

JOSHUA KHAN



# SHADOW MAGIC

"I defy you not  
to love this story."

—RICK RIORDAN

**The secrets of castle gloom**

a 'pick your own adventure' set in the world of Gehenna

## THE SECRETS IN CASTLE GLOOM

by Joshua Khan

Cover art by Ben Hibon, interior art by Joshua Khan

Welcome to Gehenna, land of darkness!

Oh, the tales you've heard are true. There are ghosts and zombies and a few other undead, but that doesn't make it a *bad* place.

I don't know if you've ever read one of these 'pick your own adventures', so a little explanation may be necessary. This is not a straight story, with one plot and only one path. There are a dozen tales to be told, and you can pick them yourself. The story is written as though you are the hero, Thorn. You decide your fate, your actions and whom you meet and what you do.

Start at the Introduction, read it through. At the end of each section there will be some choices. Pick the one that you think best, then go to that *numbered* section (like this, **36**, in the centre) next. DO NOT read the following page as you would in a normal book! This is not to be read sequentially!

Go through the story, making your choices, until you reach THE END.

Now, normally that's where you close the book and put up your Amazon review, isn't it? Not in this case.

You can go through it again, but make different choices from the first time. Did you choose to cross the bridge, instead of swim the river? If so, then swim the river this time and see where you end up!

So, do begin. Enjoy your adventure and I hope you uncover The Secrets of Castle Gloom!

## Introduction

You are Thorn, a twelve year old peasant boy from Herne's Forest.

A few months ago, your dad, Vyne, fled your home to escape the soldiers of your baron. You had poached a deer to feed your family, but Vyne was blamed.

You set off in search of him, but instead were captured by slavers.

And sold...

To Tyburn, the executioner to House Shadow. He brought you here, to serve him for a year and a day. Then he has promised you your freedom. But first you must survive Castle Gloom...

The very name sends a shiver down your spine. Castle Gloom is thousands of years old. It was built by the prince of darkness himself. They say the Great Hall was raised on the backs of four great demons, and it has been home to the Shadow family ever since.

*Be good or the Shadows will have you for dinner.*

That is the threat all parents make to keep their children quiet and in line.

You live in a world of magic, and though the magic nowadays is not as great as it once was, it is all around you.

To the south lies the Sultanate of Fire, where sorcerers weave flames as easily as your mom does her yarn. Then the seas are ruled by the Coral King, whose sailors ride on the backs of sharks and have gills and scales instead of skin. There are the great shining paladins of House Solar, the wind magicians of House Typhoon and the druids of your own home, Herne's Forest.

But now you are a servant of House Shadow, the sorcerers of darkness. Castle Gloom is the windowless citadel, the size of a city and home to more, or less, than mortals.

Bats swarm above you. Hundreds of thousands spill out of the nooks and cracks and vents every night to hunt. Most are small and chase insects in the torchlight, but others are as big as eagles and hunt for meat. The other stable boys whisper that there are greater monsters in the catacombs.

Keep your head down, mind your own business, and look after the horses. That's all you need to do until your year and a day is up. Keep well clear of the Shadows, of the zombies, ghouls and ghosts said to live within the dark dwellings of Gloom, and maybe you'll see your home again and find your dad.

So, you carry sacks of oats from stable to stable. You keep the horses watered, including the fierce Thunder, the black stallion of Tyburn's. You help the blacksmith fix horseshoes and practice archery and sword drill with the boys and collapse into your straw bed each night, sleeping dreamlessly until dawn and the shouts of Old Colm, the weapons' master stir you to a new day of chores and training.

You hoist a saddle onto your shoulder and cross the yard at Dead Man's Gate. The leatherwork needs repair and Baron Sable wants it done for tomorrow morning. The other stable boys have already rushed off

for supper yet you've this one job left to do before you can eat. The bats form a thick, swirling cloud around the towers of the castle as you slog across the mud.

And hear sobbing.

Looking down an alleyway between the stables and storeroom you see a small boy curled up, fists clenched against his face, his body shaking.

You put the saddle down and head over. You reach down to touch him, to ask if he's okay, but your hand passes straight through!

It's a ghost!

Go to 10.

## 10

You back away, startled. Not afraid, exactly, more wary. You knew you'd stumble onto one of the undead sooner or later, but not like this. You expected more chains and moaning.

The ghost sniffs loudly and wipes his nose on his sleeve. Then bursts into a fresh round of tears.

You'd think ghosts have everything sorted, after all, they're dead. It's not like things can get any worse, can they?

"You okay?" Strange thing to ask a ghost, but this is all a bit fresh.

"No, do I look okay to you?" He peers at you through watery eyes. "You're the new boy, aren't you? Leaf?"

"Thorn." Still, at least he tried. Most of people here just shout "Oi, you!". Only nobles seem to have proper names.

So, now you know about ghosts. Not so scary, just rude. You turn to get the saddle and get on with your duties.

"Wait! I'm sorry!" The ghost scurries to his feet and runs up to you. "I need your help."

"Why? You're a ghost," you point out. "You don't need anything."

"That's where you're wrong. I need to stay a ghost. But someone's taken my bones. Without them I'll just fade away, disappear entirely. I can't do that. My brother needs me. I promised when we'd go, we'd go together."

You've been told about two brothers. Had a falling out with their uncle a few hundred years ago on who should be the next ruler or something. Not that you care, particularly, one noble's as bad as the other.

"You're one of the Shade brothers, ain't you?"

He nods. "I'm Gart."

You look around. "So where's the other? Lurking around the maids, as usual?"

The ghost goes even paler than he already is. You think you've just seen a ghost blush.

"Never mind that," he blusters. "I need my bones back in my tomb before sunrise, or that'll be that. I'll be gone with the morning mist."

You frown. You'll get in trouble if the saddle's not fixed but this kid needs your help. "Alright, where were your, er, bones last seen?"

"In my grave, just under the stairs. That's where Uncle Richie buried us after... anyway, that's where he put me but I saw a bunch of squires mucking around there earlier. Squires in white."

Your frown becomes a scowl. Squires in white means trouble.

White is the colour of the Solars, ancient foes of the House Shadow.

You have two choices. If you want to look for clues at the stairs, go to 20. If you want to question the squires, go to 30.

## 11

How do you get yourself into these situations? This is what happens when you help the undead.

Next they'll be asking you to sew up zombies. Or make blood donations to the vampires.

You shiver. You should have grabbed some garlic from the kitchens before getting caught up in all this.

You slip and slide down the tunnel. It's not big, and you scrap your head more often than not. There are other small pipes spilling water into it, foul, smelly, green and brown water. It runs faster now and sloshes around your elbows and fills your boots.

You might need to have your monthly bath a few weeks early.

Then it opens up, and you gasp.

The water runs down the wall of some vast, forgotten catacomb. There are columns, over fifty feet high, supporting a ceiling criss-crossed by thick beams of stone.

Bats fill the air, thousands upon thousands of them. The walls are patched with dull, glowing green moss, tainting the chamber with an eerie light.

Peering over the edge of the tunnel opening, you see the ground about thirty feet below you. The water hits the ground and , runs off into a deep-looking stream. It'll be a slippery climb, but having grown up in the forest, you climb as well as you walk.

Then you hear something that makes your skin crawl.

A vicious, hungry hiss echoes amongst the columns and rocks. You glimpse spindly figures creeping along the ground, their bodies crooked and pale and thin, yet their eyes shine with an unnatural yellow, feverish light.

Gart floats up next to you and settles down, resting his chin on his fists. He grimaces. “Ghouls. Very nasty. Looks like there’s a pack of them using this place as their den. You’ll need to be careful.”

“Or what?” You’ve got a hunch that it’ll be something really bad.

“Oh, they’ll strip the flesh from you, and suck the marrow from out your bones.”

Why do you have to be right all the time?

“They must be scared of something?” you ask.

“The light of the day, like all undead. Fire, of course. They’re terrified of fire.”

You tap the pouch at your waist, and smile at your ghostly companion. “Fire? Now I can do something about that.”

