

## DAY THREE

“Welcome, young initiates, to the Builder’s Retreat!”

Pete wasn’t quite sure what to think. From his experiences with the Hammers, he’d always known them to be absolutely humorless zealots. To them, the simple joy of a rubber chicken became an opportunity to lecture shopkeepers about selling animals that could not be cooked and eaten. But this...this was something entirely new. A Hammer priest that actually *smiled*?

And that wasn’t all. The priest wasn’t wearing the traditional hooded red and white body stocking so emblematic of the Hammer orders...instead, he wore a red tunic, held loosely by a belt with a hammer-shaped buckle. Behind him, other Hammer acolytes wandered by, wearing similar garments, smiling and laughing. It was so...friendly. And *fun*.

Something was definitely wrong here.

“So, Pete, when is Henry coming?”

“He’s busy elsewhere. Just shut up before they hear you.”

When Pete had come up with his plan the other night, it had sounded so neat, so perfect, that it made Henry’s shoddy arson attempt seem like a toddler trying bravely to solve quantum mechanics. Through Henry’s connections with Brother William, they would don some Hammer initiate clothing, tour the facility, get a sense of the security, and locate the hidden sanctuary. Henry would get the equipment by himself so they could break in later that night. But Pete didn’t count on an organization of Hammers that seemed so, so...*Pagan*.

Truth be told, everything did seem to be in order; no one was dancing around the maypole, and there was a distinct lack of the letter ‘s’ redundantly added to any and all words. Maybe things really did change a bit since he had entered therapy.

Therapy. For a brief moment he felt his hand clench up in a familiar shape, his fingers working the mouth for a puppet that no longer resided there. He took a deep breath. *Easy there, chief, easy...puppets are for entertaining children. They are not real, and they are not your best friends.*

Jack and he stood amidst a gaggle of bleary-eyed initiates into the Hammerite Orders, some men, some women, all of them wondering how they had landed this gig. The complex was even bigger than Henry had said it was; from the front gate where the group stood, Pete could see a chapel, a block of living quarters, and an enormous building with...was that glass on its roof?

The priest that stood before them, who had introduced himself while everyone filled out a nametag, was Jessup Krinkles, who looked a little young and beardless to have one of those fire-shooting scepters hanging from his belt...which he did. He had a smile that would put those who ate excrement to shame. He had a whiny, annoying voice which had the unfortunate tendency to project over a wide audience, so everyone could enjoy its nasal quality even from a distance. “So, everyone comfy? Great. Thank you all for coming today, it’s a little hot out and traffic congestion can be just murder, I know. Just to inform you of the schedule for today, firstly we’re going to get a tour of the campus. The campus has a rich and varied history, having been established last Tuesday in a most devout and humbling ceremony. We are the flagship for a new day in Builder-related education and religious life, the first complex to utilize the optional teachings

established during Euclidian II. All lessons are taught in the common tongue of the land instead of traditional Masonic, acolytes are now allowed to have philosophical debates with those of other faiths, and heretics are allowed to present their cases to a fair and impartial court *before* they are returned to the Forge to be 'purified.'

"Once we've completed the tour, we will have a quick spot of lunch – no cheating for those of you who've taken a fasting vow – and then go into the main campus building, where you'll register for all your classes, be they Smiting 107 or Advanced Builder Theory: Bricks Without Mortar 405.

"All in all, think of the Builder's Retreat as your home away from home, or, after you graduate, your home. We're forward-thinkers to a new generation, hoping to spread the Builder's word to those who just can't seem to get out of the house these days. And I hope instead of you thinking of me as 'that priest guy,' try thinking of me as 'your friend.'" Krinkles smile broadened even further, coming dangerously close to sawing his head in half. "Are there any questions?"

Pete raised his hand. When Krinkles didn't seem to notice, he waved it a little, until the annoying young priest pointed at him. Krinkles squinted his eyes trying to read the fake name Pete had written on his name tag. "Ah, yes, you, uh..."

