

The last tendrils of mist were obstinately hanging on under the assault of the morning sun as Bernesse and Otrema Rathe rode up to the highway inn. Even from a distance, they could see that the embassy carriage had been abandoned. The horses still struggled wearily against their harnesses, and no attempt had been made to release them to feed and rest. Otrema smiled, drawing the conclusion that they had not been far behind their target. She did not consider that anyone would leave their mount to go lame unless they were in a great hurry.

She signalled to Bernesse to circle round the building, checking for any signs of ambush, while she dismounted a little distance from the carriage and the entrance to the inn. Otrema secured her horse to a stout railing, drew her crossbow from its loop, and stealthily approached, wary of anyone that may be hiding within. Her spells had revealed that a party of at least four others had left with the Diabolist, and so caution was required. The protection afforded by her charms would reveal the presence of a witch, or deflect a curse, but would do nothing to show where a man might be hiding in wait to cut her throat.

The air was chill and the morning quiet, far too quiet for her liking. The sound of birdsong could be heard from a copse of trees back down the road but precious little else. The inn was the only building as far as she could see, with naught but unploughed fields all around.

Otrema threw back the carriage door and pointed her crossbow into the breach, but to her disappointment found the carriage was empty. She scowled as her expectation of a fight was momentarily quenched and at the same time her nostrils were assaulted by a rancid smell of sweat and the lingering malodour of far worse.

Bernesse appeared to her right, having completed his scouting mission around the small building. He shook his head in silent reply to the question in her eyes: he had found no sign of anyone outside. Otrema was further emboldened; it appeared that they would now catch their foe unawares – dramatically improving the odds, even against a numerically superior opponent.

She signalled for Bernesse to dismount, and he did so, drawing a short sword and a stout club from a saddle pack before joining her. Together they quietly made their way to the doorway of the inn, pausing briefly on the threshold to silently wish each other a blessing of fortune before crossing over.

The air inside was foul with the smell of spoiled meat; of corruption and the hint of sweetness that came from decay. All around, on the walls and the floor, were splashes of drying blood and pieces of human flesh. Ravaged corpses were strewn about the inn like two-penny puppets after a show. It was terrifying to recognise, even for hunters who faced this truth time and again, that there were those in Mellorian who could perform such abased and evil acts. Those savage hearted men and women who could discard a person as though they had been no more than a spent leg of roasted chicken. Within a half-breath, Otrema knew the scene before her would be etched upon her memory until the day she died. In this place, true evil had come a-calling.

Otrema, sensing an imminent danger, swirled her right hand in the air, drawing a circle of protection. The air around the hand sweltered as a wave of blistering force erupted, forming a shield of superheated air that quickly expanded around her to form a shield. A small but perfectly-weighted blade hit the barrier a moment later and ignited, its fabricommel burning away instantly and its metal superheated as it was held suspended in the air by her magic. The blade turned molten and trickled onto the ground where it hit the cold stone with a fizzle, leaving small shining pools as it cooled.

Bernesse bellowed a warning as three assassins leapt from behind the bar in a blur of dark, hooded robes and shining steel. Otrema clenched her fist tightly, drawing the threads of the magic that held her defensive shield in place before releasing them with a dismissive flick towards the hooded assassins. The wave of heat blasted them backwards, transforming their flesh, bones, and clothes to smoking ash.

She turned and saw three more Khethra; fanatic assassin-adepts of the Wyrms. They slashed at their own arms with daggers, and spat words of power with a limitless malice. Where their blood hit the floor, a foul black mist began to rise. Otrema had seen the like before, the hunters of the Order of Maleoch had to be well versed in the weapons of the enemy or they did not survive long.

"Come to me!" she shrieked at Bernesse. "They invoke the Breath of the Dark One!" He gripped her with huge arms, almost concealing her torso behind their prodigious girth, and he closed his eyes tightly, offering up a prayer of his own for their safety. Otrema almost buckled under his weight, but she did not falter, she could not or they would both die.

The mist blossomed into a billowing fog, replete of a horrific darkness that seemed to devour the light of the chamber around it. The fog flowed along the ground like a serpent encroaching on prey, and where it passed the flesh was stripped from any corpse that littered its path. As the cloud of darkness broke upon Otrema, she shone with a dazzling azure light - her collection of charms fighting the entropic energies of the black magic with a blinding intensity.

