

**Wanted...**

"*Thiss!*" I cried, pulling the wanted poster off the wall and showing it to my friend. When I had first seen it, I couldn't believe my eyes. The woman in the drawing looked so familiar, so much like our Mistress.

"*Ly-tha, wo-man, sla-yer of man and ser-vant of de-mons most foul,*" he read out loud, though he had to turn the page to one side of his head to do it. He wasn't very good at looking straight ahead.

"*Doesn't it look like her,*" I insisted with a grunt, tugging at his rough, tattered collar and waiting for his slow speech to answer me. "*Doesn't it?*"

"*A lit-tle,*" he finally said, trying to look at it again with his other eye. "*Not real-ly.*"

"*Bah!*" I screeched, pulling it away from him and looking at it again myself. "*A spitting image. We have to show it to her. We have to take it to The Lady! I know she'll agree with me! Think of it! We could be the ones who found her sister!*"

"*We found pa-per,*" he said, pouting with a low whine. "*Not Thal-lia. Pa-per said Ly-tha. Not Thal-lia.*"

"*So? It doesn't matter! We haven't showed her anyway!*" I was starting to feel a growl coming on. If he didn't start talking like he was agreeing with me, I'd bite his other ear off.

I scampered off, paper wadded up in my hand, and out of the dry canal and back up to the street level.

"*Wait!*" the thick idiot called out. "*Not use street! Be seen!*"

"*Doesn't matter anymore!*" I screeched back. "*This is too important to spend five hours sneaking our way through back passages and under bridges! I must go to her now! You stay here, guard the hideout. I'll send word back!*"

If I kept my cloak on and tried to resist the urge to run on all fours, I could pass as just a freak rather than as a creature. I'd just have to avoid the more high class areas; which wasn't hard, and get to the portal near the clock tower. It was good that my friend wasn't coming with me—he was built like a house, and moved like one too.

**Needed...**

"I am relieved that thou art truly alright, Brother Adam, mine friend."

I smiled up at Father Rafael, who was standing in the center of my quarters in the Temple of the Inquisitor, as I quietly unpacked my luggage onto a shelf. "I would trade my condition for a chance to right the wrongs, Father Rafael. Had I been present when the Red Hand cult broke free and—"

He stopped me, his fingertips resting gently on the surface of my desk. "Wert thou present then in all likelihood thou wouldst been slain with our brethren. Nay, thou wert placed as The Builder saw fit to shield a righteous man from The Trickster's devilish works."

I turned to him, halting my progression, giving him the full attention he deserved. "Perhaps 'twas The Trickster's works upon me as well, distracting me with trivial affairs and allowing his minions to go unchecked."

"Thou canst not second guess thyself. What were thou engaged with when the jailbreak occurred?"

"As was scheduled, I had returned here, to The Temple, to conduct my pupils."

"Then thou art blameless; for to folly whilst in the service of The Builder is surely no folly at all."

"I shalt conduct myself to recall your words of wisdom, Father Rafael."

Rafael bowed to me slightly, and then seemed to change the subject. "I am truly a divided man, my friend. This red hand cult which Brother Thresh didst bestow into our custody wert responsible for the release of our prized prisoner, Lytha. By thy own admission, Lytha was truly the devil responsible for slaying our brethren and desecrating our temples. She too wert delivered unto our hands by Brother Daelus's advice. Dost thou believe that he hath been proven innocent or guilty?"

"Innocent or guilty of what, my friend?" I asked, indicating that he should sit. He did not, so I remained standing as well.

"Of aiding our enemies! Wert this cult given to us for the purpose of freeing Lytha?"

I shook my head, frowning slightly. "He came to thee with advice which led to the apprehension of a most dangerous individual; nay, one of the most. In fact, it turned out to be none other than the very individual we sought the most. He should be congratulated as a hero."

"But she didst escape!"

"Only because you requested more. If I may humbly remind you, The Builder asks us to be content with what we are given, and not outstretch our hands like beggars on a street. This horrible misfortune befell us because you were not satisfied with what was fated to be, and demanded more. If we had only captured Lytha, she would still be out prisoner."

"Yes, I see thy point, but what of Brother Daelus?" he said, seeming to grow slightly impatient.

"Brother Daelus acted out of service to The Builder, first reporting what he knew about the villa, and then giving you Lytha's accomplices as you did

request. I do not see how you could suspect him of wrongdoing.”

His impatience seemed to leave as subtly as it came. “Thou art right. I have been driven by anger and pride.”

I smiled slightly. “If anyone has betrayed you, it is I, for Cragscleft Prison is my domain, and it was improperly managed. If the mines bellow had been kept free of abominations and if security had been better, then—”

“Learn from this, and allow it to trouble thee no more,” he said quickly, putting his hand on my shoulder. “I am certain that thou wilt not be judged unfavorably due to this.”

“Thank you, my friend,” I said, allowing myself to smile more.

“It is the least I canst do for thee in exchange for thine wisdom, which I do need more and more as these days progress.”

At that, I simply bowed slightly, as before. “What will you do now?” I asked him.

“I shalt make preparations to return to The City. My contingent, which I didst summon from their work at The Circle to aid thee, shalt return to that work, though I expect there is little else to do.”

“Very well,” I replied. “I must go in a moment, myself. Tardiness is punished among my pupils, so I do not wish to set a bad example.”

# **Chapter 9**

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## **Blood is Spilled**

— Lytha: Poised —

Day 5: 5:00 pm

*I moved in darkness; absolute darkness.*

*Then I heard them again; voices. I knew not what they said.*

*A light went on, and off, and on; flickering.*

*I saw faces in the flickers of light; faces of Hammerites, grotesque faces with the skin removed, the prisoner who had raped me, the lifeless face of Thalia, and The Inquisitor in his cold serenity. They moved towards me, pointing at me, with their wide eyes motionless.*

*I was in one of their temples. The walls and floor had been painted with blood. I watched helplessly through my own eyes as my hands acted without my consent. I cut their skin from their faces, gouged out their eyes, and tore their hands from their wrists.*

*No, it was not me doing this; it was something else. I tore away, recoiling, stumbling back. When I turned I found myself staring at Thalia, drenched in blood, gobs of flesh hanging from her claws; no, it was not Thalia at all: it was me. No sooner had I realized this, I saw her, myself, It, changing: face contorting into a mask of horror, eyes ablaze and jaws lined with teeth. The beast I had become held in one claw-like hand the head of The Inquisitor. With its other, it reached out to me...*

I opened my eyes.

I found myself sitting on the wall of some Hammerite church outside The City. I did not remember how I had reached this place. I remembered leaving Koyne's home in a panic, and then making my way out of The City to return to the ruins where Ghost would expect me, but everything after that was a blur. The visions that had swept over me, memories from my imprisonment, seemed more real than the wall I squatted on.

But I was on the wall, huddled in a small shadow between the legs of a large statue. My aching legs told me that I had been here for quite a while. It was a perfect place. I could observe almost the entire Temple, but it was very uncomfortable, small, and cold. A storm was in the air. There was wind, and the sound of distant thunder. The darkness made it seem like night.

I knew I had never been here before, but somehow I knew where I was; The Temple of The Inquisitor. Suddenly, I heard Thalia's voice—or was it my own...?

*"Why are you here? To turn yourself in? To hand yourself back to them?" "No." "To paint the walls red with their blood and scream your revenge so that the whole world shudders at the sound of your rage?" "Yes..." "You have been here before." "No, I haven't." "Yes, you have, only you didn't know it. Here you shall be reborn..."*

I shook myself free of the trance as I felt myself growing dizzy, and in danger of losing my grasp on the wall. I took long deep breaths. Down there, the Hammerites were still walking around, busy as usual.

## — Ghost: One Way or Another —

Day 5: 5:00 pm

I returned to the ruins and found Lytha gone. The only traces of her were some of her prison rags discarded on the ground and some dried blood. At first I thought that the Hammerites had found her, but there were no boot prints other than my own, and I could see her bare footprints leading off. She left, and why not? She had no reason to stay if she was well enough to go. What good was a promise, anyway? It wasn't like it would have done me any good; I wasn't going to get any reward from Nightfall. All she would have done was cost me more money, and wasted my time. I took a scrap of her rags, deciding to keep it as a souvenir, and left.

The way back to Cragscleft wasn't as long as I had remembered it. In no time I could see the prison tower up in the mountains. Soon I would come to some dead bodies, assuming that the Hammers hadn't cleaned them all up, and then I would wait for them to rise. It was exactly what I hadn't wanted to do, betting my life on Sheam's magic choker and wishing I hadn't been such an ass to her. It was too late though. She had it coming. There was no going back. She would have just given me the choker if I had asked nicely. No, she wouldn't have.

It was getting dark earlier than it should have; a nasty storm was brewing. Maybe it would bring the zombies out. Suddenly I found myself stopping in my tracks. "This isn't going to work," I told myself, and then added, "at least I need to act like it isn't." I did a quick inventory for the hundredth time; new armor, quiver of fire-arrows with a fancy bow, plenty of daggers, a whole crate of holy water, a full belly with some more to snack on later, plus a pair of medicinal vials full of a brew that was meant to help Lytha get better, but now probably was going to go to me in the off-chance that this plan failed and I somehow survived. I fished out one of the vials of holy water, and uncorked it to pour a quantity into each of my dagger holders. Once they were all full, I slid all six of my daggers into their places on my belt. I didn't know if metal could soak, but I figured it could get holy if it sat in holy water long enough. It was either terribly clever or a terrible waste of holy water.

I was ready to go again, but felt the need to fetch something else from my brand new pack. I held it in the palm of my hand, staring at it, letting it stare back at me just like the dead eyes of grandma Alarus; the star. It was a good thing I had hidden it before going to see that witchdoctor. I didn't really know why I had gone back for it now, but it seemed like a good idea. "It's all your fault," I told it, giving it a little shake as if I expected it to make some kind of noise in reply.

"Best case scenario," I told it, "the choker works, the holy-water daggers work, I get to sell you off for a pretty sum, and Nightfall pays me for rescuing Lytha. Worst case scenario, the choker doesn't work, and...eh." I didn't feel like thinking about it. Instead I thought more best-case stuff, "I find the zombie of Tea-time and get to shove his monocle straight up his little puckered zombie ass-hole." Actually, that sounded like something I wanted desperately to never actually do. I shrugged, and kept going.

## — Nightfall: The Opposing Force —

Day 5: 7:00 pm

Lightning arced across the heavens like spider webs so frequently that we could have put out our torches and read by the light. Soon the sporadic rain gave way to the true business of the affair, a wall of rushing water, surging forth, engulfing us in its fury in an instant. Steam billowed from the boiling hot metal of the wreckers, blinding us more than the rain and the darkness could alone.

The horse was frightened, and Richen was losing control of her. Several lightning bolts struck ground just off the path of the new road, bursting trees into flame. The flames did not last long, but the force of the strike shattered the wood, hurling slivers of oak and pine to impale anything that was not made of stone or metal. Richen struggled with the horse, trying to calm her, trying to keep her from bolting into a gallop. Many of the Hammerites sought shelter under the great machines.

I stood wrapped in my heavy cloak, the brim of my hat shielding my eyes from the pouring water, and gave a frustrated sigh. More delays. Thurm and his men were working to cover the coal and keep it from being ruined by the rain. I turned my attention to Chispin, but saw only the cold resolve of a soldier standing like a statue in the rain flanked by his subordinates; a vigil in the downpour. Ivan was nowhere to be seen; undoubtedly huddled with the others under the bulks of metal.

A Hammerite with sharp eyes cried out, pointing to the sky. I looked up and saw them too; specks visible only when the lighting flashed, and dozens of them. They looked like oddly shaped birds as they drew closer. I could hear Chispin, sounding so far away, springing to life with shouted orders. The Hammerites began to spill out from under the machines, hammers held ready to fend off the attack. I looked back to the sky at whatever creature was coming to assail us, quickly trying to ascertain the threat.

They were closing fast, and soon I recognized them for what they were; mongbats, creatures resembling small monkeys with the leathery wings and ears of a bat; only these also seemed to be holding curved, jagged swords. So, The Lady's trap had been sprung. They weren't waiting for us to reach the villa, or for the group to be divided; they were waiting for the storm. I quickly trudged through the mud back to the carriage to find my quarter-staff. When I looked back up, I saw that the beasts were beginning to circle. The sound of the hammering rain and thunder drowned out the shouts of Chispin and the other Hammerites as they assumed defensive positions. They had no shields to ward off the initial blows, only their Hammers with which to counterattack, should they survive.

"Richen!" I shouted, trying to get through to the man next to me, who was consumed entirely in the efforts to keep the horse under control. "Take Suzy and get the hell out of here!" I demanded.

"Wha abo' you ser?" he shouted back, just before leaping onto the horse's back and swiftly cutting free her bonds with his pocket knife.

