

All around her were ghosts.

The ghosts of missing friends and colleagues, imploring her to bring them home, to grant them the rest they had earned. They begged her to notice and to act, and it made her blood boil that she could not placate them.

She worked as best she could to put these worries to the back of her mind. It was important for her to focus on the task in hand: continuing her hunt for the man that was the key to everything. Only from his mouth would the questions be answered and the ghosts laid to a final rest.

She sat cross-legged in a state of contemplation within the confines of the scrying circle, the lines of fine white chalk stark against the blackened, fire-kissed stone of the floor. Three large enchanted candles, fixed upon equidistant points on the circle, held the darkness of the chamber in abeyance. A tray, containing vestiges of the evening's meal sat but a little way off, her servant having been instructed to not interrupt her vigil further this night.

Her name was Otreミア Rathe, a hunter of the Order of Maleoch: the solemn society invested with the duty of bringing users of dark magic to justice. Due to her unique style of drawing on Vanathar, the Root of Sanctuary, and her boundless enthusiasm for punishing the wicked, the other members of the Order had dubbed her the "Fist of the Heavens".

She thought the name foolish and overly-dramatic, initially chafing at the slight she felt it represented. Over time her feelings had mellowed somewhat, for the repute she had gained in her exploits now meant that name struck terror into the hearts of her quarry. A very useful tool in the arsenal of her profession.

Otreミア was a hunter of witches - known within Mellorian as Diabolists; dangerous folk that represented a great threat to the existence of the World Tree. The magic of the Great Wurm of the Dark, the power of witchcraft, was anathema to the natural order of Mellorian. It disrupted the flow of 'regular' magic, the very Roots that underpinned the fabric of the continent. As such, the Order existed to stamp out the infernal practice, one Diabolist at a time.

Though 'ordinary' practitioners of the black arts did much to hide their affiliation from society, Otreミア now tracked a Diabolist that had brazenly paraded his evil-doing, revelling in the fear and awe that it inspired in others. This one man, a wretched creature named Suleiman, brought the very nature of the Order into contempt with his continued existence.

A string of murders had been attributed to the man and his hidden followers throughout Mellorian, but none in the Order could lay claim to even having seen him. What reports they did have were the ramblings of a small number of half-crazed victims of these attacks, left alive to spread word of his evil.

Otreミア Rathe had been sent to correct this ongoing blemish upon the honour of the Order and to meet out justice upon the recalcitrant Diabolist. This would not be easy, however, for Suleiman was currently under the protection of the Khethelic Embassy in Nephastii. They had made it very clear that the Order of Maleoch was unwelcome within their grounds and to defy that would be an act tantamount to war with Khethelia.

Not only would Prince Tromath of Nephastii violently oppose any action but the majority of the other cities would surely follow suit. Khethelia, either by trade or by fear alone, held vast sway over the land of Mellorian and even the Order lacked the political might to act against it. So they sent Otreミア to watch and to wait, knowing that in due time Suleiman would slither from his bolt hole and could be brought to justice.

She had not been the first to be assigned this task; five other hunters had come before her - all of them never to be seen again. In her heart she knew them to be dead, though their souls had not been allowed to pass to the Hallowed Heavens; she felt this strongly in her bones and it brought her a terrible sadness.

The *ghosts* that swirled around her head were the memories of five brave souls - men and women Otreミア had worked with in the limited years of her service. She felt a deep loyalty and kinship towards them, a responsibility for bringing them home, even if it would just be their long-dead bones.

The faces of Otreミア's predecessors haunted her every waking moment, and the desire to learn their true fate and return them to a state of rest - rest befitting the heroism they had shown in service of the Order, was a constant distraction to her work.

These long months she had waited for a glimpse of her quarry had been the hardest of her life, and were wearing her soul thin with the weight of inaction. She was not naturally given over to patience, and she took to the practice quite poorly. Otreミア was, without doubt, a woman of action and her very being chafed at the limitations placed on her by the meddling politics of the land.

