

Tales from Grace's Bar, Chapter 17

Mr. Graves and The Cage

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I have mentioned that by day I would get some peculiar customers. One of these was a strange old fellow who would come in the mornings before I opened to purchase and kiss chickens. I don't remember how it started or when he began coming, but come he would; sometimes every day for weeks on end, other times going months without showing his face. When he came he would knock on the cellar window while I was down there preparing the foodstuffs for the day. I'd let him in and he'd ask how many chickens we'd need that day. I'd tell him and give him some cash and he'd go buy them and bring them back, alive. He'd sit there while I worked on the cheese or whatever gently caressing each chicken until it was calm and at ease; then he'd bend down and kiss it softly on the head and it would die, silently and without any fuss. Once they were dead he'd watch me butcher and roast them, and then he'd take his leave. He never accepted any pay, never asked any refreshment, and never did any other tasks. He would buy the chickens, calm and kill them, and he would talk.

He told lots of stories. Most of them were tall tales of rare complexity; stories about the birth of Slodoop or about the time he said came before, when there was only a few day's ride to the world and there were politics and heros and calamities on a very different scale. There was a dragon then, he said, that every single living soul in existence knew about, and some of his tales were about her. Maybe I'll share a few of those tales sometime; they are majestic and fun. But the stories I loved best were the ones about an illithid named Mr. Graves.

Illithid; I guess they aren't all that common these days. They look like humans, but they've got tentacles around their mouths and they live off of people's brains. What with eating all those minds they're pretty smart and they had quite the complicated society at one time. Mr. Graves lived in one of their communities, establishing himself early in life as the head of one of their philanthropies. He retired early, played politics for a while, then went to live with humans, got mixed up with some giants, and so on. Many are the tales I heard about Mr. Graves, far too many to relate here. But my favorite tale was the story

of The Cage.

In the course of his adventures, Mr. Graves had found himself in the wilderness, waiting for some friends to return from a magical journey. His only companion at that time was an extremely tall giant called "The Cage". The Cage, in addition to being thirty-something feet tall, was rather mysterious. He had a magical voice that seemed to slice through the air like a hot knife through butter but he almost never said anything. It wasn't his way, though he did open up around Mr. Graves after a while.

After perhaps a month living in the outlands together, The Cage woke Mr. Graves up with a peculiar utterance. "I'm going to lose this one," he said.

"Lose this what?" asked Mr. Graves, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Battle."

Mr. Graves was baffled by this, and he said so. "We aren't in any battle. Even if we were, there's no reason to think we'd lose. And even if we did lose, we might still win the war."

The Cage smiled wanly at his diminutive friend and shook his head. "You'll see."

Over breakfast that day The Cage spoke again. "Cor needs help getting home."

Cor was one of the people they were waiting for and a dear friend of Mr. Graves'. This statement, accordingly, shook him a great deal. He had lived with The Cage long enough to know that there was no point in asking how he knew, so instead he asked, "What kind of help?"

"A lock of hair willingly cut from the head of a beautiful princess, a virgin eligible for at least five years, the only daughter of the ruler of a large and prosperous kingdom. We'll leave to go get it after breakfast."

Mr. Graves was stunned speechless. The Cage had never said more than a half dozen words together before; now he was spouting off unbelievable lines like a fountain. However he had no need to speak for, after taking a large bite of mutton, The Cage continued of his own accord.

"I think it will be easier for us to put her father on the throne first. That way we can take advantage of her gratitude at being rescued right away, instead of waiting

until she becomes a princess."

"What are you talking about? Rescued from what? What throne? Are you insane?" was what Mr. Graves wanted to say; but all he did say, in the weak voice of a strong man startled early in the morning by a formerly-trusted associate who seemingly had gone insane was "Who?"

"Amelia Longbottom," replied The Cage. "Unless you know someone better?"

Mr. Graves stared at The Cage speechlessly.

"Right," said The Cage, swallowing his last mouthful of mutton, "shall we be off?"

Mr. Graves offered some futile attempts at getting The Cage to explain, but pretty soon they were on their way. It was a long but uneventful walk (no sane creature bothers a thirty-foot-tall giant and an illithid) and after a couple of days they reached a small but prosperous slo.

"Horse town," said The Cage when they came in sight of the slo. It was a villoop; two towns, one burg, and a slew of little farming vils. At one time it had been much larger, complete with three stone cities built of imported granite, but the current residents had pilfered two of the cities to repair the third and built a low wall around the entire slo.

