

The remaining Khethra, broken and blooded, crawled towards them. Bernesse watched bemusedly as he made his way agonisingly slowly. "Surely you don't mean this fool?" he asked. He stepped over to the man and clubbed him on the skull. "Problem solved."

Otremia looked at him as though he had passed water in her wine cup. "Problem hastened, I fear Bernesse. His conscious mind was no doubt fighting it off."

The light of day waned as her words ended, although it was still morning. A piercing shriek, so loud it forced them to cover their ears in pain, issued from the throat of the unconscious Khethra.

"Get back!" Otremia hissed in warning to Bernesse.

He had barely taken a step away when the Khethra's body began to shake violently. Though the man had been knocked senseless, his frame twisted and contorted as though it was trying to creep along the ground.

The assassin's torso ruptured in several places with a tearing sound, expanding in mass dramatically as the body slithered around on the floor. The Khethra's eyes opened suddenly – a look of exquisite agony in them as they too ruptured and filled with blood. The unfortunate man mouthed the words "Kill me," before his face also began to horrifically expand. In a few seconds his mouth had increased in size fivefold, and it once again emitted a high pitched shriek. Bernesse stumbled backwards as he tripped on the outstretched arm of a dead patron of the inn.

The head, neck, and torso of the Khethra separated with a wet ripping sound and black, monstrous body segments unfolded from the spaces between them. No longer with any semblance of humanity to hide in, the demonic worm continued to grow until the remaining skin of its host sloughed off its calcified chitin hide like a wet rag. Bernesse gagged at the creature expelled the spent legs of the Khethra through what appeared to be its anus. He scrambled back to his feet and continued to retreat away from it.

The demon reared up before them, twenty feet from maw to tail, glistening black segments covered in horrible hair-like fronds which allowed it a form of locomotion. Its fang-filled maw opened impossibly wide, enough to swallow a fat sow whole. From its depths, and beyond that, the depths of the realm of darkness itself, it spoke to them in a voice never meant to be heard in the physical world. *"Freedom!"* it roared triumphantly. *"To consume again, and know the joy of raw flesh and hot blood. To hear the screams of mortals, and smell their rank fear. What pleasure!"*

Otremia crouched low, placing her channelling hand against the floor. She began to summon power into her body – a great deal of it. The head-section of the demon turned to regard her. *"Come to me female,"* it said as a shudder went through its segments, *"You and I shall dance in the darkness until the breaking of the world. Come forward and kiss me, and then you shall know peace."* Its maw began to spasm, opening and contracting for a few moments before they could tell it was laughing.

Otremia unhooked Hexenbolt with her free hand and reached over to place it at Bernesse's feet. The pouch of bolts followed. "If you get a shot – do not hesitate," she instructed him, without ever taking her eyes off the demon. "But you can throw that club away; all you are going to do is tickle it."

Bernesse looked once at his beloved club and then tossed it over his shoulder. He reached down and collected the crossbow and its blessed ammunition.

The demon's maw swung between them, as it tried to decide who to consume first, salivating in expectation of the meal to come. Otremia determined to make the choice an easy one for the demon – she launched herself headlong at its imposing mass. Covering the distance between them in a few nimble steps. She smashed into it with her enchanted fist and the creature shuddered as it felt pain for the first time in a thousand years.

The demon rose up to strike, its segments grinding again the stone of the floor as it moved. The blow was clumsy despite its power. Otremia vaulted away from it, the demon's tail narrowly missed connecting with her as she sailed away. It loosed a throaty growl of anger at its inability to coordinate, not yet fully accustomed to the constraints of physical matter. It had been waiting in the darkness for so long, dreaming of the slaughter it would beget upon mortals.

Bernesse levelled the hand-bow at the creature, but its hide was thick, no target of opportunity presented itself. He licked his dry lips, drew his sword and cursed "Damn this for a job. I should have remained a vintner!" He issued a cry; part courage and part thirst for a decent bottle of red, before charging the monster with his short-sword raised above his head. He hacked at the mottled black chitin of its hide with a desperate fury. In a few places, the blade bit deep and a

trickle of oily black fluid leaked from the wounds. The demon screeched in discomfort – another feeling long since forgotten to it in the depths of the realm of darkness.