Otremia Rathe exhaled slowly and closed her eyes. She reached out with her right hand, fingers fully extended, drawing upon the subtle magic of Vanathar. From her position in the cellar of a ramshackle building across the street from the Khethelic estates, she attempted to use the Root of Sanctuary to see beyond the limits of the four dirty walls that surrounded her. The building was hidden amongst a group of decrepit, empty dwellings, the previous owners having little inclination to live aside the accursed foreigners and having abandoned it long ago.

She drew back her extended fingers, making a fist, and hit the floor suddenly with surprising force. The scrying circle blazed with magical light; behind the lids of Otremia's closed eyes she became privy to all the sights of the Khethelic compound, save the main embassy that was too heavily warded to breach. Though the distance was many hundreds of feet, through earth and through stone, her vision was as clear as if she had been there.

Twice a day, always at different times to prevent her enemy from adapting to her sorcery - for they were likely aware of her efforts, Otremia would spy on the foreigners as they went about their business. She hoped to discern clues about the movements of the Diabolist based on the comings and goings of the various servants, slaves, and functionaries of the embassy.

Unfortunately, her target had proven to be a canny one, having never broken cover from the warded buildings, but her magic was accurate enough at least to let her know he *was* still in there, somewhere. Otremia was resolved to wait however long it might take, no matter the cost to her body or to her mind. That she would dispatch this accursed deviant was a matter of utter certainty to her. Before she levied justice upon his black soul, however, she would have the answers she sought, whether he was willing to provide them or not.

Although she could hear nothing - the magic provided only visions and not sounds, Otremia was proficient in lip reading the Khethelic language. The Rathe line was not Mellorian in origin; her distant ancestors had once belonged to another people, far to the north. The Rathes had once been a noble family, or so the histories claimed, but they had been brought low by the awesome power of the sea, and were now eking out an existence far from what was once home.

The Rathes had a long history of involvement with the Khethelic peoples, though none of it good. They knew them, feared them, and hated them in equal measure. This played no small part in the assignment having been given to Otremia by her masters in the Order of Maleoch.

Through Otremia's magically-aided surveillance, it became quickly apparent that something unusual was going on in the compound. Heavy looking cases were being loaded by stewards onto a stout wagon and a travelling coach was being hitched to a team of horses. The coach had heavy doors and a covered roof, and was clearly meant to convey someone of importance - or perhaps, she wondered, infamy. Everything arranged seemed to suggest a long journey would soon be undertaken, and her interest rose even more to see four hooded figures prepare the carriage for departure.

The candles blazed in a sickly green flame as the doorway from the main building opened and a peculiar looking man appeared on the threshold. Otremia found herself uttering a gasp in surprise and her heart quickened as her eyes registered details that meant her long wait was at an end.

The man was bald as an egg, and in the torchlight Otremia could see tattoos and sigils covering every inch of his visible flesh. His looks marked him as a native of the Khethelic hinterland known as the Kush - a rich, dark skin that was the result of the sweltering climate there. An old leather satchel slapped at his side when he moved.

He brandished a curious staff, black wood wrapped around with a shocking, idolatrous image of the Great Wurm of Darkness. She mouthed a litany against evil, for the ownership of such an object was in itself a crime punishable by death beyond the boundaries of the embassy. She watched breathlessly as he moved with the hypnotic poise of a serpent, one confident in his own predatory superiority.

It was beyond doubt to her that this man was no other than the Diabolist she sought; Suleiman - named the 'Thrice Cursed' within his ill-starred sect, though she knew not why. His heavy-lidded, expressive eyes seemed to gaze in her direction for a moment as though he was looking directly at her. She dismissed this as impossible - there was no way to track her position, even if he was aware of what she was doing.

Otremia failed to notice as she rationalised his behaviour that Suleiman had smiled once as he looked - a temporary, mirthless, and voracious rift in his features. The Diabolist quickly made his way down the embassy's steps and into the carriage, his robes flowing behind him as he glided down the stone steps. No sooner had the

heavy door slammed shut behind him the hooded figures jumped onto the carriage and the driver spurred the team of horses into action.