"Tuber Langley."

"Yes, Tuber. What may I do for you?"

"Yes, well, I know we're getting the grand tour and all, but I thought I might ask...if I might, you understand...what exactly the grounds consist of?"

"You most certainly might, though I wonder why you haven't taken the time to read the brochure we sent out to all initiates that wished to come here?"

Pete hadn't thought about this. Though he was pretty sure he was smarter than Henry, he wasn't used to thinking up explanations on his feet. When your most useful tool in getting the upper hand previously was a raggedy old sock, talents like 'ad-libbing' tended to fall by the wayside. "I, uh...vow of illiteracy?"

Krinkles tilted his head to one side in thought, then brightened. "Oh, yes. Forgot about that one. Well, besides the main building and chapel, we have the living quarters, which you can see behind me, a cafeteria with patio with a lovely view of the back forty furnaces, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and three basketball courts."

A very large fellow near the front raised his hand. "Is there a weight room, too?"

Krinkles laughed. "No, that would be silly. Let's begin the tour, shall we? We'll start in the chapel, where you can see a lovely reproduction of the 'Builder's Condescension to the World,' hanging over the coffee bar..." Krinkles noticed one more hand. He sighed, in the manner of someone who asked if anybody had any questions, but when it came right down to it, didn't really want to answer them. He still kept smiling, though, which was downright frightening. "Yes, you, young..." He read the nametag of the hand raiser. "Deluxe Bucket, is it?"

Jack, in the manner of someone who wanted to ask a question, but in the long run didn't want it answered if it meant the tour guide would be mad at him, tried to shrink himself below the visible level of the crowd. "You mentioned...lunch?"

"Oh, yes, lunch. We'll be having a fine, upstanding meal of bread, water, and as an extra special treat, nothing else."

"Will there be extra portions of the nothing else?"

“Normally I’d say yes, but in your case it appears fasting is something other people do.” Then, having said that, Krinkles blinked, as if he’d realized he’d said something very, very wrong. “But, heh heh, that’s okay, right? We’re all brothers and sisters in the eyes of the Builder, correct? Come, let’s get started!”

Pete smiled to himself. Given a little time and some observation, he was bound to find the secret passage and get down to the Builder’s Hammer. Well, as long as Henry came through with his part of the bargain.

---

Henry kicked a can as he wandered by himself up the street. Cashbox Lane led up the tallest hill in the City to the more posh estates, where it was believed (quite wrongly) that by having one’s house higher up would mean the stench of the lower classes wouldn’t permeate. This theory, unfortunately, did not take into account basic rules of science and air flow, and the only benefit the hill provided was a wonderful view of the decaying edges of the City.

He had to admit Pete’s plan had been good...too good. This wasn’t how things were supposed to work at all. *He* was still the leader, wasn’t he? I mean, it was very clear, he was in charge, not Pete, he always came up with the plans, led the way, had the final say.

But a small voice in his head kept giving him pause. It kept saying, over and over again, *Maybe you’re not as good as you think you are. Come on, you’ve been trying your hand at thieving for how many years now, and for what? Nothing but scorn, derision, more replacements pairs of stolen boxers than you can even count. Maybe you were never meant to be the leader.*

He tried to shut it up by covering his ears (which obviously didn’t help) and telling himself that Pete had one good idea, nothing more. This was simply a fluke occurrence, and all he need worry about is doing the task ahead of him.

While Pete and Jack were off (having fun, no doubt) inside the Builder’s Retreat, Henry’s job was to go and get supplies. That was it. This did not sit well with Henry, initially, and voiced his disapproval by throwing a haymaker. Pete gave a solid rebuttal by poking Henry in the throat and kicking him in the sternum. After that, who was Henry to argue?