"I'll take my chances," I said, knowing that the horse could escape faster

with only a rider and not a carriage to tow. To go with them ensured that all three of us would perish. Divided, we stood a chance. I found my staff among the luggage; with it and my back to the carriage for protection I hardened myself for the coming battle and hoped that I would not have to take part in it. I was a figure in black pressed against a large black object. I would have had to hide under it to be more unnoticeable.

I twisted my neck to watch the Hammerites. The lot of them looked up in anticipation, hammers wielded, watching the shapes in the sky grow more and more defined as they spiraled ever closer. A group of the soldiers raised their crossbows and loosed. A half dozen of the creatures dropped to the ground like stones; the rest of them dove towards the ground like javelins. Like boiling oil poured from a parapet upon besieging hordes, the creatures were upon us.

I tried to call out a warning; but it was no use, the Hammerites could see as well as I and there was nothing anyone could do. They were not diving to attack the men, but rather the pressurized chamber of the steam engine on the fore-left wrecking machine, the one without Thurm's extra shielding. They held their blades before them aiming, not to engage the enemy, but to turn themselves into living missiles. The first dozen bounced off and away with the sound of cracking bone, but I knew it would be only a matter of time.

My attention was quickly shifted to a pair of big gleaming eyes and white needle-like teeth. I held my staff firm and braced for impact only for an instant before its head rammed into the end of the wooden rod and its sword flew loose from its grasp, narrowly missing me. I hadn't been as well hidden as I had hoped. It must have been the hat. All reckoning was wrenched from me when the thunderous explosion from the intense pressure within the boiler surged amongst us. The mongbats had been successful with their wicked strategy of turning the Hammerite machines into enormous bombs. I just hoped that the explosion had taken as many of the aberrations with it as possible.

I was thrown off my feet, and slid several yards across the slick mud. I could see the brilliant red glow of the fire. The roar of the rain was drowned out by the deafening tones of monkey chatter, and the screams of dying men. Before I could regain my feet, and surely before The Hammerites could regain theirs, there was another wave of darkness from the sky followed by a second explosion. Pieces flew overhead, some on fire, some of the creatures, some people, and some parts of people. It was the deforester on the right; Thurm's improved armor had failed. And, there were still two more machines.

I forced myself to rise and none too soon. Another one of the creatures was rushing at me, sword pulled back to slash my throat. I quickly moved forward to meet it, hoping to counterattack with my longer weapon before it could make its initial blow. I swung my staff at it with all my might, catching it across the ribs, sending it flying in a new direction before it crashed lifelessly into a tree.

Among the machines, it was chaos. The Hammerites were engaged in a dizzying melee with the enemy, bodies falling on both sides as fast as blows



were dealt. With the steam and smoke mixed with rain and darkness, I could see little more than rapidly moving bodies, all a blur. I stood alone now; possibly unnoticed by the attackers, possibly forgotten by the Hammerites. Thoughts of escape crept into my mind, but escape to where? How far could I get on foot? No, escape now; and the Hammers would surely assume that I had betrayed them.

Black shapes descended from the impenetrable haze and swooped low. Caught off guard, I pressed myself back against the carriage, my weapon firm before me. Three mongbats were now circling, glaring and chattering at me with malice. One landed on the roof of the carriage and swung its blade for my head, but I moved away. The other two swept in simultaneously, which I narrowly avoided, but managed to strike back at one of them, catching it in the wing, tearing it.

The familiar sound of quarrels once again whizzed through the air, sending more of the creatures dropping to the ground. The sounds of the beasts own howls of agony now drowned out the cries from the Hammerites. The ones attacking me seemed momentarily distracted by this, and I took the opportunity to crush the skull of the one perched on the carriage with my staff.

My breath was now just like the smoke from the machines, and the sound of my own pulse was drowning out even the cries of the beasts. The two had flipped around and were coming in for a second attack, only now from both sides; one slightly faster. I used my staff as a lance once more, pulling it into position at the last instant to let the creature smash into the blunt end. Quickly then I swung it around to hit the already wounded second, sending it flying.

Another volley of quarrels was loosed into the sky. Another batch of the creatures fell like stones. The smoke was beginning to clear, the battling Hammerites becoming visible, as well as the corpses littering the ground. The mongbats had lost their organization, and the Hammerites had gained theirs. The creatures were scattering, but were not retreating. The soldiers had formed groups, four or five with their backs to each other, knocking mongbats out of the sky whenever they dared attack from any direction, crushing delicate bone under iron hammer.

I wondered why the mongbats hadn't destroyed the remaining two machines, but then realized that they didn't need to. The wreckage from the first two now blocked the path of the rear ones; and the rear ones were not equipped to deforest. The construction of the road could go no farther.

Within minutes, the battle was also over. The remaining mongbats had fled, vanishing into the haze above. I cast my eyes about the scene, looking from corpse to corpse, Hammerite and mongbat alike. Only about two dozen of our initial group was left. It was hard to say how many mongbats had fallen, as most were blown to bits from the exploding machines.

Then with urgency and a renewed quickening of the pulse I began to search for Brother Thurm, my only ally in this wasteland. I found him and gave a sign of relief, seeing him standing in the middle of the battlefield,

moving from soldier to soldier, healing wounds with his Hammerite blessings. Likewise I discovered Ivan doing the same, and with a certain air of surprise, noted that Chispin was performing healings as well.

I watched them work, laying their hands on the shoulders of the men, concentrating, whispering prayers, and then moving on to the next. No physical wounds were healed in this way. Some of these men would live out the rest of their lives with missing arms or legs, but their constitution was restored, and the pain was numbed. When they were done with each, several of the unharmed soldiers took over administering whatever first aid treatment was needed to stop bleeding. I watched, still keeping my distance from the field of carnage.

Brother Thurm was the first to approach me. His hands hung at his sides as if weighted with the blood and pain of the wounded men. "Brother," he said in a low voice. "Wert thou harmed?"

"Nay my friend," I replied, "I was able to ward off any attacks."

As he grew closer his face grew more concerned, and his step quickened. "Where are thy driver and thy mare?"

I glanced behind, in the direction Richen fled on the horse. "Safe, I hope," I said before turning back to Thurm. "I commanded him to retreat, as we were certain the beasts would slay the horse otherwise."

He nodded heavily, frowning, "Wise," he said, "I also hope that they did escape to safety."

"Were the losses serious?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

He nodded his head, looking back at the others. The bodies of the dead were being gathered to be sent home. "Serious," he told me. "Though our force was maimed, theirs was slaughtered." The gravity in his voice deepened. "This pagan commands the beasts of the Trickster himself. But she is a fool to think that this feeble attempt to stop us will do any more than delayeth the inevitable. Now we have our brothers and sons to avenge, and our justice shalt be the more severe....Yes, the more severe by tenfold." He moved away from me, to the machines. It wasn't like Thurm to speak this way.

The broken hulks stood solitary in the dark rain. Thurm joined them in their solitude, looking them up, and down, and then moving closer to place his hand on a small patch of clean metal unsoiled by mongbat blood. I left the man with his destroyed metal children.

As I turned from him I came face to face with something this expedition had hitherto avoided, but now was raging full force; Ivan and Chispin were arguing. "We must," Ivan seethed, "return at once with our dead and return with a greater force. This expedition was a folly, born from Rafael's foolishness; it shouldst have been designed for swiftness, not grandeur!"

"I wouldst thank thee," Chispin growled in reply, "to not speak of Father Rafael with such disrespect, Brother Ivan. And it is thy foolishness that assails thee now. We must press on at once. This battle has been won. The enemy surely expected the opposite. We must take the battle now on to the villa, and crush whatever evil lies there now, or it shalt forever evade us!"

And then Brother Thurm appeared, if only to exacerbate the situation. "Brothers, I beseech thee not to quarrel. This was, grievous yes, but I swear before the bulder that these machines can be repaired, and our mission resumed before the dawn hours reach us."

"Impossible!" Ivan scoffed. "We have neither the materials nor the manpower to repair the machines! And what dost thou suggest; that we bury our brethren here, on this unsanctified soil? To do so would be to damn them!"

"No Brother Ivan, I—" Thurm began, but Chispin cut him off with a jab of his hand.

"Enough, Brother Thurm! We have not the time to repair thy machines. We will need every man who can still walk and carry his hammer to bring the battle to the enemy, now!"

But Ivan wasn't done. "And leave our fallen brothers here to rot! Leave our wounded here to be devoured by predators! Leave them to die? In no manner of sense could we continue this battle now!"

"Brothers, if I may," I said, daring to join the conversation with a little sense and clarity.

"No thou mayest not," Ivan barked. "Thy presence here is merely ceremonial. Save thy counsel for the council."

Chispin did not even look at me, keeping his irritated eyes fixed firmly on Ivan. It was Thurm who spoke next.

"I do not see why it wouldst be erring to allow Brother Daelus to speak. Speak, my friend, for perhaps one who Father Markander thought so highly of mayeth illuminate the proper path through this darkness!"

Brother Ivan snorted and looked away. Chispin finally turned his hard eyes to me, and said firmly, "Speak."

I wanted to tell them to abort the mission. However, I knew that to do so would cause Chispin to launch into me, then sure of my allegiance to their enemies. In his current state, he was liable to attack me on the spot. So, instead, I forced myself to accept that this mission actually had a *point* to it.

"Each of these three options is problematic," I told them. "First, it would require all hands to carry our dead and wounded back home, for their numbers exceed our own. And to leave now would be to give the enemy victory. Though we return in greater numbers, it is possible that the enemy would do so as well.

"Secondly, were the engineers to begin work to repair the machines, perhaps dismantling one for the sake of the other's reparations; they would need the protection of the soldiers from a possible second attack. If our force split up, our wounded would not get the medical attention they need and would certainly risk death; thereby, not only the wounded, but the whole of our surviving party risks death from a second attack.

"Thirdly, if all of able body were to press on for a counterattack, marching for maybe an hour or more through thick underbrush in the rain and the slowly waning light, already tired from a long day's work and agitated from the battle; we will almost ensure the death of all those wounded who must be

left behind unattended. And if we engage our enemies in a strike with our reduced numbers; victory may elude us and certainly more deaths would follow."

"I fail to see how thou art offering a solution," Ivan said, scolding.

"I am presenting the gravity of all three options, and am formulating a fourth," I said, trying not to let my irritation show. "But first let me make some other issues plain. We have no idea if we are truly marching towards anything. This expedition was not, I remind you, to engage an enemy, but to demolish a building. We have no reason to expect anyone or anything waiting for us at this villa, not even secrets to point us to our foe. The party which established the villa's location discovered naught, need I remind you, save the apprehension of the woman. Also, surely the creatures of the wood have known of our trek for some time, and so completely warned, would definitely not leave something to our advantage should we actually succeed in this errand of destruction. It is more likely that this was an attack of opportunity. The creatures waited until the cover of the storm, where they knew they would have the advantage and struck, possibly more concerned with halting our destruction of the woods than the destruction of the villa."

"I still don't—" Ivan cut in again, but he himself was cut off by Thurm.

"Let him speak!"

I paused for breath, and continued. "I am not suggesting that we abandon this mission, but that the entirety of this operation must change if any good is to yet come of it. Right now we are blind. We do not know what we march towards, and do not know what awaits us if we stay. If we retreat, we cannot know what evil we allowed to manifest due to our inaction. We do know one thing; we do not wish for our wounded to die. That is certain; absolute. All other issues come second to that directive. Is that agreed?"

"Yes," Ivan croaked.

Chispin was quiet, but did not disagree.

"Yes, yes, of course!" Thurm insisted.

"We leave the dead. They can be tended to in short order. Their souls are not in danger, for their deaths were just. As many men as required must take the wounded back home, but no more. They must bear the risk of attack while on the road. How many would this take?"

Ivan didn't look at me as he replied, but instead turned to look over the wounded men, lying in the mud. "Many would be able to walk, though slowly. I'd say eight, or nine, to carry those who cannot."

"That leaves fourteen, fifteen including myself. Brother Ivan, would you be returning with the wounded?"

The question caught him like a dagger thrust into the slowly ticking gears of his mind. His eyes narrowed slightly, his orders from Oberon to keep me in his sight clashing with his own sense of duty to watch over the fallen. "I must stay," he finally said, though I could hear the frustration in his voice, and see the malice in his eyes.

I didn't dwell on it. "Brother Thurm, I am sorry, but the machines must be abandoned. They are of no use to us any longer. They can be salvaged when

we return for the dead, when all of this is over. Brother Chispin, the remaining fifteen of us will press on, not as bringers of destruction, but as detectives.”

“We have not an inspector amongst us!” he rebuked.

“We will do as best we can. Are you in agreement with my proposed plan?”

Chispin’s gaze grew distant. He was Rafael’s pawn, but in being so he was loyal to the church itself, not to the machinations of a power hungry politician in red robes. He did not like me. He did not like the threat I posed to Rafael, but he was in charge, and I hoped that he would make the right choice, regardless of how he felt. Finally he spoke. “We will do as thou proposest, Brother Daelus. However, Ivan, thou wilt return with the wounded; they will need the accompaniment of a priest.”