The cloud encircled them, trying to probe and then break through her defences with a malevolent sentience of its own. Otrema, concerned but secure in her faith and power, placed her hand on the shining vambrace affixed to her left arm. Her eyes filled with a white light, giving her a look of inhuman grace, and her voice took on an otherworldly air. "Begone!" she thundered, expelling her lungs in a great rushing torrent of air and dissipating the evil magic of her enemies.

Throwing off Bernesse's arms, Otrema Rathe sprang forward toward the group of Khethra, covering the distance between them in the space of a few heartbeats. Her eyes, now returned to their normal periwinkle hue, were filled now with an indignant fury and a desire for righteous justice. As she launched herself forwards she drew back her right hand; forming a series of nimble arcane gestures before bunching her hand into a tightly-closed fist.

The power of the Root of Sanctuary formed a nimbus around that fist that burned so brightly everyone else shielded their eyes. Otrema released her rage in one great blow, and as it contacted the first Khethra, the man's body flew backwards through the air though struck by a bolt of lightning. The body travelled over twenty feet before it hit the far wall with a sickening thud, sliding to the floor in a mess of blood and broken bones.

She landed with the poise of a hunting cat, spinning her body in a fluid motion and trailing her arm in a great arc, smashing her empowered hand into another assassin's face, crushing the man's skull instantly. The third Khethra jabbed out his dagger at the hunter, but she stepped back and away from the clumsy blow.

The man lunged again, but Otrema blocked the over-handed attack with her vambrace, causing Hexenbolt to almost slip from her hand under the force of the impact. At the same time, she slid her boot down the leg of her opponent, putting her weight into the connection at the man's patella and displacing it with a muffled crunching sound. The Khethra bent forward in extreme pain, head dropping low as he let go his weapon and went to grip the injured leg. Otrema pounded the back of his skull with such force that his head cannoned into the stone floor and cracked like an over-ripe cantaloupe.

Breathing deeply with an air of satisfaction, she turned to Bernesse - paying no further attention to the carnage she had wrought - as though it had been the most normal thing in the entire world. "There are more in hiding, no doubt," she warned. "Be vigilant, unless you wish to join the mountain of dead within this chamber."

Looking unusually sombre, Bernesse nodded sharply. "Aye, my young mistress. This is shaping up to be a bad day, and no mistake. I could do with a drink right now," he said, licking his lips. "Something to wash the taste of the dead from my tongue."

Almost in answer to their words, a Khethra appeared on the balcony at the top of the stairs. He waved his hands menacingly and began to incant some sort of curse upon the hunter in his harsh and guttural tongue. Otrema looked up, and calmly fixed her position, raising her left hand and levelling Hexenbolt at the hapless fool before releasing the trigger.

The quarrel flew true, and pierced the man deeply in his abdomen, causing him to holler in pain. The stricken Khethra barely had time to look down at the agonising wound and reach to try and remove the bolt, before he suddenly burst into black flames, and fell like an immolated star to the ground below.

From further down the corridor, the hunters heard the sound of a heavy staff tapping on the wooden floorboards as its bearer moved somewhere in the distance. Warding Bernesse off with a shake of her spent crossbow, Otrema approached quietly, stepping over corpses warily in case another assailant lay in wait. She swiftly climbed the stairs and stood defiantly at the neck of the corridor, waiting for her quarry to appear.

A door at the end of the darkened, windowless corridor duly opened, its rusted hinges groaning at the movement. The faint torchlight from Otrema's end of the corridor reflected on something just beyond the doorway, almost beyond the light.. Her eyes focused into the gloom and detected there the polished, golden edifice of the Wyrms that sat atop Suleiman's staff. For the merest of moments the sight transfixed her with a sensation she had not felt for some years: the pang of fear.

Otrema drew a minute sliver of Vanatharic energy from her vambrace, breaking the spell of disquiet surrounding the Diabolist. Suleiman's round, bald head emerged from the darkness of the chamber, bearing a grin of insane and irrepressible joy. The rest of his body followed in an odd shuffling gait, slightly mesmeric to watch, interspersed by the tap of his staff on the floorboard as he continued towards her.

