

The Town Drunk
Presents

The Bastard Saga

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I

“Well, how would *you* like it if some crazy bastard with a sword came and sucked *your* soul out?” Edwin’s voice said. “Of course I’m upset! You think I like being stuck here? This is the last time I go adventuring. If I wasn’t trapped in your thick skull, I would strangle you!”

Bast did his best to ignore the voice in his head. He swore this was the last time he killed anyone. It was too damn annoying.

“Feed me,” whined his bastard sword.

“Shut up.” The humid air dragged sweat from Bast’s naked chest and did nothing to improve his mood.

And here he’d thought getting an enchanted sword and setting off on a quest would be fun. Instead, he was stuck with the personality of some idiot named Edwin he’d mistakenly beheaded one cloudy night.

When the wizard had told him the sword’s name was Soul Sucker, he’d thought it a descriptive title—not a literal one.

“Feed me,” the sword begged. “I’m starving!”

“I said, shut up.”

After leaving his backwater village, Bast had expected grand adventures, beautiful wenches throwing themselves at him, monsters to fight, and all the ale a man could wish for. The reality was that having some old geezer (who had been struck down by a random lightning bolt a second later) proclaim him the Chosen One was not all it was bragged up to be.

“I’m bored,” said Edwin. “You should recite some poetry for me.”

“I’m a warrior,” Bast growled. “I do *not* recite poetry.”

Edwin sniffed in disdain. “Barbarian.”

“Feed me!”

Up ahead was a small hamlet with an over-sized signboard advertising the best pub in a hundred leagues. Bast pulled on a tattered, dusty tunic with a sigh. From the pub, the sounds of music and breaking pottery echoed out into the street, which was no more than a rutted cow path with sewage ditches on either side.

“Oh, don’t tell me you want to go in *there!*” Edwin groaned. “I’m upset enough already without someone discovering what happened to me.”

“Shut up, damn you!” Bast raised a fist to smack himself in the head.

Edwin huffed. “There’s no need to get violent on me. I know you’re stupid, but I didn’t think you were masochistic, too.”

Bast growled low in his chest.

Finally, blessed quiet.

“Feed me!”

“I know,” said Edwin. “Let’s continue on this quest of yours. Maybe if you complete it, I’ll be freed.”

“Yes, and then I will kill you with my bare hands.”

“That’s not very sporting of you.”

“I don’t care.”

“Stupid bloodthirsty barbarian.”

Bast reined in his dun stallion and pulled out a leather-wrapped book the dead wizard had insisted he carry.

“Guidelines for your quest,” the wizard had said. “Don’t lose it.”

Bast could read—thanks to an uncle who had insisted he grow up civilized—and he flipped through the linen pages. All the arguing with Soul Sucker and Edwin had made him forget what he was supposed to be doing in the first place.

The heading *Demons, Death, and Doom* looked promising.

The section listed various hell-spawn and how to kill them; traditional hero deaths, in case he

picked up sidekicks; and signs that indicated cursed or magical objects capable of dooming the world.

But no advice on how to get rid of unwanted souls.

He flipped back to the Introduction. *If your family has not yet been mercilessly slaughtered by unknown enemies who also destroy your home, proceed to the nearest out-of-town tavern to receive the necessary information about starting your quest.*

Bast glanced at the pub.

“Oh, no.”

Bast grinned at the despondency in Edwin’s voice.

“You’re going to get mauled, I can feel it. And I’ll be a civilian causality—again!”

II

Rackshalok, Prince of Demons and Lord of the Underworld, glared at the chessboard. This was the third game he’d lost to his spirit minion. The third! By the cursed powers, wasn’t it enough that he had to live in this depressing upperworld castle without being bested in a strategy game by an insignificant demon?

The renovation imps had promised to have his personal hellhole refurnished last week. They *still* hadn’t finished. Damn them—he would, too, as soon as they replaced the burned-out hellfire conductors.

Rackshalok looked back at his defeated king piece, then flicked his hand and destroyed the spirit minion sitting across from him. Its pitiful wail of agony didn’t improve his mood. The departed little creep had beaten him. No amount of inflicting eternal torture on the spirit was going to mend his ego.

What I need, Rackshalok decided, *is a wicked, old-fashioned onslaught against the living world.*

That would cheer him up. Mindless death and destruction were good for the soul, he’d always said. Perhaps this time he might even destroy most of the world before some random hero put a stop to his fun.

Rackshalok nodded and swept out of the stone room. He hadn’t had time to redecorate, although the previous owner had shown some taste with the severed heads and weathered skulls. A few corpses on stakes would have been a nice touch.

In the fog-shrouded courtyard, his minions lounged about in boredom. Rackshalok couldn’t blame them. They’d been stuck in the late evil wizard’s summer home for more than a week. No lost souls to torment, no living beings to possess and drive insane, nothing. It was bloody,

mind-numbingly boring.

