

## **Replacing the Pain King**

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Edrin took the scroll from his side and began to read it aloud

The ancient words bounced off the hallway walls, only to be drowned out by the horde of teeth and steel behind him. He turned a corner, briefly losing his footing but quickly regained his balance.

The goblin horde behind him pushed and struggled down the narrow passageway. They could have caught him if they weren't swarming like ants.

Edrin also could have easily confronted them, killed every last goblin, but he wanted witnesses for his final confrontation with the Pain King.

Finally, as the door to the final chamber was in sight, Edrin spun himself backwards. He concentrated as he finished the spell. A pale blue wall appeared inches from his nose, expanding and cutting into the hallway like a thin blade.

The train of goblins rounded the same corner but could not stop and they smashed against the blue field. The leaders of the swarm crushed under the weight of their comrades and popping like evil green pimples.

Edrin laughed.

The field would last about fifteen minutes, plenty of time to foil the Pain King's evil plans. Then, the goblins would come into the chamber, see him victorious, and run in terror, spreading the word of Edrin the hero... or Edrin the Great. Or Edrin the Awesome. Or maybe Edrin, Pain Eater! He liked the sound of that one. He'd have to make sure to shout that name at the goblins as they flee in fear.

He turned, facing the door that lead to his final victory. His brow furrowed as he studied the door; it was not nearly as ornate as he had imagined. The door was fine, well made with sturdy iron and locks but it lacked any pizzazz. No demonic face on the entrance, no eyes worked into the wood, not even a plate telling people what was here. It was covered in dozens of magical traps though.

Edrin searched through his bag, musing. "Ring of Electrofire, Hilt of Deathzone, Scroll of Zulus' Curse, ah!" He pulled out a small metal rod "Alexander Supertrap!" he said, the magical words bringing the metal to life.

The rod floated up, thinned, elongated, and began slowly penetrating into the wood of the door. Each magical trap laced into the wood giving off a soft pop as it was rendered inert. Dismantling the carefully laid defenses would take a minute, and since the goblins were still held at bay, Edrin had some time to think and prepare himself.

He quickly inventoried his gear. He was wearing the Armor of Krin. He had the glasses of Elven Acuity. Sox's Cape of Erasure draped across his back. The twin axes of Law and Mercy floated next to his head, ready to strike at his command. He had the Spiked Shoulderpads of Bleeding. He had the Matching Socks of Shocking. The Gauntlets of Titanous Power. He had two Bags of Deepness that held dozens of artifacts from around the world. He had the Backbrace of Sturdyness. He had the Swords of Thlum, Seth, Gebralter, and Ronald. He quaffed a Potion of Magical Resistance, followed by a Potion of Swol Body, and then a Swig of Holy Water. Patting around himself, he made sure that everything was in its place before it finally struck him. He had forgotten something. In all his planning and preparation, he had forgotten a bold one-liner. If the story of this battle got around and he screwed up the one-liner, then he would never be able to live it down. The Alexander Supertrap only had a few seconds left before it would finish. His mind raced, created, discarded, considered, and finally settled. It would have to do. The metal pin popped, and the last trap deactivated.

He kicked in the door, splitting large chunks onto the floor. He stepped in rapidly, holding aloft twin swords, searching for a target. The door slammed against the back wall, bounced back, and shut behind him as he quickly entered the room. He shouted the best line his brain gave him. "Your reign of pain end here, Pain King!"

He scanned the circular space, looking in every direction for the expected attack. There was a small stone throne in the back of the room, a well-worn cushion resting in the center. About the walls were hundreds of tomes, some of them oozing sticky black icor. In the center of the room was a large cauldron. It bubbled a bright green liquid that released a dense rising fog. Inside the swirling fog, which covered the ceiling, faint outlines of tortured spirits could be seen.

A few feet in front of Edrin, almost exactly in between himself and the Cauldron, was the Pain King, lying face first on the ground.

Edrin laughed, thinking he must have caught the fiend by surprise. He shouted "Get up, you treacherous masked sorcerer. Face me and die!"

The Pain King did not respond, he continued to lay motionless on the dirt floor. His black robe draped over a thin frame. His fearsome demon mask was pressed against the floor, making it jut out at a strange angle and revealing a bit of cheek. One arm was underneath him, the other stretched out and away from the body. The arm ended in a bony hand, complete with sharpened black nails.

Edrin, thinking this might be some trick, quickly braced himself for a side attack. He spun, checking his surroundings and stopped, facing the still Pain King.

