

"Mindless dog!" Suleiman shrieked angrily, driving his dagger down through a rent in the floor, and plunging it into the creature. The magic that contained its form exploded in a shower of tainted blood, banishing the monster back to whatever hell it had been summoned from. Bernesse fell to the floor with a grunt, pleased to be free, yet now feeling quite alone and overmatched. The creature's explosive demise had saturated the entire area and Bernesse slipped onto his back as he tried to crawl away from the Diabolist.

Suleiman wiped the creature's ichor from his eyes. "Do not fear that she has left you," he said to Bernesse as he got to his feet. "She is not the type to abandon an ally, regardless of the danger." Suleiman snatched out at his staff, grasping it with his bloody, slippery hand. "Still, Suleiman said, matter-of-factly, "patience is not one of my virtues. Perhaps she needs an inducement to return with greater haste."

He gestured a single slash with his dagger and spoke the words of the Eviscerating Curse. A long red line opened in Bernesse's stomach and blood slowly bubbled out. Bernesse groaned. "I will not bleed you dry," said the Diabolist as he walked towards Bernesse, his feet squelching in the remnants of the creature's blood. "Unless she keeps me waiting, of course. Then I will peel the flesh from your body and force you eat it."

Suleiman loomed over Bernesse, his control of the dark magic strong enough to staunch the flow of blood to what he considered a mere trickle. He turned to his Khethra. "Prepare yourselves. She will not give him up without a fight."

"Your will, master," said one.

"I shall bring you her he--"

A portal opened behind the second Khethra and Otrema darted out. She raised her arm swiftly, aiming a reloaded Hexenbolt directly at Suleiman, but his Khethra guards moved to engage her before she could release the shot.

Suleiman snarled and threw a blast of wind towards the three of them, not wanting to put his safety solely in the hands of underlings. The gust pushed an assassin into the path of Otrema's shot as she pulled the trigger, taking the bolt destined for his master. The man exploded into black flame, temporarily obscuring Otrema and allowing her a moment to summon another doorway. She disappeared as rapidly as she had arrived; leaving the remaining Khethra confused yet wary.

Suleiman roared in fury. He placed his thumb into his mouth and bit deeply; shaking his accursed blood all over Bernesse. In his mind, the time for *kindness* was now over. The time for suffering had truly begun. He began to recite the Curse of Swelling, a cruel smile growing on his lips. The servant of his enemy would die screaming, and his mistress would follow in a like manner. Then Suleiman would simply take what he wanted from her lifeless corpse.

Suleiman called on the aid of the Great Wyrms of the Dark, the source of his vile magic. He felt the power of the Immach add to his own considerable abilities, and was strangely comforted by the alien strains of speech he could suddenly detect in his own words.

A blue flash of light at his feet surprised him, halting the incantation, and he felt hands on his ankles. He was wrenched down and through the magical portal and for a brief instant he free fell through a vortex of energy before rematerializing. He crashed to the floor, landing painfully upon stone in a heap of sore limbs. His golden-crested staff landed with a clatter behind him, the vibration of the ebon-wood thrumming loudly at the impact.

He was back in the drinking hall, just a little way off from where he had just been. He looked up and saw Otrema standing triumphantly over him, an amusing reversal of fortune that caused him to giggle manically. "You cannot kil-"he began, before she started pummeling him with her enchanted fist.

She rained down furious blows upon Suleiman's body, and each was met with the snapping of bones and a wet, dull thud as her magically-infused strength brought ruination to the Diabolist. Her rage was still unsated long after he stopped moving - Otrema could not fight her base need to reduce this creature to a bloody smear upon the ground.

The remaining Khethra assassin, drawn by the sounds from below, appeared on the balcony. "Master!" he shrieked in anguish, as though he had felt the blows on his own flesh. Otrema ceased her assault upon the corpse of Suleiman and turned to her enemy. She raised her bloody hand and beckoned mockingly for the man to come closer. "Come and join your worthless master!" she taunted.

Without warning, the building shook violently; both Otrema and the Khethra were thrown to the floor. The Khethra, having been at a greater distance above it, fared rather poorly; landing sharply upon his shoulder on the stone slabs below the balcony and loudly snapping his clavicle. At least that is what Otrema discerned from the sound and his subsequent yelp of pain.

The walls continued to shake. Clay urns, metal tankards, and casks of small beer fell from the shelves and tables to smash or clatter on the floor. Benches were upended; dust was shaken from the thatched ceiling, blanketing the entire room in a grimy grey powder. Far above, in the eaves of the inn, there was an ominous cracking sound coming from the timbers.

Otrema's thoughts went at once to her companion Bernesse, injured and no doubt in need of her help. She tried to stand, to acquire the requisite balance needed to cross the room to the balcony and the corridor where he waited, but the chamber shook so violently she could not gain purchase. The timbers above cracked again and she gazed skywards, only to see the main crossbeam snap and fall. Her hand was already forming the shapes of the hidden doorway as the beam fell, and its impact would have surely killed her had she not escaped into a portal at the last moment.

She crawled from the magical vortex a few paces from where Bernesse lay motionless. The whole building was still shaking, making standing difficult, so she crept through the foul red muck on her hands and knees to reach him. She checked for a pulse at his broad neck, and her heart was filled with joy and relief to detect it, albeit faintly.