The only difficult part was that nobody had any money for supplies; Pete had started listing off places that might have been easy to knock off for some quick cash, until Henry explained he knew of a place where he could grab a few bucks. Pete had then started asking Questions with a capital Q, such as, “Oh, really? Where is this magical pot of gold you’ve been hiding that has money in it?” and “No, seriously, why is your eye twitching like that?” But he couldn’t tell them. It was far too embarrassing. If they ever found out, that all these years he had lied to them, that his father, far from dying in a dungheap, and his mother, a raving maniac who brandished cucumbers at passers-by in a random fashion, wasn’t really a raving maniac...

And so he trudged up the hill, towards the massive, solid gold gates of the wealthy, until he came, at last, to the Cresswell Mansion.

---

“Darald? Darald, dah-ling, Henreah’s back.” Henry’s mother, Burtilda, leaned as far as her massive coiffure would allow her to shout once again at the distant parlor room. “DAH-LING! Did you heah me?”

Echoing over the pristine marbled floors, the voice of Henry’s father, Darald, ninth Earl of Cresswell, came back. “Yes, my deah, I heahd you. I’ll be roight theah.”

Henry turned bright red, standing in the cavernous foyer, with the three story staircase that led to the summer bedrooms and the hall-length collection of busts of his more famous ancestors. One of the things he never understood was his parent’s infatuation with Richspeak, which they had discovered on one of their Roman holidays. It had about as much love for the letter ‘H’ as the Pagans had love for the letter ‘S.’ It made them sound like they’d had a bottle of claret laced with tranquilizers and cough medicine.

Burtilda fussed with her hair, which was powdered white and about twice as tall as she was. “Reahhly, Henreah, you should stop by more often. Ah you still busking ovah on Main Streaht?”

“Mother, I stopped doing that when I was 12. I’ve done a lot since then.”

“Well, how am I supposed to know? You nevah tell us anything!”

Henry turned away from her and moaned. “Mother, would you *please* stop talking like that? It’s, it’s...something the Lopsons would do.” That would put a halt to it. The Lopsons were always trying to outdo the Cresswells in every endeavor; at the rate the two families were warring, it was only a matter of time before one side tried to outdo the other by cutting off one’s head with a guillotine instead of a shiny new hacksaw.

Burtilda shook her head, nearly taking out a chandelier. “Honestly, dear, did you *have* to say that? Why do you hate something that makes your father and me so happy?”

“Because it reminds me of growing up here. Last time I checked, that didn’t turn out quite so well, now, did it?”

There was the slam of a door as a butler closed the door behind an extremely wealthy-looking older gentleman. He wore a brown and red waistcoat with white leggings, matching his wife’s oversized hoop skirt perfectly. His hair, thankfully both much smaller and a wig, curled up neatly at the sides. To Henry, it looked like his father had blowgun pipes hidden on the sides of his head.

“Ah, Henreah mah boyah, howah ah youah today...ah?”

Burtilda, reaching as far as her dress allowed her to reach, smacked Darald on the shoulder. “Good heavens, Darald, get a grip on yourself! You’re letting your accent run away with you!”

Darald, a little disheartened, took the monocle from his eye to clean it. “You’re right, darling, as usual. Sometimes my brain does *so* get in the way. I need to go back to the doctor’s and get it re-tuned.” He breathed on the monocle, even though the rim contained no glass and was purely decorative, vigorously rubbed it on his waistcoat, and placed it back in his left eye. “So, my boy, how are things at the...”

“I just finished telling Mother, I don’t work there anymore.”

“Really? Damn shame, that is. I always thought you were one hell of a morris dancer.”

“Again, I never learned morris dancing. I was trying to sing ‘How I Love My Sodden Rose’ and some miscreant lit my foot on fire.”

“Well, foot on fire, morris dancing, it’s all the same to me. Do you remember that time when...”

Henry tuned out as his father went on and on about one of his many, lengthy anecdotes about times past. Granted, he couldn’t fault his parents for caring about him and his various situations throughout his childhood, but they couldn’t help but be so clueless about the world. When they hired that private tutor, was he able to teach Henry anything about the streets and how to survive them, how to think on your feet, how to know which hot dog was the oldest in the vending carts? No, of course not. All he wanted to teach was nonsense like history, mathematics, science...all that boring stuff that didn’t help anybody.