Otremia ducked as the demon turned its head-segment to face her, she could feel the creature's movement above her as a sickly breeze that felt unclean upon her skin. She threw a punch upwards; the crunch of the beast's hide under the blow was a satisfying sound to her ears. She could feel the pulse of pain radiating out from its broken skin and knew that it would flail away in response. She reached up with her left hand quickly, gripping the shattered gouge tightly. Otremia was jerked violently into the air as the demon pulled away, like a rag on a washerwoman's line in a gale.

Bernessee watched as she flew over his position, watched the demon thrash in response to her additional weight, trying to throw her. He bellowed and began jabbing rather than hacking, stabbing the point of his sword into the creature until a torrent of black ooze gushed out upon his arm. The segment convulsed in pain, and the demon's tail rushed out to swat him away. Bernessee was a large man, but not a nimble man, and he could not avoid the blow. The impact sent him flying across the chamber and into a collection of empty barrels.

The force of the collision knocked the air from his lungs and so his cry of pain at landing was somewhat muted. He writhed in discomfort amongst the splintered planks, rocking this way and that, but each time finding a new injury. Eventually he stopped still on his back, gazing blankly at the breached roof as heavy breaths whistled past his lips.

His tongue tasted the ferrous tang of blood in his mouth whilst his fingers probed the soreness in his chest – a broken rib or two, no doubt. Somehow, he still held Hexenbolt tightly despite the impact, but the sword was gone – still lodged in the demon as it thrashed about in hot tempered pain. "I'm cursed," he coughed out the words with difficulty, as he eyed the remnants of the dusty barrels. "I get myself into a fight in the only bone-dry tavern from here to Hard Bargain. What's a man have to do to get a mouthful of something to slake his thirst round here?" The light dimmed as he considered this; his head swam and he then passed into unconsciousness.

"Bernessee!" Otremia cried as he lay suddenly motionless. She screamed in rage, a wrathful howl that augured more violence. She slammed her right fist into the demon again and again, causing a deep wound. She inserted her hand into the damage, tearing out a chunk of fibrous muscle from below its damaged exoskeleton. The demon's head bit wildly in the air, and it turned back on itself, determined to tear her away from the agonising wound. "*Pale skinned bitch!*" it hissed. "*You will be the brood mare for a thousand darkling young when I am done with you.*"

Its cavernous maw expanded, revealing even more rows of serrated teeth that continued seemingly down to its core. It lunged forward, eager to resolve its anger and hunger in a single bite. At the last possible moment, Otremia summoned the hidden doorway, dissolving away as the head took an enormous mouthful out of the space where she had been.

The bite radius was wide enough to conceal a small pony and half as tall as Otremia herself. Otremia reappeared close by through a faint blue portal as the Demon emitted a piercing wail, louder than anything Otremia had ever heard. She felt heat and moisture at her left ear and her fingers found blood there. The Demon thrashed about in blind agony, the rent in its body akin to a huge bite taken from an apple – one almost to the very core. Buckets of ichor poured out from the wound, flooding the floor in murky foulness.

As it flailed wildly it made heavy contact with the remaining beams holding up the inn's roof. The sound of cracking wood presaged another cascade of dust, followed by heavy lengths of timber dropping from the eaves. Otremia dodged one, an aged and soot blackened piece of wood that would have killed her instantly, but in doing so missed a smaller one dropping in concert. It fell across her right shoulder, knocking her to the ground. For a moment there was a dull pain; remote and yet unmistakably hers, and then blackness.

The Demon's maddened voice woke her. "*Too soon! Too soon...*" Otremia could hear the pain reverberating through that unnatural voice. It was dying. "*So much flesh to taste, so many souls to feast upon... Tricked me... Too soon for banishment... Spiteful whore! Curse this wretched mortal!*"

Otremia blinked twice and raised her head from the floor. Pain lanced through her back – a savage throbbing sensation originating just below her neck on the right side. She put all the hurt to the back of her mind as she had been trained, being no stranger to injury over the brief course of her

hunting days. Far more worrying was the absence of feeling in her right arm, and channelling hand. She was dimly aware of a weight on her back, very heavy and in her current condition, immovable. She could feel it distantly between the bursts of pain.