"Enough of your tricks! Rise and fight!" There was no response. Edrin stood for a long time, longer than he thought he should have, then relaxed.

He approached the body, retrieved his trusty Stick of Poking and prodded at the Pain King. When he didn't move, Edrin poked him harder and said, "Pain King?"

There was still no response.

Edrin considered the possibilities. He had expected a climactic fight, traps and evil magics. Was this a trick? It could be, but to what end? Edrin could stop the ritual right here if he wanted. Did the Pain King want that? Was the Pain King narcoleptic? Edrin needed more information.

He pushed the Pain King with his foot, rolling the body over onto its back and there was a soft squish. Edrin bent down and was immediately assaulted by a terrible odor. The Pain King had soiled himself.

Edrin jumped back up, away from the stench, and retrieved his Nose Plugs of Lemon Freshness. Planting them firmly in his nostrils, he bent back down, removed a Glove of Slicing from his hand, and checked for a pulse. There was none.

The Pain King was dead.

"Crap!" Edrin exclaimed to the room. "Crap, crap, crap!" He repeated to his own echoes. "This... this isn't what's supposed to happen!" He looked down at the body. "We were supposed to fight! I was supposed to be a legend! The Pain Eater!" He stopped abruptly and searched his pack for the Glasses of Apothecary. Placing them

in front of his helmet visor, he scanned the corpse, and it gave him a diagnosis: heart attack, several hours ago.

"Crap!" Edrin once again belted. "Maybe..." He paused and mused "If I bring him back he's just gonna try and kill me. Plus, he's covered in... What if he beats me? Then I'll be Edrin, the Lame Guy Who Was Beaten by a Poo Covered Wizard!" Edrin began pacing, before something in the Pain King's robes caught his eyes. Two scrolls peeked out from underneath his robes.

Edrin grabbed them.

The first contained the instructions for the ritual the Pain King was about to complete. It seemed he was almost done, it was only missing one final component, "The Wet Nose of Innocence." Edrin had learned that most arcane things were nonsense, so he didn't bother figuring out the riddle. According to the scroll, the ritual would have given the conductor the ability to manipulate the pain around them into physical manifestations. Swords, entities, anything really. Edrin sighed, relieved that at least he wouldn't have to deal with that.

He set the first scroll down and unrolled the second. It read:

*"Red Berry*

*In all the sad lands, is there none more terrible than the strawberry?*

*It carries it young on itself, to shield itself against a world so scary?*

*It looks so sweet, so plump and red, but hold it close and see it's hairy!*

*If made a pie, and were asked to shar-e, I would have to answer, Nary!*

*-Pain King"*

Edrin nearly puked. Was the Pain King trying to write poems?

This was not turning out as expected, not at all. Nobody could ever see this poem, nobody could ever know the Pain King was a terrible poet. If someone found out, he would be Edrin the Angst Eater or some other equally demoralizing name. No, everyone had to believe that the Pain King was a terrifying menace that could only be taken out by a courageous, handsome, muscular, and charismatic hero.

He looked down at the devilish mask on the Pain King's corpse and was genuinely afraid. He wasn't afraid of the face, but afraid of how much worse things would get if he removed that mask. How much worse would this situation become if he took off

that fearsome face to see what was below? Edrin mentally checked his time, he had about 5 minutes left before the goblins came crashing through that door.

“Well,” he said to the corpse “can't get much worse I suppose.”

Edrin was wrong. Removing the mask wasn't gross or frightening. Like the door on the chamber, and finding the dead king, and the poetry, his face was just as disappointing. The Pain King was very plain, not handsome but not horribly disfigured either. He had pockmarks from a poor diet. It looked like he was trying to grow a beard, but the hair was all discolored and growing in uneven patches. He had a mustache that was trimmed down to a thin line over his purple lips.

Edrin sighed loudly as he tossed the mask aside. This was worse. He stood up, holding the demonic mask in his hands. His brain ached as he tried to wrap it around everything and how it had all changed so drastically.

The Pain King had died of a heart attack and his body was a smelly mess for whoever discovered him. Edrin looked down and saw a small grease stain forming around the Pain King's hips. On top of that, he was a terrible poet.