No, Henry had a dream; he didn’t want to live a life of luxury, always pampered and preened by a vast assortment of butlers and maids. Sure, his family had money, and liked to spend it, but that was just it: the *family’s* money. Where was his contribution? What good was having a proper last name if you never accomplished anything? His dream was to become rich and famous on his own terms, to *earn* it. And what better way to fame and fortune than the thieves’ way? Did Aladdin get to where he was through entrepreneurial investments? Did Robin Hood found a bank in the middle of Sherwood Forest? Did Lord Frobbman come from a wealthy family and use it to bankroll his heists? Well, maybe Lord Frobbman was an exception, but still, if he’d just sat on his duff and counted his treasure all day long, he would never have won the lady’s hand.

“I mean, nobody would actually marry you just because you’re rich, right?”

Darald, smack dab in the middle of what was honestly one of his more amusing anecdotes (which involved a blunderbuss and a large cake), blinked at his son’s sudden response. “What was that, son?”

“Oh, did I say something out loud? Sorry, my mind’s miles away.”

Darald raised an eyebrow. “Looks like somebody else needs their brain re-tuned as well. Pity, you’re too young to need something like that...”

Henry waved his hands, indicating that in the name of all things decent, he wanted his father to just stop talking for a moment. “Listen, I just need to grab some money.” He added hastily, “Not much, actually, just a little. I need to buy some supplies for a job I’m working on.”

It was Burtilda’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “A new job? What’s this one all about? Something exciting? You’re not planning to...make an investment, are you?”

That was another thing about his parents that he couldn’t stand: their lives seemed to revolve around ‘making investments.’ He was certain by now that they had invested their savings into every business that existed in the City; considering that at any time some businesses went up and others were bound to go down, somehow they managed to sound like they had good business sense while never actually making or losing any money. On the one hand, it sounded like a stroke of genius. On the other, he wondered why they didn’t just build a mint facing the fireplace so they could burn money as fast as they printed it. It all added up to the same thing.

But, if it could get him out of here any faster, he’d say whatever he needed to say. He grinned and bobbed his head mechanically. “Yes, I am making an investment. I am going to purchase some...invests...in the fields of...mountaineering, and...lessee...door maintenance.” It sounded realistic enough; hopefully the more difficult parts to swallow would be dealt with by the parts in each parent’s brain that want to ignore the more

unpleasant truths that they surely know about their children but overlook anyway because it makes things so much easier to deal with.

Darald coughed. "Mountaineering and door maintenance? Hmm...sounds like two separate endeavors, wouldn't you say?"

"Er, that's part of my investment strategy. They are so different from each other that if one sinks, I shouldn't be completely out of my money."

And thus, for a brief, shining moment, in the wake of a lie, the idea of the mutual fund was born. Unfortunately, no one with a lick of common sense was nearby to hear it; the idea crawled across the room, leaving a trail of junk bonds behind, died, and made a terrible stink in the corner.

Darald sighed. "Very well, if you think that will work for you. Just grab a few notes out of the vault. Do you remember where it is?"

"Of course I do."

"Good. I was afraid that since you never stop by to say hello to your mother and me anymore that you may have forgotten..."

"All right! I get it! I'll send you two a letter occasionally. Happy?"

Burtilda and Darald looked at each other, then at Henry, and nodded.

The vault made its residence within the library, behind a stack of books of family history (which, to Henry's disappointment, had contained very few offshoot branches) and cookbooks (which, also to Henry's disappointment, mostly consisted of boiled beef and salt recipes). The door consisted of a massive steel construct with a giant wheel in the middle, which would be quite impressive if one used the door to gain access to the vault. Instead, twisting the wheel activated a security system which involved a trapdoor, a gas-filled sewage pipe, and the clever application of lit matches. Anyone who knew better used the real entrance, a small, disguised doorway which unlocked with a key hidden under the rug.