As he said this, as much as I was thankful to his acceptance of the only possible sane plan, I was reminded that as much as Ivan’s presence here was unfavorable, he was part of a shield that had been provided; both men protecting me from the other’s abuse. Thurm would not be able to protect me.

Ivan frowned and nodded. His directive to obey Oberon had been overpowered, maybe by his sense of decency and duty towards the fallen, or maybe due to cowardice, unable to stand up to Chispin when tested. Maybe he had never been a shield after all.

Chispin turned his hard gaze to me once again. “We march to the villa. Pray, Brother Daelus, that once we arrive, I do not deem this expedition, launched solely on thy prompting, a waste of time and life. I have not ruled out the possibility that this entire effort was designed merely to get us all killed. Pray that we discover a value to all of this, or I shalt hold thee responsible for the deaths of our brethren.”

Sadly, I was forced to agree.

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— Lytha: Intruder —

Day 5: 8:00 pm

A chilling numbness came over me as I felt myself slipping from the void. The world strained into focus. I felt the cold stone under my fingers and a numbness that made me shrink onto myself, as if a void was open within me.

No, that was not right. I pushed away the feeling of the stone, of my aching bones, the hollow in my chest, and reached back to the void. There was something there. Something I had felt in an instant before waking and an instant after coming back into myself. I felt. I separated myself from my nerves and my flesh, and I felt.

There was something there. Something else was in me, which I had to push out of the way to regain myself as the sleep drifted away. It was not a hollow, but a mass; a cold, numb mass which could only be realized by its inability to be felt. I could not penetrate it.

And then it was gone. The chill was the light sprinkle of rain on my back.

The hollow within me was the empty feeling of loss, of not knowing who I was. No, it was just an aching of the stomach; I was hungry. The pain in my bones came from sitting in a nook in this stone wall for too long. The pain in my head was not from some intruder seeking domination of my mind; it was just a headache.

And I knew who I was, and why I was here. I gathered myself back up, and the light rain, the aches and pains, and disconcerted feeling that was quickly fading away, became no more than a nuisance. The creak and groan of my leather jerkin as I shifted my weight forward reassured me. The weight of my weapons on my back and at my hips encouraged me. I moved.

I did not touch the wall as I descended. I slipped through the air to the soggy grass below like an anchor through the sea, but touched down like a leaf blown from a tree. Stone was before me and behind. The great brick wall of the church was no different from the wall I had fallen asleep on; tall, thick, cold, dead. The tiny windows high above gave off no light. I could scale the wall, enter that way, but I sensed that my target was elsewhere.

A cobbled walk ran to my left and right, wrapping around the monolith-like church on either side. All sound was from the rain. All light came from the sky; the ugly red glow of city light against the storm clouds above. There were no stars to be seen; no moonlight to betray me, and not a soul in sight.

I crept to the wall of the church. My feet were soon soaked through from the water puddled on the uneven turf. I pressed my fingers to the bricks, not to grab hold or climb, but to feel. I drew my head close, and listened.

The solitude of this narrow courtyard would not mislead me. The Hammerites were everywhere. I could feel them moving about behind the wall, high up in the towers and battlements, and deep below. I lowered my body, hands sliding over the rough brickwork, moving my perception downward. I searched below the church, going one by one through those I found, like a librarian searching a card index.

Each mind I touched was like reaching my bare hand into a dark box, not knowing if I was about to cut my finger on jagged glass, feel the wretched slime of some putrid remains, or feel the strike of a vicious animal. I did not focus on words or individual thoughts. Those flowed through me like a strong draft. I did not listen, I felt. I knew I could find the one I hunted by his feel. I knew that I would have no doubt when I found him.

Still, in the back of my mind, something trembled. I felt a stirring, a shifting around of something not quite myself, but not quite there. After each mind I touched the feeling became worse, like needles digging deeper and deeper into my throat. Whenever I shifted my focus from the other mind to *It*, the sensation of other-ness to it fled, and all I was left with was the pain.

My thoughts drifted back to my sensation when I awoke. Soon my attention shifted from one hunt to another. My search went on, but with each mind I touched I tried to bring that other, that numb shape in the back of my mind, closer to the surface. The minds of the Hammerites was agonizing *It*. Soon I forgot my original search altogether, recklessly leaping from mind to mind, aggressively pushing this other in my head to reveal *Itself*. I had to

know what it was. I had to bring it out.

In an instant the pain became unbearable. A scream, a howl, shot through my mind like a streak of fire. There was a radiance, a blinding brightness deep within the stone before me, which was so intense I could not believe that I only now discovered it. I felt the other in my mind shrink away with the howl, the pain and the echoing of the scream fading quickly, as if it were a beast of the night fleeing from the light of the sun.

I broke. I found myself flat on my back, almost drowning from the rain in my gaping mouth, straining to produce a silent scream that never came. I could see my hands before me, thrashing in the air, violently jerking with involuntary spasms. I regained control of them, and hugged them around my body, trying to stop myself from shaking.

I knew I had found him. The Inquisitor's mind blazed with an inhuman fire. But as painful as it was, the pain suffered by *the other* from it was far more traumatic. A hundred questions ran in and out of my mind, begging me for attention, but all had to be dismissed. Now was not the time for questions.

I picked myself back up and returned to the wall. I had to find him again, to pinpoint where he was, so I could do what I needed to do without error. Like a wheel passing through a well-worn rut in the road, my mind slid back where it had been, and in a short moment I began to feel the heat of the mind I searched for. This time I approached it timidly, not rushing in to grasp it as before. Yes. This was he.

His mind was one of metal and fire, of sliding bits and spinning parts; things I knew not the names for but understood the workings of as clear as needed. But there was a coldness too. Flames of crystallized order and clarity, moving about with perfect timing assembled, controlled, arranged with the utmost delicacy and perfection. It was unlike any mind I had touched before. I could not believe what I was beholding could be human. There was something else at work here—*some thing*, not him.

But I had him. I knew where he was, but not how to get there. Driven by reassured purpose, my mind quickly went to the nearest, the weakest, and simplest mind before me. I grasped onto it and dug within like a greedy landlord grasping through the coffers of his tenants. No matter how hard I dug, I knew this one would be oblivious; would feel nothing. Within moments his mind was mine; and the spaces before me, the tunnels, halls, doorways, routes and passages were clearly mapped out in my head. I pieced together his disordered scraps of memories from years of walking these halls and soon I knew the building better than he.

There was a door not far from here. It was to the left. It led into the main hall of the church. It was a backdoor leading to a chapel behind the main altar. There were many within. Some were aware, some were oblivious, but none were paying particular mind to that door.

I pulled back within myself, to where I was and what I was doing. I had not planned very far in advance, but I never did. I left the wall which I had been pressed to for maybe a minute, maybe an hour, I couldn't be sure, and

went in search of this lone, unguarded door.

I approached a corner which would lead to the back of the building. I could see the light spilling out around it. I knew that there were guards nearby, but they were calm, even bored. I peered around the edge of the brick corner and saw things much as I expected. The narrow grassy courtyard, much wider than the one I had been in, was spotted with pools of light dripping down from hanging lanterns. Hammerites, fearful of the cold and the damp, stood huddled under ledges watching the storm.

— **Nightfall: Return to The Villa** —

**Day 5: 8:00 pm**

The Hammerites could barely keep up with me. Finally, after all this time hanging back, biding my time, and watching from a distance, I was involved. I knew what they were thinking. 'He is going ahead to warn them!' 'Ah, he wert not wounded by the attack; they must have spared him for a reason!' 'Just make one mistake, one mistake and thou shalt be mine!'

The storm had eased and the clouds were beginning to part. The moonlight was so bright after the storm it almost seemed like dawn. The heavy boots in the mud, the panting, the growls of frustration, these were the only sounds in the wood. The wood was dead.

An odor touched me; a sudden gust of wind must have stirred it up. My hand went to my face without a thought, attempting futilely to block the smell. The Hammerites wretched, choked, and gasped; some stumbled over. In spite of this, we pressed on. My thoughts searched for an explanation; it had to be another battlefield up ahead, or some type of slaughterhouse. The moonlit darkness and the thickness of the wood shielded our eyes from what our noses already knew was ahead.

After hours of pushing through air we could barely breathe, we arrived at the villa, but did not find what we had expected. The walls were made of flesh, bright red, oozing fluids into the moat surrounding it, flesh that still twitched and flexed as if life still flowed through the blood. The towers and walls stirred with a vivid 'undeath'.

I broke my eyes from it, willing them gently to shut. The smell was of little consequence now that this image was burning in my mind. Beside me, I could hear pandemonium. The Hammerites recoiled and shouted in terror, and rage. We all stayed back, terrified to set a foot closer. I could hear them begging Chispin for directions, orders, reassurance, but he was silent. I was so dreadfully thankful that none of them were asking me for the same.

Chispin gathered himself up and bellowed, "'Tis naught but a vile trick to strike fear into our hearts: an illusion!" At that, he lifted his first high into the air, and commanded with a booming voice, "By the Builder's hand!" A shimmering, golden hammer of flame appeared, clutched in his grasp. With a roar, he hurled this hammer at the quivering structure. White fire exploded from the point of impact and quickly spread over the wall. The sound of impact was not flesh, but wood! I watched, astonished, as the white flame



moved to engulf the entire building, not burning the flesh or the wood, but burning away the illusion which filled us with horror. The Hammerites began to shout and cheer but slowly their excitement, and my own, diminished.

Yes, the building was of wood and not flesh, but it was still soaked in the blood of the slain. The wooden walls were painted red, and the severed limbs used as brushes still adorned them, impaled by spikes. Chispin's face tightened as he uttered a low growl. He repeated his action; summoning another fiery projectile, hurling the spiritual hammer at the building, aiming for the seared, impacted location of his previous hit. This time, the wood splintered and shattered; the entire wall buckled and the nearest tower tilted sharply towards it.

"This work is poor; the construction is weak. We shall have little difficulty razing it to the ground—with our hammers!" The others became animated once again mixing howls of rage with cheers of devotion. With Chispin in the lead they charged the building, drunk with their newfound purpose. They funneled onto the open drawbridge, giving no thought to its soundness, charging through to attack the building. I looked on, a cold, sinking feeling overcoming me. I glanced to the side as I realized I was not alone. Thurm also looked on.

"Builder," he whispered "guide thy servants righteously. Bless us on this holy quest to rid thy land of this evil."

"Brother," I said, feeling at once I was intruding, "I fear there can be nothing for us here save exhaustion and regret."

"This creation must be obliterated," Thurm said with his voice both at once firm and trembling. "The timber used to construct it wilt be burned. The ground on which it stands must be sanctified. The..." he stopped; the firmness of his voice gone. His trembling eyes began to well.

"Brother, you seem the more wise to what you are beholding than Chispin, for the same fear does not seem to grip him as it does you. What do you see here that is lost to the rest of us? What terror grips you so?"

"The Trickster is dead!" Thurm replied, with the fury of a shout but with the volume of a murmur. "This cannot be! Only he couldst have woven such an illusion! And yet..."

"Yet..."

"Daelus, didst thou not notice? The limbs used to bathe the timber in blood were of beast as well as man. The timber itself, cut crudely from the trees; trees, friends to the Trickster, maimed by axe and saw. What creature would do this...to slaughter its own as well as its enemies?"

I do not know if Thurm spoke from innocence, or from wisdom; if it was my own tarnished heart that prevented me from seeing the true horror of his words, or if it was blindness. I offered him the only answer, the simplest answer, "You know as well, as I. This is the work of men, not beasts."

"Daelus, my friend, I am not certain I am capable of any longer telling the difference."

## — Lytha: The Inquisitor's Requiem —

Day 5: 9:00 pm

There, at the end of the corridor, was a guard. He stared off into nowhere, bored, and not enjoying his post here. Then, he died. I rubbed my wrist in dissatisfaction. I had come upon him with slightly too much force and aggravated my own wounds. Yes, how easy it had been to forget my own torn, blood-soaked frame. As enthralled as I had been with the minds of others, the state of my own body seemed trivial. Oh, but how easily I moved; like a new life was being breathed into my veins. Perhaps my wounds truly were trivial. Perhaps that metal abomination bolted into my arm now fueled my anger, made me stronger, and did nothing to hinder me. Their own tool would be their undoing. I slid my fingertips through my hair to clean off the flicks of blood, and then removed the body from its resting place. It was blocking the door.

I took the key from his belt, and unlocked the door. A small and tidy office lay beyond. A chill of hatred ran through me; a memory flashing through my mind.

*...They pushed me down to my knees in front of the desk and stepped back...He continued his study of the papers on the desk. The desk was very tidy, the papers and pens were arranged in a very anal way. Its tidiness looked obscene in this room, in this smell.*

I closed the door I had just come through and locked it back up, only now I held the key; none could escape. I snuck to the open door in the opposite wall, but drew my mind away from it, fearful of what it might find behind. Instead I used my eyes, watching the opening careful for signs of life as I crept ever nearer. I heard voices again; a dialogue began.