Fearing Suleiman would escape her grasp, Otrema broke the scrying spell, rising to her feet and calling loudly for her retainer. The door swung open and Bernesse, her manservant and erstwhile travelling companion, strode through. He was a very large and jolly looking man, with thick curly hair and tender eyes. There was a large, freshly-made wine stain upon his greasy doublet.

"I see I have interrupted your festivities again," Otrema scolded him as she saw the stain. "Have the horses readied with all haste or I shall have your fat hide for costing me my quarry."

Bernesse smiled warmly, used to such threats from his prickly mistress. "So the fox has finally sprung from its den?" He asked. "A good thing too, after all this time."

Otrema Rathe stretched her aching calf muscles and sourly noted a cracking sound in her knee. Her blond locks fell to the sides of her face as she stood to full height - revealing a youthful yet imperious woman, used to more action than she had seen these last months. "Agreed, Otrema murmured. "Justice has waited too long."

Bernesse shrugged at her words. "I was more concerned that I was running low on wine actually. Another week and I would have been drinking the rubbing alcohol. You know what happened the last time that happened - I had a really terrible case of the shi-" He spun on his heels and exited quickly, as she threw a stream of curses and threats his way. Otrema stared daggers after the impudent fool. She considered Bernesse a good servant and a good man, in his own way, but by the sleeping Gods, he was too jovial for such serious and dangerous work.

She walked over to an old, fire-damaged oaken table and retrieved her panoply of witch hunting: a metal vambrace - blessed with the power of Vanathar, a collection of charms and the finger bones of holy men to ward off curses, and her personal favourite - a small hand crossbow she had dubbed the 'Hexenbolt'. The crossbow's bolts had been consecrated in the blood of martyrs, and were a potent poison to anything with the mark of the Wyrm about them.

She hung the crossbow from a leather loop that hung from her belt and strung the charms round her neck, allowing them to drop between her leather armor and her skin to ensure they would have the greatest effect. The vambrace was quickly fastened to her arm, its silvered steel gleaming in the eerie glow of the candlelight.

In the grove behind the building they had called home these last six months, Bernesse waited with the horses. Somehow everything was prepared for their departure as she emerged from the building and greeted him with a curt nod, even in the brief period since she had instructed him to be ready. It was one of the reasons she found she could not part with him despite her concerns over his temperament - he was so good at his job that she needed no others to assist as some other hunters of the Order did.

Otrema had no idea how he managed such organisational miracles, for she had rarely seen him do anything other than idling, or worse, his endless carousing. When he fought it seemed to be more a matter of comically fortuitous and drunken luck than of any discernible skill. Oddly it seemed to work, for he was still very much alive and therefore all the more infuriating.

She gave him another hard-won nod as she checked his work, to which his only reply was a knowing, sly smile. *Insufferable oaf!* she thought, before ordering him to mount. Otrema climbed onto her horse and drew it around with the reins. Without another word the horse burst into a canter and then a gallop. Bernesse smiled again as he watched his aggravated mistress depart and set his horse to follow at a more reasonable pace. *For what we are getting into, I would not hurry,* he thought to himself as he followed her with resigned but yet none the less admiring eyes. *Her lack of patience will be the death of me yet.*

The carriage came to a stop outside an isolated coaching inn, the horses tired and lathered from being pushed hard throughout the journey. The door opened and the Suleiman clambered out, puffing a breath of warm vapour into the cool air. His movements were sharp and irregular, the result of a period of cramped confinement. He peered off into the early morning darkness, looking first one way and then the other, checking for any that might

mark his arrival. In his infamy, he had not lived so long or so well through a lack of caution, or at least a lack of manic paranoia driving him to always be wary. Without waiting for his followers to attend him, he entered the building.

The inn was little more than a dirty highway tavern, possessed of a single large drinking hall with some stone steps leading up to a small balcony, and from there to a score of small sleeping rooms along a narrow corridor. Throughout the years, the inn had seen precious few travellers desperate enough to risk an overnight stay. Out here in the badlands between cities, dangers abounded.