Out of the room, Suleiman stopped a few paces along the narrow corridor. Now clear of the limiting height of the bedchamber he stood proudly and raised his hand in a traditional welcome. "Greetings hunter of my brethren," Suleiman boomed – a strong and oddly charming voice emanating from a shallow-looking chest. "I have been waiting for you to come. I am glad that you have made all haste, for I have many labours and I do not wish to tarry. We must speak, you and I." "I have not come here to gossip with you in the manner of some bored fishwife", Otrema replied sharply. "Yet speak with me you will," he chuckled, "for I sense in your heart you have questions that only I may answer."

Otrema said nothing for a short while, placing the empty Hexenbolt back in its loop at her belt whilst she let the silence hang in the air. *A talker then, she thought to herself. There shall be no discourse between you and I foolish man; only my questions and your answers, interspersed with shrieks of your pain.*

She felt Bernesse arrive behind her, smelling his potent, wine-sour breath on her neck. Though he could aid little against a foe such as this, his presence was oddly comforting. A small light against all the darkness arrayed against her.

"I shall take the answers I need as you lay broken at my feet," she finally answered. Without further delay, she leapt into the air and summoned the power of Starfall once more, hoping to shatter his confidence and his body with one judicious strike.

She had travelled only a small distance through the air – far too little to put Suleiman within her deadly reach or to complete the gestures needed to channel her magic, when the Diabolist swept out an arm in a great arc and shrieked an ancient, unknown, word of power. A potent gust of wind blew her back five paces into Bernesse, colliding with such force it pushed the large man back a few steps and left Otrema scrambling on the floor. "You shall not approach me unless I wish it!" Suleiman taunted his enemy. "I do not wish to feel that savage hand of yours against my sanctified skin. Threaten me not, or you shall know pain." Suleiman flashed another disturbing grin as he ran his free hand over his smooth scalp.

Otrema scrambled to her feet and placed her hand on the wall of the corridor, tracing the lines of another spell into the woodwork. As her fingers moved they scorched a symbol into the surface. She felt great power answer her call and flow through her channelling hand into her body. The immense strength of the heavens and the earth, the natural order of things, streamed into her mortal form and for the briefest of time she felt truly without limits.

Suleiman hurriedly drew some scraps of raw meat from his satchel bag and stuffed them into his salivating mouth. His mad eyes widened in ecstasy as he savoured the taste of the bloody repast. He whispered a few dark words of magic, before forcefully spitting gobbets of the unwholesome feast onto the floor.

A hideous shriek emanated from under the floorboards, and the planks buckled as something huge moved beneath them. Writhing tentacles of dark magic erupted from the floor, splintering the wood and grasping at the limbs of Otrema and her companion Bernesse. Otrema's arm was dragged away from the wall and her connection to the Root of Sanctuary was disrupted before she could complete her spell.

"Mistress," Bernesse spluttered in disbelief, "I can't move!" He puffed as he struggled against captivity, groaning as a bone in his arm cracked under the pressure of the restraining magic.

Otremia tried to turn to him and offer assistance, but the more she moved, the more tightly the tendrils of dark magic gripped her. As she struggled, she could see something moving below the broken floorboards at her feet, something foul, and something impossibly alive. Bizarre fang-toothed mouths opened and closed on the surface of the creature that hid below them, flowing along whatever passed for its monstrous skin like leaves on a river.

Otremia's eyes hurt merely to look upon it, to see madness born of the realm of darkness given a physical form. "Do not fear, Bernesse!" she hissed through her own pain, as a tentacle pinioned her right arm into the air, preventing her from moving it her from casting any of her own spells.

"But that's my good drinking arm," he murmured, coughing out a broken laugh. "The other one will be too slow to keep up with my thirst."

Otremia laughed, a ludicrous response in light of the situation, but she could not help it. She cursed herself for encouraging such behaviour, but it did help to allay the concerns in her heart at being ensnared so easily.

Suleiman finished chewing the flesh and sighed contentedly. "There," he said in his honeyed but broken accent, "that is much better. I cannot have you free to invoke your sorcery, that would invite much undue... unpleasantness." He came over to her, the rap-rap of his staff accompanying the soft patter of his bare feet. As he approached, Otremia began to detect his rancid odour – the same foulness she had sensed in the carriage outside. It was the smell of corruption that she had long associated with witchcraft and with evil.