"So," said Mr. Graves after a reasonable pause, "is this where we reenthrone Mr. Longbottom?"

"No."

"Just a slo we bumped into on the way there?"

"No."

"What is it then?"

"You see that vil?" The Cage pointed. "You'll find Chester Longbottom there, buying produce wholesale. Convince him he's the rightful heir to the throne."

"Is he?"

"Yes. Once he believes you, take him to the graveyard to find the symbol of the old house. Teach him to use it. Then pawn his produce cart to get some nice clothes for him—trust his taste, not your own—and meet me at the back gate of the outer keep an hour before nightfall. Oh, and don't kill anyone."

"Wait a minute..."

"No time for that."

"But..."

"No time for that either. You'll have to run as it is. Now go!"

And he went. He jogged to the low wall, scrambled over it, pushed through a seemingly endless field of ripe grain and finally reached the vil in question, quite out of breath. He walked as fast as he could down to the market square just in time to see four men heaving squash into an already-full cart.

"Chester!" he yelled.

All four men spun to face Mr. Graves and, neither understanding the bubbly noises that form illithid speech nor welcoming the presence of such a grisly-looking creature, whipped out their swords.

It was then that Mr. Graves realized his plight. He didn't know which of the four was Chester Longbottom, or even if any of them were. He couldn't talk to him even if he did figure out which one he was; and he was about to be attacked.

"What do you do when the king tries to attack you?" he asked himself. "Give obeisance and hope he has a change of heart," he answered himself. Now, to an illithid king the appropriate course is to cover the right eye with the left tentacles, the left with the right, fold you arms behind your back and clatter your beak. Mr. Graves was pretty sure that was not the human way; he remembered once to have seen humans squat on their knees with their heads to the floor, their hindquarters raised and their arms stretched toward the thing they were respecting; he was pretty sure it wasn't a king, but it was the best he could think of so it is what he did.

"Um, Chester?" he heard a voice say. "What do we do now?"

"I dunno," another voice answered. "It seems to be worshiping us; seems wrong to murder it like that."

"Well we can't have monsters just wandering through the market," objected a third.

"Let's see what he wants," said the second. "Up, fellow, for we would speak with you."

Mr. Graves raised his head and saw that one of the men had stepped forward, while the other three had been joined by four others and stood, swords at a ready, behind the leader. Assuming the one in front to be Chester, he addressed himself to him.

"Your grace," he said, for he thought that might be what kings are called, "forgive me for interrupting, but I was just informed of your identity."

"Sorry," said Chester, "I'll need a little help on that cypher. Could you say 'Dale, moving sluggishly, rose with either hoof whetted. 'Back, you jovial pawn!' he chatted'?"

Mr. Graves obliged him. As he repeated it the other men tried to ask Chester what he thought he was doing.

"Hush, I'm trying to listen! Sorry, sir, but you'll have to say it again; I couldn't pay proper attention."

"Dale, moving sluggishly, rose with either hoof whetted. 'Back, you jovial pawn!' he chanted."

Chester concentrated for a moment, then asked slowly, "did you say he chanted?"

"Yes; didn't he?"

"He chatted, not chanted, but no matter, I've got it now. Now, who are you and what do you want?"

"Forgive me, your highness," (he had remembered the proper form of address) "for we should have met long since, but I have only just been informed of your identity. I am called Graves, keeper of the Royal Treasure."

"I'm afraid I'm lost. Graves? Identity? Highness?"

"You are known as Chester Longbottom, are you not?"

"I am."

Mr. Graves dropped to his face again. "Then I am indeed in the presence of the king!" He lifted his face. "For long years I have known that the true heir to the throne was neath at hand, but a man of my description can scarcely wander the towns making enquiries. I have only this day learned you are here, your highness, and have come to return the—but I can scarcely talk about it in the presence of these merchants..."

"My word, that's horrible!" said Chester with passion. Mr. Graves was more than a little surprised by this. Why...but he was talking again. "Gentleman," addressing the men behind him, "what do you think; should we help him?"

The men looked at each other dumbly.

"What! Wasn't even one of you moved by this poor man's story?"

There was an awkward pause, then one of the men said, "Sorry, but we couldn't understand him."