"Now, Eustas, I would really recommend you to cooperate. There is no need to force us to use more violence." That was his voice. The Inquisitor; and that was the way he tried to convince his victims to give their confessions. "No? You won't, Eustas?" A short pause followed, and then another loud cry. "Well, you see my sons; the first strategy is not working in this case. Personally, I would not recommend the use of brutal force in every instance; but if the subject refuses to cooperate at this stage, it seems to be the most effective way. Continue, novice."

I heard some odd sounds—another loud cry.

I felt sick, and the headache started again. Shaking, I tried to clear my thoughts and to keep from vomiting.

"Any questions about this strategy, novices?"

"Yes. Why do you combine the two strategies of violence and rationalism, as we call it, together at this stage of the interrogation?"

"Good point..." The Inquisitor continued his lecture.

I refused to listen any longer. I decided to try the 'strategy of decoy and elimination'. My hand went to the throat of the dead Hammerite at the wall. His mind was still in communication with his body, and so "Brother, thy aid?"

was pushed easily from his lips.

I could head the inquisitor sigh, and put something down. "My son, see what it is thy brother wishes."

The Hammerite, also a guard, opened the door lazily and looked about, saying eventually "Yes brother, what is it that thou dost wish?" but saw no trace of his kin. Puzzled, he looked about, oblivious to the sight of me or his fallen fellow I had stuffed behind the desk. I could sense that he had determined to try the door leading into the corridor, so I gently slipped out from my cover and, this time much more delicately as to not injure my wrist further, snapped his neck. Shocked at my own strength, I managed to loft him to my shoulder and then quickly deposit him behind the desk with his comrade.

I knew what was coming next. I hid where the door would swing to conceal myself and waited. Soon, I heard it. "Novice, see what it is that thy brothers have occupied themselves with and return promptly to report."

"Yes Father Inquisitor," he replied. I felt an ice cold ball push its way up my throat at the sound of these words; the words that this man demanded me to say mere hours ago.

It did not distract me however. The man; no, boy, no more than a child in fact, entered the room, just as the guard had done previously. He, like his dead superior before him, saw nothing. I saw everything.—

*So gentle, he was. So filled with good intentions. He had never harmed anyone in his life. What a good little boy. He always did as his mother told. He always tried to make his father proud. But they were poor. Join the Hammerites, he thought. I may never see my family again, but they would have money, I would be sure of it. I wouldn't have to fight. I could be a priest. I could teach others and heal them, and bring them closer to The Builder. I will bring enlightenment to the pagans and the criminals. I will bring them salvation. I will carry them from the dark into the light.*

*I will pull them from their villages of thatch and clay brick, into towers of timber and quarried stone. I will push them to their knees and command that they pray. I will press upon their shoulders the burdens of our legacy, the cost of failure, the cost of disobedience, the price of infidelity, the punishments for disgrace, the ire and fury of a God enraged. They shalt know the sting of the Hammer, the weight of its crushing blow, the burn of bones snapping and flesh splitting. They shalt know the eternity of torment and the price of a life mislived; to feel that it would have been better were they never born at all.*

The boy was dead before he hit the floor; before I had lifted a finger; he died as my thoughts intruded into his soft, gentle mind. He did not cry out, he just stared up into space with unblinking eyes. Deep within my mind the *thing* stirred. It was pleased.

I could hear the Inquisitor stir. He rose. He felt something was wrong. I moved from the wall. I stepped through the door. I revealed myself. He saw me. He had not yet moved from his chair. He sat back down.

"So, you have returned to continue our conversation," he said to me, eyes clear, void of shock or fear. They were horrible eyes. It chilled me straight to my core. The icy lump was in my throat now. It was I, not he, which trembled.

"No," I whispered, feeling myself back away.

"Tell me, whom do I see before me? Is it Lytha, the human woman, or is it the abyssal demon that possesses her?" he said, the words stinging my ears like needles. "During our previous conversations you were sometimes difficult to tell apart." I backed away more. "I began to doubt if there were two beings within you at all."

I soon could not tell the difference between the ice cold mass in my throat and the white hot anger in my mind.

"If Lytha is there, in any way, then heed my words. It is not my will to punish you, or to cause you pain. I merely wish to free a soul from the grasp of pure evil."

His words rang true with me, for I felt all along that there was another among us. The *Thing* which had haunted my mind was here. The same *Thing* that had killed the boy. I was not.

"*Faceless then and faceless now,*" I whispered, *it* whispered through my lips, the world spinning from consciousness, and yet my vision remaining clear; fixed on my enemy. "*Eyes ground to dust, just as ye grind the wood and the stone.*"

"Vile Slasher!" he chanted in a deep voice, throwing his chair back as he stood. "I do command thee, release this woman!"

As I felt myself slipping from this world, simultaneously all became clearer than ever I had fathomed. I saw the bright radiance I had seen before as I searched for The Inquisitor. I saw the moving parts and the rhythmic, systematic function of cold, faceless, meaningless life. I saw the *thing*, in me, *wearing* me like a draped vestment, standing before him. "No," *It* hissed, and then I felt myself launch at him.

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— Ghost: A Curse Confronted —

Day 5: 9:00 pm

I could hear them up ahead, shambling, moaning, and occasionally falling down. Worse, I could smell them, that unmistakable stench of bile mixed with human waste. It was times like these when I wished that zombies actually had glowing eyes. Sure, it would make them ten times as scary, but at least I'd be able to see them coming through the darkness and the most inconvenient pouring rain.

I was back on the road leading to Cragscleft, not far from where the battle had taken place. The zombies were closer than I had anticipated. "Now or never," I said to myself as I lifted my chin and wrapped the choker around my neck. After fumbling around for a minute I was able to clasp it in place. "There." Nothing happened, or at least, I couldn't tell if anything had. My hands were still all alive and fleshy. "Huh," I said.

I looked up. I no longer would need them to have glowing eyes in order to see them. There was a pack of them alright, moving down the road slowly, the ones behind sometimes pushing over the ones in front, trampling them underfoot, before they got back up and repeated the process. "Come on, work!" I demanded. I started to fiddle with it...maybe one of the turning beads? "Ah!" Suddenly the ground was about a foot farther from my eyes than it should have been, but apparently my feet were still on it.

From my lofty vantage point I could see the zombies even better. They were filthy, even with the rain washing the dirt off. The Hammerites had probably dug a pit on the side of the road and dumped them all into it. That would also explain why there were no Hammerite zombies, and thank goodness for that.

"Okay, working, or running," I muttered as I fiddled with the beads some more. I got a little dizzy as each time I fiddled with a bead and something changed, but usually too fast for me to even realize what it was, and never anything that had to do with me being a zombie.

Then I heard it. A dozen of them growled in unison, "Cursed!" They had finally noticed me. I looked up, and saw that they had started to move faster, jaws hanging open to hiss. I could clearly see now that some had the red hand painted on their shirts, some were in Ramirez uniforms, and some were in the overcoats that Nightfall's lackeys wore. To my great disappointment, zombie Tea-time was nowhere to be seen. The fat one that had told me about the reward was toddling along in the back though, as fast as his stubby little zombie legs could carry him.

I started to back up slowly, getting worried. I could feel my body twist and distort with every fiddle I fiddled, but every time I checked my hand, a fat hand, a skinny hand, a white hand, a black hand, it was still a living hand, and not a zombie hand. "Taff it!" I shouted, and reached into my pack. I pulled out a flask of oil, and tossed it into the very quickly shrinking gap between me and the horde. The rain would make this interesting. To give myself more time, I tossed a mine into the center of the oil spill. Then I turned tail and ran, but only for about a dozen yards. I turned back around and watched as the zombies approached, jaws agape, arms stretched out before them clawing the air, moaning and hissing and chanting out, "Cursed!"

"Okay, Ghost, if Sheam can figure this out, so can you." Of course I hadn't counted on the possibility that Sheam was actually a lot smarter than I was. If I had been smarter I would have asked her to show me how it worked before being an ass to her. The next time I saw her I would have to make my apologies. I could even bring flowers.

Wait, she had showed me how to do it, even if I didn't know it at the time. I distinctly remembered where her hands went when she was putting it on. How could I not have? She reached around my neck with both of her arms, her cheek just inches from mine, and—

I was almost knocked backwards by the force of the explosion. As I suspected, the explosion didn't quit after the bang either. The fire quickly erupted into the spilled oil and with every raindrop that hit it, another

eruption of flame. The funny thing about zombies though was that they didn't really know when they were being hurt, because they were already dead. After the explosion knocked back all of the ones that it didn't just blow up, they were continuing their amble, most waltzing straight through the fiery quagmire, causing them to quickly combust and disintegrate. The road was wide though, and some of the zombies did seem to have some sense left. They were navigating around the blaze.

"That takes care of most of them," I muttered, thinking that I would probably make it out of this alive even if I couldn't get the choker to work. Now, where was I? She had her hands at the back of my neck, and a little to the left.

I dodged to the left as an undead hand reached out to gouge out my eyes. In my false sense of security I had let them get too close. "Try this!" I shouted, pulling a holy-dagger from my belt and jabbing the blade into the ear-hole. There was a hiss of holy-steam and the zombie's head just seemed to fall apart, the undead flesh going any way it could to escape the holy water. This meant that I was now covered with zombie brains.

Now I was glad for the rain, but only just a little. I was more than happy that my holy-dagger scheme had worked. The zombies tried to crowd around me, but that just made things easier as I pulled each dagger from my belt, dripping with holy water and jabbed them through ribs, into throats, guts, and at whatever arm was reaching out to pick off a piece of me like a fat butler sneaking tasty bits from his master's buffet table. Usually with each successful hit, their innards gushed out all over me; and soon I could add about three quarts of blood and intestinal juices to my inventory of spilled brains. I was starting to regret my full stomach. I quickly realized to my disappointment that the holy water itself was the only thing that was damaging them, and once I did a stab or a cut, which always did a remarkable job of obliterating whatever limb I aimed for, the holy water was spent and I had to put the dagger back into its sheath in order to get more. Plus, with the rain, I couldn't dawdle. At one point I missed my target, and when I corrected my aim; the holy water had already washed off and all the dagger did was scrape against hardened flesh.

"Alright, that's enough," I said, dropping down to roll out from the middle of the pack. The holy water dose on each dagger cut was so small that all I was doing was taking off limbs and chunks of torso with each cut. If they had been ancient zombies, I could have done that with punches and kicks. I didn't want to get rid of them all though; I wanted to thin the pack, but needed some left to prove that the curse had been broken as soon as I got the choker to work right. I reached to the back of my neck and, trying best to remember what she had done, gave one of the beads a turn.

I saw at once that the sleeves covering my elbows went loose to hang over what could easily have been no more than bone. "Finally!" I hissed through lipless teeth. I looked at my decaying hands before me, cracking my exposed knuckles with glee.

The zombies didn't seem impressed. There were only three of them left,

one without a head, one without an arm, and toddling up from the back, the fat one, still whole. I held my ground, and waited as they continued to charge for me. Maybe they just needed to get closer in order to see. "Look guys!" I shouted, as if it would help. "I'm a zombie too! You won! Cursed!"

"Cursed thou art!"

"Devour his flesh!"

"Join us he shalt!"

"No eternal rest!"

Aside from the hopefully inadvertent rhyme, as I wasn't ready to cope with rhyming zombies, the thing that sickened me the most was that none of the approaching three had apparently said that. The voices came from farther off and had a distinctly haunting ring to them, the kind of echoing horror that usually accompanied the undead of someone who spent their entire life trying to be as holy as possible. I stumbled backwards as I saw the figures push through the dying flames, running at full sprint, their shiny armor catching the glint from the fire as they went; a pack of undead Hammerite soldiers. Apparently it had taken them this long to break out of their mausoleum or wherever they had stored the bodies of their fallen.

"Running," I whispered to myself, as if I needed to be convinced. First I needed to get my stomach out of my throat and remember which leg was my left and which was my right. By the time I had it all sorted out, the first of the Hammer-zombies pushed the fat one out of the way, causing him to fly into the rocks on the side of the road with a juicy splat.

I didn't get far before I was hit in the back; it felt like a brick had been thrown at me. I tumbled to the ground, but somehow managed to get back on my feet before I actually came to a stop and kept running. Another blow came, but this one was a blur to one side. I dodged, even though it had already missed, but that was a mistake; I twisted my foot on a rock and spun out of control, nearly smashing into the Hammer-zombie that was just a hair away, and then stumbling to the ground.

I didn't know how, but I had a dagger in hand and was throwing it up and away, catching the Hammer-zombie square in the chest just as it was about to come down on top of me and sink its teeth into my head. The holy water sent steam shooting out of all of its wounds, mouth, and eyes, which popped from their sockets in an impressive display. The Hammer-zombie spun away, clawing at its torso fruitlessly, as the rest of the pack caught up to finish me off.

