



THE ROTTEN HEART

by

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Zerys' left brow twitched as he concentrated on the corpse. He tried to focus, to visualise the rotting flesh shrinking, stripping itself from the bones. But all he saw was that dwarven corpse, old and rotten. Zerys struggled to free his hands, but the rope that bound them was too tight. Exhausted, he surrendered to despair.

“I've got something to tell you.”

Zerys opened his eyes. He stared at the corpse as Lastrem spoke.

“The *rotten heart*.”

Zerys' eyes widened.

“Your powers came from the *rotten heart*.”

Zerys growled. He closed his eyes. When he reopened them, they were full of tears. Anger crept through his spine, his fingertips tickling to strangle Lastrem. Once again, he tried to free his hands, but all he did was thighten the knots, preventing the blood from getting to his fingers. His palm felt as if it would explode if it didn't rip appart Lastrem's throath. Instead, words eructed from his mouth.

“Dirty pirate bastard ! I should not have trusted you. I just hope they kill you first so I can watch you...”

The words froze around Zerys' tongue.

Lastrem wanted to apologize, but Zerys's silence roused his curiosity. Lastrem tried to turn his head, but all he could see was the hold's ceiling.

Zerys stared at the corpse. Even if it would not move when he tried to animate it, it now convulsed as if caught by an irresistible dance.

That's not how it should work, thought Zerys.

The boiling fat should dissolve the flesh.

The eyeballs should crumble to dust.

The motion stopped and, as Zerys wondered if he had been hallucinating, a tiny creature struggled to free itself from the corpse's weight. The skeletal rat extirped its bones from under the rotten flesh and, when his empty eye sockets crossed Zerys' gaze, Zerys felt a connection, as if the creature and he were a kin mind. Zerys had already controlled undead, but only his word mattered then, not his thoughts.

The rotten heart.

It must have been the rotten heart.

I should escape and leave Lastrem to die, thought Zerys as the undead sensed his command and moved behind Zerys' back.

"What are you doing Zerys ?", asked Lastrem. "Isn't worth anything wasting your energy on magic. You're just a corpse collector, remember ? An ex-corpse collector. Not a necromancer... What's that ? Zerys ?"

As Lastrem talked, Zerys' anger kept increasing. His hands were free, but he didn't want to spoil his trick. The rat's teeth were sharp. They could sever more than rope. Zerys would free Lastrem, but not without a price for his treachery.

Lastrem screamed a second before Zerys felt the mind-reaching taste of his blood. *Enough*, thought Zerys as he raised, *cut the rope now*. He walked to face Lastrem, whose expression was a mix of pain and confusion.

“You’ve got powers after all...”, Lastrem said, “I hope you’ll thank me waking them.”

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Qiroy sat in the captain’s quarters, scrutinising the rotten flesh that enclosed the bloodstone. He relished the faint putrefaction that emanated from the *rotten heart* and thought about keeping it for himself. Burrowing his head in his notebook, he wrote down every observation. The only missing thing was actual experimentation. When Qiroy was done describing the item, he stood and headed for the deck. He should find some corpse on which to experiment the powers of the artifact.

A shame the master wants the thieves alive, thought Qiroy as he looked across the deck in search of a test subject. For a few seconds, he stared at Lia, who bent over the rail, looking at the plains from above. “That would make a pretty zombie”, mumbled Qiroy as he moved his gaze to a bird perched on a mast. He began praying.

A ray of pale light erupted from Qiroy’s palm, striking the big white bird straight in the chest. The bird creaked, and fell on the deck.

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Lastrem climbed the ladder leading to the hatch. He pressed his back to the trap door, but as much as he tried, he could not open it. “Now that’s a problem”, muttered Lastrem as he tried to remember the trap door’s mechanism. “I’ll need a piece of string”, said Lastrem, turning to Zerys. His bloody fingers stained the wooden ceiling when he removed a shard of wood from the trap door.

Once Zerys sampled a string on the dwarven corpse, Lastrem began humming a strange tune that sounded like a children's rhyme. After a few seconds of humming and gesturing, the string entangled around the wooden splinter. The trinket hovered over Lastrem's hand, then it disappeared, turning itself into a translucent ectoplasm which instantly slid through the hatch's cracks.

"*It's the hand that'll set us free*", rhymed Lastrem as he mentally asked the hand to remove the latch from the door, "*One can't hear. One can't see. Is the rotten heart for me ?*". Pushing his back against the trap door, he motioned Zerys to cover his ears.

As he looked at the crew tending the ship, Lastrem hummed a creepy ballad, projecting his voice through the trap door so that it reached most of the crew working on the deck.

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When Qiroy bent to break the bird's neck, he was thrown aside by the ship's abrupt stop. Tightly gripping the *rotten heart*, he left the bird's corpse to rot on the deck and ran to the helm.

