

1

One wolf alone should not have been able to take down a horse, but this one did. It was just lucky for Geigel that he didn't wind up underneath the horse when it fell. And greater fortune still that the wolf seemed more concerned with tearing the horse apart than pursuing him further . . . at least at first.

As he ran, it suddenly occurred to Geigel that the brook was near. In the midst of his panic, one rational thought broke through: water might mask his scent. It might be his only chance.

The moment his boots met the modest stream of the brook, another thought struck him—a memory of a saying his father once used. *Never get between two dueling wizards.* If only he had recalled this wisdom twelve hours earlier.

The first wizard had passed through two weeks prior, offering a reward for delivery of the second wizard, dead or alive. He rattled off several names that this other wizard might be using, which caused some of the men present to chuckle. At one point Brikster nudged Geigel with his elbow and whispered, “Is he serious?” The wizard then produced a bag as big as Brikster's own sizable noggin, full of gold. He promised five more bags just like it for completion

of the appointed task. Brik wasn't chuckling after this, nor was anyone else present.

One more thing: the second wizard would likely claim to be a necromancer. This would be an empty boast of course, as everyone knew there were only a relative handful of true wizards left in the entire world, and certainly no necromancers among them—assuming the dark masters ever truly existed in the first place.

No one honestly knew what to make of it all, but the money was real enough, which ensured the men would keep their eyes and ears open.

The second wizard—the purported necromancer—arrived early yesterday afternoon. Based on the description they'd been given, there was no mistaking him. When he loudly announced his intention to go to Salisa's, Brik practically went mad, proclaiming this to be “the opportunity of our lifetimes” and, clearly, “the will of the gods.”

Geigel had a bad feeling about it, yet found it hard to argue with Brikster's logic. This was merely another panel job, Brik insisted, except maybe they'd have to dirty their hands just a little. And hadn't they made their biggest scores as panel thieves? And wasn't he going to Salisa's, which they knew like the backs of their hands?

But that's precisely what bothered Geigel the most: it was too perfect. Something about it made his hackles stand upright. Then there was the way Brik was behaving—blind with greed and frothing at the prospect of collecting that gold. Usually it was the other way around, with Geigel the impulsive one and Brikster the cool head. Everything about it was wrong; all of it precisely backwards, like they were no longer themselves but characters in a story written by someone else.

Still, he had gone along with it. Like a fool.

How long has he been running now? It must have been half an hour since the sun rose. Daylight would make escape more difficult, assuming they were still in pursuit . . .

And with that thought, Geigel stopped.

Could he have lost them? Exiting the brook, he found the nearest tree and slumped to the ground as he leaned against it. The early morning quiet soothed him. His breath began to slow.

He began to entertain the thought that Brikster may yet live. Perhaps that scream in the darkness was not a death wail, but one of

a more general fright, made right before he managed to run off. Perhaps the two would meet at an inn later, get drunk, and laugh at how they managed to escape this awful predicament. Geigel ran the idea over and over again in his head until he almost made himself believe it.

Then he heard the baleful howl of the wolf not far off.

Immediately he was up and running again—through the trees once more, this time on the other side of the brook. Normally, on a sunny, spring morning like this, these woods would be beautiful to behold. But to Geigel, running madly as he was, the trees were a battle line of soldiers and their branches were pole arms held high, which he ducked and weaved through furiously to avoid being impaled.

Yet again, somewhere beneath Geigel's hysteria, reason bubbled up and a fleeting hope reasserted itself. There was a road close by, he was sure. If he could reach it, there might be a rider he could flag down for aid . . . or steal his horse, if need be, and make his getaway.

But suddenly, something or someone tripped him as he ran and he went head over heels. Landing awkwardly on his left elbow, his arm felt like some tuning fork within it had been struck. Looking back, he saw the one responsible for his fall: a small, hooded figure (a dwarf?) stepping out from behind a tree. Geigel wondered if he was hallucinating at first; then the figure drew back his hood and revealed its hideous visage and laughed a terrible, cackling laugh. It was a goblin. Its laughter was a sound that Geigel's own modest imagination was incapable of conjuring. This was real.

When the goblin saw the fear on Geigel's face, he drew his short sword and charged, cackling all the way. Before he could fall upon him, Geigel kicked at him savagely—desperation temporarily adding to his strength—and the goblin was sent flying backward. But his cackling never ceased. Geigel shot up and resumed running, now more frantically than ever.

"Stupid man run!" the goblin squealed. "But no escape Great Geech and the master!"

Geigel knew who the master was, causing all hope to drain from his heart. He ran for his life even though he was certain now that he would be following Brik to the other side before much longer. With the end so near, images of the first girl he ever loved came to him:

Elyn, whom he first met when they were both just ten years old. Recalling her now, he knew every other woman since her had been a lie; a diversion from the pain of losing his first and only love. He should have settled down with Elyn and raised a family with her. Why didn't he? It was so damn obvious now. How could he not have seen it then?

Every man knows he's born to die, yet he never truly accepts this fact until he's staring death in the face. Why is it only then that he feels the true weight of his mortality? Why is it only then that the truth becomes so painfully, ridiculously clear?

Still, the base instinct to survive would not let Geigel stop. He was finally past the trees and up a slope, looking behind nearly the entire time, his eyes seeking out the goblin. When he finally looked forward again, he was stunned to see another hooded figure in the road before him—a staff held in his right hand while grasping a canvas sack in his left. To his terror, Geigel knew who it was immediately.

“The necromancer!”

On impulse, he turned and sought to flee in the opposite direction, but an awesome weight fell upon him and brought him to the ground. It was the wolf, which somehow, somehow, seemed to fall from the very sky. Geigel screamed as he lay pinned beneath the awful brute, its coat mottled with blood and its fetid breath filling his nostrils.

“He's led us on quite the chase, hasn't he Longtooth?” the necromancer observed.

“Please,” Geigel begged. The wolf's jaws hovered an inch from his face and its warm drool would have dripped into his eyes had he not turned his head to avoid it. The creature snapped its yellow fangs and growled.

“That's enough,” the necromancer said, but the wolf didn't budge, continuing to snap and growl. It seemed to crave satisfaction now that the hunt was over.

“Longtooth!” the necromancer exclaimed. And at last, the wolf slowly climbed off of Geigel and took several steps backward. But its gaze never left its prey.

“And you,” the necromancer commanded Geigel, “get up. There is much you have to answer for.”

“This is all a mistake,” Geigel said as he rolled over to his hands and knees, gasping for air. “My comrade and I, we never meant anyone harm.”

“You claim innocence, do you? Perhaps a second opinion on the matter is called for.”

The necromancer opened his sack and Brikster’s large head tumbled out like a melon, rolling on the ground and stopping face up. This would have been horrifying enough by itself, but then, incredibly, the eyes of the head blinked before a single word crossed its dead lips:

“ . . . Guilty.”

Excerpted from *The Necromancer*, first book of the Soulgrave series. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For further information, please email info@paradoxcomics.com.

Copyright © 2023 Paradox Productions LLC