervous and tingling, coming up his neck hot and pushing into his mind. He could flee. Get away and never come back to see this sacrilegious and terrible monstrosity again. This was not his dream, to be here in some ungodly room full of gruesome sights and awful smells. He could still be normal, still choose a decent life.

But beyond the shock, and the quick fear, there was one thing which pushed back against his desire to run: he was truly terribly hungry. He was tired and he was malnourished, and this balanced his mind's resistance to the scene. It made him a bit numb, a tad delirious, and soon he came to think: I can run tomorrow. Because I have no energy to sleep in the woods again tonight – why make the decision this moment? I want to sleep indoors, I need to eat, and then I can run – I'll run later.

“We'll stay,” he heard himself saying.

Gywn looked at him, but said nothing.

“Alright,” said the old wizard, “Your room is two doors down on the right. Your chores begin at dawn.”

The boys walked out of the wizard's frightening chamber, past the strange undead unmoving servant, and two doors down the hallway walked into a small normal room with two nice beds. And between them on a table was a large loaf of bread, two apples, some dried meat and a jug of water. They ate it all immediately, said nothing to each other, then went to sleep.