The gnome still held the commands, but his face was blank.

Qiroy pushed him aside and gripped the helm with his free hand. He felt the elemental's fear, but couldn't understand why the entity was so afraid. Qiroy was not an expert in elemental control, but he knew he would never be able to get the elemental out of its trance singlehanded. Putting the *rotten heart* in his robe's pockets, he grabbed the helm with both hands.

The telepathic link that established between Qiroy and the elemental was precarious, as if the thing was panicked. *What is a fire elemental's mind made of ?* Qiroy wondered as he tried to pierce the entity's trust with his own spirit. Nothing would do. Exhausted by his failure, Qiroy backed up and called to the powers of the Blood.

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The second she heard Lastrem's voice, Lia swung her gaze from the dying bird to the trap door. Aware that the song could affect the crew of the vessel as well as the elemental that drove it, she made sure to keep her balance. *Does Lastrem think children spooks can freak me out ?*, she wondered as she watched him stumble out of the hold. She thought about yelling to Qiroy, but the half-deaf priest wouldn't flicker at her calls. Anyway, she could take care of the thief herself.

Under the darkening flames of the bound elemental, Lia regained her balance and sprung after Lastrem, who ran to the shady spot where an acolyte hid like a scared child. As if protecting himself from invisible foes, the acolyte brandished his weapon to nothingness. The blade shone under the dark fire. Lastrem could not have missed the flash of metal.

A few paces before he could reach the acolyte's dagger, Lia caught Lastrem's shoulder. She had always been a fast runner. Unsheating her short sword, she punched at Lastrem, who dodged the attack. She liked the guy, but she would not let him spoil her contract. And his darned tune was really getting on her nerves. How could he carry on singing while he ran and fought ? That Lastrem was never out of surprises.

Moving sideways, Lastrem slid around Lia, tripping her as he tried to catch the dagger. She took advantage of her fall to kick Lastrem in the ribs.

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Lastrem's singing stopped when Lia stole his breath. The bitch had pointy boots.

And the scared acolyte had a sharp dagger.

Almost in Lastrem's reach.

If only he could stop swinging it back and forth. The scared man stared at the fighting couple as if they were aberrations from Xoriat. And he fought as if. Lastrem made the most of the man's strikes to push Lia aside and grab her sword.

Then, the moment came when he could have killed Lia. Her throat was right beneath the tip of his sword. Instead, he stole her a kiss and pushed her against the acolyte.

"Don't hurt her too much", he said as he jumped on his feet and sprung out of reach. "I'd like to keep a piece of her myself."

Where was the *rotten heart* ?

Lastrem walked across the deck, trying to spot the Emerald Claws commander. *He must have kept the heart on himself*, thought Lastrem as he ran to the helm, *Qiroy would not make that mistake twice.*

The putrescence of the artifact reached Lastrem's nostrils when he came near Qiroy. *How could Zerys have been fooled when the artifact was so smelly ?*, wondered Lastrem. *The rumors must be true, corpse collectors really get their olfactory system burned through their training.*

While he pondered about Zerys' credulity, Lastrem crept behind Qiroy, whose closed eyes were a benediction. How could Lastrem reach the *rotten heart* without alerting Qiroy. Even his stealth could not allow him to get his fingers inside the cleric's robes. Anyway, it would have been disgusting to caress the torso of a man who bathed in dead bodies.

Lastrem thought too long. Qiroy backed up and began chanting macabre Blood of Vol verses. At least, the cleric hadn't seen him. Lastrem moved beside Qiroy, and shove his fist in the man's face.

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Zerys waited in the hold for almost a minute, covering his ears with both hands. The skeletal rat waited beside his feet, awaiting orders.

When he found Lastrem had stopped singing, Zerys uncovered his ears. After hiding the rat in his pocket, he headed for the ladder. On the deck, he looked around. The crew's constant working sounds had stopped, as if something terrible had happened, like when all birds of a wood stop singing.

His eyes locked with Lia's, who had freed herself from the acolyte's delirium. Lia didn't care looking at Zerys for long. The acolyte's dagger in her hand, she jumped to her feet and ran to the helm. Zerys let the trap door shut behind them.

Zerys' gaze following the changeling, he soon found Lastrem tearing the cleric's robe apart. He then saw him rip Qiroy's heart from his chest with his bare fingers.

Zerys stared, breathless.

Suddenly, he realised.

The *rotten heart*.

Lia was almost on the bard, but he kicked her before she could reach him. Zerys shouted and Lastrem threw the *rotten heart*.

Zerys watched the artifact fly from Lastrem's hands. He ran to catch it, but the *rotten heart* bounced on his fingers. It took Zerys all his care not to make the bloodstone fall overboard. The artifact hit the deck with a squishing sound and slid on the planks as Zerys ran to catch it.