"You what? After I had him say... but never mind, it's not important, I'll just tell you that this poor man has a highly contagious curse that made his face grow tentacles and he wants us to take him to a sorcerer who might be able to reverse it. He's offering a few bits if we'll help him out, and he'll even cover our own de-cursing if we catch it while we're taking him there. I think I'll do it; anyone want to come with me?"

There was a moment while this information sunk in, then all of the men backed off, offering various reasons why they really couldn't stay any longer.

"Alright, Graves, they're gone. Of course, they couldn't understand you anyway, but I guess they could understand me. Either way, explain yourself. You say I'm the king?"

"Of course I do, your highness! The fact that someone else occupies your throne—but I see you don't know you are the king! This is incredible! Surely you did not think that your current ruler had any ancestral right to his rulership?"

"Well, no; but the old king had no children."

"No children, your highness?" This was an unforeseen twist. The Cage had assured him that this man was the heir.

"None that lived, anyway. The queen was unable to carry a child to term; they were all stillborn."

What to do now? Graves needed a suggestion, some clue of where to go, and the only person around to give him one was Chester, so he asked, "are you positive that you are in no way related to him?"

"No, my mother was a Longbottom, no relation to the kings at all."

"And your father?"

"Ah, my mother wasn't a very good woman, and..."

Mr. Graves smiled to himself. This was almost too easy.

"... And your father," he filled in, more than half convinced he was telling the truth, "was very desperate to sire children by any means. I hope you don't think being an illegitimate son makes you unfit to be king?"

During this discussion Mr. Graves and Chester Longbottom had boarded his wagon and were now plodding the country road toward the city. Indicating the castle towers which rose from the far side of the burg, Chester said "You mean that that castle is my father's?"

"Was your father's, yes; it rightfully belongs to you now, of course. But we waste time. We need to return to the graveyard immediately!"

"The graveyard?"

"Yes. I came to pay my respects to your highness, it is true, but no mere formalities could drag me from my appointed task. I have been sent to restore to you the symbol of the old house."

"To do what?"

"To give to you the emblem of kingship I have been guarding these past years. It lies concealed in the graveyard, but it need lie concealed no longer."

"And what exactly is this emblem of kingship?"

The exact question Mr. Graves had been asking himself since he heard of it—and one he had tried to ask The Cage, too, though without success. Fortunately, his thinking had not been wasted and he had a ready answer.

"When you want to keep something secret, you keep it secret from the guardian as well. What the emblem is, I do not know; all I know is it is in the graveyard, and I am to return it to you this very day."

"You don't know what it is?" Chester sounded somewhat skeptical.

"No."

"Do you know where in the graveyard it is hidden or how to retrieve it?"

"No; the reason I was not told what it is is to keep me from accidentally finding it."

"Then what's the use of our even going there? I certainly have no idea what it is you are talking about."

At one time a comment like this would have brought immediate agreement from Mr. Graves, but his faith in The Cage was nearly unshakable. Thus, he simply said, "Ah, but you're the king. Trust me; everything will work out."

"Well, alright, I guess it doesn't hurt to go there. We'll stop by after I unload this produce."

"There isn't time for that; we need to go there now."

"Not time? Why not? It's waited all these years; why not a few more hours?"

"If you are to reclaim your throne, it must be tonight, this very night, mere hours from now. There is no time to go messing about with unimportant things like produce!"

Chester looked at Mr. Graves quizzically, surprised by this sudden outbreak. "Well, if you insist, but it seems really arbitrary to me."

When they reached the cemetery Mr. Graves was stunned. Illithid don't bury their dead (actually, humans may be the only things that do) so his idea of graveyards was a bit vague. He had seen a couple of little plots of, oh, a dozen modest headstones each; but this....

"So, Mr. Graves," said Chester as they pulled up in the wagon, "—by the way, 'Graves'? Is it some kind of a joke?—anyway, here we are, all five square miles of the place. Any idea where we start?"

Mr. Graves groaned. Five square miles of tombs and headstones. It might take them days to find it even if they split up and both knew exactly what they were looking for.

"Your highness," Mr. Graves said, "The whole point in appointing me to guard the cemetery is that I could be here a hundred years and never figure it out, but I can sense someone searching for it a dozen miles away and—ah—apprehend them. I have little doubt you can find it easily enough, though, your highness—after all, you are the king."