Henry entered the darkened vault and walked over to the sleeping butler. Of all the butlers in the household, he liked Paul the most. The elderly fellow currently dozed in a rocking chair, holding a gun usually reserved for taking down rampaging herds in a single shot. Paul represented what was known in most circles as the 'second line of defense,' or in other words, 'shooting the buggers who managed to find the secret door.'

Henry stood over the snoring Paul, cleared his throat, and recited the secret phrase. "Don't mind me, just getting a few things."

Paul's left eye opened, still snoring, and nodded. "Good to see you again, Master Henry. Just a few bills, I take it?"

"Just a few."

"Ah. What job you runnin' this time, good sir?" That was one of the reasons Henry liked Paul. Not only was the man capable of feigning sleep for hours at a time, he also actually knew what was going on in everybody's life. That seemed to be the life of a butler: don't speak up, just keep your ears open, and someday when you've retired you could write a gigantic tell-all book about your employers and their...eccentricities. Oddly enough, though, Paul didn't seem ready to retire anytime soon, which meant he either really liked the Cresswells or knew what happened to butlers of other families who did write their tell-all books and were found weeks later in the river with sharp objects lodged in places they weren't intended to go but fit nicely anyway.

“The Hammers, my good man. Something exciting, dangerous, and potentially very lucrative.”

“Bravo to you, young master. Always good to see young people taking initiative in their lives. Need me to help you with anything?”

Henry’s eyes scanned the long, torch-lit rows of the vault, containing countless numbers of safety deposit boxes. Again, he got a feeling, deep down, that all he should do is grab a huge wad of money and live off of that for the rest of his life. But then, nobody would care that the wad was gone, and where was the fun in that?

“I think I can manage, thank you anyway. I just need enough to get the ball rolling...”

---

“...serving over seventeen varieties of mochaccinos. Now, if you’ll follow me, through here is the Acolyte lounge, where, after a long day of study and self-flagellation, you can find time to kick back and relax, unless the chapel is in use, in which case you must remain absolutely quiet or else...”

Krinkles’ voice dissipated as the crowd followed him into the lounge, the door shutting behind them. Jack and Pete stood alone in the chapel. The quiet, in stark contrast to the babble of the recently departed tour group, was vast. Pete had never attended a Hammer service in his life, but if it sounded anything like this, he would probably go nuts. Well, more nuts than he’d been in the past, anyway.

The chapel itself had a high vaulted ceiling, with simple chain-hung chandeliers hanging from it at placed intervals. Naturally, this early in the day they were extinguished, but considering how far they hung from the floor it was anybody’s guess how they were lit during the night. Besides the door leading into the lounge, several other heavy doors led off into the recesses of the building, most likely to the special event refectory, bell tower, and on-staff offices. Towards the front stood the altar, over which towered the massive stone hammer that prevailed in every chapel and cathedral from here to the beginning of time. And, to no one’s surprise, the coffee bar stood off to the left, next to a poor box on the wall with a sign reading “Tips” attached to it.

Jack tapped Pete on the shoulder. “Why aren’t we going with them? Don’t we need to search the whole campus?”

Pete shook his head. “If the Builder’s Hammer is anywhere on this campus, it’s in here.”

“How do you know?”

“We’re in a sacred building that contains seventeen varieties of mochaccinos. It doesn’t get anymore holy than this. Now let’s get cracking. There’s bound to be a secret switch here somewhere.”

Their search almost began when the giant double doors at the back opened and a wizened old man came in. He turned, closing the doors behind him, started up the center aisle, and stopped when he saw Pete and Jack in conversation. The man raised an eyebrow, suspiciously.

“May I help you two in any way?”

Pete fumbled for an excuse. “We’re just discussing the...architecture of the building, to see if the Builder thinks it is...proper.”

The old man cocked his head to one side. “Who are you?”

“Who am I? I...I...I am supposed to be here. Who are *you*?”