In the early morning, some of the patrons were still awake, though not very watchful, but the majority present were slumped over tables sleeping off a night's drinking of cheap wine. At least, that is how it would have appeared to anyone that lacked the Diabolist's keen senses.

Suleiman halted in the doorway, his nose wrinkling at a familiar smell - the ferrous tang of blood. He gazed over at the innkeeper, a pale-faced and tired looking man standing nervously behind the bar. Beads of sweat were clearly visible upon his brow, despite the chill of the morning and the weak fire crackling in the hearth. Suleiman grinned slyly, as though he was aware of a joke that no one else could hear.

"Greetings my brothers, my beloved Khethra!" Suleiman called out to the room. "I see you have prepared for my arrival, though your methods have been sloppy." The wakeful patrons stood as one, casting off their look of weariness for one of bloodthirsty madness. Two hidden men - assassins, or Khethra in their native tongue, appeared from behind the bar. They wore light hoods to obscure their features, but their intent was clear. One held a wicked looking dagger at the back of the innkeeper.

"I beg forgiveness master Suleiman," said the knife-wielding Khethra. "We arrived shortly before you did and we didn't have time to adequately prepare. I had to hold my knife at this dog's balls just to keep him from mewling long enough to determine who you were."

Suleiman nodded sagely. "Very well. But now we can dispense with this charade. We have such little time to get ready that it cannot be spared on such fools. Kill him and be done with it."

Before the innkeeper could issue a protest the two assassins had plunged their blades into his neck. The innkeeper made a gurgling sound, looked at both of them incredulously, and then slumped to the floor.

A man leapt up from the floor a little way off; someone that had been wounded in the orgy of violence before Suleiman had arrived, that had been feigning death since, hoping for a chance to escape. He had thought them bandits, and assumed they would leave in due time with any valuables. When he had heard them refer to their master as Suleiman, then terror had gotten the better of him. There were some things worse than death, after all, and so he had tried to make a run for the door.

Suleiman hissed a curse and made slashing gestures in the air in the direction of the running man. Crimson rents opened up on the man's torso and blood fountained from them in a horrific torrent of gore. As the unfortunate man was exsanguinated to the last drop, Suleiman turned his furious eyes to the Khethra nearest where the man had come from.

"Inept dog!" he screeched in his broken accent. "How will you hunt a lion when even the sheep evade your clumsy efforts?" The Khethra backed away from him with fear in his eyes, and Suleiman grinned madly at him, laughing in a low basso tone. Suleiman plunged his thumb between his foul, yellow teeth and bit deep. He shook drops of blood from his thumb onto the dirty stone floor by his feet, mumbling a spell of painful torment. "Bhasshech!" exclaimed the Diabolist, before a red mist rose from the drops of his own blood and flew off in the direction of the panicked Khethra.

The assassin was lifted into the air with a screech, his torso and limbs began to expand as though he were a bellows being filled with air. The man screamed in agony, drawing a cruel laugh from the other assassins, and his eyes suddenly popped out of their sockets due to the pressure from within. Suleiman regarded him with a fierce joy, taking a couple of cautionary steps back before the man exploded in a shower of blackened offal and bone fragments.

"Kill them all and harvest some of their meat for my satchel - no more mistakes!" Suleiman hissed in warning to the remaining Khethra. "Leave the bodies where they lay, I want the world to know this to be our glorious work... Leave the usual markings." Suleiman stepped forward and lowered himself to gaze upon the still-warm body of the man he had bled to death. He lifted a lifeless arm close to his mouth and took a savage bite from it. "Bah," he spat after chewing. "Without the blood there is little taste! The flavour of these Mellorians is little to my liking."

Suleiman rose to his feet. "May your feasting be better than my own, children of the Dark One," Suleiman called out cheerfully. He walked past his followers, up the stone steps and towards one of the rear

rooms, to prepare himself for the arrival of a very special visitor. The sounds of his allies greedily ripping into the flesh of the dead sent a thrill through his body. *A father is always happy to see his sons eat, after all, he thought* to himself as he left them to their dark meal.