Edrin considered the scrolls, then chucked them into the cauldron. He glanced around the room, if there was one poem, there were likely dozens more. Plus, it turns out the Pain King wore a mask because he couldn't grow a beard. Edrin knew that struggle, or had, before he found the Cream of Facial Masculinity. The question now was what to do with all of this information. He couldn't let anyone else know any of these things. In order for Edrin to be the awesome hero, he needed the Pain King to be a terrifying villain. The Pain King was simply not living up to his end of the bargain.

There was a crash in the hall.

Edrin had misjudged the forcefield timing, or the goblins had found a way to deactivate it. He raced for the doorway, grabbing a nearby bookshelf and smashing it down to brace the door. He had no more time.

“Think, think!” He shouted to himself over the cacophony outside, “...if the Pain King stays cool then I am cooler for beating him. But if everyone finds out how bland he is, then... What does that make me?” he asked the dead room.

He knew the answer, even as he weighed all the other options.

*Clean the body and then stab it?* Not enough time.

*Teleport away?* Goblins would discover Pain King's lame poems.

*Kill all the goblins and leave?* Possible, but anticlimactic and he might miss one. Plus, the cleanup crew that would come to retake the dungeon might discover how much of a dweeb the Pain King was somehow.

He gritted his teeth and steeled himself for what he knew had to happen.

Edrin picked up the Pain King's body and slid it into the cauldron, along with his stained clothing. The green liquid bubbled and hissed as the body sank and dissolved. He then reached into his pack, knowing he only had seconds left, and retrieved the Orb of Disrobing. Crushing it in his palm, all of his armor and supplies unstrapped, deactivated, popped, fizzled, and slid off his body in a large pile. He stepped out of the mound of magical items, picking up the Briefs of Superior Support and sliding them up his legs.

The door splintered and cracked as Edrin ran to the stone throne, sat down on the cushion, and placed the Pain King's mask on his face. It smelled faintly of cheese and sweat. He rotated positions, from legs up, to hand on chin, to arched fingers, before settling on a leg crossed and hands on the armrests look.

"This had better work," he whispered to the musty mask.

Seconds later, a small group of bugbears kicked away the last bits of the door and shoved aside the bookcase. They brandished spiked clubs and rough spears, both of which shone with a faint blue aura. They growled as they surveyed the room, spotting Edrin and looking him over. They stayed near the doorway, guarding it from an expected foe while a river of goblins stood behind them, choking the hallway like a stream of green flesh. The goblin river shifted as a tall figure moved down the hallway, stepped through the doorway, past the bugbears, and around the cauldron.

His nose was floppy and long, like a steamed carrot. His body was the size and shape of a human, but it was stunted and gross. His skin was a swirling mishmash of pink and green. Edrin recognized Jailer, the half-goblin advisor to the Pain King.

Edrin made a sound that was like a sigh of relief and a gulp of worry, forming a sort of glurp of mixed emotions.

Jailer would have certainly found all the evidence of the Pain King's lameness and spread the news far and wide. After a small pause, Jailer bowed, the bugbears and hallway of goblins following.

"Sire. Where is the hero?" Jailer asked, his head bowed.

Edrin had not thought this far. He had fought the Pain King many times, so he summed up his best impression. A booming and deep voice he now suspected was all an act.

"I defeated him and stole his body!" He explained like a teenager pretending to be an adult.

Jailer raised his head. "Ah yes, a classic move. I assume he begged for mercy?"

Edrin stopped himself from breaking that silly nose of Jailer's face, gritting his teeth instead. "Yes. Like a child."

"Excellent news. Sire, I beg your pardons. I am confused as to why you decided to disrobe? Do you require..." he paused, taking a deep smell of the area around him. Edrin instinctively sniffed as well and could pick up the remaining odor of the Pain King's defecation. "...new underclothes?" the goblinoid asked.

"No!" the new Pain King exclaimed before calming himself. "No. I simply have no need for all those useless trinkets." He regarded his pile of armor and weapons. "My new body, mixed with my powerful magic, is all I need. Clothing and armor are for the weak!"

"Exhilarating as always, my lord!" Jailer said, with a small clap. He then turned and shouted several words in goblin to the crowd behind him. A dozen or so small forms peeked into the room and began picking up Edrin's armor. He watched his precious armaments travel atop the goblin river like driftwood. His heart sank, and he did all he could not to jump up and start swinging punches. In his armor, with all his weapons, he could have killed everyone here. Without it, he would be lucky to make it past the bugbears. He briefly thought about running for any one of his weapons before dismissing that idea as well. He would kill more of them but die all the same. Then the goblins would discover the truth and his name would be completely destroyed. The goblins would assume he was trying to replace the Pain King. He wasn't trying to steal the Pain King's place, but the common folk would never understand the difference.