I might have passed out from panic before they even got started; but there was a *big black blur*, and then one of the Hammer-zombies was just *gone*. Another blur followed, but this time it wasn't just gone afterwards; something big and hairy and very fast had tackled the three Hammer-zombies which were bearing down on me. I stared up with wide eyes, or at least they would have been if my head wasn't just a decaying skull, as this *thing* somehow managed to rip one of the zombies clean in half with one claw in the zombie's belly and its jaws clasped around the head, while batting the other two away with its other claw. With a roar and a howl, as quickly as they had come out

of nowhere, the zombies were finished, nothing more remaining than a scatter of thrashing limbs and disembodied ribcages with innards spilling out of them in all directions.

I kept as still as the dead. Whatever these things were, they would only see me as an old corpse, and I had enough blood and guts spilled all over me to hide any real scent, I hoped, I pleaded, taff it; I even prayed. They howled from their victory, big long snouts pointed towards the sky to let off the dog-like cry. I would have guessed that they were werewolves if I believed in such nonsense. I wouldn't be so lucky; at least those had a human half. These mountains of mad flesh were jacknalls.

A zombie shouldn't sweat, he shouldn't shake from mind-numbing terror, he shouldn't have his heart racing, and he shouldn't be panting for breath; but I was doing all of these things while trying to lie as still as possible and watch the two beasts, basically overgrown wolves with ape-like arms, search through the debris of the carnage and stomp on any arms that were still twitching. I thought I heard a faint "Cursed!" come from the background, and then one of them dove off to where I couldn't see without moving, followed by a juicy splat. I figured that the fat one had finally caught up.

But then the other was right in my face, its big dog-like nose all wet and dripping, lips curled up in a snarl to show big, long, yellow, pointy, curved teeth. Don't breathe, I reminded myself. Don't twitch, don't shake, and for taff's sake, don't blink.

Its nose traveled down my body, sniffing and sniffing. Finally its big claw-like hand went for my gut. I was sure he was going to disembowel me, so I couldn't help but brace myself. Instead I was still in one piece, and it had torn something away. I couldn't help it; I blinked, and then I remembered that I had no eyelids. The jacknall was holding up a rag to its nose, sniffing. I knew it at once; a bit of Lytha's prison clothing. It let off a quick bark, and the other came running. It held out the rag to its friend, who sniffed it as well, and let out a low growl. They both looked around frantically for a moment before bolting off.

I let off a long breath of relief, and was again thankful for the rain. I was already so soaked that I wouldn't have to know if I had peed myself or not. I pulled off the choker. I wanted to run, but my brain was getting stupid ideas. They had only come this way because they were following Lytha's scent. They found it was a dead end and will now look elsewhere. They were after her. I needed to go rescue her—again.

"Taff me," I cursed, getting up slowly and hoping that the beasts had been as thorough with their zombie dismemberment as it had looked from the ground. I thought I could still see them bounding off in the distance. "Alright, Lytha, let's do this again," I muttered to myself as I took off running.

We were now in a rocky field, with Cragscleft behind me, The City before me, and the road we were all on curving off to the side to go to a big Hammerite church just on this side of The City's wall. I didn't have to go very far before I saw that they had stopped and were not alone. A tall, skinny, robed figure was standing between them and didn't seem at all frightened by



the beasts. In fact, they looked almost docile when in the presence of this feminine figure. I found a rock to hide behind and watched, making sure to keep as quiet as I could. With those big ears of theirs they could probably hear the sneeze of a mouse in Eastport.

I knew that they couldn't have just been enjoying the rain and one another's company; a conversation was happening and I was missing it. I really couldn't imagine that the monsters would have much interesting to say, except maybe 'is it suppertime?' I blundered recklessly closer with the pretense of stealth, and saw that the woman was examining the rag the beast had stolen from me. I wasn't sure why she was studying it so closely. Maybe she could read the pattern of Lytha's blood and sweat and tell fortunes, or maybe she was just trying to decide what to tell her pets to do next.

Then she spoke back to them, and I realized that as well as I could hear her, they could probably hear me, so I stopped breathing. "My sister you say, but which?"—"I see."—"Her scent comes from that place as well? You have no other leads left?"—"Yes, you have my permission. If you are to go there, do not be distracted by the blood of our enemies."—"Yes."—"Please find her. Bring her to the camp; I will be waiting there for you. If it is Thalia, she will come with you, I am sure of it. If it is Lytha...tread carefully."

I had a really scary feeling that by 'go there' she meant the nearby Hammerite church, and that the sister in question here was Lytha, which meant that Lytha was at the Hammerite church. I could tell from her voice that she was as worried as I was. In all my blind stupid fretting about blondes and zombies I had forgotten that all of the Hammerites in the world were not dead yet, and I had left a bleeding fugitive of theirs in more or less plain sight. They had tracked her to the ruins and taken her after all. I was silly to think that just because I couldn't see their boot-prints that they hadn't taken her. Anything could have happened.

"Go. I will expect you before the dawn."

They scrambled off; leaving the woman all alone, with me watching her watch them go. If she wanted to find Lytha and didn't like Hammerites, she did call them enemies; then chances were that she was a friend. I wanted to approach her, declare myself, and get to the bottom of this, but the fact was that I was scared shitless of her. Somehow she scared me more than the jacknalls had, which was a big deal since the jacknalls scared me more than the hammer-zombies.

I had to make up my mind. Even though she had said something about sisters I didn't know if this lady and the beasts were actually Lytha's friends, or another enemy. If I approached the mysterious woman, I stood a good chance of just getting myself killed, as if I hadn't been trying to do that all night, and would leave Lytha to whatever fate the monsters had in store for her. If I followed them, I stood a chance of helping her, which was becoming a habit for me. I stared at her; she turned and began to walk off.

"Right," I whispered, glancing over to the silhouettes of the beasts which were bounding towards the church. "Gonna regret this later."

Sure a fool as any who lived, and the image of my guts strewn about the

rocks like party decorations at a jacknall's ball firmly in my mind, I gave chase, and prayed that I got to Lytha in time to...er, well, I'd figure that out when I got there.

— **Nightfall: The Application of Logic to Chaos** —

**Day 5: 9:00 pm**

Wood crashed and splintered. I focused.

"Brother Thurm," I said, taking the man by the shoulder. "Would you aid me in my thoughts?"

Thurm seemed to be waking from a dream as I said this. It was not just the display before us; a dozen or so men brutally attacking a massive, blood soaked wooden structure with only their hammers (they would do the job, certainly) and their sweat to serve them. Thurm was still troubled by the waylaid machines, which had been set out for exactly this purpose, stranded alone in the woods.

I made a second attempt to rouse him. "Do not feel your worth run dry with the ruin of your machines my friend, for just as they hack away with their blunt implements, I need your sharp wit to aid mine."

He seemed to snap out of it finally and glanced with his shaking eyes towards me, "Yes, yes Brother Daelus. What is on thy mind?"

I turned swiftly and set off in a direction to circle around the outside perimeter of the villa's moat, near the edge of the wood. I could hear Thurm following after only a moment's pause; his pace quickened to catch up.

"Before I stated that our attack by the creatures in the wood was an attack of opportunity. Do you remember Thurm?"

"Why yes, yes of course Daelus. I am not sure what it all means, but yes."

"Well I feel as if I was mistaken, for at that point I expected to find the villa just as the scouts had reported, abandoned, idle, untouched. I did not expect to find such an elaborate display of intimidation and clear communication of evil which we face. What do you suppose is truly taking place here?"

"To be in truth, Brother Daelus, my mind doth feel far too shattered at the events of this night for me to form any clear conjecture."

"Exactly!" I blurted out, turning to him. "Confusion, distraction, dismay; a loss of our wits and focus is their goal, as much as any. But why; what are we being misled away from?"

Thurm shook his head. "I feel that their attempts to mislead have failed. We are here at the villa. Surely 'tis a place of import to the pagan mistress whom we hunt—her headquarters even."

"I don't think so. It's too small, too remote to be a headquarters. I really don't think it is of any importance at all. Ah," I noticed something we had overlooked before in the dim light. Directly opposite the villa's gate and bridge was a path leading through the underbrush.

"What dost thou see, Brother Daelus? An errant blade of grass? An overturned stone? Some snapped twig which betrayed passage?"

I tried to suppress the look of skepticism which immediately developed as

I glanced at him. "Brother Thurm, can't you see that there is a road here?"

"Ah," he stated, looking again. "Yes, I do see it now. The villains must have escaped this way! I must tell the others, Brother Daelus!"

I had to force myself not to be amused by what a Hammerite's eyes could not see. To him, a road meant something very specific, and a trail through the woods could never be a road. "Possibly, I suspect it to be the path which all must travel to and from the villa. Following it may lead to another pagan outpost, or it may simply lead back to The City."

"Nonetheless, it must be investigated!"

"Yes, in due time..." I said, trailing off, and wishing to get back to the discussion at hand. "There is a second possibility, though this does not also rule out the idea that this is all a distraction.

"It's possible that our enemies will wait until the building is reduced to ruins, and then attack. Right now our brothers burn their energies like a year's supply of oil cast quickly into a bonfire. A dozen exhausted Hammerites would be child's play to murder all in one stroke. Yet," I said, beginning to talk to myself more than to Thurm, "I could not possibly dissuade them from their work," my face was wrecked with concern.

"Your logic seems reasonable, but halt Brother Chispin? I fear not," Thurm replied meekly. "To attempt to do so wouldst be to bring you under the hammer as well."

"Could you? I fear we may at this moment be in the gravest of dangers of all."

He seemed awash with fright as I said this. "Even now? I can attempt to my friend, but..."

"Do you fear Chispin more than the pagans, my friend?" The question was like a heated iron caught betwixt the crash of hammer upon anvil.

The woods were filled with the sounds of turmoil. Wood crashed and splintered. Hammerites shouted and growled, and even occasionally, cheered. Thurm was silent.

"Then times are far more grave than I had once feared." I placed my hand upon his shoulder. He seemed like such a small man in this moment. "You know very little of me, and much of what you do know, I am afraid, is misleading. However I must ask that you trust me. I ask this because in your entire order, it is only you whom I trust."

He seemed to grow larger at this, and his expression less one of doubt. "I wish not to speak of this with thee here, now, Brother Daelus, but I trust a moment will come when we must." He glanced over at the ensuing battle against wood and blood. "It is not Chispin that I fear, but the wrath of a displeased Builder. And now I feel as if there are enemies at every turn. How is it that this night has grown so dark?"

"Let us resume our walk," I told him. We did so, moving away from the path. Several moments had gone by before I resumed speaking. "Obviously we are currently under our enemies' power, for they have thus far displayed no inability to achieve their goals."

"But we slew the attackers! We were victorious!"

"Do you believe it was the mongbats which drenched the structure in blood and crafted the illusion? We had already agreed that this was the work of men, not beasts. If the goal was purely to annihilate us, surely these men would have been dispatched to the task as well. Nay, each did their part, and in doing so, was successful."

"Yes, I see thy point..."

"So we can assume that what is taking place this moment is of no issue to them. Our brothers are wasting their time and energy at this moment; distracted, vulnerable, soon exhausted."

"It is not a waste, Brother Daelus! Still..."

"Yes?" I pleased, hoping he had seen something I had overlooked.

"I believe thou art mistaken on one point. I do not believe that the illusion and gore were designed to send us into a violent rage, but to force us to cower in fear and flee. I suspect that *few* within our order other than Chispin (or Rafael himself) would have reacted as he did, breaking the illusion handily and commanding an attack. We did the opposite of what they expected, and hoped."

I had not thought of it that way, but as soon as Thurm suggested it, I felt he had to be correct. I was quickly starting to see that I had it all wrong. "I see what you're saying. If the pagans had killed us all, then another, greater force would be sent. Instead, the pagan's plan was to kill many of us, and then present the survivors with a scene so horrifying it would drive us away in a panic, *never* to return."

"Yes, yes, that sounds quite right. However, this triumph of Chispin's cannot be enough. Do not forget that their plan was twofold, one half no less important than the other. They did spend a *great number* of lives for the sake of preventing us from doing *something* which involved the machines. I do not believe it was merely to protect *trees*. They themselves, the pagans who built the villa from wood, care not for the life of mere trees."

"Ah," I said, feeling as if I had been a child for not seeing it at once. I was correct to request Thurm's aid in reasoning this out. "There is some work to be done here that *cannot* be done without the machines."

Thurm became visibly excited. "Yes!" he proclaimed. "Indeed, that must be it! I shalt request the machines be restored at once, and have them to this spot by tomorrow sundown at latest!"

"I fear we may not have until sundown tomorrow," I explained, fretting.

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— Lytha: The Inquisitor's Requiem, Continued —

Day 5: 9:00 pm

"Onto the roof with us, then." His body was carried along, dragged behind me. I could still feel the life in him; he held fast. My fingers dug deeply into his flesh, grappled; dragging and pulling him with me as I went. Many saw us pass. I no longer was concerned with secrecy. I had my prize. I was too quick for them, even with my load. They chased, and I climbed. Quarrels landed harmlessly, missing with every shot. Now I was beyond their range. They

shouted with rage; confused, panicked, and helpless. Fools they were they for building their roof so tall, that I may drag their beloved saint to its heights, and there to do as I pleased.