You pull out your flint and tinder. You tear off your sleeve and tie it to a discarded bone lying around (too big to be one of Gart’s), then working away you get a spark catching and within a minute you have a smoking, flickering flame at the end of the bone.

Now you can climb down and try and search for the missing skull, or you can try and scare off the ghouls first. Searching is 19, and fighting the ghouls is 31.

## 12

You walk into the Ebon Hall, where the Solars are staying.

“Look! Another one! Clean this mess up, peasant!”

Before you know it a big squire dressed in white grabs you by the collar and slings you across the floor. You tumble, adding to the laughter, and someone throws a potato at you.

You grit your teeth and stand up—

“Stay on your knees when in the presence of Lord Gabriel.” The squire presses his boot down between your shoulder blades, forcing you into a puddle of spilt soup.

Twisting your neck you manage to catch a glimpse of Gabriel Solar. He is handsome, like the bards say. His hair is pale gold, and bound by a circlet of platinum, and his pearl-decorated clothes are so white they glow.

But your grandpa has a saying. You can wrap it in silk, but a pig is still a pig.

Gabriel turns his sapphire eyes to you, and sneers. “Look, the vile beast is staring at me.”

“What did you do with Gart’s bones?” you snap.

“Whose?”

One of the other squires leans over and whispers to Gabriel. He laughs. “Oh, the bones! Yes, I was told about the two princes in the tower, so we thought we’d check if the story was true, and it was!” He shivers. “Dirty, dusty things, but the skull made a fine football!” He frowns. “What happened to it?”

One of his hench-squires grins. “You kicked it down the well, m’lord.”

Gabriel claps. “SO I did! It was an amazing kick, wasn’t it?” He looks around his cronies. “The best kick you’ve *ever* seen, right?”

They all nod and a few clap. “Amazing. Astounding. Poetry in motion. Sublime skill.” Each squire tries to outdo the other in his praise of the young, stuck-up lord.

You wriggle out from under the boy’s boot and stand. “How could you? Do you know what’ll happen to his ghost if I don’t get all the pieces back?”

Gabriel snorts. “Do I look like I care?”

You shove the squires out of the way, the sound of Gabriel’s mocking laughter rings throughout the hall as you leave.

Go to 40.

## 13

You run, slipping and stumbling as the ghouls howl and scream and chase. You’ve Gart’s skull pressed against your chest which beats with pure fear.

They scurry over the walls like grisly lizards, all full of jagged movements and uneven speed.

Gart’s gone, disappeared away as you dash down one tunnel, not knowing which way you’re fleeing. You don’t have time to think, all you can do is run!

The tunnel walls ring with their terrifying screams, the ghouls close in, you can feel their claws swiping the air behind you. Bones lie scattered beneath you, brittle and old and they crack under your pounding boots. How many years, centuries have these monsters lurked down here, trapping the unwary? And will your bones end up here, chewed and forgotten?

The air around you changes. A breeze hits your face and you hear something roaring ahead of you.

Another horror?

No! You skid to a stop.

The tunnel opens up. Far below you is a river, crossing from open cave mouth and running into another. Across it is an old, rotten wooden bridge.

The ghouls grin, and creep closer...

What are you going to do? Jump into the river (which will carry you off to 28), or try and cross the perilously fragile bridge? In which case head to 34.

## 14

The Shadow girl gasps as you both stumble through the door.

“I didn’t realise...” she whispers, staring about her.

You have entered a long, narrow hall with high walls and cross-beams strung with vast, thick cobwebs. The floor is of chequered black and grey tiles and the walls themselves are sheeted with ebony, but they are also pasted with countless sheets of paper.

You peer at one. You cannot read, so the writing upon them is meaningless, they are just broken black squiggles.

The door slams behind you. The girl twists the handle, it doesn’t budge. She curses. “We need to cross, and do it quickly.”

The pages are not all that litter the hall. There are trinkets on the floor, torn books, broken mirrors. Things abandoned, and forgotten. You see a small earring, decorated with a black pearl. You reach to pick it up...

The girl slaps your hand. “No. Leave it.”

“It may not be much to you, princess, but a jewel like that would buy me a month’s worth of beef.”

“It’s cursed, like everything here. Like we will be if we linger too long.” She peers at you, frowning. “What’s your name again?”

You match her frown. You only told her less than an hour ago. That’s the problem with nobles, they can’t be bothered with the likes of you. Servants are just part of the scenery to them. “So you’ve forgotten already?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not like that. Tell me mine.”

“That’s easy. You’re Lady... Lady...” You scratch your head. “Wait a minute. It’ll come to me. Lady...” Why can’t you remember?

“We’re in the Hall of Forgetfulness.” The girl tears a sheet off the wall and drops in to join the rest. “All this stuff was forgotten, and ended up here. And listen. Shh...”

You thought it was the breeze, but it’s not. You hear voices. Faint, overlapping each other. Some speak languages you don’t recognise, and you only catch the odd word, but no understanding. “Ghosts?” you ask.

“Forgotten promises, wishes. Oaths abandoned, curses too, thrown in anger then just... let slip away.”



You try and concentrate, but it's like trying to think through a fog that seems to be settling between your ears, growing thicker every passing second. "We need to get outta here."

She draws out a key made of bones. "This is the Skeleton Key, it'll open any door, but sometimes it only works for me."

"That's just great. So what am I supposed to do?"

The girl points to a far door. "You need to get to there." She faces the door she came through, then glances back. "Good luck."

"Why?" Who is this girl? You've never seen her before.

She pushes you down the hall. "To the door! Run! Run as fast as you can!"

She taps the door with her key and disappears through it.

You hesitate, gazing around you, bewildered. Why are you here? And why do you have a skull tucked in your tunic?

Why is this hall so full of rubbish?

But your feet have been commanded and you began to quicken your pace, not sure why, but you begin to run...

Head to 25.

## 15

How big is this place? You catch sight of Castle Gloom, maybe a mile away, but you struggle to make your way through the labyrinth of tightly packed gravestones and tombs, some of which are bigger than the barns back home.

The wind whispers through the stone, carrying in its breath pale waves of mist. It's as though the graves are sighing out their spirits. This is not the sort of place you want to be in the dark.

And the dark's not going to last much longer.

It's not like Gehenna ever sees much sun, but the sky's lightening, which here means going from inky black to a miserable grey, with the promise of drizzle.

No wonder they called the place Castle *Gloom*.

Gart's skull weighs you down. Not because it's heavy, it isn't, but because you need to get it back to the Towers of Torment *really* soon.

No more messing about. You hook your toe into the elbow of a demon statue and use it to hoist yourself over a mausoleum. If the inhabitants don't like you climbing over the roof, they'll have to come out and complain in person.

This is more like it. You can see the boundary of the City of Silence. Then you see something move. You gulp.

Some vampire coming back from a late night snack? Or a zombie out on a pre-dawn stroll?

It whinnies.

A horse! A real, live horse!

Nearby lies a man curled up against a grave, having a snooze. A man with one leg. It's Old Colm, the weapons' master. In the distance you see a pack of squires running through the mist and mud. He does that as a punishment to those boys who don't pull their weight.

You could get in real, deep, deep trouble taking Old Colm's horse. But it's turning light...

Decision time. You could 'borrow' Old Colm's horse and gallop off to 36, or you could be a good boy and make a run for Castle Gloom and hope you get there in time? That'll take you to 26.

## 16

Gart falls into step with you. It's weird, walking with a ghost. He ignores walls, furniture, sleeping animals, other people and just floats through them. You bump into a door when you forget this is a talent the living don't have.

"Now what are we going to do?" he moans. Which is kinda normal for a ghost, moaning.

Yeah, what are you going to do?

Right, Gart's bones were thrown down a well, and that water supplies the whole castle. So there must be other ways to the water source, right?

You stop and face your eerie companion. "What's the lowest part of the castle?"

"There are the dungeons," says Gart. "But the deepest parts are the catacombs, and the bat caves."

"How do we get down there?"