The Diabolist stood his staff against the wall, propping it reverently against a door frame. He got onto his knees, wiping his bloody hand upon his dirty, faded black robes. He issued a shrill whistle and two doors opened back down the corridor. Two Khethra, the last survivors of his little band, appeared at the summons, standing patiently ten feet away with a look of victory on their kohl-rimmed eyes.

Suleiman shifted closer to Otremia, his knees cracked as he did so, momentarily interrupting that alarming smile that seemed permanently affixed on his round face. She saw him for the first time closely, noting his rank teeth, his even worse breath, and the curious tattoos that seemed to cover the entirety of his skin. Tattoos that fogged her mind when she looked upon them for too long.

Most of all she could see a fierce intelligence in his eyes; not a replacement or a competitor for the madness that she had seen earlier but rather a fuel for it. She shivered at the thought. Never before had she faced one such as this man; a Diabolist that could actually exceed her power. A man of great intellect and even greater insanity that was undoubtedly beyond all reason and morality.

Suleiman laughed guardedly as Otremia examined him. "Mmm, yes. This face I have seen before, girl. Many times. You wonder how I, what you would consider a mere Diabolist, can overpower you so easily."

Otremia sneered. "There is nothing about you I find remotely interesting other than the moment I shall be able to kill you." She forcefully pulled against the dark magic restraining her but it only resulted in being pushed down, closer to the floor.

"Come now," Suleiman chided, "I expected less petulance from the renowned Otremia Rathe. But then again, you are so very young." He looked into her eyes, and he saw confusion and yes, perhaps also some fear burgeoning there. Victory swelled his chest, as it always did when he closed in on his quarry. "Are we not civilised enough to speak without threat and artifice? I would speak with you as an equal if you mind your manners."

Otremia noticed that he was wearing a necklace hidden under his robes – the rough hempen string seemed to pull at the flesh of his neck, as though something was weighing upon the thread. He followed her eyes and his eyebrows rose in response.

"Ah yes," he purred. "You have sharp eyes." Suleiman reached under the folds of his robes to retrieve his necklace. The smell around him immediately worsened as he dragged something from beneath his robes and unclasped the rough metal clip holding it in place at his neck.

He held it aloft, a sickening and outrageous defilement of the dead – a string of human tongues, ripped from the mouths of the dead and the dying. Tongues marked with arcane symbols and encrusted with what smelled like bodily excrescence. Otrema wrinkled her nose, repelled at the depravity of the Diabolist. Suleiman laughed, and this time the sound of mirth was genuine enough to believe.

“Child!” he hooted. “You reveal your foolishness. To shy away from such power instead of embracing it – this is why you cannot defeat me!” Suleiman continued to laugh as he shook his head. “This,” he said as he shook the necklace of tongues at Otrema, “is named the ‘Tret Immach’ in my language. Roughly translated it means-”  
“The Essence of Words,” finished Otrema, transfixed by the horror of it.  
“Good! Very good,” agreed Suleiman in a pleased tone. “I had forgotten for a moment that you speak the Khethelic dialects. But are you aware of its use?”  
Otrema shook her head; her eyes were still drawn to the grizzly trinket.

Suleiman nodded upon receiving the answer he expected. “The tongue is an organ of great power, you see,” he said, speaking more to himself than to Otrema whilst marvelling at the revolting sight dangling before his eyes. “Words are the gateway to the realm of magic – the forces of creation, of change, and of death.”

He saw the doubt in her eyes, the denial of his words. “Ignorance!” he barked at Otrema, his eyes wide with the self-assurance of his own knowledge. “Everything you think you know is false. You have vainly built a temple to your own wisdom upon shifting sands. You drown in the waters of your own foolishness even as you complement the taste of that which drowns you!” His lips pursed into a sneering grin. “How you Mellorians look down on those such as I, those of the truth faith, when you are nothing more than paupers fighting over the scraps of a once great feast! Digging the dregs of power from the ground like animals.”

He paused for a moment, looking down into the eyes of his enemy, revelling again at how defenceless she was before him. Suleiman even considered for a moment of taking further pleasures, but thought the better of it. Time was an enemy even he could not defeat... Yet. Otrema saw that decision play out in his eyes, and every second felt like a lifetime. She did nothing to alter it, remaining quiet to buy more time to discover a means of escape.