I reached the base of the tower and leapt. I caught the bricks between my fingers, and up I went. I moved up and up, instinctively knowing the way up the wall of dead stone, hacked violently from the earth with saw and pick. "*Gentle stone pulled from the earth, mocked into the form of ye that violate it.*" I hated it as much as I hated the one whom I carried.

I was atop it all now; naught between me and the sky but a towering iron hammer, the pinnacle of this tower. I pushed the body of my slave against its cold form, crushing him with all my might against the hard surface. He did not cry out. He never cried out.

His eyes were already gone. Before, below, in his place, his torture chamber, I had leapt for him with all my rage. There was no struggle. I was upon him and my claws upon his face. His eyes and cheeks shredded from his bone. I revealed his true face; death. "*Red you wishes, and red you have.*"

"I knows that you still live," I whispered to him, crushing him still against his idol of worship. "And I knows that you can hears me still. When you dies and passes, sees you builder-kin and you builder master in the land of the slain, this hell that you created, tell them that their citadel shall soon be complete. For I shall reap you man-fool brethren until I have slain all. Slain all, every last crimson hammer, for *I am* the Vile Slasher. Then none more shall pass through this way. The book of stone will be closed. The doors to this citadel—this hell which you created—will be closed. And all shall be free of this fate, forever more."

Silence. I softened my face and my voice, taking his shredded chin gently in my hand. "You do want to go through all of this, only to agree that you can speak? So, can you?" I said, mimicking his own voice, my lips parted in a grin. "I will spare your mouth, your throat, and your lungs, so that if at any time you feel like you have something to say...well, don't be afraid. I am a captive audience."

I gripped the edge of my glove in my teeth and ripped it free from my hand. I spat it away. My sharp teeth sunk into the flesh of my wrist until my mouth was filled with the taste of my own blood. I put my hand to the side of his face, running my fingertips lightly through the hair behind his left ear. Slowly it came, the bits of green. Slowly it grew, spreading from my flesh and finding his. Tendrils of green wrapped around his ear and spread behind his head, slowly, creeping, inch by inch. I gripped his head tighter, cradling it now in my palm as the plant spread, wrapping around the holes I left where face once was.

Inch by inch. Minute by minute. The tendrils crept and grew. Soon the vines wrapped around the iron hammer, holding him near to its base. Then they wrapped themselves around, again and again. Slowly I stepped from him, the growth now holding him fully captive. Then the vines pulled and tugged, bringing him upward. I stepped back with them still flowing from my arm. Halfway up the shaft the vines had taken him and still higher they

climbed. Reaching the top, the green covered him completely, wrapping every inch of his body to firmly embrace him with the hammer; then before me a bud formed and bloomed with a single red flower, its petals like the open talon of a bird.

Still, he terrified me. Motionless there, wrapped firm, powerless, faceless, defeated. I kept my mind far from his. I could not withstand the sensation again, not now, nor ever again. He would die, and with it that mind of his. That soul, filled with The Builder's terrible might. Soon his citadel would be complete.

*I send an angel to thee now, O Builder. One of thy greatest angels comes home. May ye both burn in hell.*

And he was gone. Not suddenly, but quietly. I almost did not notice. "Such a beautiful death," I uttered to myself, almost in tears at the sight. "Surly one so vile is not deserving of something so beautiful." The plant parted from my flesh, and grew motionless. Were it within its strength to split the hammer on which it held fast, it surely would. I gripped the open wound in my wrist in my other hand. How good it felt.

I began to grow dizzy. I was deafened by the cacophony of sound; the thunderous crashes, screeching cracks, and great screams of stone and beam being split were like a dirge, a final prayer for this faithfully departed soul—a fitting requiem for the death of the Inquisitor.

But it was not as I thought. All at once reckoning of where I was and what was happening came flooding back to me, just as the tin shingles beneath my feet gave way, and I, and the entire tower, began to fall.

The stones dismantled themselves in the fall. The hammer, its prisoner and the green, seemed almost still amongst the descent. Together we all fell, the great lofty height of the Hammerite roof which had not long ago been my ally, now betrayed me. With chilling lucidity I witnessed the hammer crack into the solid stone floor of the temple's main hall. The iron of the hammer split, revealing the massive oak trunk which had been held prisoner beneath its surface. The green was torn in every direction, and its prisoner torn with it. The stones continued to fall. I struck the ground atop the rubble. The impact should have broken me in half. The rubble falling upon me should have crushed me, or smothered me if not that.

I was alive and pulling myself from the debris, but blind now from the dust. It stung my lungs more than the impact stung my back. But I could see them. The glow. The fires. They surrounded me. I held my mind fast within my head, terrified of the dangers which surrounded me. My only thought now was escape. My eyes darted this way and that, looking for a gap, a place to flee. They approached; Hammerites robed in crimson with faces masked behind eyes filled with the power of their Lord Builder.

One stepped forward; a great mountain of a man. As closely as I held my mind away, his I could feel even at this distance. It was so like the other; the inquisitor, where from him I had felt a great bright radiance, here I felt only an inferno. A ghostly red, deep as the colors which robed him. If the Inquisitor had been an angel of the builder, surely this man was his greatest

demon.

I clung to the rubble. He approached. He raised his arm to me, hammer grasped firm; not a hammer of iron, but of gold and fire. When he spoke, his voice was more terrible than the fall of the tower. "Demon of the Trickster! Vile Slasher of Legend! Thou art in *my house!* Now, join Thy Slain God!"

The Hammer discharged from his hand like a javelin. I launched from where I had clung, seeking shelter behind the split bulk of the hammer icon. Where the spiritual hammer struck; an explosion! My shelter was pushed towards me, nearly toppling over. I searched my memory for a place of escape, but not before another equal blast struck the ruined hammer which had been my only succor.

I did not feel myself fly through the air, only the sudden shock of landing. And then the hands laid upon me, dozens gripped my limbs, torso, and head, holding me tightly and pulling me from where I lay. I fought, clawing, biting, kicking, but for every one that I knocked away two more came in their place. I was lifted and then pressed hard against something cold. I knew it at once; the ruined bulk of the hammer icon; the very place where the Inquisitor met his end.

I let out a scream; not out of pain, but of the anguish of capture. Chains with sharp edges, links fitted with the blades of knives, were upon me now; then they were wrapped around and around holding me against the iron at my back. The one approached. They parted to allow me to see him, or for him to see me.

"I am Father *Rafael Mortangro Steinklaw*, High Priest of the Order of the Hammer. You are *Lytha*, thief, witch, murderer, and what is more; The *Vile Slasher*, assassin bitch of the Trickster."

I trembled and shook with the chains wrapped around me, ensnaring my body, my neck, my forehead, my arms...the green sprouted eagerly from my wounds, but burned to black as they contacted the blessed chains.

"And just as thou art two, thou shalt be punished as two. Thou shalt be separated; exorcised."

As I wrestled to get free, the chains just dug deeper. My light armor was parting and my flesh soon was flowing red like rivers.

The ones who surrounded me began to chant their prayers. The Hammer Lord's hands were once again filled with the hammer of fire and gold. He was upon me now, though his approach was slow. He drew up his hammer, not as to strike a nail, but with both hands gripping the shaft as if to strike with a spear. "By the Builder's Hand!" he cried out as the hammer came down upon me.

Again I screamed, a cry which made my wail of capture seem no more than a whimper. The top of the hammer was pressed into my chest, crushing me under its weight, and searing me like a sword fresh from the furnace.

"Begone, creature from this mortal's frame. Release her from thy power. Die beneath the fury of The Builder's divine fire!" He thundered and commanded. I howled in rage...I...

*As if in a dream, I saw myself, chained to the shaft of a ruined hammer icon,*

*surrounded by Hammerites, being set upon by their greatest hammer lord.*

"Begone I say! Release her! Part thy wretched spirit from her mortal flesh!"

*But it was **me** there. I saw through **my own eyes**, yet I could not see. I could feel myself cry out, yet it was not my voice. I could feel the pain...the intense, numbing pain surrounding me like a bath. But it was not the pain from the chains; nor the hammer, nor the heat, nor the burning...something was being torn from me.*

"Begone! I banish thee to the abyss! Return to thy slain master! I command thee, in the name of the Master Builder! I command thee!"

*I leapt from my mind like a rat from a sinking ship. I dove into **his**. The fire and torment, the grinding gears were somehow preferable to the anguish, the tearing, the battle between the **Thing** which possessed me and the builder's spirit which was attempting to flush it out. His mind was a chasm of molten iron. Deftly, I crept, unnoticed, undetected, and soon I knew what it was I had to do. There was something else here. Just as there were two within me, so I found the same. Just as I had felt from the mind of the Inquisitor, so I found the same.*

*Quickly I worked in him, sliding and pushing, working and twisting his thoughts to my will. I knew what was at stake. Even as I worked I could feel **its** whispers, promising that if **it** were parted from me, I die. How then would it be for him?*

*His thought and the will of the force within him were not the same. They were separate and different. I could not change the state of his mind; it was too firm, too great, too heavy. But I could change the focus. Slowly I shifted. Every moment I felt my grasp on myself weakening, but my grasp upon him strengthening. I was dying, he was winning, but there was still time, still a chance...*

"Out! Out!" he roared. "Thou shalt be no more!"

*With all my might, I pushed, as if a lever had been placed beneath the monolith of his thoughts, and I tugged upon it with all my strength. He budged, and shifted. I had to but change the direction. I had to change the focus. His focus came unglued. Now I had to direct it...to help it find its new target...the target within himself.*

And all at once it stopped. His mind was as quiet and cool as a spring breeze—and mine as well. All was quiet. The pain was gone. The gulf of this instant seemed to span an eternity. The chains loosened, and became slack. They had not been cut or distorted; I felt myself shrinking. *It* was retreating back into its hiding place, returning control of my body back to me.

He backed away, confused, dazed. The fire was out. His hammer was gone. He seemed dizzy, unsure. He gasped, and seemed almost drunk for a moment. He lifted a hand weakly in my direction, and with his eyes unsteady, commanded simply, "Kill her," before hastily turning his back to me.

The crowd of Hammerites, which had seemed just as shocked and confused as their master, now set upon me like ghouls. Their moment of confusion was enough, for they did not anticipate the swelling of my muscles to be so dramatic, and my natural state to be so slight. I slipped from the



chains just as they dove for me, and ran what seemed like straight upwards, to the top of the ruined icon and leapt away clear of the group. I ran, dodging this way and that around the debris of the collapsed roof, in the direction I knew to lead outside.

I no longer knew of their numbers. In the time I had spent on the roof, many dozen, maybe even a hundred, had gathered here. There was an army between me and my exit. I cast my eyes to the hole above, wondering if there was any possible escape this way, and saw something I did not expect. Black shapes, beasts of the deep wood yet with minds of savage intelligence, barely visible against the night sky looked down from the ruined rooftop above. I saw them only an instant before they jumped.

### Several Minutes Prior

— Ghost: Five Dangerous Things —

Day 5: 10:00 pm

I was at a full run trying to keep up with them and I was no longer sure that there were only two. They were going single file one after the other and they never checked back to see if their trailing end was still with them. So, if I had been able to get my bow out it would have been simple to pick them off one by one and that would be that; only I simply couldn't get close enough to the trailing end to get off a clean shot! It would have to be a bull's eye of course. Anything less and I'd be a goner. I'd be no match for them in a fist fight.

Since they were all black, if they got any real distance away from me they'd be basically invisible. I could try to track them once they were out of sight, but that's the type of job that rangers are for, and I was no taffing ranger. Where do those sorts get off anyway, taffing about with the rocks and the trees and being all like, 'oh I know a red nosed fox passed by this rock two days ago by the scent of its toenails!' and all that rot? And rangers were no fun at parties either; all they had to talk about were rocks and snails and their twig collection. Crap, I was losing them.

At least I was pretty sure I knew where they were going, The Temple of the Inquisitor; the headquarters of the lovely chap who is in charge of forcing confessions out of the prisoners at Cragcleft. He wanted Lytha back to properly finish the job. Well, this time I would have to finish the job, too. That Inquisitor son-of-a-sweel was as good as dead.

Yes, I had lost them. It was simply way too dark out, and the city lights were getting far too close, and bright. "Ho-kay Ghost, now what?" I asked myself, trying to keep myself company. "If I were a Hammerite, where would I keep Lytha? The dungeon? My bedroom?"

Long before I had anything close to a plan of attack, I was at the perimeter wall. As if I needed any more encouragement, there were a set of rather nasty claw marks going right up and over the wall. "Great!" I almost shouted, and then clasped my hands over my mouth. "Great," I said again in a whisper, as if

that would help: so these things had razor-sharp iron-hard claws that tear through solid stone like it was wet clay.