Gart doesn't look happy. "The bat caves are off limits, that's Shadow territory. But the catacombs, well, nobody goes down there, owing to the ghouls."

You have a bad feeling about this. "Ghouls?"

"Corpse-eaters. Not the sort of undead you invite over for tea and scones. They're savage, only thought is focused on eating flesh and crunching bones. They operate in packs, which makes them doubly dangerous."

Big sigh.

But what choice do you have? "Show me."



Gart leads you down a spiral staircase, down and down until the air becomes foul and still and the ground slimy and stained by ground-water leaking through the cracks. You grab a torch off the wall and keep it in front of you until Gart puts his fingers to his lips.

Ahead is a large, actually enormous, natural cave. There are massive columns and thick beams used to support the castle above. Bats fill the upper heights, nestling in every space, or flitting between the columns.

Bats don't bother you, even the ones the size you find in Gehenna. What bothers you are the twisted, pale figures creeping amongst the broken tombs and fallen rocks. They move in awkward, jagged actions, some on two feet, others with backs so bent they scurry on all fours. Their nails are long and ragged, and their eyes glow with weird yellow light.

"Ghouls," Gart whispers. Then he points to a far wall. "That's the outlet from the well."

Yes, you can see a hole some thirty feet up, and water pouring out of it, dribbling really, and wriggling its way down the uneven and crooked rock face into a narrow stream. You narrow your eyes, peering into the dimness. You think you can see objects scattered on the ground, things that have been washed down from the well.

Worth investigating, that's for sure. But how?

You could try and use stealth and creep around, keeping low and out of sight of the ghouls. If that's your plan then sneak over to 19. Or you can deal with the ghouls, face to face! If you're feeling that brave then charge over to 31, and good luck!

## 17

You won't let it end like this! The eastern sky is brightening!

"Open up! I need to get in!" You bang the gate, kicking it furiously. Where are the guards? Is everyone still asleep?

Then the bolts at the side door grind open and a man steps out, one garbed in black and a sword hanging comfortably on his hip. Dark eyes rise from under the hood and his mouth opens into a scarred, mirthless smile. "Shouldn't you be working in the stables, boy?"

It's Tyburn, the executioner.

He doesn't look like much; he's old, scarred and average in height and build. You're gaze would pass over him in a crowded tavern. But you've seen thugs quake at the mention of his name and remember, with a smile, how your old slave master paled when he met him.

Then of course there was that fightin Raven's Wood where Tyburn slew seven armed men with just a branch (and only a branch because you'd run off wit his sword. Yeah, you feel a bit bad about that now).

“Speak, boy,” Tyburn suggests. “And tell me why you’re out here.”

Words and gestures spill out and you show him the skull. Tyburn responds with a grimace, not at the empty eyed head, but at the time. “Come with me.”

He leads you through and into the courtyard past Dead Man’s Gate.

The sky’s turning light.

Smells rise out of the kitchen chimneys, all full of fresh hot bread and your stomach rumbles. Two stable boys tend a pair of horses and black armoured warriors, the famous Black-guard with their grinning demon masks, practise their sword drills in the grey pre-dawn.

He’s going too slow! Tyburn’s quick with a blade, but you’ve got to get to the Towers of Torment NOW!

You see a doorway. Surely if you cut through there you’d be quicker?

You break off and run for it.

Tyburn shouts. “Not that way, you fool!” He runs after, but you’re through the door already. “No! It’s too dangerous! You’ll—”

The door slams behind you.

And straight into 18.

## 18

You run down a corridor lit with spluttering, stubby candles. There’s a grander door ahead made of oak and carved with designs and you heave it open. Surely the Towers of Torment must be at the other end of the hall?

It’s a curious place you’ve entered, the walls and covered in old letters, and the floor littered with junk. Broken bits of furniture, or old clothes and odd shoes and even a few pieces of jewellery.

Then a figure stirs out of the dark corner. And old woman in threadbare robes and hair, a dull, dull grey, all tangled and hanging down to her waist.

“Who are you, boy?” she asks. “And who sent you here?”

“Here? Where is here?” There’s a door at the far end.

She frowns. “Here? I’ve forgotten...”

Uh oh.

You look at the earring by your foot. It’s the sort of thing that could easily come loose and be forgotten.

Your heart skips a beat. The local boys warned you there are curses upon the secret places of Castle Gloom, rooms and chambers no one should venture, not because of ghouls and vampires, because the very stones themselves are evil.

One is the Hall of Forgetfulness. The longer you linger, the less you... what?

You look around you. Why are you here? And why are you carrying this skull?

A fog settles, and thickens, within your head. You try and remember what you've been up to. There was a strange boy you spoke to and he wanted you to help him.

He'd lost something...

"Stay here, it's safer," says the old woman. "Outside is just misery and torment. Forget the world and stay."

Torment? The word triggers a pale memory.

Gart! This is Gart's skull and you need to get it to the Towers of Torment before the sun appears!

You run!

And sprint all the way to 25!

## 19

You hide behind one of the columns, crouched, and senses alert. The ghouls have clustered at the far end of the catacomb, over fifty yards away, and are picking at some old meal. You don't want to know what.

Gart creeps up next to you, grinning while you try not to tremble. "It's all a bit exciting, isn't it?"

"No, it's not." What is it with the undead? Maybe two hundred years of haunting the same old halls can get kinda dull.

Keeping low you search amongst the cracks and broken columns. You find rats' bones and old coins. These must have been tossed in the well once upon a time and ended up getting washed down here. You pocket a few of the shinier ones.

You spot something, half-stuck in a crack in the ground. Something skull-shaped...

You pull it out and wave it. "This yours?"

Gart gives you the double thumbs up.

You tuck his skull into your tunic.

Then you hear an evil hiss from nearby...

A ghoul creeps along the ground on all fours, his mouth wide and crowded with jagged fangs. His long nails tap the stone and his eyes glow with an evil hunger.

And there are more behind him.

Time to leave!

You can either try and climb up the wall to the well outlet (which takes you to 29) or run down a tunnel, branching off from the catacombs (leading you to 13).

## 20

Castle Gloom can be dangerous. There's a pack of ghouls living in Woeful Hall, sure it's a shortcut to the west side and Old Keep, but you need to be fast, otherwise they'll be feasting on your bones.

The stable boys also avoid the Corridor of the Ancestors. Some of the statues, well, best not dwell on what they might do.

The two Shade brothers were buried at the bottom of the Towers of Torment. The stairs spiral upwards and the steps are dusty, no-one living ever ventures up there anymore, not since the Shades met their demise. The walls are thick with cobwebs and the air still.

There's a nook at the bottom of the stairs where the uncle hid the two boys after his men had dealt with them. It didn't do him no good, their ghost were out and about the next night, telling everyone about his treachery. He ended up being chained to an anvil and chucked into the moat.

This is Gehenna, after all. The nobles play rough.

Getting onto your hands and knees you wedge yourself into the gap under the first few steps. The space is barely large enough for you but, yeah, there are a bunch of bones and tattered remains of what must have been fine clothing. There's a silver belt buckle and some jewelled rings.

"Well?"

You bang your head as you hear the voice whisper in your ear. It really hurts!

Gart floats down through the stone and crouches down beside you. "See? Two bodies but only one skull, my brother's. Someone's taken it."

You glance over at the ghost. "Don't do that again. Spooking up on me."

He grins. "Did I scare you? I can make a really horrid face, I can pull my eyes out, just watch."

You stop him from stabbing his fingers into his eye sockets. "I believe you."

The two of you shuffle out. You look at the broken panel that once covered the opening. The wood's been splintered, but it was old and warped.

"Someone kicked this in," you say. "It wouldn't take much effort."

"It wouldn't be any of our people, they know we're buried here, and the Gehennish leave the bones well alone."

You scan the ground around you. The Towers of Torment doesn't get any visitors, it doesn't go anywhere, the upper floors fell in decades ago. So, under your feet you've dust, blown in leaves and bits of rubbish. And some white cloth. You carefully pluck it from the broken wood. It's just a few threads: feels like

silk. The sort of material worn by nobles, no-one else is allowed such finery. And white. The Gehennish only wear black. Only one folk here dress in white...