Suleiman paused, taking in a calming breath to clear his mind. “For those that have spoken the words of power, a splinter of that energy is stored forevermore within this-” He pointed a dirty finger directly at his tongue, and it darted out in response to absentmindedly swipe across his grime-filled nails. “The tongue never forgets,” he continued, “even if we do.”

He earnestly kissed a tongue on the string, a mottled blue ruin of decaying muscle. “For each of these *jewels* on the Immach more power is added – and now, as the bearer, this power is mine to command.” He drew the necklace back over his neck, fastened the clasp and slipped it back beneath his robes.

He smiled; an almost friendly expression had it not originated from the face of such a man. “When I call upon my magic, I call not only with my own voice but with many others. What hope can your pitiful, amateurish skills have against this?” He snorted in contempt. Otrema fixed him with her pale blue eyes. “Release me and I shall answer that question for you,” she commanded.

“It is a question that is often asked by men such as you, small men with small dreams and poor imaginations. Small in every way that counts.” Her words probed for a weakness, anything she might exploit. Suleiman raised an eyebrow and sighed, disappointedly. He tried to ignore the smile on Bernesse’s face, yet he resolved to hurt him badly later and make him regret the insolence of it.

Trying to maintain his façade of civility, he carried on in spite of her provocative words. “It might interest you to know,” he explained dryly, “the creation of the Immach is an ancient skill of my land, passed to me by my own grandmother, my Baba.” Suleiman patted his robe above the necklace deferentially as he recalled something of his youth.

“I was nine when I created my first necklace. Mmm... Yes, I still remember that very clearly. More clearly than a great deal that has transpired since. Baba knew a great secret you see.” He leaned in conspiratorially before whispering rather cheerfully, “Once I tell you I’ll have to kill these

two Khethra of course, so they cannot share in that secret." He moved back a small distance before resuming.

"Yes, Baba was very wise. They all hoped to learn her secrets and to consume her power. She outlasted them all – well almost all," he said sheepishly as he patted the Immach once again. "She told me," Suleiman cleared his throat to effect a higher pitched voice, "'Suleiman, little one, an Immach is a useful thing – yes. But to make it the best it can be it has to be personal. Just taking the tongue of the first fool that crosses your path will net you little in terms of power, but if you make a personal connection with each victim then the power you will gain shall make the world take notice of you.'"

Suleiman took a heavy breath as he reminisced. "I say again, so that you can be sure of my earnest feelings, Otrema Rathe, that my Baba was indeed a wise woman. So cunning! Baba had me kill my father, two of my sisters, and an aunt to make my first Immach. All her rivals removed in one fell swoop, their threat ended on the blade of one they had underestimated." He paused for a moment, a brief cloud forming over his features before returning back to this maddening grin. "The words of power once ran freely in my family. I was the drought to end all of that, I suppose. But that is a story for another time, and for another victim."

Otrema spat in derision, a small amount of phlegm directly into the face of her captor. She shook at the magic holding her, which again, only served to restrict her further, dragging her down – her channelling hand most tightly of all. Suleiman laughed in surprise, his slimy tongue snaking out of his blackened mouth to lap up the spittle with relish.

He drew a wicked looking dagger from his belt. It had a gilded handle and a crooked blade, sharp and dirty. He tapped the unclean knife on her cheek, jabbing the soft flesh there gently with the tip as he ran his tongue over his teeth. "Look at me talking so when there is work to do! Baba used to say that I spoke too much, and I believe she was right." His voice lost the rampant triumphalism, the unfocused nostalgia, to be replaced by workmanlike pragmatism. "I offer you an exchange, Otrema Rathe. Something I need for something you want. That is why I drew you here, to this place at this time."

Now it was the turn of Otrema Rathe to laugh, scornfully so. "I already told you," she scoffed, "there is nothing I want from you that I cannot take from your broken body before I finish you."

"Not even the fate of your fellow members of the Order you serve?" Suleiman countered.

"If they crossed your path then they are dead," she spat. "That much is clear now."

Suleiman smiled, "My thanks for your hard-earned respect. You see the truth of my power, and that of my masters."