Chester took a little more persuading than that, but eventually he conceded to look for this mystery object and the two of them walked into the cemetery. They didn't get more than a dozen paces, though, for almost immediately Chester tripped over something protruding from the grass. Wrenching the thing from the ground, he found it was...

"...a silver hairbrush with legs? What do you make of this, Graves?"

Mr. Graves didn't reply immediately. It looked like a joke, but it was clearly enchanted, positively dripping with excess magic. Could this be the thing they were looking for? "Do you recognize it at all?" he asked.

"No, I—wait a minute. Isn't this the thing that's carved above the doorway of the old house?"

"The old house?" Wasn't that the same phrase The Cage had used? This must be the thing they were looking for, then.

"Yeah, the old iron hut that was the residence of the rulers of the slo before they called themselves kings and started living in the castle instead."

"Magnificent," said Mr. Graves. "You're here for all of twenty seconds and you find it without any effort at all. That should help you regain the throne."

"It should? How?"

"You don't know what it's for?"

"The only thing I can think to do with it is melt it down and make coins out of it, but it won't be enough to buy the throne."

"It's a hairbrush, your highness. I suggest you use it to brush you hair."

"Brush my hair?"

"Yes."

"I'm not going to brush my hair with any wire brush I just dug out of the lawn! Are you crazy?"

"What are you going to do with it, then? Take it for a walk? It has legs, after all."

"I'm going to pawn it in hopes of making back some of the profit I lost by wandering around the graveyard with an overgrown slug-man instead of taking my produce to market while it was still fresh and in demand. Take it for a walk indeed!"

At this point Mr. Graves stepped out on a limb. He had been hoping to delay Chester Longbottom long enough that he could figure out what the enchantment on the brush was so he could teach him how to use it. As he watched his quarry stalking away, peeved and rude, he still knew nothing more than that underneath the main spell, whatever it was, was a hint of returning magic. He didn't know if this was part of another spell or intended to stand alone, but he had to do something so he said

"If you sell it you'll be arrested."

"I'll what?"

"You'll be arrested for theft or fraud. That brush's not going to leave you that easily. It's not like you can just give it away."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's enchanted to never leave its rightful owner, and that's you now. How do you think it got half-buried in a cemetery? It was coming to look for its last master when he died and it went into hibernation until it got a new owner. Even lock and key won't keep that brush away from you for long, now that it knows who you are." Mr. Graves was making all of this up, but it wasn't entirely random. He was pretty sure he detected magic traces connecting the returns magic with Chester.

"Are you serious?" asked Chester, turing to face the illithid. "I'm stuck with this thing forever?"

"Give it a try. Give it to me if you want to see how it reacts to being given away; at least I won't call you a thief when it returns to you."

"I sure don't want it. Here."

Chester handed the brush to Mr. Graves, but as soon as he backed away a few paces it started kicking and squirming, causing Mr. Graves to lose hold of it. As soon as it hit the ground it scrambled to its feet and darted over to Chester, at who's feet it fell lifeless and inert as any ordinary brush.

Now, you might think that at this scene Mr. Graves would have had a feeling of satisfaction that he had guessed the behavior of the brush so well. Instead, he was trying to place the tingle he had felt while the brush was in his hands. He had tasted minds that had that feel before; not snail or troll but something kind of like them...

"Wow," said Chester, picking up the brush again, "you weren't kidding when you said take it for a walk, were you?"

"Doppelganger!" shouted Mr. Graves.

"Say what?"

"Doppelganger! It feels like a doppelganger mind tastes, only less shifty and wet. You rub your hair with it and it makes you look different, I'll bet my life on it. Quick! Let's go sell the wagon and buy you some new clothes!"

"Slow up! What is all this?"

"There's no time to waste! Come on, come on!"

"Graves! Am I or am I not your king?"

"Of course you're the king, highness. Come, let's—"

"Then as king, I command you to shut your beak, stand still, and answer my questions!"

Mr. Graves stopped his mad caper and apologized to the king.

"Now, what did you say this brush does, besides following me around?"

"If you brush your hair with it it makes you look different."

"What kind of different?"

"I don't know. Like the king, I guess."

"Hold on, let's see if you're right." Chester swept the brush through his hair a few times. As he did so his bearing and expression changed from that of a sensible, reliable, intelligent man in his forties to the noble, lordly bearing and majestic expression of a king. Chester examined his reflection in the flat polished back of the brush.

