



ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

ORPHAN MAKER

By S.E. LINDBERG

THE Lord Protector lay supine on the pyre with his sword displayed. Around his burning skeleton, hundreds of children stood evenly apart in concentric rings, clutching their artwork in quivering hands. All held their breath in silence, the crackling of fire the only sound atop the Keep of Looming Cromlechs. It warmed and illuminated the orphans beneath a night-cape that did neither. Their stark shadows trembled on the plaza's cobble as they waited for approval to begin the ceremony.

Doctor Grave guided the ritual from the hearth's edge. His mask and robes of stitched faces appeared as plain, soiled linen since the firelight could not penetrate their thick coatings of soot. "Lord Lysis will protect you, children. You must continue giving or he will not rise again. Then no one can shield you from dyscrasiac beasts or retrieve others like you from beyond the Keep. Give again." The necromancer extended his arms, palms upward. Shadows flooded the folds of his vestments. "Feed the Votive Pyre."

Ragged youths walked toward the fire in a spiral, each bowing when offering their paintings. Fears, realized onto canvas, burned. Afterward, as the artists darted into the tunnel-ridden keep, their creativity lingered within the immolated art.

The Lord Protector consumed these musings which stoked his magic. His body shook with a dozen offerings. Legs kicked ashes after fifty more. Soon his bones gleamed as one with the flames.

Lysis rose to kneel in the Votive Pyre. His hairy scalp had long since transmuted into a crown of horns, arched and deadly as his sword's blade. He leaned on the hilt of *Ferrus Eviscamir*. Pearlescent ichor oozed from his skeleton. With undead vision, he saw his aura boil with haunting memories. Phantoms of his ill brothers kept his consciousness hostage, tormenting him with effigies of his deceased wife Maeve. *I failed you. Can I truly save others?*

He stood on shaky legs while exiting the hearth. Cinders drifted in his wake. *I must save more.*

"Rest, my Lord." Doctor Grave approached. "Recovery takes time. Wait! Where are you going?"

Lysis pushed his vizier out of his way, drawing *Ferrus Eviscamir* on guard. "I hear whimpering."

Doctor Grave backtracked to evade being cut. "Relax, Lord. You hear those you saved already. The orphans just revived you. Some watch from the tunnels."

Lysis stalked the plaza, sword raised, assessing the eyes of those hiding in the shadows.

Grave saw the confusion, so explained, "You are in the Keep of Looming Cromlechs. The danger is not here, but abroad."

The lord contemplated lowering his weapon. Lucidity improved as he surveyed the courtyard. *Those whom I saved fear me. Rightly so. I am a revenant. How desperate are they, to seek refuge with a necromancer and help from an undead warrior? No matter. It is time to seek the real dangers.*

Lysis staggered back to the Votive Pyre to cast a seeing spell. He connected mentally with the alchemical smoke, molding it into semi-sentient plumes and casting the vapors away from the pyre, through the angular cromlechs, to stream like fingers over the countryside.

The skeletal lord read the pyretic pneumas as they returned from the desolated Gravenstyne estate. Swirls curdled into anthropomorphic shapes. A crawling maiden appeared. "Help," the female phantom whispered through the ether. Tresses of dark hair matted against slender shoulders. Dry, pursed lips quivered. She muttered, "Ingrid. Katja. Valter."

Giant mosquitos formed in the smoke, swarming the apparition. She reached with her free hand while sobbing. "My children."

Maeve? Lysis tried to identify her.

Doctor Grave read his master's thoughts. "Lord? Must every woman remind you of Maeve? She is dead."

"I will save this lady. And her children."

"You are not strong enough to venture out."

Lysis strode past the vizier. "Whoever she is, she needs help. Get out of my way."

"Lord, I advise you wait."

The Lord Protector hiked down the keep's sandstone slopes toward Gravenstyne. Lysis commanded telepathically, "Monitor the keep. Be prepared to welcome whomever I bring back."

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THE maiden lay in a heap of trampled grass, her aura smoldered dimly crimson. Lysis analyzed it to learn her name was Astrid, and she was nearly twenty years old. Her corporeal body was as fragile as the smoke depictions of her. Blanched skin matched her gray gown. Patterned cuts on her legs suggested torture.

Mutant mosquitos gathered on her lacerations. Cyanic light emanated from the insects while their human-like fingers dug into the wounds, their proboscises siphoned blood, and their bellies swelled. The vampiric bugs turned to inspect the intruder.

Lord Lysis extended his arms, inviting the mosquitos to feed on his magic. They swarmed. He laughed. Miniature claws scraped his augmented bones. They ate his marrow. Lysis's blood filled the crops of the insects, then crystallized. They fell dead.

The remaining horde attacked.

Ferrus Eviscamir lashed faster than the bugs could dodge. Swollen abdomens split open. Glowing gore reacted with the blade, then rained down as fragments of glass.

All insects had perished.