“Heed me,” Rackshalok said in his best Prince of Demons voice. The harsh, mind-shattering timbre of his baritone sounded a little flat in the courtyard. Damn acoustics.

His minions ceased their bouts of small talk and gave him their full attention.

Rackshalok cleared his throat. “I have decided it’s time to lay waste to the world.”

Cheers met his words.

“We shall fall upon the semi-suspecting world of men and destroy them!”

“Yeah!” the demons yelled back. “Whoo-hoo!”

Rackshalok showed his fangs and spread his massive, ink-black wings. “Come, and let us leave none alive!” Hyperbole, perhaps, since he wanted to save a few prisoners for his personal amusement.

With whoops of excitement, his evil horde surged out of the spiked gates. The demons waved hellfire torches and inventively curved swords.

Rackshalok followed at a more sedate pace, letting his aura of ultimate dread precede him. Somewhere in the world, he suspected a few visionaries were trembling and fainting with premonitions of his approaching malevolence.

He grinned. Ah, it was good to be evil.

III

Bast pushed open the door to *The Brawler* and ducked a ceramic tankard that whizzed by his head. The tavern lived up to its name. The whole of the common room, barring a few shadowy corners, consisted of one huge fight.

Soul Sucker quivered in its scabbard. “Food...”

Edwin whimpered. “Don’t let that thing eat anyone.”

Bast decided against flexing his muscles and joining in. Too much risk Soul Sucker would get out of control, and he did *not* want an on-going brawl in his head.

Instead, he sat down at one of the few remaining tables and watched the buxom serving wench pick her way through the crowd with expert carelessness to take his order. The ale was ridiculously expensive to cover overhead costs.

Bast waited for his ale, and for someone to meet up with him and give him the details of his quest,

whatever it was. The book made it clear that the nearest tavern would result in a chance meeting with either a messenger or companions who would put him on the right path.

Edwin snorted. “That only proves you’re an idiot. You don’t even know *what* you’re supposed to be doing, you just sit here like the totally ignorant bastard you are.”

Bast quaffed his ale.

His mother had been at a loss about what to name her illegitimate child. And considering she had less than an hour to decide after she gave birth, she’d settled on the most obvious name. *Bastard*. All things considered, it could have been worse. He went by Bast because his full name had too many syllables.

At last, a stranger approached his table and sat down. He was a tall, lean man in a dark cloak and a hood pulled low over his face. “A great evil stirs.”

“No kidding,” Edwin said. “Evil is always stirring.”

“Mmmm, food.”

“Silence,” Bast ordered, even though only he could hear the voices.

The hooded stranger drew back. “I’m only warning you.”

“Unnecessarily,” Edwin said. “You know, I don’t know which is worse: ignorant barbarians or—”

Bast clutched his head. “Shut up!”

“Damn it,” the stranger said, “I’m trying to tell you that you must go stop the Demon Lord of the Underworld from ravaging our land and obliterating all life! Listen to me.”

“Not *you*,” Bast said. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“But you must listen—”

“Sure, go on a dangerous quest that will get us all horribly maimed and killed and our souls devoured by demons.” Edwin’s voice cracked. “Why can’t you get a safe quest?”

“You’re already dead,” Bast retorted.

The hooded stranger stood and drew his sword. “I’ll make you listen before you kill me.”

Soul Sucker shivered in excitement.

“No!” Bast banged his head on the table. “Everyone shut the hell up!”

Action ceased. Silence fell over The Brawler.

“You are The One,” the stranger whispered. “You have the Voice of Power.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Edwin said. “And here I thought you were just shouting very loud.”

Bast wondered if it would be less painful to let that demon lord eat his head than to live with Edwin. With a colossal effort, he looked up and focused on the stranger. “You were saying?”

Warily, the hooded messenger sat down. “Rackshalok, Prince of Demons and Lord of the Underworld, has awoken. He has invaded the surface and now threatens to lay waste to all the known world.”

Edwin sniffed. “What else is new? You know, I could have been living my *own* life if you’d had a smidgen of sense and gone to this place *before* you killed me. Do I look like I want to go after some slobbering demon bent on—”

Bast smacked the side of his head.

“You are the only one who can stop him,” the hooded man said. “You must go to the Plains of Torment.”

“Is there such a place?”

The stranger shrugged. “Not officially. But there’s a stretch of land about sixty miles from here.”

“Why the Plains of Torment?” Bast asked.

“Chances are good that, eventually, something will happen there to earn it the name. Besides, it’s as good a place as any for you to face Rackshalok and defeat him.”

Bast grunted.

“That is the stupidest logic I’ve ever heard,” Edwin said.

Bast ignored that. “And if I don’t face this demon?”

“The world is doomed.”