"Ok, so you were right. Now, what was the other thing you were so excited about?"

"We need to go sell your cart and use the money to buy you a new wardrobe. Once we've got you all decked out we can meet the rest of your reenthronement brigade and get you crowned and in power, as you ought to be."

"'Reenthronement brigade'?"

"Yes—you'll see. But we need to be by the back gate of the outer keep at least one hour before sundown or we'll miss them, and we need to get you changed before that, so let's run!"

"You want me to sell my horse, cart, and produce in order to buy clothes? What if this doesn't work?"

"My, you are one for questions, aren't you. 'What if we don't find the symbol of the old house in the cemetery? What if it's just a dirty wire brush? What if it doesn't follow me? What if it doesn't change my appearance?' Come off it, King Chester; you think I'd start lying to you now?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"Yes, I am! Now come on!"

And on they came. The selling of the horse and wagon was unremarkable, and the clothes shopping, though amusing to watch, was uneventful. They explained Mr. Graves' presence by saying that he had been cursed and the witch who could turn him back would only accept requests from royalty, so they needed to get some suitable clothes. This was Chester's idea and he used it without consulting Mr. Graves, who had honestly forgotten that an illithid can't just saunter through a slo and help his friend buy clothes. They argued about every single aspect of the wardrobe, though Chester always won.

"Hose? You're going to wear hose?"

"What did you want me to wear, footerbags?"

"Something along those lines, yes! Maybe some nice silk knickerbockers tied gracefully below the knee."

"So you want me to wear knickerbockers, do you? I thought I was supposed to look regal, not like a spoiled noble's brat. Look, here are some nice snug black silk hosen; just the thing to go with the deep green-and-gold doublet we saw at Terry's."

"Black? Are you joking? If you have to wear hose, at least get some that match. Here, these are a nice cheery goldenrod with emerald pinstripes. Just the compliment to Terry's green and yellow jacket—though I still think the jacket is rather bad."

"We've already been over the doublet, and now that I've found these sable hosen I'm going to buy it for sure. And no, I won't consider the yellowjacket leggings; I'm not trying to look like the court jester, now am I?"

And so it went.

When they reached the back gate of the outer keep, the glare from the setting sun kept them from seeing The

Cage until they were within the shadow of the keep. Then they saw him, his massive back leaning against the strong keep wall, his knees hugged against his chest.

"Good evening, your highness," he said without moving. "Pardon me for not rising to greet you properly, but I have already attracted too much attention from the keep today so I'd best keep still for the nonce. The left guard room should be open and unoccupied; if you'll step inside and select a hauberk and sword, but no shield or helmet, we'll be in business. Oh, and drop the brush, let it walk on its own; that will help us out later, as you will see."

It goes to show both the magical penetration of The Cage's voice and how accustomed Chester had become to being ordered around by weird monsters that his reaction to this statement was simply to drop his brush and let it follow him into the left guard chamber.

As soon as the king was gone, The Cage said to Mr. Graves, "Ok, Mr. Graves, you see that spur of a mountain away east of here? Take this broom," and he tossed him one, "and get as close to the summit as you can before I catch up to you. You'll probably want to catch some dinner on the way, but not until you're well out of the inlands. You'd best go immediately; we'll be cutting it pretty close as it is."

Mr. Graves, who had learned to ride brooms witch-style some years earlier, swung the broom between his legs, but paused before he took off.

"You might be omniscient or something, Cage, but it sure wouldn't hurt to say 'thank you' when someone helps you out."

"When you know you're going to lose the war, why thank someone who helps you win the battle?"

"Because being nice helps people feel good, and that's a war in itself, well worth fighting."

"Thank you for giving me your opinion. An honest opinion is half a soul, and not to be given away lightly. Now fly, or we might not be able to get Cor home."

Mr. Graves flew.

It was two days later* that The Cage and Mr. Graves met up again. Mr. Graves was flying along low to the

*Yes, two days. What happened in between? Well, I'll tell you what I know; my informant told me this story twice, and each time he got to this part of the story he stopped and asked,

"I'll bet you wonder what happened to The Cage and Chester, don't you?"

"Well, yes," I replied the first time, though the second I said "And what happened to Mr. Graves," but it didn't matter what I said; his answer was the same.