You grew up in Herne's Forest, the oldest, greatest forest in the world. Your dad taught you to hunt the moment you could walk. You know how to draw a bow and you know how to track.

Footprints. Right there.

Good quality boots, by the look. Four or five, some bigger than others. You're big for your age and you put your boot beside one. The footprints smaller.

The prints head off towards the garden.

"So what are you thinking?" asks Gart.

You don't know how to read nor write. You can count up to a hundred. You have no book learning like the townsfolk and those brought up in places like this. The only stories you know are the ones sung by the bards and minstrels that pass through your home during the feast days, but you can read the story left by the footprints and the damage here. And this silk thread you rub between your fingers. But the marks on the ground tell you as much as words on the page.

You point out the prints. "Five squires, give or take, they've come this way. One booted in the panel. His pants' leg must have caught on the wood and torn, hence this bit of white material. They took your head and," you turn towards the foliage. "They went thattaway."

"The Solar squires making trouble," says your ghost friend.

"Looks like it," you reply.

Now what do you want to do? You can either confront the Solar squires, or you can follow the tracks to the garden. Go to 30 to question the squires, or 40 if you want to head to the garden.

## 21

You wander back into Castle Gloom. You don't know the place well and it's not long before you're lost. It's not easy judging directions if you can't see the outside.

"You're new, aren't you?" says a voice from somewhere nearby.

"Show yourself!" you demand. Even as you peer ahead, you can't see anyone. Another ghost, perhaps? And where is Gart? The boy's vanished. Maybe it takes effort staying in the world of the living.

"Up here."

Up where? Along the ceiling are just a row of grotesque carved stone faces.

Then one winks at you.

Once, that might have seemed a bit strange. Now? Not so much.



“Need some help?” asks the ugly face.

You look it over. Cracked, stained and stuck. “From you? Unlikely.”

“Alright. But one of the doors leads to a pack of ghouls, and they like nothing better than young farm boys. Then you’re got the Dungeons of Despair, and the Hall of Horrors near. And you don’t want to go in either, not without a magic sword and a few spells tucked up your sleeve.”

“Hall of Horror? You’re making that up.” Still, this is Gehenna, so you can’t be sure. “What are you anyway?”

“Bob. Bob the Imp.”

“Bob?” you ask. It doesn’t sound very imp-ish.

“What’s wrong with Bob?” He smiles, or at least rearranges his face so its not quite grimacing. “Free me and I’ll help you.”

What do you think? If you decide to free the imp called Bob, go to 32. Otherwise head off to 16.

## 22

You find a stairs that takes you to an upper gallery, overlooking Ebon Hall, where the Solars are staying.

There are a dozen or so white-robed squires. Their tunics sparkle with silver thread and pearls and each has long, blonde hair that shines from a thousand brush strokes per night. They laugh and are clustered around one boy, maybe a year or so older than you, dressed far, far more richly than the rest, and far, far more handsome.

It can only be Gabriel Solar, youngest of the duke’s thirteen children, and the only son.

His clothes are covered in diamonds and studded with pearls. His hair is pale gold and guarded by a platinum circlet. His eyes are a pair of bright sapphires and his face unblemished by a single scar or spot. He’s the sort of noble that inspires bards’ songs and maidens’ dreams.

He sniffs his bowl of soup. “Have you ever smelt something so disgusting? I swear by the Six they’re trying to poison me.” He flips it onto the floor. “I wouldn’t even feed it to a dog.”

The others shout their agreement and soon all the dishes have been tossed on the floor and trampled in.

You grit your teeth. Only nobles would waste food like that. You’ve been hungry, achingly hungry, and have learnt, the hard way, that any meal put in front of you is a blessing, and you never leave anything on the plate.

You have the table manners of a goat, which has been mentioned more than once, but, as your grandpa often said, an empty plate is the best compliment you can give a cook.

Gabriel's a loathsome, stuck-up fool, that's obvious. You watch him order the other squires about, lording it over them and mocking them as it suits him. He thinks he's better than the rest, but they're too scared to answer back. He lobs a cushion across the food-strewn floor.

"Did you bring my football?" he asks.

The squires look anxious. Then one pipes up. "We had a good game already, kicking that old skull around, didn't we?"

Aha, now this seems interesting...

They talk about the story of the two boys and their evil uncle. Apparently it's quite popular even in Lumina, their home country. Gabriel challenged them to go find out if it was true, and the Solar squires dug out the bones from the foot of the stairs in the Towers of Torment. Gabriel played with the skull before kicking it down the nearby well.

Now you know what happened, what are you going to do?

You can head down the well, and that's over at 11. Or you can see if there's another way, and a trip to 21.

## 23

Great, wrought-iron doors unfurl ahead of you. The metal groans and creaks as the panels slide over each other and disappear into the walls.

The man holds his candelabra aloft and you glimpse a huge space beyond. The light catches the edges of strange shapes and furniture. The man proceeds in.

What sort of room is that? You watch him head deeper within, the light from his candle seems a will o' the wisp, a floating spirit that briefly illuminates a small sphere around the man.

You need to find out more.

Gart glares at you as you head down toward the open doorway. "You can't go in there! It's the Shadow Library!"

"Library?" You're disappointed. "So it's just full of books and such?"

"Not any old books! But the diaries of the previous rulers. Their spell-books are down here too, and their treasures."

Now that sounds more like it. "Treasures? What sort of treasures?"

"Never you mind." He crosses his arms. "You can't go any further."

"And you are you going to stop me?" and with that, you walk straight through him and into the Shadow Library.

Wow. Double-wow. The masons put in a lot of effort for a place just to store some old books.

You enter a circle surrounded by gigantic statues, each one over fifty feet in height. You recognise one immediately, a fur-clad figure with huge antlers. That's Herne, one of the legendary Six Princes, and the founders of magic in this world. The druids of the forest all worship him. If he's here...

You count five others. There's one with eagle wings, so he must be the Prince of Air, then there's one with scales and gills and another wreathed in cunningly carved stone flames and so on. Then the last, hooded and mysterious. The sculptors put in extra effort with this one. Within the folds of his cloak, carved out of black marble, lurk skeletons and ghosts and other phantoms.

This must be Prince Shadow, the first necromancer and the founder of this house.

The man you've been following is seated at a table. You creep into a hiding place behind a suit of dusty armour.

Is he a sorcerer, studying one of those wrinkly parchments?

No, he's not looking at a book. He's got something in front of him. Whatever it is, it's broken, spread out in pieces before him.

Why come all the way down here, just to glue something together?

He mutters angrily with himself as he works, at times dropping the pieces, sobbing, other times gathering them up and clutching them against his chest, as if he can't part with them.

Weird.

Gart has joined you. He's scared. "You've stayed long enough. We need to leave. And don't touch anything."

Despite the crowns and bracelets and other treasures just scattered around and home to spiders, you agree. This place gives you the creeps and you've heard enough tales about the Shadows to know stealing from them is a very bad idea indeed. So, ever so quietly, you retreat out of the Shadow Library, leaving this strange man to his work.

Go to 18.

## 24

The path, strewn with spiky brambles and weeds though it is, leads you out of the City of Silence.

Unfortunately you're further away from Castle Gloom than ever and the eastern horizon is turning light.

Three boys are jogging, wearily, up towards you. Each is red-faced and covered in mud and carrying a heavy backpack. The one at the front spots you. "What are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask the same of you."

The trio slow down. One drops to the ground, splayed out, exhausted. The nearest to you wipes the sweat off his face. "Punishment, from Old Colm. We're to do a lap of the city before breakfast."

"What did you do?"

He shrugs. "You know what Old Colm's like."

Yeah, you do. The one-legged weapons' master is a terror. But he's also the best trainer in Gehenna. He's been teaching squires since the gods first lit the sun you reckon.

"Couldn't you just take a short cut?" you suggest.

The tired squire points to a large gravestone. "Can't risk him stopping us."