“Right, as if there weren’t already enough pressure.” Edwin’s voice got higher with panic. “What happens if you get mauled? Killed? What happens to me?”

Bast ground his teeth.

“You can’t go after a demon lord. I don’t want to die again!”

“That’s it!” Bast roared. “I’m getting you out of my head.”

The messenger leapt up. “But—”

Bast ignored him. He slammed a coin on the table for his drink and stormed out. He would find a way to rid himself of Edwin, find someone to dump Soul Sucker on, then retire with a personal harem for the rest of his life.

Some other Chosen One could save the damn world.

IV

Rackshalok was on the verge of obliterating a helpless village of humans—one-handed, just to show off—when one of the renovation demons popped into view.

Much to his chagrin, the sudden appearance startled Rackshalok and spoiled his dramatic illustration of destructive evil. He glowered and let his hand drop. The citizens of the village ran screaming in all directions.

The green-skinned runt snapped a bit of tarry pitch it was chewing and tugged its loincloth back up. “Heya, boss.”

“What do you want?”

“Ran into a problem.”

“Then fix it.”

“No can do, boss.”

Rackshalok resisted the urge to incinerate the minion with a thought. “Explain.”

The demon snapped its pitch gum. “See, boss, it’s a zombie clog in the tunnels.”

“What?”

“Too many of ‘em, boss. They all get jammed and then they back up, you know? So, we need to divert ‘em somewhere or we’ll have serious leakage into the other dimensions of the underworld.”

“Then unclog the tunnels.” Rackshalok really needed to get back to the carnage.

“Can’t, boss.”

“Why not?” Rackshalok bellowed. A nearby barn collapsed in a flaming mass of embers.

The little runt had the brains to flinch, but didn’t cringe. Impudent minion.

“Only you can open a rift between worlds, boss.”

The puny demon did have a point there. A rift would enhance the mayhem and terror; zombies always made a good addition to any campaign.

Rackshalok looked around for a suitable place to open a fissure between the living world and the underworld. There was a nearby meadow, over a few hills and a sparkling brook. Sickening.

He spread his arms and wings and parted his jaws, summoning all his power, and snapped his fingers.

The ground cracked and bubbled. Grass withered and steam spurted from the ground. The earth and reality ripped apart, and a gaping hole, gushing the stench of the grave, appeared in the landscape. Shuffling out on rotted limbs, the ranks of the undead emerged. They chanted his name through decaying lips and shambled off to devour the helpless populace.

It was truly a touching moment.

V

The Plains of Torment didn't live up to the name. It was a lush, green meadow sprinkled with wildflowers and sagebrush. And there wasn't a demon in sight.

Although Bast had no plans to save the world, he figured the Lord of the Underworld might have some ideas about disposing of unwanted souls.

“Hey! That's bloody not fair. You can't give me to a *demon*. Even if I am a disembodied soul, I have rights.”

“No, you don't.”

Edwin's protests faded into incoherent whimpering.

Bast sighed. “There's no demon horde lying in wait here.”

Then the earth shook and the sky darkened as blood-red and corpse-gray clouds boiled over the horizon. Wind screeched over the plains and whipped Bast's dark hair into his face. Eerie wailing voices grew in numbers and volume, and the rumbling of millions of feet sent tremors through the ground.

Damn.

“Oh, you had to open your mouth, barbarian!”

Bast gripped Soul Sucker's hilt. Now he regretted his mad dash to this place without first stocking up on a variety of clubs and unenchanted broadswords.

His great stallion panicked and galloped off.

Bast swore. The horse had been a rental.

The first wave of... things... loped over the nearest hill. Bast squinted. They were former warriors, all decomposed to various degrees, and chanting something unintelligible.

“Ewww,” Edwin said.

Bast held his ground. Would slicing through a zombie horde result in more voices in his head?

“You’d better hope not! Don’t blame *me* if you get stuck with a bunch of savage, mindless, slobbering, undead... oh, gods, please run away and save me!”

“I came to find Rackshalok.” Bast stomped forward. “I’ll be damned if I run before I find him.”

“Damned is right! This is a demon we’re talking about.”

Bast continued on. Edwin broke down into inconsolable weeping.

“Which one of you is Rackshalok?” Bast demanded.

He tugged at Soul Sucker’s hilt, but the blade remained secure in its scabbard. Bast wrenched at it, panic rising inside him. Unmanly and unheroic as it was, facing a horde of zombies without a weapon—Soul Sucker or not—didn’t do wonders for his nerves.

“Damn sword.”

“No.” Soul Sucker shivered and remained in the scabbard. “Not food.”

Wonderful. His all-powerful weapon was a coward.

Bast made one last attempt to draw the blade. It failed. Then the zombies were upon them.

Edwin shrieked.

Bast let out a war cry a little too high-pitched to intimidate anyone.