"Mr. Graves spent a couple days in transit, and didn't know what The Cage was doing. When The Cage rejoined Mr. Graves two days later, they were almost immediately set upon by bandits...." and he would continue the tale from there. I've got some great ideas of what *might* have happened, but I don't know. Sorry.

ground on his broomstick when he heard the piercing voice of The Cage behind himself and, turning back, absently crashed his broomstick into a tree and fell headlong into the swamp below. Instantly a dozen armed bandits sprang from concealment all around. Several of them pinned Mr. Graves' head down so he could neither breath nor reach them with his tentacles while the others moved to try to slow down the giant.

Mr. Graves heard shouting and heavy thuds, felt magic zipping about, and then woke up to find himself slung over The Cage's shoulder as the giant climbed a cliff face in the dark. The Cage noticed his motions and asked "you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. I must have blacked out during the attack back there." With his position, Mr. Graves could see the swampland at the base of the mountain which seemed many miles away. He must have been out for some time. "What happened?"

"They hit me with so many spells, I could hardly move."

"Why didn't you counter charm?"

"I'm a giant, not a wizard. But it wouldn't have mattered anyway: they were Hank's spells. You either take them or dodge them, there's no countering the effects."

"Hank?"

"Huangu Su really, but the locals call him Hank. An ogre mage and the captor of Amelia Longbottom."

"Oh." Ogre mage? Not good. The Cage was right; these cutters were renowned for crafting irreversible spells. Mr. Graves wondered idly how The Cage decided on such an awkward target. Before he could ask, though, The Cage began giving directions. It seemed to Mr. Graves like all The Cage did lately was fail to answer questions, show up in the nick of time, and give bizarrely prophetic instructions.

"On the next ledge is a cave that runs up through the rest of the mountain into Hank's cellar. It's too small for he or I, but you should fit in it pretty easy. Work your way up to that cellar and kill everything you can find. I mean everything; plants, rats, mice, people, whatever. I'm pretty sure Hank has put bits of his own mind in all of them, and we need to weaken him as much as we can. Mind-blast them if you can instead of eating their minds; you might need to eat a lot later on. If you see Hank or the girl, run away immediately; don't hesitate. Speed is the essence here."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mr. Graves.

"Climb up the rest of the mountain, force the front gate, and knock the ogre on the head with a boulder or two. Then we find a pipod and the princess, send her on her way home minus one lock of hair, and head back to

our camp. Any other questions?"

Mr. Graves was stunned. The cage was not only answering questions, but also offering to answer others? "Are you feeling OK?"

"Do you mean am I tired of climbing?"

"No, I mean you're acting all weird."

"Oh. I guess losing is getting to my mind."

"Losing?"

"I told you, I'm going to lose this one."

"Then why are you fighting?" Mr. Graves asked.

The Cage didn't answer. Instead he set Mr. Graves on a ledge near a small cave entrance, gave a sad smile, and continued climbing without another word.

Sobered by the expression on The Cage's face, Mr. Graves crawled into the tunnel and began wiggling his way up. Soon the passage opened up enough to walk in and he risked a small magical light. As it began to glow he saw a mouse scurry away and, mindful of The Cage's injunction, he gave a little mind blast to kill it. To his surprise, the mouse's mind was huge and hardly budged. Summoning his might he gave a much larger blow and the mind gave easily enough.

As he walked up the corridor he saw other small animals; a rat here, a bat there, even a caterpillar proved to have a nearly man-sized mind. By the time he reached the cellar entrance he figured he had destroyed maybe a dozen times as much mind as most people have. It had all had the same flavor, too, sort of acidic and thick.

Standing in the cellar surrounded by barrels and crates, hanging onions and dried meat, Mr. Graves felt around cautiously to see if he could locate more of the mind. Sensing a few bits nearby he shoved, but felt farther afield to see what he could sense. As he did so he found The Cage's mind not far away, just passing his own on the other side of the rock. That must mean that he was near the gate, and from the feel of things Mr. Graves had hardly begun to weaken Hank's mind.

Suddenly Mr. Graves began to panic. There was a whole city worth of Hank; enough to crush and overwhelm the most strong willed even without the addition of magic. There was no way The Cage could survive!

Mr. Graves sprinted for the staircase, making for the densest bulk of the acrid mind he sensed all around him. As he went he twisted and shoved, destroying any bit of mind that was small enough to grapple. Bursting through the door at the top of the steps he found a gubhorble; too large a mind for a distant blast, he leapt up and wrapped his tentacles around its head, springing away from the lifeless body even before it had time to fall.