Jailer looked back, breaking into Edrin's thoughts. "Sire, you seem distraught. What is the matter? Aren't you happy to have killed that insolent hero?"

Edrin thought and geared his voice for another loud response. "I was expecting a far greater challenge for my final victory." This was at least the truth "And I am just a little disappointed he didn't put up more of a fight."

"Well sire, cowards rarely do." Jailer responded.

Edrin thought of all the ways to punch a human and wondered if they hurt half-goblins the same way. "Indeed." Is all he managed.

"Allow me to brighten your day. I have the final component for your ritual of pain!" His face stretched into a long genuine smile. Jailer reached into a side pocket, one that stretched too far and went too deep, and searched before hearing a sharp yip. "Gotcha!" he exclaimed pulling out the small furry mass.

He presented Edrin a yellow puppy. The animal squirmed in Jailer's hands before spotting Edrin. It grew still at the sight of the Pain King's mask. It whimpered and a small trickle of urine splashing on the floor. Edrin was momentarily confused. Was the Pain King also into puppies? It took longer than he would like to admit for the dots to connect. The torches on the wall flickered, shining off the small dog's wet nose. This dog was the last ingredient, the Wet Nose of Innocence. Edrin began to think he had made the wrong decision.

Jailer placed the puppy in Edrin's lap and stepped back. "We are all excited to see you finish the ritual, my lord"

Definitely the wrong decision.

He should have killed all the goblins. He could have found a new mass murdering madman to take down. Surely some distant land had a lich that needed destroying? Maybe there was a dragon that had captured a princess. Hell, he would have been happy killing wild boars at this point. Instead, he was stuck. Save his life and reputation by finishing a dark ritual that required a puppy sacrifice, or die and have his name besmirched for all of history?

Slowly he stood, grasping the fuzzy bundle. He walked to the cauldron, smelling the acid and evil leaching into the iron walls. The goblins held their collective breath,



except the Bugbears who couldn't help but snort as they exhaled. Jailer stood beside the cauldron, hands extended towards it in invitation. Edrin stopped in front of the glowing green liquid. He held the puppy aloft; his mind running through every possible excuse or escape from this. If Edrin wanted to be the Pain Eater, the Pain King had to be a worthy evil opponent. The puppy barked, invading the oppressive silence and surprising Edrin, who flinched and lost the battle over his nerves and sweaty palms.

The puppy fell slowly and Edrin reached a hundred times with slick fingers. The dog was gone before the and Edrin was left with a handful of loose dog hair. The green liquid swallowed the animal like a hungry void, giving off only a small burble in response. The goblins cheered, the bugbears roared, and Jailer clapped in delight. This celebration went on for several seconds before they all looked at the frozen Edrin.

"Sire?" Jailer asked

Edrin kicked his own brain, over and over again, before it finally came to life. They were expecting some reaction, and so was he, he supposed. He didn't feel any different. He wasn't overcome with evil energy, no demon jumped into his throat, nothing at all happened. The magic wasn't set up for him he realized, so nothing would happen. Another moment and he responded in the only way possible: he screamed and didn't stop.

After he had finished screaming for real, he began screaming for the show. "Power! S-so much power! Yes. Yes!"

The crowd cheered again.

"Pain King, my lord, what is your next command?"

Edrin was struck by the sudden possibility of control and stumbled over his next words. "I, uh, I am weary. I need time to rest and...and contemplate. The b-battle and this new power have drained me. Leave! I-I will speak with you when I see fit!"

Jailer bowed "Yes, my liege." Then he turned and barked more goblin commands at the others. It took several awkward minutes for everyone to file out. Edrin just closed his eyes behind the mask and waited. Once they were all gone, bits of the door propped up in a makeshift barrier, Edrin sighed.

He pulled the mask down and looked around the room. Considering the tomes of evil, he wondered how many might contain an answer to this new problem. Could he go back in time and stop all this? That's one option. Maybe he could find a spell to imprint and change memories? He shook his head as there are too many goblins to manipulate that way now. He hoped that somewhere on these ancient pages there was a body swapping spell waiting for him. Yeah, that's it. Just wait for another hero to come by, steal their body, and kill the "Pain King."

"Now," he mused to himself "how do you bait a hero?"

**Chris Lock**

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