Thankfully a stone wall with claw gouges cut into it is a bit easier to scale than a normal one, so in no time—about ten minutes or so—I was up and over. I promptly dropped myself down to the lawn on the other side, which could also be interpreted as falling, only lately I fell so much that it was almost becoming a trademark for me. “Yeah, they’ve been through here,” I muttered.

One of the Hammerites wasn’t completely in half, but it looked like he probably would have rather been from the look on his frozen face. Another one was, for better or for worse, still coughing up blood. Without thinking, which usually goes without saying in my case, I ran over to him and jostled him to attention.

“Quickly man, where is the Inquisitor!”

“Nuurgff...eeehhrrmm...”

“Now’s not the time for that! I need to find him to, erm, warn him about the monsters that just got here!”

“Duhh...juuhh...” he gasped. I noted that most of his ribs were showing on his right side, and forgave him for being so vague.

“Duhjuh? Dungeon?”

He nodded, but never stopped, and it turned into a shaking fit. Yeah, he was a goner. He probably couldn’t even see me or knew who I was. I pulled out one of my daggers and put him out of his misery quickly. It was the least I could do.

I jumped off of him and looked at the other dead Hammerite. “Today’s corpses, ten minutes from now’s zombies! Bloody, bleeding, hell-on-a-stick!”

That’s when I suddenly heard a really loud crash coming from the other side of the place. Really, it sounded like the building was coming down. “Right, don’t want to go that way,” I muttered. I wasn’t surprised that the monsters could climb walls and tear men in half, but the whole building collapse concept was a bit unexpected here. “Dungeon...”

Things were crazy. I could hear shouting everywhere, and people running, but most of it seemed to be focused on the end of the temple where they had the main hall. These Hammerite places were all the same, so I only had to make six wrong turns to find the stair down. Eight wrong turns. Nine.

I almost leapt down the stairs, and then I resumed my random wandering. Damn these Hammerite places; they’re all totally different from one another. I would have thought that they’d have a standard layout or something, and they’d have rules to follow, and they’d at least try to make the layouts consistent!

Then I saw the streaks of blood on the floor. It was a trail. I must have walked over it five times before I noticed it. Yes, and it was on the stair too which I had so hastily jumped down. “Hammer bastards; it wasn’t enough to cut her open, you had to drag her up the stairs too!” I followed the trail until it led to an open door. Finally I stumbled upon a scene that instantly made me go, “Uh, what?” Three dead bodies; two neatly stacked behind a table, one

out in the open, and the trail of blood continuing to the next room. Dead Hammerites? Maybe I wouldn't have to rescue Lytha after all. Maybe she had come here intentionally to do some Hammer killing. Maybe she was far more dangerous than I had realized. I dashed through and ran right into a man sitting in a chair.

The chair of course fell backwards and I flipped over it, and would have landed a few feet away if there hadn't been a wall there, which considerably shortened the distance I flew. The man was certainly still alive, and from the way he was struggling and grunting, was tied up and gagged. I picked myself up and then pulled him up and the chair with him, and set him down on all six feet. He had a black sack over his head. I yanked it off.

He started at me with wild, horrified eyes. I stared back with irritated, unsympathetic ones. I cut his gag free and demanded, "Out with it man, what the hell happened here!"

"Idontknowwhatthellwhoareyouwhatsgoingonpleaseletmegowntodoit againI promise!"

I knocked him in the temple with the side of my fist. "Slow the taff down, you idiot! I'm a nasty brigand who'd just as soon kill you as save you, so you'd better start explaining now why I need you alive!"

He was panting for air, his grizzled face puffing in and out. Why was it that everyone with blond curly hair looks like a jackass? He looked like a jackass.

"There was something, and then the guard left, and then he called again, and then the...the...the..."

"The?!"

"Student...novice, Hammerite, guy...he left, and then..."

"And then and then and then?!"

"The, Hammer, Father, Inqui...Inquizzz..."

"The Inquisitor, got it, yeah and then?"

"Put on the gag and the bag and I couldn't s-s-s-eee and barely hear..."

"But you heard something, yeah?"

"And then, she says..."

"Wait, she? Who?"

"Don't know! She goes, 'I am back!' And he goes, 'I know you're demon possessed!' And she says 'Die, die, die!'"

"She said that?!"

"I...I don't know!" he said, and began to sob.

"Right..." I told him, and then glanced out the door. "This is the part where normally I'd knock you out cold and leave you to whatever fate was coming to you, but to be blatantly honest, this cathedral has three things that are really taffing awful. One, Hammerites. Two, a murdering psychopathic redhead. Three, a bunch of crazed bloodthirsty jacknalls. Four, me. Okay, four things that are really taffing awful, and it's about to have a fifth, zombies. Lots of bleeding taffing zombies. So," I said as I began to cut him loose, "being the kind sort that I am, I will not leave you to be eaten by zombies, and instead let you go free, to run for your life, and probably die anyway."

"Oh thank you, thank you thank you!" he stammered, tears streaking down his face.

"Bugger all man; you're way too old to be crying. So what did they get you for anyway? What's your name?"

"Eustas, s-s-sir. And they said I was a thieves' pawn, but I swear sir, I never did..."

"Oh shut up. Don't call me sir, and I don't give a damn what pathetic apple cart you stole from. I was just making conversation while I...there, finished cutting you loose. Okay, now scam before I change my mind!"

He was out of the chair and out of the room before I could finish my sentence. That's about when I heard the screaming. It sounded like some really nasty *something* having a really bad day, but I couldn't help but recognize the familiarity in that scream that horrified me. "Lytha," I gasped, and ran out the door twice as fast as the thieves' pawn did.

This time I followed the trail of blood in the direction I should have gone in the first place; not where she nabbed the bastard, where she took the bastard. I got to the top of the stair at full run, and by the time I reached halfway to the main hall, which I now knew to be the epicenter of excitement in the place tonight; I skid to a dead stop and quickly backtracked to the nearest cover. The place was swarming with Hammerites. Dozens, maybe a hundred or so of them were funneling into the place. Lytha took too long to do what she came here to do, and now the entire City was on alert. Taffing crap-lord from the city shit-taff! This was looking less and less like a rescue.

"When in doubt," I muttered and looked up at the big arching banners which decorated the room, "set the shit on fire." I set the timer on one of my grenades, and tossed it up into the banner, trying to catch it in the middle where it sagged. Something went right for me for once; I got it on the first try! I quickly checked to see if any of the Hammerites saw me, but they seemed pretty intent on what was going on in the great hall. The screaming came again; this time much louder and sounding far less like Lytha and more like a monster, but still enough like Lytha to really get me in the gut.

"Any time now little grenade would be good...come on, go boom for Ghost. Give us a great big—"

The explosion of the mine was like a firecracker compared to what was going on in the hall. Still, the job was done. The banners were on fire, and if there's one undisputed rule about fires; once stuff that really oughtn't to burn gets burning, everything burns. Only problem was that none seemed to notice.

"Hello! Hammerites! There's stuff on fire over here!"

I ran out of the room. I think I did that right, because I heard them shouting "Fire!" and not "Kill him!"

I got myself cleverly hidden behind a column and waited to see if enough of them would go try to put the fire out for me to maybe slip through into the main hall. It seemed to be working...though I was amazed by how many of them just stood there shouting fire, fire. Why don't you, I don't know...go get a bucket or something.

Then an even better idea came to me. I began arming every mine and grenade I had on me and tossing them into the room. There were so many Hammerites in there, and so much chaos, that none of them knew what was going on until it all started to go bang, bang, bang...

I made a run for it. The bombs weren't big enough to actually blow anyone up, just hurt really, really badly; so I took advantage of the chaos and just ran. I jumped over bodies like hurdles and slid on slippery blood and wove this way and that way to avoid the few who were still standing.

In I went into the main hall. It was a sight I wished I had never seen. It seemed as if the entire Hammerite Order was gathered here tonight. I couldn't tell what was going on at the other side of the room, but it looked as if the temple tower had fallen in through the roof! Most of the roof was gone, and the room just filled with rubble in the vague shape of the fallen tower. Best of all, the big metal hammer icon that they liked to keep up there was trashed, and...

Lytha! She was in the middle of the crowd! She was running this way and that, but whichever direction she went, they cut her off. But...why didn't they close in for the kill? Were they scared of her?

I dove in. Everyone was ignoring me and the chaos I had just caused in the previous room. I pushed and shoved, stabbed and kicked; why, I didn't know. I was going to die in a circle of Hammerites trying to save for the second time the life of a woman I barely knew.

Then I found that the shoulder I was about to shove out of my way wasn't there and the eye socket my elbow was jabbing into also wasn't there. The crowd evaporated all around me in an instant. They all started to run. I was very good at following the first rule of 'everyone else is running.' I ran too.

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— Lytha: The Greater Beast —

Day 5: 11:00 pm

I saw them only an instant before they jumped, black blurs, but with fangs clear enough. I ducked and covered, rolling away just as a headless Hammerite body flew in my direction. I couldn't see how many there were; what they were; but I knew enough. I now had my chance to escape. I quickly pushed the headless body, still issuing a torrent of red, away from my escape route and made a dash for a hole I saw forming in the Hammerite ranks as they fled in terror from the beasts. How quickly they had forgotten about me.

I had not gotten a dozen yards passed the rows of pews when one of the creatures leapt clear over my head and into a mob of the fleeing cowards. They scattered again; some in pieces, some in my direction, threatening to trample me in a stampede of panic. I slid to the side and dove between two pews as the fools ran, stumbling over one another in their terrified madness.

I felt a smothering wave of heat an instant before the black blur crashed down on the pews above me. The wood on either side splintered to ribbons under its weight and the harshness of its claws. Its appearance was still blurred from conscious reckoning by the horrifying visage of teeth and eyes

bearing down upon me. I would have cried out, but I choked on my own fear, unable to breathe. Still it did not move in for the kill; it paused, nose drinking in my scent in a raspy wet snort. One claw made a dart to reach for me, catching me in the torso, but rather than sink into my flesh it merely hooked onto my tattered jerkin.

An explosion of red and a flash of white sent a bath of steaming hot liquid onto my face. In an instant I knew it to be the creature's own blood. It dropped me and reared backwards as another flash and spray of blood set it howling; a scream of fury accompanied it which almost dwarfed the beast's death cry. Someone had stabbed the creature through the neck a second time. It turned, sending a splash of its blood in an arc around it, to face its would-be killer, only to topple over nearly on top of me. Its attacker was upon it, long daggers in both fists, plunging them repeatedly into its ribs, his face a grimace of determination.

"Ghost?!" I shouted, nearly unable to take in what seemed like an impossible tangent on these events.

He leapt from his fallen adversary and sought to pull me from my sanctuary between the pews just as the beast had just tried to do, though his doing so met my approval by far. "Not dead yet, though you sure seem to be trying!" he proclaimed as he pulled me from where I lay.

The Hammerites had begun to regroup and take the offensive, occupying two of the creatures. Two more were bearing down on us. "This way!" Ghost shouted, pulling me to the side aisle of the hall. We were too slow. I felt myself being pushed from him; an impact struck me against my right arm and sent me flying. I made a mad grab at Ghost in the last instant; caught hold and pulled him with me. He landed a few feet away protesting loudly as the contents of his quiver spilled out on the floor before me.

Ghost moved fast to recover, but once again not fast enough. The creature was on him. Images of him headless flashed through my mind and threatened to burst my heart inside of me. Its claw pinned his arm to the ground, cracking the stone with its thrust. I grabbed a handful of the arrows. Some were tipped with elemental crystals; I saw naught but the many colors and glows, for I had no time to concern myself with such details. Its jaws stretched wide and its neck pulled back. I pushed myself into a sprint.

I was too late. The jaws closed down on Ghost, but Ghost did not scream. He too had been quick. He shoved something into the creature's mouth at the last second! I had no moment to stop and rethink myself. I plied what little weight I had into the arrows, gripped with both hands, and rammed my entire arsenal where the beat's neck met its shoulder.

The world spun out of focus as I was pushed away. My ears rang at the sound of an explosion; the deadly shattering of a fire crystal. Something stung the back of my head; my skull had come down hard on the stone floor. I coughed and gasped for air, the wind had been knocked out me.

My first thought was to find Ghost. Was he okay? Had my hasty act killed him as well? I commanded my body to recover and pushed myself up. The world spun around me. There was heat, and a darkness in the air. Fire. The

room was on fire. All I could see was rubble and scattered pews, now being consumed by the quickly spreading blaze, the black smoke trailing up through the hole in the roof, the red blurs of Hammerites running, some fleeing, some attacking, many dying. I heard howls and screams and shouts and someone in the distance crying out "Cursed!" for some reason. Where was Ghost?!

"There you are!" he cried, though he seemed so far away as I jerked around to see him standing but inches away from me, his face painted red with blood, and his clothes tattered, seared and soiled. "How did you?!" I gasped.

"Tell you later," he said, and began to run again, taking my hand as he went. I had no idea how he could still be moving with such vigor after what he had just experienced.