Then you see a lump in armour resting in the long grass. Old Colm has his chin down on his chest, and he's snoring. His horse pulls at a bush, nibbling lazily.

Now that gives you an idea. You're a long way from the castle and you're running out of time. You could take the horse and ride the last mile. That's option 24. But it might get you in deep trouble. So, you could pull up your breeches and run, hoping your legs will carry you all the way in time. In which case you need to jog over to 26.

## 25

You twist the door handle and stumble out of the hall, your heart pounding so hard you can barely breath. You slam the door closed behind you and wearily head towards...

You were going somewhere?

But where?

And why have you got this skull in your hands?

"Thorn! Thorn! You made it!"

Someone's running towards you, across the cobblestone courtyard. There's a bench in front of him but he runs straight through it!

A ghost!

The ghost, a boy, stops and stares at the skull, then waves eagerly at the tower across the courtyard.

"Quick! It needs to go back!"

"Who are you?" The boy's frantic, and you back away.

"It's me, Gart! Come on!"

He flies over to the doorway leading into the tower. "The sun'll be up in minutes!"



Something's going on, but it's too weird for you to understand. There are vague... memories drifting in the back of your mind, but they disappear the moment you try and grasp them. But this skull seems important to this Gart, and he also seems harmless enough, so you do what he says.

"Now!" he urges. "Back under the stairs!"

"You want me to put this skull there?" Why?

"Just do it!"

You shuffled under the stairs, in amongst some other bones and tattered clothing, and put the skull up in the corner. The ghost is crowded in with you, and when he sighs with relief.

Outside, a cock crows.

Gart grins. "And here comes the sun."

The pair of you come out. You're covered in cobwebs and dust, but somehow you feel satisfied. You've helped this, er, person, and it felt important.

As the sky brightens into a new day, the ghost begins to fade.

"Thank you, Thorn," he says. He holds out his hand. "I'll see you around, and I owe you one."

You falter, never having shaken hands with a spirit before, then reach out. But all you feel is a slight chill as your hand passes through his, and then Gart is gone as the first rays of sunlight enter the small courtyard.

You look around, bewildered. The last thing you remember was being given a saddle to repair.

"You! Boy!"

You spin around to see Baron Sable marching across the courtyard towards you, his armoured boots striking the stones loudly. He's tugging on a pair of riding gloves and he scowls as he faces you. "Where's my horse?"

THE END

## 26

You run. You run like you've got the hounds of the underworld after you.

Dawn is coming and Castle Gloom's a long way away.

The road back, The Merchant Road, is a churned-up muddy quagmire. Old, broken paving slabs only make things worse, and you slip and graze your knees upon one of them that's half-sticking out of the ground. It's not long before you're covered head to toe in cold, sticky mud so each step is a battle. No wonder the squires hate these morning runs.

You see the Needle, just rising above the mist that hangs over the plain. It's the tallest tower in Castle Gloom, and to the right are the ruined Towers of Torment.

You never asked why they were called that. It can't be for any reason good.

At last you cross over the moat to and stumble through the gatehouse, under the portcullis to Dead Mans' Gate.

It's closed!

You bang on the carved wood, bound with heavy iron bands. Stone demons grin at you from above, as if taunting you to fail at this last barrier.

"Open up!" you yell, but your shouts seem to sink into the blanket of mist.

"Open up!"

Is there anyone even there?

You back away. Could you make it around to, say Phantom Gate?

Anxiously you search the sky, willing it to get darker. But there is no stopping the sun, even here in Gehenna.

Maybe there's another way in?

The stones of the gatehouse are rough, cracked and old. You could try climbing over to 38, or you could bellow all the louder and hope someone's awake! That would be 17.

## 27

You follow the sound of the barks and catch up with the black and white puppy as he scratches at a door. He sees you and, wagging his tail wildly, runs around you, shepherding you towards the door.

"What's on the other side, boy?"

Then it swings open and Cook bustles out, dragging a howling servant behind her. "I warned you about that garlic! The whole soup's wasted! If Mary gets a sniff of it she'll never let it rest! That old bag has it in for me! Ever since Lord Shadow's, the Six guard his spirit, ever since his fifteenth birthday!"

You have no idea what Cook is chattering about but you stand aside as she hurls the servant out. She brushes her hands. "And stay out!"

The kitchen smells roll out over you. Oh, the Cook knows her, er, cooking. What's that? Spicy muffins? Then the delicious odour of bread right out of the ovens, the smell of onions frying and chocolate melting in saucepans.

The puppy dashes in, yapping at the heels of one of the junior cooks, begging for a slice of sausage.

Cook's face goes red. "Get Custard out of here! I'll not have that smelly dog in my kitchen! Out, out, out!" She glares at you. "You, new boy! What are you doing down here? Skiving off real work, no doubt!"

You've been told that there are two true rulers of Castle Gloom, and neither of them is Lady Lilith Shadow. Above ground it's Mary, Lady Shadow's old nanny and tyrant of all stable boys and serving girls, whilst below it's Cook, who controls all the food and supplies with an iron cooking glove.

"I... got lost," you reply.

She shoves a tray into your arms. "A likely story. But since you're here you can take that tray of loaves up to the Blackguard at Skeleton Gate."

You look around the kitchen. It's huge, steamy, crowded and there are five stairs going out of it. "Which is...?"

She points to the third stairs. "And fast. They like them warm."

Fast it is!

Now you're racing. Head over to 33 without delay!

## 28

Over and over you spin, in the freezing dark currents underground. The waters roar in your ears, tossing you this way and that, giving you a fraction of a second to gasp for air before being dragged down again.

Your fingers slip over the wet rock, you hit your shoulder and bang your head and swirl with dizziness.

You glimpse a light, a rippling pattern over the surface. You kick your heels and rise up towards it.

Crawling, coughing, bones and muscle exhausted by the beating, you manage to crawl out and collapse on the edge of the river before it disappears further underground.

You lie there, no idea how long, slowly gathering back your breath. You shiver, but at least you're alive.

How much worse could things get?

You touch the skull, still there and still whole, a miracle.

You wobble as you get to your feet, your senses still spinning from your underwater ride.

You're in a cave, what a surprise. Way waaay underground. But you've plenty of company. Bats. They hang from every inch of the sky dome of ceiling above you. The whole cave is made up of dozens of uneven platforms, and there's a narrow ridge running along the perimeter and that's where you see the light, high above you.



Someone's walking along the stony path carrying a lantern. It looks like a girl, all dressed in (another surprise) lots of black. In fact, only black. The only thing that's not is her face, as white as Gart's. But she's no ghost. Where's she going? Could she help you?

Do you want to shout up to her, ending up at 39? Or do you want to follow at a distance, leading you to 35?

## 29

The rocks are slick and climbing up is not helped by the ghouls screaming at your heels. A claw tears your calf and you lose your grip for a second before latching your fingers into a crevasse.

You crawl upwards, but the tunnel open looks a long, long way off.

Teeth sink into the leather of your boot and you ram your heel down. There's a satisfying scream.

You look back, and wish you hadn't.

The ghouls swarm below, snarling and howling for your flesh. They scabble over each other and fights have broken out between them, each wanting the first bite, and that's the only reason you've not already been turned into ghoulish goulash.

But they're too many, and they're better climbers. They're coming in at the edges, their claws perfect for hanging off the cracked, broken rock face.

You look up to the tunnel opening.

You're not going to make it.

You glance down. The water spilling out of the tunnel opening has to run off somewhere, right? You see a wide, jagged crack in the ground, and churning water through it.

It's a wild, desperate chance. It could be only inches deep and you could smash your head as you go down. But it's better than being eaten alive by ghouls.

You push off the rock, twisting in the air as you fall. The ghouls leap after you, but are too slow, your dive took them by surprise.

You hit the black water...

Go to 28 right now!

## 30

Once, when you were younger, a bard came visiting Stour. He was old, white bearded and keen-eyed. His voice was deep, musical and even his whispers carried across the village square. He came during Mid-

Summer's, the biggest feast day in Herne's Forest, and he drank and ate freely. Then at dusk he took out a harp, and he told you a story...