Otremia tilted her head in the direction of the demon's voice. It was only a little way off, she could see it shuddering weakly as it bled out.

"*Too soon,*" it sighed. With great effort, the demon stretched out its fore sections whilst pushing with its rear muscles. It inched towards the hunter ominously. "*Take the female with me. Yes! Make her suffer.*"

Otremia struggled against the weight holding her down, alarmed at how close the creature had come. Her left hand scrabbled manically, alternating between trying to push or pull, and neither yielding the least bit of success. She scrabbled around blindly for a weapon, hoping to be able to fend the demon off just long enough to watch it die from blood loss, but there was nothing within reach. Her fingers came into contact with a hand and for a moment her heart lifted in hope that it was Bernesse, that he would save her. The flesh was as cold as the grave. It was a corpse of a patron, or perhaps even a Khethra she had dispatched earlier. In either case, they would not be coming to her aid.

The demon shifted again. The imminent meal seemed to grant it some extra strength, and certainly gave it back greater focus. "*Delicious skin! Mmm. Sinew, organs, and blood. Blood! Oh to drink you once more... So sweet to taste.*" Its evil, rasping voice almost seemed jolly.

Otremia slammed her useful hand against the ground in fury, screaming out in impotent anger. Her mind raced as it processed and then discounted various methods of escape. But there were none. Her death was nigh.

The demon came upon her with another great push. Though she could not turn enough to witness, it reared up above her, maw flexing in anticipation. The demon's head-end lowered until it was just above her. When it spoke, she could feel it upon her neck. Drool spattered upon her skin, as it savoured the moment.

"I hope you choke on me, you filth!" Otremia roared.

"*Unlikely, female,*" it laughed - in that peculiar manner of something lacking a face. "*I shall devour you slowly, starting with your legs. I will relish each bite.*" It paused as it swayed to her legs and brushed up against them.

She felt its teeth rake her calves, shredding through her soft leather boots. "*The only question,*" it said with a malicious cruelty, "*is will you die before I do? Either way, I will fondly remember the taste of you while I wait in the darkness...*"

The demon drew back up to its full height. The rays of the sun, penetrating through the sundered roof, kissed its unhallowed flesh; a strange sensation for one birthed from the darkness, but not wholly unpleasant to it.

The creature rued all the sensations that this snivelling, insignificant mortal had denied it. Being banished back to its master held little interest compared to the endless possibilities of the material realm. With a grunt it opened its maw wide, and lunged for the first bite. Otremia screamed. Nearby, Hexenbolt fired.

The sound of the bolt launching from the breach was the last thing the demon heard. The projectile caught it in the throat, through its open mouth. It exploded into a vast cloud of black ash in an instant.

Well," Bernesse coughed, spitting blood onto the ash covered floor. "It appears the question was answered sooner than you thought." Otremia burst into uncontrollable laughter, tears of relief running down her grimy cheeks. Bernesse dropped the crossbow, and staggered over to his mistress. With supreme effort, he pulled the timber from her shoulder. He fell to his knees and placed a calming hand on her good shoulder while he examined where she had been struck.

"Hmm," he said though laboured breaths, "Looks like a dislocated shoulder, and a bad break on the arm. We had better get you to a healer quickly, mistress." Bernesse scooped up the smaller woman in his wide arms and carried her from the ruin of the inn.

They emerged into the brilliant sunshine outside. They were bruised, broken, and bloody. Covered from head to toe in all manner of grime and ash. The hunters were barely recognisable from the people that had entered the inn just a short while before. Bernesse closed his eyes and felt the sun upon his worn face. He opened them again as he looked down at his mistress. Her eyes were closed but tears still ran from them. His heart was filled with joy.

They were alive. That was all that mattered.