The first zombie latched onto him with cold, bony fingers. Bast punched the undead warrior in its lack of a face. His knuckles splintered rotting cartilage and squished into something gray behind the skull. Blood and entrails he could handle, but corpses with liquefying brains were disgusting.

He pulled his arm back, then spun around to kick a second zombie in the chest. It tumbled back. A different zombie grabbed his ankle. Bast tripped. He staggered in a circle, scything at the attackers with his arms. Several of the zombies mimicked his actions and ended up knocking over their horde-mates.

Bast lashed out in all directions. The zombies drove him into the ground and scrabbled at his throat. He kicked and punched and even head-butted the mass of undead soldiers. Nothing worked. They were smothering him from sheer numbers. And it stank.

Instead of choking him, either with deteriorating hands or their odor, the zombies lifted Bast onto their shoulders and carried him back the way they had come.

Edwin squeaked. "Oh gods, they're going to take us back to their grave and eat us alive!"

Bast struggled to get free and failed. He doubted the zombies had been that strong while alive.

Over the trampled meadow they went. Bast had an awkward and upside-down view, but what soon came into that view made his heart pound.

The zombies dropped Bast into the mud at the demon's feet.

Rackshalok, Prince of Demons and Lord of the Underworld, looked down at Bast from a modest ten-foot height. Other than having a mane of blood red hair, glistening fangs, blazing scarlet eyes, ebony wings, and patches of scales, Rackshalok looked like a well-built human. A tall, heavily-muscled, and reeking-of-evil human, but still. This wasn't as bad as he'd thought, given this was the first Prince of Demons and Lord of the Underworld he'd ever met.

"Masssssster," the zombies chorused. "Giiiiiiifftt. Braaaaaaiiinsssss."

Rackshalok whipped out a clawed hand in an absent gesture and decapitated half a dozen zombies. "What is it?"

Bast pulled himself out of the muck and glared, his hand on Soul Sucker's hilt. "I'm Bast."

"So?"

"Tell him you're the Chosen One," Edwin said. "Do something!"

Bast cleared his throat. "Um..."

"Insect. I think I will obliterate you," Rackshalok said.

"Food!"

Soul Sucker lunged out of the scabbard before Bast could stop it. The sword buried itself into the Lord of the Underworld's stomach.

"Yum."

Rackshalok's eyes bulged.

So did Bast's.

And then Soul Sucker lived up to its name. It slurped the Prince of Demons' essence out and deposited it in Bast's head.

The husk of Rackshalok's body toppled over and exploded into ash. Soul Sucker belched in satisfaction.

Bast felt the surprised presence of Rackshalok in his mind.

"Where am I? This cannot be happening. I am Rackshalok, Prince of Demons, Lord of—"

"Shut up," Bast said. "Just shut up."

To his surprise, the new voice obeyed.

"Maaaasssssstter," moaned the zombies. They all made awkward bows to Bast.

Calm and still teeth-rattling in its power, Rackshalok's voice said, "You do realize that whoever kills the Lord of the Underworld must assume his duties in his stead?"

Bast blanched.

Rackshalok laughed.

"I knew this was a bad idea," Edwin said. "You should never have come—hey, stop looking at me like that. Hey! No, stay back, demon! Help me! Ahhh!"

There was a crunch, and Edwin went silent.

"What just happened?" Bast demanded.

"Tasty," said Rackshalok. "I shall instruct you on how to carry out my duties as Lord of the Underworld until I reclaim my former glory and crush your pathetic soul in eternal agony."

Bast sheathed Soul Sucker, annoyed. His problem wasn't solved—he'd just gotten an upgraded voice...

A dark, surging power filled Bast. It hummed through his veins and invigorated him. Intrigued, he flexed his hands and raised a palm, then blasted a hundred zombies into indistinguishable bits. He grinned.

Screw being the Chosen One. He liked the idea of being the new Prince of Demons, Lord of the Underworld, instead.

Rackshalok snorted. "Don't get too comfortable."

Bast ignored that. It was time to have some fun.

“I suggest you pick up where I left off until our lair is fully refurnished. How does world destruction sound?”

Bast shook his head. That was too barbaric. And his uncle had brought him up civilized.

For now, he would settle for world domination and obtaining that harem he'd been daydreaming about. He waved his zombie horde to resume its march and had several of the undead construct a litter to carry him on.

Time to show the world its new Overlord.



Abby “Merc” Rustad writes and lives in Minnesota, where she has enough room to raise a zombie horde in the backyard. (The ferrets are her seconds-in-command.) Her fiction has appeared in *M-BRANE SF*, *Alternative Coordinates*, *Fusion Fragment*, *AlienSkin Magazine*, *Sorcerous Signals*, and others. On rare occasions she posts on her blog (merc-rants.blogspot.com), and she always welcomes donations of fresh brains (don't worry, we won't ask where they came from).