



Max and Mombie acquiring skill

Eleven

A Bad Habit

After Dendra came out of her faint, we convinced her that Max was completely safe and “under control.” So she put us all to bed: Max in the stable with the horses, the Zombies in the pasture, the goats in their shed, and me in the front guest room. Oh, I must confess that the down featherbed and eyelet linens made me feel like a thousand-year-old princess. Gods, my joints were painful! It was maddening. And sleeping in this featherbed felt like a cloud of comfort for my old bones.

Dendra knocked on the door and brought a steeping cup of willow-bark tea with honey. “For your joints,” she said. And then, more softly, “I had a mother once, too.”

So this is what it was to be so old that everyone worried about you.

The tea eased my aches and the sheets were immaculate and luxurious. “My daughter has sheets like this,” I murmured.

“Real Gnome work,” replied Dendra. “I learned it as a child.”

“It’s beautiful.”

I slept like a baby that night and awoke with a renewed sense of purpose. Max and I could not continue as we were. Dendra had sketched out the political situation for me, and if I had any hope of getting back to the real world, I was going to have to get to this evil overlord, Barthas, and the Sorcerers who supposedly controlled the barrier gate.

We couldn't live this way unless we wanted to become a travelling freak show, painting barn walls and corralling goats with Zombies for the locals. There was little future in that.

More than likely Barthas would find us anyway and try to make use of my talent for himself. It would be far worse to raise an army of the dead for the bad guys: it was better to do it for me—and my “side,” whatever that was. At least then I would become a participant and not a pawn.

I had been set upon this chessboard with certain abilities and handicaps. Whether I chose to like it or not, Max was right: my greatest strength right now was my necromancy. I was a Zombie Mistress, a raiser of the dead. For better or worse, till death do us *not* part.

I was too frail to put up much of a fight by myself. Again Max was right: much as I did not want to see it, my only protection, aside from my brave and willing thirteen-year-old son, was the Zombies themselves. *That* was my ability. I was either going to use it to become a player, and get Max and myself home to Middleville, or we were going to be stuck here forever and wind up as pawns of Barthas.

So I did what I always do when under pressure: I began composing mental lists.

One: Gather more Zombies. Yes, much as I had fought it at first, if I was to make a show of myself, then I would have to amass at least an honor guard of Zombies to both impress and threaten Barthas. I began by sending a mental call to the six Zombies in the graves down the road from Dendra's farm.

Two: We needed transportation. My body was failing more each day, and I could not continue to walk. As if in answer to my prayer, Dendra offered us her old pony cart; when Max hitched himself to the old leather harness it made a fairly nifty pedi-cab. Our three battered Zombies could shuffle alongside.

Three: Max needed that sword. The pike would do for now, but if his training required a sword, then we needed to outfit him. I had

to start thinking less like a parent and more like a leader.

Four: We needed to arm the Zombies. For now some of the Mossys' old farm equipment would do: a hoe, a rusty scythe, a metal rake, an iron bar, whatever we could find. But we would need more, I was sure.

Dendra sewed us some simple nondescript robes with detachable hoods. It was amazing to watch her fingers fly as she whip-stitched sections of black cloth with her Gnomish fingers. Even such simple skills could be full of magic. The robes made us look like travelling holy men. Mine covered some of my frailty. Max's was in three pieces, including pants so he could move freely. But the upper portion was long enough to cover most of his tail and thereby disguise his new non-Human self, just as the hood concealed his scaly face and fangs. We needed to look mysterious if I was going to convince Barthas that he needed to bargain with me.

I decided to luxuriate one more night between Dendra's inviting sheets. Max seemed happy enough bedding down in the barn for his brief snooze. Most of the night he roamed, so he knew the surrounding terrain like the best of scouts.

That night he sniffed out and dug up an old wolf skull, and we fashioned a sort of crown out of it for me. Mr. Mossy even joined in to help by carving me a gnarled wooden staff from a twisted oak sapling. I was beginning to look the part of a true Crone. My hastily wrought sushi wrap was history.

Lastly, we agreed that Max was no longer to call me “Mom” in public. He would refer to me as “Mombie,” his Zombie Mistress. Max thought this was the best idea of all. It made him laugh no end.

Halloween was going to seem like a sham after this.

The additional Zombies arrived by noon. There were six of them: four decayed Gnomes, a Giant, and a Human. I set the Giant and the Human as point guards, front and rear, and had the Gnomes, along with Bernice, Johnny, and Klug, arrange themselves defensively about my cart.

Dendra had marked some local graveyards and family burial

plots on the simple map she had drawn for us. She also made note of a major battle site where Barthas and his Swamp Ogres had won a critical victory against the united forces of the Fairy Folk. There should be plenty of warrior Zombies to resurrect there. We intended to visit these sites first to gather recruits. Then we would hit some of the ransacked villages, after which perhaps we would head for the place Dendra referred to as the Manor—Barthas's fortress.

We were only a few miles from Dendra's when we met up with the first squadron of Barthas's forces, an assorted foot patrol of roughly twenty-five ruffians. They included Trolls, Ogres, Humans (both men and women), and a few vile-smelling Harpies, who flapped overhead and shook feathers and detritus on the unlucky troops below. The talons on their chicken feet looked sharp enough to gut a bear.

The company drew to a halt as it approached our cart. I formed a line with the Zombies. A murmur grew among the troops as they realized that these were zombies, not citizens. In fact, these were Zombies carrying metal implements.

"Stay where you are," I called, trying to sound as calm and threatening as I could.

"I am Sargent Troff Tunker, and I lead this company of Lord Barthas's army."