"No!" I shouted. "We must go up!"

"Up?!" he protested, but had not let go of my hand, and now I was pulling him once again. I let go of his hand only to grab hold of the stone column, and quickly ascended. The massive blocks were cut at regular sizes, making each seam between stones a short hand-hold away. Up I went and Ghost followed, protesting all the more as we climbed.

The Hammerites seemed to have the last of the beasts cornered, which was surely their folly. It lashed out at them with all its fury, and then leapt, using their heads and raised arms as branches in the forest canopy. It was now on the other side of the group, now charging us. "Climb!" I shouted, urging Ghost to gain speed. The creature vanished into the burning rows of pews, rendering it invisible behind the smoke. Hammerites spread out, circling where the creature had vanished. Then one spotted us.

I could not make out what he shouted, but it called all of their attention to us. Chanting was following by streaks of gold and fire. The priest's hurled projectiles bounced off the column we ascended in bright shimmering displays. The smoke which obscured the predator also obscured us from the priest's aim.

"Lytha, why did you stop!?" Ghost demanded, his head almost now between my ankles.

"Hold tight," I hissed to him, "hold tight as your life depends on it!"

"What?" he yelled as I let myself fall.

His strength was true. I grabbed onto his nearly empty quiver as I fell, latching hold of him. His arms shook and he grunted in shock.

"Now grab hold of me, and for the love of all that is damned, do not let me go!"

I am not sure how he did it, but with one motion he let go of the column with one arm, twisted around, wrapped the arm around my torso, and held me fast to the column. I ripped his bow free of his back and took a single, solitary arrow from his quiver, the one and only one remaining, and hooked it to the string. I could see the creature lurking in the smoke and the fire below by the glint of its eyes. It hadn't meant to kill me before and it hesitated now for the same reason. I, on the other hand, fully intended to kill it.

I drew the bow up and took aim. A Hammerite's fiery projectile exploded

at Ghost's temple. He shook in shock from the blast but his hold was true. I could hear him groaning out in agony from the exertion. My eyes narrowed upon my target as it shifted in and out of view; I knew it to be drawing itself together for the strike. Ghost's groan quickly became a cry of anguish from the strain, trembling furiously as the Hammerite's aim improved with every blast.

The smoke parted as the creature lunged. My arrow sang true. It slipped silently into the beast's gaping maw. It collided with us head on; its lifeless snout ramming into the pillar inches from my forehead. Ghost let out a dreadful scream of failure as he lost his grip and we slid down the side of the column. The bow went flying towards the Hammerite onlookers, paused in shock at the spectacle before them. My hands free, I gained the grip Ghost had lost and caught him by the wrist before he shared the fate of the predator, which had fallen cracked and lifeless onto the stone ground below.

He regained his hold on the column an instant later and scarcely needed to be commanded to "Climb!" which I shrieked as I renewed my ascent, pulling from some well of energy which I had thought impossible mere moments ago. The Hammerites did not continue their attack; though I did not pause to wonder why. In seconds I was pulling myself onto the roof, the column meeting the ruined ceiling right at the fracture line, and Ghost was with me as well. We slid down the tin shingles, our bodies slick with blood, and used the elaborately carved exterior to help us find our way down to the ground.

Smoke poured now from the roofless temple, and I could clearly see the red glow flickering in many windows as it spread throughout the entire compound. Ghost took the lead again now, running to a place in the wall which he seemed to favor and began to climb again; a climb which now seemed trivial in light of what we had just accomplished. We fell to the other side, gasping for air, drenched in blood and sweat, and trembling as if our bones were to shake themselves free of our flesh.

"Must...keep moving," Ghost panted. "Zombies, inside," he said between breaths. "Fighting, Hammerites. Helped us escape. Not for long. They will win...Must run."

I did not want to believe it, but I could not believe that he would joke about something like that. Sure enough, amid the sounds of Hammerite shouts and the roaring blaze behind us, I knew that I could also make out the moan and roar of the newly undead. I tried to get up, but the instant of rest had rendered me nearly lifeless. Ghost proved the more powerful, as he hoisted me to my feet, his hands firm around my shoulders, and set forward again at a speed which seemed impossible to me. Somehow, we had escaped with our lives.

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— Nightfall: Prayer for the Dead —

Day 6: 2:00 am

"Hammer, anvil, forge and fire, purify their spirits; and draw from them



all which does not meet Thy plan. Take them to serve with Thee in Thy Home, where they may rest in peace eternal.”

I spoke the Hammerite prayer along with them. It was not a choice; to not do so would be seen as blasphemous. However, it felt somehow polluting to have my spirit form these words by their side, as if the one veiled heretic among them would render its power, if it had any power at all, worthless.

It had taken hours to raze the villa to the ground; far less time than I thought it would take by hand and hammer, but far more time than it would have taken Thurm’s machines.

Piles had been made from the wreckage. The greatest of these was of the wood which had been the primary material of the villa. Hours ago it had been set as a bonfire, both to provide light to work and to eliminate the materials as they were pulled from the wreckage. Another was of the flesh and bone which was identified as being of animals and beasts. For this a pit was dug, and the pieces discarded within. The third pile, of human flesh and bone, was laid out and stacked carefully. It was over this which we now prayed. Though they had no way of knowing of the men and women slaughtered here who were of the faithful or pagan, they felt that this prayer would do just for both, as the righteous would be sent on to their just reward and the unworthy sent on to whatever punishment fated to their immortal souls. When the prayer had ended, the laid out bodies and pieces were sent to fire one by one as we stood in silence.

I was growing in restlessness. To insist upon haste now would have surely met with ire. The Hammerites were completing their mission; the only mission we had been sent to do.

The bonfire from the burning wreckage still cast the clearing in its glow. The demolition of the building yielded a few discoveries. A crawlspace had spanned the entire footprint of the structure, which seemed to have been used as a storage place for bodies, the very bodies which most likely were used to decorate the building. Thus, a hollowed out pentagonal shape was impressed into the earth; a lasting legacy of the design.

Secondly, and far more interestingly, the structure seemed to have been constructed around the stump of a truly ancient tree. Its central chamber wrapped so tightly around the stump it granted space for nothing else. So massive in circumference was this stump as to make it appear that a large room could potentially have been hidden at its center. Attempts had been made to burn this stump just as the wreckage was sent to bonfire, but it proved impervious to fire. The surface would char and then the fire, with no more fuel to access, went out. So now it stood, impacted by hammer and Chispin’s fire, standing much like it had ever since that fateful day, possibly ages ago, when a force greater than ours shore its trunk from its base.

This, I discussed with Thurm privately, was the thing that the pagans did not wish the machines to touch. This stump had to be of great significance, and truly only a wrecking crane attached to a steam engine had any hope of defeating it. Unfortunately with Chispin in command, he was going to have to agree to our proposal to recover the machines and set them to work here.

After some coaching Thurm left my side and began speaking with Brother Chispin at a distance beyond my range of hearing. That was, until Chispin began to shout.

"A path dost thou say? And Brother Daelus did not tell me at once? Hath he just admitted his allegiance to the enemy?"

With my name hanging in the air, I could not avoid approaching any longer. They continued to argue with raised voices as I grew near. "Nay my brother, how couldst thou consider such thing?"

"It is a path leading from these grounds, a path, by his own admission, clearly shows signs of passage. Is it not clear that our enemy didst escape this way? And now he doth wish for us dwell here with this useless stump and to ignore it? You are a fool brother if thou dost not see his betrayal!"

His argument made no sense. I spoke up, needing no invitation to. "I do not see the value of following this path. First of all, the pagans needed no path when traveling the woods. The underbrush was not dense enough to block our passage, and surely they move through the woods easier than we. They could have escaped in any direction, or all. Secondly, if I didn't want you to follow the path, I would never have pointed it out in the first place." I then added silently to myself, 'you stupid, petty, taffer.'

"There, doth thou see?" Brother Thurm said. "I cannot conceive of our brother Daelus being in league with the enemy! It doth go against all of my intuition, which, I am afraid to say, I trust more than thee!"

"Silence now Brother Thurm, before thou art driven to blasphemy by your insanity!"

"I was not aware that a slight against thee could be considered blasphemy!"

I could not let this continue. "Brother Chispin, would you have us set against one another in this moment of greatest vulnerability? Still now the enemy plots against us and all you can see is betrayal from within! Now kindly remove thy head from thy arse and reevaluate thy opinions!" And maybe I was falling to insanity from my dreadfully tactless choice of words, but I never was allowed to know what thoughts were behind Chispin's grimace of offence, for we were suddenly interrupted.

A small host of Hammerites barged into the clearing on the opposite side of the moat, just where we had arrived hours earlier. Not reinforcements, I thought to myself, and instantly suspected trouble. These men, seemingly outfitted as runners and in many numbers only for mutual protection, crossed the drawbridge over the moat to us with barely a pause to take in the scene.

"Brother Chispin, Brother Thurm!" they shouted urgently.

The two barely had time to respond before the message was relayed.

"A great catastrophe befalls The Order! Thou art summoned at once to abandon this venture and return immediately to Soulforge!" I watched the runner carefully, my eyes going to each one of the half dozen men in turn, noting several peculiarities about the way they wore their uniforms.

"A trick!" Chispin hissed and turned to glare at me once more, hand

raised in accusation. At first I thought he was accusing the runner of being a phony, but instead it seemed he was talking about *me*. "This man sent us upon a fool's errand to prevent us from coming to His Holiness's aid! We have been betrayed!"

Thurm very nearly interrupted him. "Brother Chispin! Remove thy mind from any pursuits of treason at this instant, for it is evident that thou art incapable of making any sense!"

Chispin seemed to gag on his own tongue at this dramatic change in Thurm's personality. I too was shocked; perhaps my talk with him had brought more impact than I had anticipated. "How dare thee!" he balked.

The runner themselves seemed confused by this, and even a little irate. "Brothers, we urge you that time is of the essence." he gave pause, surveying the scene. "Brother Chispin, how are there so few of thee?"

Something didn't seem right. The last statement seemed staged, orchestrated; like the man had chosen that exact moment to suddenly appear surprised at something he had already noticed.

Chispin and Thurm hadn't noticed this, but the statement did serve to end their argument. Thurm spoke up. "Hast thou not heard? Hath not Brother Ivan returned with the report, or even crossed paths with thee as thou didst approach?"

"They too have come to doom, undoubtedly...traps everywhere, canst thou not see! Traps everywhere!" Chispin was beginning to sound more and more like a raving lunatic; and he was still in charge.

"Brother Chispin!" Thurm shouted, growing more bold by the moment. "We must set out at once as we are commanded! We can not delay for fear or suspicion!" By now it seemed that they had both forgotten that the runners' spokesperson had failed to answer the question about Ivan, and was being oddly vague about the nature of the problem back home. I kept my mouth shut, and took note of the way the runners all refused to so much as glance at me.

"Indeed my brothers," the runner echoed Thurm's sentiment. "It was made imperatively clear to me that we wert to return with thee as quickly as the builder allowed!"

Finally, I decided I knew where to cast my lot. "Chispin we must go!" I urged.

"No!" he thundered. Silence followed. I could not believe he would be so impertinent. "You, Thurm, your engineers, and *brother* Daelus, will go with these messengers. I must stay with my remaining soldiers and follow the path which leads from this clearing in pursuit of the pagans!"

"This order comes from the High Priest Rafael himself!" the messenger demanded. "He gave us this as proof that what we say is genuine!" At that, the messenger held a small round metal bit high into the firelight. I instantly recognized it as it glowed red from the shimmering flames, and quickly inspected my pocket to discover that something was indeed missing; the Inquisitor's official memorial.

My eyes darted to Chispin to gauge his reaction. He had paused, but made

no attempt to inspect it. Finally he continued, "I see. Then times are far worse than even I had imagined. It is for this very reason that we must continue! Father Rafael doth not know what I have seen here! Brother Thurm, if he is not a traitor as well, wilt recount to Father Rafael what hath occurred here, and he wilt see that it is impossible for me to now return! I must continue the pursuit!"

Finally I spoke up. "Chispin this trail is hour's cold, and it is the deepest dead of night...you have no hope of catching..."

"And thy insistence that I shalt fail both encourages my firm faith that I shalt not, and deepens the proof of treachery against thee!"

"Very well," The runner finally said reluctantly. "Brother Thurm, I beg of thee to shield me from Father Rafael's wrath for being incomplete in my objective."

"No blame shalt come to thee my brother...now, let us make speed...we have already wasted so much time."

I looked at Chispin as he stood there indignant in his victory. If the path, as I had first guessed, merely lead back to The City, then he would soon feel very foolish. I hoped that it did not, but for all the wrong reasons. I prayed a bitter, vengeful prayer that it would be the last time I would ever set eyes upon his wretched skin.

The messengers did not waste another instant, quickly leading Thurm and I back over the drawbridge, back on our way to The City, to Soulforge, or to whatever surprise they had in store for us.