Of the Six Princes, the first, the greatest, sorcerers the world had ever known. Everyone cheered whenever he mentioned Herne, the sorcerer who commanded the earth and the beasts and was crowned by huge antlers.

But you knew all the stories of Herne. What captivated you, and everyone else, was the Tale of the Twins.

Prince Solar and Prince Shadow were born together. Twin brothers, the last of the six princes. Solar was fair, his hair the colour of platinum, his eyes brighter than the rarest sapphires and skin the hue of pure gold. He was born laughing, they say.

Shadow was dark, dark-eyed and raven-haired. Sunlight hurt him so he dwelt in the dark places, so his skin turned sallow and his demeanour melancholic. Smiles were unknown to him.

Yet the brothers were loyal and dedicated to each other.

The stories differ. They say they were playing, fighting, as brothers do. Then Prince Shadow struck his brother, cutting his cheek with the edge of a nail or perhaps a play sword. A scar so small that no-one noticed it.

But Solar did. Each time he saw his reflection in a mirror, his scar, to him, made him hideous. He blamed his brother, saying it had been done on purpose, because he was jealous.

And over that scar, began the great hatred between Solar and Shadow.

That was thousands upon thousands of years ago. But even the village imbecile knows that Light and Dark are at war, forever and always.

Yet here are white steeds in the stables. There are maids, dressed in pale colours, and the paladins, knights in silver and gold armour with ivory plumes rising from their helmets.

Gehenna and Lumina have been at war, and Gehenna lost. All you know is the only hope Gehenna now has is to marry its ruler, Lady Lilith Shadow, to the heir apparent of Lumina, Gabriel Solar.

Why hadn't you been bought by Solar? You'd loved to have worked at the Prism Palace. The bard also told you of the great adventures of Lord Michael Solar, the Golden Knight, and how he defeated the evil Lazarus Shadow for the heart of a fair princess. And the Solar princesses are said to be the most beautiful women in the world. The paladins are each mighty heroes, handsome as a maid's dream and tall and everything a knight should be. Here you are, working in the stables of the dark masters of death, when you could be serving a real hero.

Maybe if you make a good impression here, one of the paladins might hire you?

Yeah, that would be great!

You turn the corner and

THWAK!

A servant crashes into you. Plates and mugs go flying.

And he's covered in soup (peas and carrots judging by what's stuck in his hair).

You help him up. "What's going on?"

"They're vile! All of them! That that Gabriel's the worst!" the servant cries. "I was bringing him a light meal and he tipped it on my head, said he didn't like it!"

You gather the fallen dishes. Cook does overdo it with the salt, but that's not the servant's fault. Maybe this Gabriel is just tired, the Solars have come a long way...

But you hear the laughter from the other side of the door. Loud, merciless and mocking.

Have you made a mistake about the Solars? Perhaps they're not such good guys after all...

You still need information from them, but do you want to go barge in (which'll be 12) or do you want to try and be more sneaky (which will be 22).

## 31

You creep through the broken tombs and columns that fill the catacombs, torch aloft and eyes and ears keenly sharp. Your heart thumps against your ribs and, despite the cold, you sweat.

A claw scrapes upon the stone and a hungry snarl ripples through the dank air. A creature scurries between the rocks, too quick to catch but you grab a glimpse of a thin, twisted body with long fingers and fangs.

Gart's right beside you. He looks scared. "Why should a ghost be scared?"

He shrugs. "Old habits."

Then you are face to face with one of the dwellers of the catacombs.

It creeps around a column, hugging the ancient stone, keeping a wary distance from you.

There is no meat on the bones, it is a skeleton still robed in skin, with wiry muscles working under the sickly pallid skin, criss-crossed by ugly blue veins. Its skull is marked with scars and patches of dirt, but dominated by its unnatural bright yellow eyes. The teeth are crooked, and sharp and its tongue long and blood red and it flicks out, as though tasting the air. The fingers end with long, broken fingernails that are as thick as wolf claws, and you glimpse old blood encrusted upon them.

"Be careful..." warns Gart.

"Tell me something I don't know," and you wave the flaming torch in front of you, driving the ghoul, spitting hate, backwards.

But as Grandpa warned, it's not the bear in front, it's the wolf behind...

You spin around and shove the flames into the face of a second ghoul, just as its about to sink its ragged claws into you.

Its hellish scream pierces your ears, so high-pitched you feel as if your head's going to burst. Then, smoke flooding its head, it flees, beating the flames that are crawling over it.

You turn and spin, shoving the fire at everything that moves. They come at you from all sides, and above! Claws rake your clothes and they spit and snarl, dashing forward to grab, then leaping away before the flames bite.

"Come on!" you roar, filled with desperate fury. You knock one ghoul off its feet in a burst of flames and howls.

But more spill out from their hiding places amongst the rocks, tempted by your warm blood. Everywhere you look their malevolent eyes shimmer out of the dark...

"There!" yells Gart. "My skull!"

You stab the burning torch at a ghoul blocking your way and run to Gart.

Yes! A skull lies half-wedged into a crack in the ground. You scoop it up and shove it in your tunic.

Time to get out!

So, what do you want to do? Try and climb out, or take one of the other tunnels leading out of here? the climb is 29, the other tunnel takes you to 13.

## 32

"How do I free you?" you ask the imp called Bob.

"Just break me out of this wall," he says. "Then I'll help you."

This may not be one of the best ideas you've ever had, but you ain't got many other options and there's something about being held a slave that sticks in your throat. You climb up beside the grotesque face and grab hold of a horn, and pull.

"Ow!" cries Bob.

"Do you want to be free or not?"

Bob scowls. "Just be careful. That really hurt."

So you grab hold of his nose and pull.

"Nnnuuh..." Bob's eyes water, but a crack appears between his head and the wall. He's coming free. One more big pull and

CRASH!

Bob comes clean off and smashes on the floor. Dust explodes everywhere and sparks crackle, flashing blue in the dimness.

And now there stands a creature, half your height, with grey-ish veined skin and small bat wings, clearly too feeble to lift him, and a bulbous belly.

Bob stretches out, groaning as he twists his body. “Ah, now that’s better!” He picks a spider out of his ear. “Right, let’s go.” He skitters off.

By the Six, Bob does not shut up. He jabbers about his life, the Shadows he’s served, that birthday party he was meant to handle and resulted in him being turned to stone and stuck up there for years and years. “My party piece was zombie juggling. I had a troupe of them and trained them to flip limbs and heads and it was pretty famous. Juggling without a head is a lot trickier than you’d imagine.”

“I’d imagine it’s pretty tricky,” you reply.

Bob shrugs. “Anyway, I wasn’t keeping count and it was only half-way through realised there were more... er... bits flying about than there should have been. Turns out the zombies had got a bit carried away with one of the guests...”

“Oh. Anyone important?”

The imp blushes. “Look, we’re here.” He edges along a corridor, then turns and puts his finger to his lips. “Look.”

The corridor breaks into a vast cavern, half-natural, half-carved. Huge columns rise up to support a vaulted roof space filled with bats.

Bob points to the far end. “See that hole, about thirty feet up? That’s the outlet from the well. Anything chucked down there will eventually roll down into this cave. Can you see the bones at its base?”

You nod. Could one of them be what you’re looking for?

It seems too easy...

“Oh-uh...” Bob backs into cover, you do the same.

Crooked, evil-looking creatures scurry past. Their eyes glow with a fierce, evil yellow light. They have long, claw-like nails and a mouth full of jagged fangs.

“Ghouls,” whispers Bob. “You don’t want to be caught by them.”

“That would be bad, right?”

He mimics eating meat off a bone. “They like the taste of stable boy most of all.”

You sigh. This isn’t going the way you hoped.

Bob slaps you on the back. “Good luck.”

“Ain’t you going to help? I just freed you!”



Bob steps back, surprised. “Help? Against those ghouls? Sounds like suicide to me. No, I’m off, bye!” And with a skip and a jump he disappears back down the corridor, singing what sounds like ‘The Old Duke’s Longsword’.