Lysis loomed over the maiden. Over his shoulder, far behind him, the pyre shone brightly to outline his horned head with a blinding halo. He asked the woman's unconscious mind, "*Who hurt you?*"

Astrid stirred. Her awareness slowly acknowledged Lysis. Three youthful phantoms took shape in her thoughts. Staring back, she communicated, "*Ingrid. Katja. Valter.*" She seemed more worried about her missing children than her assailant's identity.

"*I will reunite you if I can find them. But I need to know what happened to you.*"

Astrid would not respond anymore. Reading the woman's memories clouding her body, Lysis saw her torments: children yelled under glowing orbs; a frantic retreat promised hope; she raced toward the keep's beckoning firelight, seeking sanctuary.

Nothing more to explain? Then I will escort you back to solve this mystery and reunite you with your family. He lifted Astrid and walked toward where her astral trail originated, Gravenstyne's countryside.

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NATURE had invaded Gravenstyne's orchard when the plague ran rampant. Invasive maples overtook the grove. Gleaming, engorged mosquitos hovered over the forest canopy like an eerie constellation. Crude plank walls served as a primitive rampart.

A child watcher spotted the lord's approach, motioned for others to join, and became the center of a mob of coalesced shadows with hundreds of sparkling eyes. They peered at the skeletal warrior carrying the limp woman.

"Halt!" yelled an immature, high-pitched voice. Urchins shifted atop the parapets of the tree fort.

A projectile launched toward him.

He turned to shield Astrid. An apple crashed into his back. Juice splattered. Fruity pith clung to the lord and reacted with his magic, turning gray then crumbling to dust. *Mere children trying to defend themselves. They fear me as everyone else does.*

Several volleys came from behind the ramparts, raining apple missiles and forming a debris field of fruit chunks. Some rinds were tough and meaty, like sinew. *This is not real fruit. It bleeds ichor. Dyscrasia corrupts the orchard.*

Lysis yelled to his juvenile assailants, "Cease this nonsense. I bring Astrid home."

The barrage stopped.

"It is her!" the voice squeaked from the lookout. Celebratory drumming and hollering erupted as adolescent ruffians poured forth to surround Lysis and Astrid. Girls with long, matted hair came in groups while mud-covered boys skipped with toy axes, pushing each other with violent joy. Many carried baskets of

decayed fruit and stick dolls topped with carved-apple heads.

The children bumped against Lysis as they inspected him and Astrid. *These children defended their ground at first, but they do not fear my visage in the slightest. Although the orchard is certainly diseased, the urchins appear healthy. Perhaps I can persuade them all to come to the keep.*

Children ushered Lysis and the maiden toward the commune's center. Lysis tried to inspect their destination but could not see through the vegetation. Bulbous insects ornamented the trees made of actual flesh, veined with ill blood. Lengthy, fine hair grew from under boughs as they split from trunks. Sweat pervaded the air. Viscous sap swelled from cracked bark. Azure icicles dangled from limbs, shattering as Lysis's presence contacted them.

Astrid trembled in her slumber. Perhaps she detected her home's scent, or her approaching daughters.

"Where are this woman's children?" Lord Lysis asked.

"Here we are!" Two girls with cinnamon-hued hair bounded forward. Each smiled. Scarlet, walnut-sized ticks dangled from behind their ears as jewelry. Similar bracelets wrapped their wrists and necks. Dendritic bruises complemented the insidious, decorative bundles.

The younger, Katja, exclaimed, "Ma!" She tugged on Astrid's shift fiercely.

"Come on, smile," said Ingrid. Using her index finger to trace her mother's mouth. Astrid's lips snapped back into a frown.

Lysis looked upon the girls, visualizing his daughters grabbing Maeve's injured form. It was as if he had come home with his beloved, and his children were alive as she.

When he awoke from the spell of the past, Astrid was no longer in his possession. The crowd had taken her.

Ingrid yelled, "Follow us to the Bleeding Trees. Come on. We go to Valter. It's his birthday!"

Many pressed against Lysis, propelling him. Astrid drifted away, held aloft in the parade. Urged forward with the current of bodies, he followed her.

Lysis strode under rickety, roped walkways connecting tree houses. These misshapen bridges served as streets in the canopy. Youths stared down at him while gnawing at apples, spitting out skin-rinds and hispid stems. The rank stench of rotting fruit hardly masked that of human waste.

Youths congested the path to see Astrid and cheer. Behind them, young adults cowered. They reared babies, breastfeeding in the shadows. They peered while avoiding the procession. When they glimpsed Astrid, they turned away.

The forest parted. The trees surrounded a large, circular ravine. Within the depression, wetland encroached an unkempt garden.

Lysis approached the ravine's edge to view the town center and the surrounding rim. Long boughs extended over the pit's circumference. Gnarled, finger-like limbs sprouted from each. Bloated galls appeared as knuckles on these branches that curled at their tips like closed fists. Lacerated feet dangled from within these, bleeding. Ghosts hovered close to the incarcerated corpses. They mouthed: "*We gave.*"