As he reached for the *rotten heart*, pain erupted in his back when Lia's dagger pierced his shoulder. Zerys' fingers were a few inches from the artifact when he fell on the deck, his body convulsed by pain.

This darned changeling should not even be here. Zerys wanted to kill her, but he knew he didn't stand a chance. Even Lastrem didn't stand a chance against her. His only salute was to grab the *rotten heart*. Zerys extended his arm.

As soon as he touched the heart, he felt it's power fuse through his veins. So, this rotten piece of flesh was the source of his necromantic might. Commuting with the *rotten heart*, he felt every corpses within the ship. He concentrated his power upon the only corpse that laid on the deck.

By that time, Lia had reached Zerys. With one hand, she tried to grab the *rotten heart*. With the other, she removed the dagger from Zerys' back.

"You'll be dead within a seconds", said the changeling, raising the blood dripping blade.

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As Lastrem struggled with Qiroy, trying to ignore his putrid stench, he saw Lia's dagger gleam with a redish flash. "Zerys", muttered Lastrem as he tripped Qiroy and sprung on his feet. "We'll be on our way", he said to Qiroy as he slashed at his face, aware that his musical magic would soon reach it's end. Before he could reach Lia, his gaze was strung by a peculiar sight.

Lia was not struggling with Zerys anymore, but with a skeletal bird that peaked at her back. She had had no other choice than to leave Zerys alone and take care of the undead bird instead.

When Lastrem reached Zerys, he was standing and had backed up to the airship's rail. "Nice wings", said Lastrem as he took Zerys' arm to lead him to the ship's prow. He gripped the corpse collector's shoulder, feeling the wound through his wool shirt.

Zerys, in a trance induced by his wound, let escape a cry when Lia clashed the bird on the deck. The breaking bone's noise echoed in the air, like marbles falling on the floor, and left

Zerys clinging to the *rotten heart*. His wound was not helping him regain his mind. Now that the bird's bones laid scattered across the deck, they needed to get out of there as fast as they could. Lastrem gazed at Qiroy, who had made it back to his feet and was casting as he crossed the deck to catch them.

Zerys was in shock.

Lastrem had a plan, but Zerys wouldn't survive if he wasn't in good shape. He would only have a few seconds to heal his friend, so he began chanting immediately. He kept his voice low, but the magic fused from his lips, healing Zerys' wound within a second. Too busy with his magic, he didn't see Lia creep right under his nose.

The changeling surprised Lastrem with a strong kick behind the knee. Lastrem managed to keep his balance, but Zerys fell on the deck. He was just regaining consciousness.

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When Qiroy noticed Zerys' wound, he called the powers of the blood to fill his senses with an hunger for death. Praying, Qiroy advanced to Zerys, hoping that Lia would take care of Lastrem before his spell was done. Most of the crew had regained their senses and the elemental was regaining it's fiery red glow. The acolyte shook from his fear ridden torpor and moved to Qiroy's side.

While Lia took care of Lastrem, Qiroy pointed his hand at Zerys. Both men's eyes locked when Qiroy shove his hand in Zerys' face. The necromantic energy fused from Zerys' face through Qiroy's hand, but the flow was halted within an instant.

"You're not dying", growled Qiroy as he unsheated his blood red steel dagger.

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Zerys was still shook up, but he slowly regained his mind. When he opened his eyes, it was only to get his vision clouded by a withered hand. His skin tingled with negative energy as he felt his life slip through his pores. He had almost resigned when he felt his life coming back. Qiroy swore and that was the only cue Zerys needed to smash the Blood of Vol priest in the face. He jumped to his feet and looked at Lastrem, who had freed himself from Lia's grasp.

"Stand back or I'll throw it", said Zerys as he extended his arm over the rail.

As he threatened to drop the *rotten heart*, Qiroy stood still, trying to make sense of what he just read on Zerys' lips. Beside him, the acolyte backed up a few feet. Lastrem moved beside Zerys, always keeping Lia locked in his gaze. The changeling kept her knees crouched to spring at the first hint of Zerys dropping the artifact.

"Thanks for the hospitality", said Lastrem as he grapped Zerys' arm. "Allow me to repay your kindnesses with a poem."

"Choosing your face to suit your needs", Lastrem began.

"I looked at you, my mind was seized

Whatever look has your own pretty face

I am trapped by your self-turning grace

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"Put off that mask, and we'll stay together

For you've caught my rotten heart, forever."

And he jumped.

The bastard jumped.

Leaving her with a wink, a bow, and an infuriated Qiroy at her side, Lastrem jumped, bringing Zerys and the *rotten heart* with him. As Lia bend over the rail to spot the rogues now falling from the airship, she heard Qiroy shout orders at the captain, who just regained his mind.

The ship started moving, they would soon land on the plains.

Lastrem had escaped, but Lia knew she would catch the thieves.

She always did.