So, that’s it then. No help from Bob (but really, what did you expect?). If you want to deal with the ghouls, go to 31. If you want to try something more sneaky, head over to 19.

## 33

Gart leaps out through a wall. “Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over!”

You’re in a courtyard (no idea which) and you grab the collar of another stable boy and shove the tray of loaves into his empty hands. “Take these over to Skeleton Gate.”

The boy frowns. “Oh, and who died and made you Lord Shadow? I don’t take orders from the new boy!”

You grit your teeth. It’s been a long day and a frustrating one. You fight the urge to take it out on this... brat.

Gart intervenes. “Do it or I’ll haunt your dorm room for the next six months. Make your hair turn white I will, and have all your teeth fall out.”

The boy pales, but takes the loaves and runs off.

“I thought stealing people’s teeth was the tooth fairy’s job,” you say.

Gart shrugs. “Look, the sun’s almost up and I need my skull back at the Tower of Torment right now.”

“Which way?”

He points to a crooked ruin in the distance. “There’s a shortcut, but it’s dangerous...”

“Great. Why am I not surprised? At all?”

Gart approaches a doorway. “This leads into the Hall of Forgetfulness. If you’re quick across it, you should be okay. But if you’re slow, you’re in trouble, and so am I.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“You’ll forget. Why you’re there. What you’re meant to do. Even who you are.”

“It just gets worse and worse, doesn’t it?”

But you and Gart know there’s no choice. You need to get to the tower and time’s almost run out. You turn the handle and go in...

Jump to 18!

## 34

You work your way along the fragile, wobbly bridge. The rotten planks creak underfoot and the whole thing sways as you reach the middle but, lightly and quickly, you get across.

You look back as the monsters gather, ready to follow. But in their haste, and in their hunger, they pile onto the bridge and...

It collapses!

They howl as they tumble, crashing into each other and the sides of the crevasse and then hitting the water. They claw hopelessly as they are swept away.

Phew.

Gart's gone. Maybe his ghost fled or maybe he can't travel this far down. You take the skull from within your tunic and have a look.

This is a lot of trouble for a guy dead two hundred years. But then, what his uncle did wasn't nice.

*Alas, poor Gart.*

You return the skull to nestle against your chest and look around. This bridge has to lead somewhere, right? There are steps leading up, crudely cut into the natural rock. It's the only way out.

Eventually the steps lead to a doorway, and through that you enter a corridor. This is more like it. Candles bring some light, illuminating small irregular patches with a soft amber glow. You think you are alone, then see something dash around the corner. It slips over its own ears on the tiled floor, then springs up, barks, and scampers over to you.

A small black and white puppy stands before you, wagging its tail. Crouching down, you tickle its chin. "Do you know the way out of here, boy?"

Then someone else comes around the corner, muttering to himself. He wears a hood and glances around, as if making sure he's not being watched. His hand constantly checks a bag dangling from his shoulder.

Instinct warns you not to be seen by this guy. You puff out the nearest candle and take a step back into the shadows, warning the puppy to stay quiet. The small dog understands.

The man rushes past. He's angry, and confused, almost arguing with himself. Yet his clothes are richly made, and you catch the shine of rich gold and silver on his fingers and belt buckle.

Where's he going?

Once he's passed by, the puppy springs back into action. He's dashing back and forth, wanting you to follow him.



Hmm, there's an intriguing mystery here. You could follow the man, and find out what he's up to. That's 23. Or you could head the opposite way down the corridor, the way he came, and that'll lead you to 18. But the third choice is to trust the puppy, maybe he knows the way out? That's number 37.

## 35

You're starting to think this wasn't such a great idea.

The girl you're following is clearly just as lost as you, if not more lost. You want a way out, she seems to be wandering aimlessly, stopping only to feed the bats.

How far have you gone? No idea. What time is it? No idea. The sun could be bright in the sky by now expect for one thing. This is Gehenna and the sun never gets bright. These people are pale for a reason. How long will it be before your colour wears off?

She stops. You creep closer as she takes something out of her pocket. A key? She taps the wall. Dust shakes off its frame and a cluster of sleeping bats jerk awake and flutter around her before fleeing out of the slowly widening doorway. A cold, night breeze blows in.

A way out!

You give her a minute to get ahead, then the door begins to close. You run for it and scrape through just in time.

You're out, but out where?

It's still dark, that's good, but you're not in Castle Gloom anymore, and that's not so good.

There is no sight of the girl.

You've come out of the door of a large, black granite mausoleum. A pair of spirits stand over the door, their stone faces hidden under the folds of their hoods.

To the left is a huge sarcophagus, two stories high. Then to one side is a row of tombs, to the other path lined with headstones.

Castle Gloom is far away, a mile or so at least to the north. Between you and it is a vast graveyard.

This is the City of Silence.

The good, the bad and the plain evil of Gehenna are buried here. They've been buried here since the earliest days and that goes back to the beginning of the world, if the minstrels are to be believed (and they're not, but there are a lot of tombs here so maybe they have a point, this time).

Black rose bushes run riot over the countless tombs. There are statues of hellish guardians, and armies of skeletons and other creatures of darkness. One massive sarcophagus is held aloft on the back of a massive demon lord, held by iron chains. His face is locked in eternal rage and you begin to believe the ancient rulers

of House Shadow bound demons to their service. Was this one of them? Turned to stone to bear the weight of his master for all eternity? No wonder he looks so... upset.

You shiver, and it's not because of the cold.

The people of Gehenna are strange.

Right, you want to leave. Either search out a path (weaving you in the direction of 24), or see if you can find a shortcut of your own back to Castle Gloom (and head off to 15).

## 36

You approach the horse. It looks up and you and recognises you with a friendly sniff. It's Jog-a-Long, the warhorse for Old Colm. Coal black, like all the horses of the Blackguard, Jog-a-Long doesn't have a fierce hoof on any leg and hasn't galloped in a decade. The saddle's been adjusted, instead a stirrup on one side there's a leather sleeve for Old Colm's peg leg.

You brush his mane from his eyes and hop up onto the saddle.

Jog-a-Long looks undecided between you and the tasty tuff of grass at his forelegs. You lean down and whisper. "You get me to the gates and it'll be fresh oats and apples for a week."

That persuades him and he circles around.

Okay, riding is for nobles. Sure, you've ridden before, but that was the plough horse back in Stour and you went the length of the field.

How hard can it be? It's just a case of not falling off, right?

Urging Jog-a-Long along, you manage to get up some speed (it is downhill to start with) but then as you hit the flat the horse slows down and nothing will get him to do more than trot. You bounce on the saddle, watching the castle slowly come into view through the pre-dawn mist. And while on the subject of dawn, the sky's lightening, you haven't got long!

Someone at Dead Man's Gate spots you and the doors open. A couple of guards stare at you, bewildered that you're on Old Colm's horse. One helps you with the reins. "You're gonna catch hell for this," he says.

You'll deal with that later. "I need to get to the Towers of Torment. What's the quickest way?"

The guard shrugs. "There isn't one. Not a safe one. You need to go along Bone Alley, then turn right at..."

"I ain't got time!" You shout, grabbing him by the collar. "I need a shortcut!" One eye on the sky you glimpse the first rays of the pale Gehennish sun cutting through the clouds. "Which way?"

“There’s the Hall of Forgetfulness,” the guard replies, startled by your desperation. “But no one goes that way!”

“Just show me!”

He points to an arch and you drop him and run.

He yells after you. “Whatever you do, don’t linger in the hall! Every minute there and you’ll forget! You’ll forget it all!”

The dawn’s not far behind. Head straight to 18!

## 37

You dig out a strip of dried meat and offer it to the puppy. The greedy animal almost snaps your fingers off with eagerness. He finishes it with two gulps then sniffs around you for second helpings.

“No, now you need to get me out of here. Then you can have more,” you tell him. “And I’m in a rush, got it?”

He barks. He’s got in.

“Go on then.”

He dashes off and you follow.