She gently drew the shape of a circle around his wounded stomach and then slapped her hand, face down to his flesh. Her magic fused the rent in his flesh, and delicately reknit his broken arm. Bernesse awoke with a start as the magic's burning purity seared through him. Otrema looked at her handiwork, noting that he would always have a nasty scar to show for his troubles. She smiled as she imagined the scene in the future: Bernesse would no doubt show it to a pretty tavern wench or two as part of this story. Embellished, of course, with a more pivotal role for *his character*.

"Peace, Bernesse," she said soothingly as she patted his chest.

The big man coughed wetly, some blood was still lodged in his throat. "Is... he... dead?" he spluttered.

Otrema nodded calmly. "We shall not have to listen to his prattling any longer. Now, let us leave this place before it becomes our tomb."

Bernesse ran his tongue over dry, spilt lips. "Could we check if any wine remains? My thirst is a danger from which I still may not recover!" The sound of bottles smashing downstairs as the building shook itself apart made Bernesse wince. The stern look on his mistress' face only added to his disappointment.

"I can again break whatever I have fixed, you know," she said with false exasperation.

He coughed a laugh, expelling the rest of his blood as he sat up and spat.

Just as sudden as the shaking had started, it subsided. Otrema shrugged her lack of understanding to Bernesse as she got to her feet, gripping his hand as he also rose, though somewhat shakily. "This place is still a death trap. Let's get out of here right away," she said. Bernesse was wringing out some blood from his cuffs with a perturbed look on his face. "Just for once, mistress, I would be glad of a foe that didn't bleed on us. How am I to get our clothes clean from this muck?" He rubbed the cloth furiously. "What we need, basically, is nothing that makes us any dirtier than we started out. We should determine whatever that could be and hunt it instead." Otrema raised an eyebrow, "Perhaps next time, Bernesse," she said, unconvincingly. "Time to leave."

Bernesse put his hand on her shoulder, seeking to steady the spinning in his head, and they both made their way back down into the inn. A shaft of light pierced through the roof in the place the crossbeam once occupied. It revealed, in the brilliant light of day, the ruination strewn throughout the chamber: of flesh and of stone. *The sooner I leave this place behind the quicker I can try to forget about it*, thought Otrema.

The broken, but none the less familiar sound of mad laughter rang off the stone walls.

A blood-streaked hand gripped the top of the huge fallen crossbeam. There was a grunt and Suleiman pulled himself onto it with great effort. He laughed painfully at Otrema's surprise, and dismissed Bernesse's aggressive push towards him with a weak wave of his hand. Otrema was beyond alarmed to see that his wounds were beyond fatal, yet somehow the Diabolist still lived.

"Thrice...cursed." Suleiman struggled to make the words, such was his pain, and such was the damage done to him.

Otremia's keen eyes detected the movement of something slithering just beneath his skin, and recoiled from the sight of it. She extended an arm to prevent her angry-looking manservant approaching the Diabolist. "Bernesse; be wary," she said, confusion and caution in her voice. "The darkest magic is at work here."

Suleiman chuckled, and spat out a molar. "Thrice-cursed am I," he wheezed painfully. "My soul is claimed by three masters, for three times have I bartered it for power." He reached a dirty finger into his mouth to probe at the gap left by the tooth, wincing at the sore flesh and quickly retracting it. "Three times have I accursed myself in the eyes of your sleeping Gods."

He howled as his right arm, bent and broken in at least four places, reset itself sharply. "I shall not die until the day they agree which one shall feast upon my soul in the darkness... It appears today is not that day." He smiled at the hunter through a broken mouth. "Though, if it is any consolation to you, the pain I feel now is keener than you can imagine." His spine clicked into place with a horrific grinding noise and his wild eyes rolled as he almost lost consciousness.

Suleiman pushed himself up to his knees slowly, with exhausted muscles. "You have won this day, Otremia Rathe. For that I give you much credit. But, in the end, you *will* die screaming at my hands," Suleiman smiled again. "If you live that long, anyway." He threw back his head and began to howl words hurriedly in clipped Khethelic speech.

Otremia released her grip on Bernesse and leapt forward, "Don't let him finish!" she snarled as the Root of Sanctuary flooded through her.

Bernesse raised his club and charged the Diabolist with a fierce cry. "For the Order!" he bellowed.

Suleiman's voice grew louder, yet more distant, as though coming from somewhere near and far at the same time. Otremia's fist passed through Suleiman as he exploded into a swirling tempest of coarse desert sand. The abrasive wind scraped at the flesh of Otremia and Bernesse as it blasted through the room. The sentient gale funnelled around Suleiman's staff of office, lifting it into the air and then out of the doorway. All that was left to them was the echo of the Diabolist's voice. A single word reverberated within the shattered confines of the inn: "Varag!" "Come!"

"Shit," said Otremia as she brushed sand from her bodice.

Bernesse stared agape at his mistress, for he had never heard her cuss or even suggest that she knew of the word. "I take it, mistress, that something awful is about to happen?"

Otremia nodded. "You recall what you hoped for? That clean fight?"

Bernesse nodded, grimacing at the worlds that would surely follow.

"Not very likely," she said apprehensively. "We are about to have company, and not very pleasant company at that. He has called forth a demon."

"Oh..." he sighed. "Shit indeed."

To be concluded...