The old man’s jaw fell open. “Well, I’m...” He stopped, deep in thought. “Who *am* I?” At that, the old man turned around and walked out of the chapel, closing the double doors once again behind him.

Pete sighed, deeply. “Well, that was something you don’t see everyday: the world’s most incompetent guard.”

Jack smiled. “I’ve got a mug that says that on my desk back at the office!”

“Good for you. Let’s get looking for that switch, shall we?”

---

“That yours, Henry?”

Henry beamed. Maybe it was a little more than he was planning on spending, granted, and he felt a little bad that he took as much money as he did from the vault. He kept telling himself that he needed to earn his living, and that this was just an investment so he could earn his living. But when he saw just how much was sitting in there, just going to waste in some drawer...after a couple of moments of rationalization, he convinced himself that he needed just a little extra to make this job succeed. Really, really succeed. “Yes, every scrap of it.”

Cait, on the other hand, merely shielded her eyes from the sun as she stared at the cart. The bundle sitting on top of it did not resemble a sack of equipment as much as it seemed Henry was trying – very poorly – to sneak an elephant past city lines using nothing but a tarp and a couple of strings of twine. “Do you really think you’ll need all of this?”

“Let’s just say I’d rather have more than I need than not enough.”

“I think you have enough to storm a small country.”

“Funny you should say that, the shopkeep actually said *two* small countries.”

The two of them stood there for a moment in silence, looking at the gargantuan pile, the breeze tilting it this way and that. Despite its ridiculous size (and the clanking of the metallic objects buried within), there was a stoic, almost epic quality to its bulk, that something this proudly absurd would not be seen again for some time. In an odd way, it was repellant and awe-inspiring all at once.

“And what about him?”

Cait pointed at the beast that had been harnessed to the cart in front of the ninth wonder of the world, who himself could have been labeled as the tenth. It was a horse to whom the word ‘draft’ would have been an understatement. He stood nearly seven feet at the shoulder, and was shaggier than the Hermit of Kuldungo. His previous owner had named him Huge, as he had no sense of irony. Despite his size, the giant animal stood in the alley behind the Haunted Foghat, digging clumsily through the garbage to see if there was anything edible. He found a sofa, and that seemed to work well enough for him.

“Huge? Oh, I got a great deal on him. When I was buying the cart, his owner offered to throw him in as well. Said Huge just wasn’t willing to work, that he just stood around all day, dumb as a post, and ate him out of house and home.”

Cait chuckled. “He sounds a lot like Jack.”

Henry shrugged. “What can I say, I just have a soft spot for big, dumb animals.”

Cait slapped him on the arm. “Don’t be mean. But his owner said he didn’t do any work. How’d you get him to lug all this around for you?”



“It’s all about dangling the right kind of carrot.” Henry pulled one out of his pocket, and Huge stopped devouring the sofa to sniff the air. “This one, for example, is not completely rotten.”

“I see. So what are you going to do now?”

Henry put the carrot back in his pocket. Huge, denied his treat, went back to tucking into a particularly delicious rusted spring. “All I can do is wait until they get back. Once they see what I’ve brought to the party, getting that Hammer should be a snap.”

Cait started to lead Henry back into the tavern when Nick came around the corner, whistling a happy tune and carrying his afternoon tea and a book of philosophical discourse. He saw Huge standing in the alley, and he stopped. Henry and Cait watched as Nick went over to the gentle giant, gave him a rub on the nose, and walked past them and into the tavern without saying a word.

Cait smiled. “I think somebody made a friend.”

---

Jack and Pete searched the building high and low, crawling under pews, over the altar, even looking behind the giant stone hammer, but all Pete was able to find was a ring hidden up on a shelf that only seemed to be there to be stolen. Jack managed to find a switch inside the clergy side of the confessional booth, but all that did was open up a trap door on the confessor’s side where a slide led down to a whole lot of screaming and whipping noises. Even Jack could tell that did not lead to where they wanted to go.