On he ran, blasting the small and tackling the large. One door he kicked in revealed the towering hulk of the

ogre mage; without breaking his stride Mr. Graves rushed on down the hall, wrenching and destroying as he could. He could feel the epicenter of the mind housed in that massive body crashing after him, but he knew it was hopeless to attack Hank directly while he was fortified by all the little reservoirs of mind with which it had surrounded itself.

As he sprinted along, laying waste on all sides, Mr. Graves suddenly saw, looming before him, The Cage, a massive boulder in hand. He darted to the side just as The Cage hurled the boulder. Hank reduced it to dust with a spell, but in the dust failed to notice the second boulder The Cage hurled right on the tail of the first. As The Cage leapt forward to finish off the wounded ogre mage, Hank cast a spell on him which caught him full in the chest. Then there was a swift and decisive motion and all of the myriad Hank-minds suddenly winked out of existence.

Mr. Graves ran to The Cage's side. "You did it!" he shouted.

"That was a nasty curse," said The Cage, and his voice sounded weak and plain, no longer the powerful enchanted voice Mr. Graves knew. "Go get Amelia's hair and send her away while I try to absorb it."

"But—"

"I'll be fine for now. Just get the lock of hair."

Mr. Graves reached out with his mind and, sure enough, there was one other mind in the castle, that of a human female.

"Why wasn't Amelia possessed too?" Mr. Graves asked.

"Not now," said The Cage weakly. "Just get the hair."

Seeing that The Cage was not about to answer questions, Mr. Graves began finding his way to the princess. It proved harder than he expected; the castle was massive and in some disrepair; the corridors had caved in in more than one place and few of the stairwells were still navigable. Eventually, however, he found his way to the top of the single tower in the castle and there sat the princess.

From the description Mr. Graves gave later, we must conclude that Amelia Longbottom was a singularly beautiful young woman. Mr. Graves himself, even being an illithid with radically different taste in women, was impressed that she seemed both strong and delicate in a particularly elegant way. He felt quite inferior seeing her, and the idea that he had been instrumental in aiding her brought chills of pleasure to his heart.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice as musical as The Cage's had been powerful.

"We have killed your captor and wish to return you home," replied Mr. Graves.

"What? I—oh, wait a minute. I don't suppose I could

get you to say ‘Dale, moving sluggishly, rose with either hoof whetted. “Back, you jovial pawn!” he chatted’, could I?”

Like father like daughter, Mr. Graves thought. “Dale, moving sluggishly, rose with either hoof whetted. ‘Back, you jovial pawn!’ he chatted.”

The princess looked at Mr. Graves thoughtfully for a while, then said, “Sorry, I’m a little slow on the uptake. Could you say it again, a little slower?”

Mr. Graves said it again, a little slower. Amelia asked once more, and he said it a third time. Then she stated that she thought she had it and would he please talk slowly to help her out.

“Sure. Is this slow enough?” he asked. Amelia nodded. “We just killed the ogre mage and all his lackeys and are here to rescue you,” Mr. Graves said.

“You killed Hank?”

“My friend and I did, yes.”

“You have to be joking. How?”

“Um, well, first I killed a lot of his mind pool to weaken him—just ordinary mind thrusts, you know, nothing too special—and then The Cage hit him with a few boulders and finished him off.”

“I—you—say what? What was that last part again?”

“The Cage hit him with a boulder and finished him off.”

“Do you mean there was a boulder inside a cage or something?”

“No no, The Cage is a giant, a friend of mine. He’s downstairs with the body, we can go see him if you want.”

“Uh, no, that’s alright, thanks anyway. You’re absolutely sure that the ogre mage is dead?”

“Yes yes yes! He’s dead, completely and in every other way kaput! Lifeless, crushed, gone, never to walk Slodoop again, finished, no more, end of story, relegated to history, vanquished, epitaphable, carrion, food for mold and maggots, beginning to stink—”

“Sir,” interrupted Amelia, “you’re babbling.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, you are, and I wish you’d stop.”

“If I am,” said Mr. Graves, and he ever after claimed that in saying it he made the best decision in his life, “it is just because—well, I mean—look, I feel really silly for saying this, but you’re hair—I mean, it’s amazing! I’ve never seen hair so—so—well, so wow! and I guess it just kind of distracted me.”

“My hair?”