"You may tell your master that you have met Mombie, Zombie Mistress and Necromancer. I am on an important mission with my loyal bodyguard, Max of Dojo Kyuke."

Max drew back his hood and executed a karate kick. Murmurs arose from the motley troops.

"She travels with a Swamp Demon!" I heard someone whisper loudly.

"The Swamp Demons have sworn allegiance to Barthas," blustered Sargent Tunker. "How is it that you are travelling with one?"

"My business is my own. My companion is sworn to *me*, not your master. Stand aside and let us pass." The Zombies began

brandishing their weapons and took a step forward. Klug moaned menacingly. Max whirled his pike in the air. One of the Harpies flung a clawful of dung toward the zombies.

The air was thick with tension. Finally I added, "We are on our way to a meeting with Barthas."

This last bit seemed to satisfy Sargent Troff Tunker. He made a motion with his hand and said, "Let them pass. We have no business with Necromancers. Barthas will know what to do with them. Heil Barthas!" He stuck out his right arm like a Nazi.

"Peace, Dude," replied Max with a similar salute, only his hand took the shape of a peace sign. I hid my face in my hood to avoid laughing, and we proceeded on down the road past the dumbfounded company of Barthas's "army."

Barthas himself was blissfully unaware of anything outside his own reality at that moment. A man's leather belt circled his blubbery bicep, and his other hand shook as he injected a solution of Pixie Dust into his vein with a crude homemade hypodermic. It was an eyedropper onto which a needle had been cobbled.

"Damn, that's the real stuff," Barthas sighed as he leaned back on his enormous wooden throne. "You should let me do you, Irene. You don't know what you're missing."

"That's one thrill I can do without, José. I watched my brother kill himself by mainlining drugs, remember?" Irene tried to catch Barthas's attention, but he was seeing things beyond the reality of his throne room.

"It's not drugs, Irene. It's magic. Pixie Dust."

"Look, José, you can tell yourself whatever you want, but you are addicted to that stuff. Look at the facts. You can't get through a day without it. You shoot up the minute you get up in the morning."

"So what? It don't mean nothing, Irene. I just like it. I can stop any time."

"That's what my brother always said. He used to tell my mother that he had quit, because it made her happy. He never quit. He

couldn't. But in his mind he believed he could." Irene shook her head. "He would have broken my mother's heart, but sadly, she always believed his medicated lies."

"Well, I ain't your brother, Irene. And you ain't leaving. I told you before. I need you here."

They had had this argument a hundred times. "I have to go back. You know that. You swore you would let me. We've been through all this before. I have already foreseen for you. Bring the old woman to you, use her power, and you will defeat the Rebels."

Still in his drug haze, Barthas murmured, "So when is she gonna show up, Irene? See, that's why I need you here." His voice grew defensive, then arrogant. "You can't go back. I won't let Sideous open the gate for you." At last he whined, "Just stay a little longer until we beat the Rebels. Come on, Irene."

"José ... Barthas, we've been through this, over and over. First it was stay until the Manor was built, then it was until we had captured all the Fairy Folk, then until the batteries are built.... It will never end. I cannot stand it here any longer. If I don't get home soon I will lose my mind!"

Barthas snorted another line of Pixie Dust on the table and coughed as it flew up his nose. "I am telling you, Irene, this stuff is PURE."

"Oh God, of course it is PURE! Pure innocence. It's the very essence of innocent happiness, José. Some of the last drops of happiness for the sheer sake of happiness. That is what those Pixies and Fairies experience that we no longer can, because we've experienced too many painful things in our lives. We have too much pain. You and I cannot just experience this magnificent world that way any longer. We're too jaded to react with pure joy. But they are PURE. They are INNOCENT. They react with PURE JOY! Don't you see, Barthas? Don't you see what you're doing?" Irene clenched her fists as her voice rose to a shout.

"Relax, bitch," Barthas muttered, slumping sideways in his throne. "There's always more Pixie Dust. I leave those details to

Sideous." He started to drift away.

"That's just it, Barthas. There won't be any Pixie Dust left, because you're destroying all the Fairy Folk. There won't be any more pure joy in this tired old world. Because *you* are breaking their hearts the same way that my brother broke my mother's heart, with your lies, your talk of a bigger society, electricity for all. They don't need electricity, José. They need their hopes and dreams and joy back. You're destroying the very thing you seek."

The tears flowed down Irene's face.

Barthas spoke out of his growing stupor. "Relax, Irene. It's all gonna work out. You'll see. Take somma this, you'll feel better. Look at me—I feel HAPPY." He grinned in a pallid, empty ecstasy.

"No Barthas, what you feel is someone else's happiness, not happiness in your own life. You are living on borrowed happiness, and I can't stand watching it any longer." She slammed the door as she left.

When Ben reached the Mess Hall he headed straight to Ferny and Planks and asked, "Where is Patty?" They both pointed to a large table in the middle of the Hall, lush with flowers and melons and other fruits. When Ben looked closer he could see tiny figures moving amidst the foliage. He walked closer and could make out windows and doors cut into the melons, and vines which had been trained to arch around windows and form shutters of leaves and pediments of flowers. Roads and walkways wove between the structures, and Pixies and Brownies walked along quietly chatting with one another. Butterflies flew over their heads, and several birds sang sweetly from the rafters above the table.

The largest melon sat in the center of the table, and he could hear voices coming from the interior. He leaned down and squinted with one eye through one of the windows. There were rows and rows of tables packed with tiny laughing forms, all eating pollen and nectar, joking and calling out to one another.

It was another world, a world within a world.