But he gets further and further ahead until, after turning this corner and that and then another one, you lose sight of him, and hear only his barks echoing, you think, from the left junction. But did he go right?

Aargh, decision time! You can follow the echoes to 27, or take your best guess to the right, and head into 18.

## 38

You are finally inside Castle Gloom, limbs trembling with exhaustion, but with your job not quite finished.

The sun’s struggling to clear the horizon, it won’t be long before dawn finally arrives.

Gart appears literally out of no-where. He’s frantic. “Where have you been?”

For a second you want to stand there and explain, in detail, all that’s happened to you since you spoke to him, sobbing in the alley all those hours ago. But you can’t spare the breath. “Show me the way to the Tower and let’s get this over and done with.”

He furrows his brow. “You won’t make it, not unless you take a short cut. It’s just...”

You groan. You’ve got a bad feeling about this. “What?”

He points to a corridor. "You can cut through the whole east wing if you take that way. But you must go through the Hall of Forgetfulness."

"And that's bad, right?"

He winces, and nods. "Don't stop. Get through it as quickly as you can. If you delay, you'll forget."

"Forget what?"

He shrugs. "Everything."

You've got your breath back and you straighten. "Nothing here is easy, is it?"

He grins. "You don't become a hero by taking the easy way."

"Hero?" You scowl. "My grandpa has a saying about heroes. The world don't need more fools with swords. Let them princesses save themselves for once."

Gart frowns. "That doesn't make much sense, at all." But before you can explain he begins waving at the archway. "Go! Go and hurry!"

Best listen to Gart. Dash off to 18!

## 39

"Wait up! You shout, jumping across the broken floor towards the girl.

She spins around, almost dropping her lantern in shock. "Who are you? And you're not allowed down here!"

"As if I came down here on purpose."

She's rich, that's for sure. She dresses in shimmering black silk and has enough jewellery on her to buy pretty much everything ever.

Yet she's creeping around here, in the underground.

The Gehennish are strange folk, but everyone knows that already.

"Who are you?" she demands. Definitely a noble, you can tell by the way she sticks out her chin. You dislike her already. But you need her.

"I work in the stables. How about you? One of the maids?" you ask.

"Don't you know who I am?"

"Obviously not. Obviously."

She straightens up and you get a good look at her. Large, grey eyes dominate a pale, oval face framed by the blackest hair you've ever seen, and the shiniest. It hangs down to her waist and is beaded with black pearls. The only colour is her red lips.

You catch your breath. “You’re not a vampire are you?” You really should have grabbed some garlic the last time you were in the kitchens.

“Don’t be foolish. I’m Lady Lilith Shadow.”

“Oh?”

“I rule Gehenna,” she adds.

“Great. So you must know the way back out. I need to get to the Towers of Torment real quick.”

“Why?”

Now, normally you’d just scoff and tell her what’s what, you’ve got something to do and no time to waste explaining it to the likes of her. But she’s got a look that says ‘trouble’ with a capital, er, capital letter of some sort. So you explain, quickly, touching on Gart, the skull and the deadline of dawn.

She grabs your wrist and starts dragging you along. “We’ve no time to waste,” she declares. “It’ll be dawn soon and the towers, and Gart’s burial place, is on the far side of the castle.”

“They what are we going to do?”

She stops by a blank section of wall. “Take a short cut.”

She takes a key out of her pocket, one made of bones (yeah, that’s the Gehennish being real strange again) and taps the wall.

The wall breaks into two.

She looks at you. “Well, go on then. Push the door open.”

You could argue, tell her she’s got two perfectly good arms and could push herself, but what’s the point? You heave and enter a narrow staircase. Lady Shadow steps past and leads. “Come on then.”

You bite your tongue before you say something that might get you tried for treason.

It doesn’t take long before you’re in a proper corridor, one with straight walls and tiled floor and lit by oil lamps.”

You jump as you hear a sudden bark and then relax as you see a small black and white puppy charge towards you. It leaps into the girl’s arms and licks her face.

“Custard! You naughty dog! I told you to wait in Devil’s Den!” but she lets him carry on licking her face.

You take the dog off her. “This is all well and nice, but the Towers of Torment?”

The girl frowns, looking up and down the corridor, at a door. “I think it’s that way.”

The dog springs free and starts barking excitedly.

Sigh. “You think? I thought you knew this place.”

“I do! It’s just... Castle Gloom’s really big. And this is the east wing. I don’t come down here often. No one does.”

“And why’s that?”

She shrugs. Then smiles. “Yes, I’m sure it’s that way. Probably.”

But the dog, Custard, has other ideas. He pulls at your trouser leg, wanting you to follow in the other direction.

So, who do you want to trust? If you think Lady Shadow knows the way, follow her into 14. But if you think the dog’s got a better idea, the go with him into 37.

## 40

The Night Garden lies in the heart of Castle Gloom, hidden between the Great Hall, The Towers of Torment and the Needle. The roses are black and bloom only in the moonlight and the bushes have long thorns and seem ready to drink your blood. A statue guards the gravel path, a tall, gaunt figure wreathed in marble bats.

Pale luminescent fish swim in the pond and the fruits trees hold the richest, darkest plums you’ve ever seen. You double-check no-one’s around and shove one in your mouth.

Oh yeah. Now that’s how plums should taste.

You follow the tracks to a well.

Ivy clings to the old frame and the stone is encrusted with moss and weeds. Peering down you see a puddle of water, just a few inches deep, and... bones?

Gart cried out. “That’s my elbow!”

“You sure?”

“I know my own elbow, Thorn!” He bites his lip. “They threw me down there!”

Big sigh. “And I suppose you want me to go down there and collect your bits?”

The temperature around him drops. So that’s what happens when ghosts get upset.

You test the vines, they look strong enough to hold, and you clamber over, and down.

The pit’s muddy, and stinks. You dig around and retrieve the elbow, a thigh bone and a shoulder blade.

“Where’s my skull?” shouts Gart.

You search again. “No skull down here.”

“But there has to be! I need all of me reburied. Without it I’m gone, Thorn.” He’s desperate. “Please, you need to find it!”

Then you see something.

There’s a tunnel, more like a sewer, sloping downwards. Water trickles off to somewhere.

Did the skull roll down into the depths of the castle?

You have two choices, to go down the tunnel (in which case head to 11) or to climb up and try something else (which will be 21).

## AFTERWARD FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Hello! I trust all's well and thank you for grabbing a copy of THE SECRETS OF CASTLE GLOOM, I hope you've had a great time exploring. You are now officially members of House Shadow.

As you may (or may not) know, this 'pick your own adventure' is based on SHADOW MAGIC, my epic (even if I do say so myself) fantasy novel brought to you by the excellent people at Disney-Hyperion. You may well have spied it at your local bookstore and wondered if you should buy it for yourself, or someone special.

I know, there are *so* many choices. I'm too modest to talk about my own book, but a nice chap called Rick Riordan (Yes! The real one! Amazing, right?) had this to say about SHADOW MAGIC.

*"If you are pining for that thrill you felt when you first discovered Harry Potter, let me recommend SHADOW MAGIC. Here is a fantasy world you will lose yourself in--with Six Great Families of magic, the nicest princess of darkness you've ever met, a peasant boy with skills to rival Robin Hood, and a supporting cast of zombies, paladins, ghost puppies, executioners, minstrels, murderers, and a giant hero bat. I defy you not to love this story."*

I'll be honest, I blush each time I read that.

So if SECRETS has whetted your appetite to explore more of Castle Gloom and Gehenna, then grab yourself a copy, and feel free to visit my website or tweet me, or drop a comment on the [Shadow Magic Facebook](#) page. All those details below.

If you enjoyed this (and perhaps the novel too) do spread the word, a review here and there is always appreciated! If you didn't, well, just pretend we never met.

Something different for the next newsletter, which should be out end of July. Just sign up at my website for all the news and goodies!

Till then, best regards and sweet dreams,

Josh

[www.joshuakhan.com](http://www.joshuakhan.com)

@writerjoshkhan

<http://www.facebook.com/ShadowMagicSaga>