“Yes! Oh, it is like a glorious fountain of glistening amber cascading over a pristine mountain fall! Never have I seen anything so—No, but I forget myself! I am here on behalf of your father to rescue you from the ogre mage,

and such thoughts should not be expressed by a mere servant.”

“My father?”

“Yes, your father, Chester Longbottom, rightful heir and recently enthroned king of the best slo and kingdom in all of Slodoop! Hail King Chester! Hail princess Amelia!” and Mr. Graves dropped to one knee, his face toward the ground.

“What are you talking about? Are you insane?”

“No, I mean every word of it! King Chester found the... and...” he trailed off and stared at Amelia’s hair, seemingly transfixed.

“He what?”

“Oh!” said Mr. Graves, starting. “I’m so sorry, but I caught sight of your hair and—I say, I really shouldn’t ask this, but could I, maybe, possibly, I don’t know, have a lock of your hair?”

“A lock of my hair?”

“Oh, yes! I know I can never aspire to anything else, but even to have a single lock.... But it can never be, for your father was only recently crowned and no one other than a true princess, raised with all the generosity and selflessness of a princess, could bear to part with even a single strand of such hair!”

Amelia bristled. “Are you saying I’m not a true princess?”

“No no! I’m just—”

“I’ll show you! Just because my dad came late to his throne doesn’t mean that I’m some sort of cur! Here!” she grabbed a razor from her night stand and cut a lock off her left temple. “Here’s your precious lock of cascading amber! Still think I’m a second-rate princess now, do you?”

“Oh, no! I never said such a thing! Forgive my bumbling ways!” Mr. Graves dropped to grovel at her feet, but not before placing the lock of hair securely in an inner pocket.

“Well, that’s alright. But shouldn’t we be leaving or something?”

“Oh, yes, we must get you home! Come, let’s get you a pipod and send you on your way.”

“I have a pipod of my own, thank you.”

“You do? Here?”

“Yes. Hank let me keep all of my things.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, really.”

“Then do you know how to get home?”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

“No; I need to tend The Cage.”

“Your giant?”

"Yes; he was hurt in the fight. Can you find your way home alone?"

"Sure. It's a straight shot, and the city is easily visible from the window. You're sure Hank is dead and all his wards and spells are gone?"

"Positive."

"Ok, then, I'll see you at home." And, going to a closet, she pulled out a pipod, went out by the window and shot into the void.

Once she was out of sight Mr. Graves hurried back the way he came in search of The Cage. He found him digging away at a cave-in which blocked the main entrance.

"You got the hair?" he asked. His voice was once more powerful and piercing.

"Yes, and I've sent her home."

The Cage kicked away the last of the blockage and started forward. Then turning, he stooped down and said "Climb up and straddle my neck with your legs. We'll be safer that way."

Mr. Graves did as he was told and soon the two of them were slithering and bounding down the mountainside. As they went The Cage repeated over and over again a detailed set of instructions about what to do with the hair. He went over it at least half a dozen times, with side notes about how to deal with mistakes and other contingencies. Finally, Mr. Graves felt he had it down and asked,

"Why do you keep saying *I* need to do this and that? Won't you be there?"

"You recall that final spell that Hank hit me with?"

"What about it?"

"It is going to turn me into a demon before too much longer. That's why I need you to ride so close to my head. The instant you feel me begin to change, latch those tentacles on my head and eat my mind as fast as you can. Don't wait a single second or it will be the death of both of us and the lock of hair will go unused. Do you understand?"

"You want me to kill you? To eat my friend?"

"It won't be me by then; it will be a demonic being of Hank's creation occupying the shell of my body. You must not hesitate or all will be lost!"

That is where the tale ended both times I heard it. There was a moment or two of silence, and then the old man rose and prepared to make his departure. The first time he left without me realizing he was going, but the second time I intercepted him.

"Wait a minute!" I cried. "You can't leave it like that!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, did he do it? Did The Cage turn into a demon? Did Mr. Graves have to kill him?"

"Yes, The Cage died that day."

"And did the lock of hair work? Did Mr. Graves remember the spell? Did he get his friend—I forgot her name—"

"Cor"

"—did he get Cor home?"

"Yes, everything worked out the way The Cage said it would. But never you forget this; he lost. He lost the battle and he lost the war. All his life he knew he was going to lose, and he did—but he fought anyway. That's why he was called The Cage."