Otrema shook her head as fiercely as her restraints allowed. The confining tendrils continued to push her limbs down. "Respect? Never. Whatever power you think you possess I shall one day take from you. I will break you just as easily as I have broken many self-deluded fools before you! You are all so alike and yet each one believes they are unique. Your endless prattling is merely a tiresome vanity that masks your own sense of worthlessness."

The sound of Bernesse sniggering weakly punctuated the silence that followed.

Suleiman leaned forward in anger, his face little more than a hand's breadth from the hunter. "I am no mere Diabolist you lack wit cunt!" he hissed. "I am so much more, beyond anything your limited imagination can devise. Do you really think I have lived so long simply because I am some lucky hedge wizard, scrambling around in the dirt and avoiding the notice of such as you? What blind idiocy!" His breathing was shallow and rapid, and the blood vessels in his eyes expanded under the strain of his hidden fury.

"I am the first among the Diabolists, and entire peoples shall fall at my whim," he said grandly. "Mellorian shall merely be the first of these. I shall collect souls without number so that I can pay the debts I have incurred to my masters. I shall buy my way to the table of the great and claim my place on the Council of the Many and the One. This I solemnly vow before you now." His eyes now took on a third guise – along with the intellect and the madness there was now also hatred. A twisted hatred of life in all its many guises and a desire to see it cleansed from the world.

Otrema's reply was wordless and violent. She smashed her head into her rival's face, the connection not strong enough to break cartilage but at least hard enough to injure.

"Gaah!" he howled, as his head pushed back from the impact. Suleiman blinked in surprise as a thin stream of his own blood ran from his nostrils. Fury, unguarded and white-hot, replaced the look of surprise as he gathered his wits to see Otrema staring back at him smugly.

He leaned forwards, though this time wary of her ability to do him harm. The point of his dagger was pressed harder into her cheek, drawing a small trickle of blood. His eyes lit up with a savage joy at the sight of it. Suleiman positioned his head to taste her blood, running his tongue along her cheek like a cat lapping at milk.

As he drank, his own blood, still freely flowing from his nostrils, mixed with Otrema's. The minute hairs on her skin rose in revulsion, his tongue leaving a smeared mess behind that smelled abhorrent. Otrema could feel him shudder in ecstasy as he drank of her essence.

Bernesse spat impotent invectives at the Diabolist, but his colourful threats only seemed to stir Suleiman's desire further.

"I have dreamed of your taste these long months you have watched for me," Suleiman whispered to Otrema as he moved away from her now staunch cut, "I had to make this personal - I had to draw it out for a long time so that you would come to hate me as much as I hate you and all your kind. Our connection is now set and I will be glad of your power for what is to come..."

He leaned back and gripped her chin forcefully, eyeing her pink and healthy tongue. "Now," he said, returning to the mask of charming civility, "you may ask a question of me before I take what I want from you, though I expect you will not avail yourself of the opportunity. You are quite stubborn - and I find the charm of this ebbing away quickly."

Suleiman turned her head forcefully; taking in the details of her face as it was, to better remember in the long years that he hoped would follow. "I have been waiting to add you to my collection," he said as though he was appraising a prize winning calf. "The five others call for you in my dreams, for their sweet youthful sister. Now all of your voices shall be mine." As if in response of what was to come, the tendrils of dark magic pushed her down, anticipating her struggles that would come from his untender ministrations. She was forced prone onto the broken floor of the corridor.

"Then I shall ask my question in spite," said Otrema, a curious smile on her face. Suleiman instinctively retreated a little, his paranoid senses acting out against the warning of her face. "How," she continued, her voice rising in emotion and elation, "will you take my tongue when I am free?"

"No!" he hissed. His eyes widened and flicked to the creature of madness that had been instinctually lowering his prize closer to the floor... closer to a surface to contact.

Otrema's fingers finished scraping against the splintered wood at her back, and she felt the power of the spell blossom - first as a tingling in her skin, then as warmth flowing out from deep within her soul. A thin column of azure light burst from the prone form of the hunter, expanding very rapidly until it encompassed her entire body. Suleiman cursed once more and averted his eyes; the light was too painful to look upon directly. Otrema's form dissolved into the light, and the tendrils of the dark beast thrashed wildly and confusedly in the now empty air.

To be continued...