They would have simply given up then and there and returned (hopefully unnoticed) to the tour when Jack decided he was incredibly thirsty and turned his gaze on the many taps that lined the coffee bar’s syrup dispensers. He stood underneath them one at a time, pulling the taps and squirting the delicious, multi-colored flavors into his mouth, and had nearly finished the row when Pete noticed something interesting about them.

“Jack, why did you skip that one?”

“What?” Jack stood, syrup dripping from his chin, and pointed a thumb at one cask that contained a ghastly, bilious yellow liquid. “That’s banana. Nobody likes banana flavor.”

“Nobody likes...yes, yes, of course!” Pete went over to the banana tap, inspecting it closely, and noticed the spigot could rotate on its axis. He spun it, and pressed it down. There was a click, and the wall behind the altar began to slide to one side. The effect would have been more impressive if the building was old, with clanking gears and rusted parts making a racket, but the designer had been too forward-thinking and hadn’t bothered to include the parts required, so it just sort of moved over in relative silence.

“Wow.” Jack poured a shot of vanilla flavoring in his hand and slurped it up. “I would have never thought of that in a million years.”

“Nah, not that long, my friend. The way you’re going through that syrup, you would have been at the banana in less than a few hours.”

Jack cocked his head to one side. “Is that a compliment or an insult?”

“Take it however you want. I’m going down to get that treasure.”

“Get the...wait!” Jack reached out to stop Pete from moving towards the secret entrance, nearly slipping in a puddle of raspberry. “What about Henry? We need him here for the supplies.”

Pete sighed and shook his head. “Jack, we need to check it out first. We can’t just find the secret passage. We need to see what kind of safeguards we need to get around in order to take it. You remember this *is* the Builder’s Hammer, right? It’s going to be harder to steal this than to teach a dog to sing the national anthem.”

“There is a dog down the street that can sing the national anthem.”

“That’s not a dog, that’s a sewer rat. And secondly, it’s not the national anthem, the owner just steps on it and makes it squeak at random intervals.”

“Oh.” Jack rubbed his chin. “What *is* our national anthem?”

“Not sure, but I think they talk a lot about the smell in verse 2. Let’s go.”

---

Henry checked the clock in the corner. They should’ve been back by now with their report, shouldn’t they have? It was nearing happy hour, which in most places could, yes, be construed as a time in which people tried in a vain attempt to drown their sorrows in tankards overflowing with suds for prices that made their smiles even bigger. But the end of happy hour, much like the end of every hour in the Foghat, ended with people vowing never to drink again as their liquid investment came out of them through one hole or another.

Ten minutes went by, then ten more. Still nothing. He began harboring thoughts that maybe they were in trouble and he should go help when two large figures came up to him on either side.

“Well, well, if it ain’t Admiral Undershorts!” One of the men clapped Henry on the back, hard enough to make Henry cough. “How goes the racket these days? Still getting yerself in trouble, as usual?”

Henry glared back at him, which turned out to be a bad idea. The man smiled at him, revealing teeth that could make a toothbrush run in abject fear. “I’m doing fine for myself. How about you, ‘Theodore?’”

Ted, né Theodore Graham, did not much care for people using his full name, since it made him somehow sound less intimidating. No one ever messed with a Ted, but a Theodore was somebody who often got picked last for sport or was forced to swallow worms for the amusement of larger boys on the playground. One could point out to him the many philosophers and world leaders named Theodore, but unfortunately none of them had been born yet, and as such history books showing their contribution were rather difficult to find.

“You just watch yerself, ‘Henrietta,’ a man could get worked up with words like that.”

Henry looked up and down the bar. “Well, that’s lucky. There isn’t a man within five yards of us.”

Ted grabbed Henry’s lapels and pulled them face to face. This resulted in Henry’s feet dangling a few inches off of the floor. “Why, I ought ta...ta...do something that face of yours.”

The other man, Ted's brother, a slightly less violent chap by the name of Dale, came around and put his hand on Ted's shoulder. "Ted, mate, this ain't the time to get into a fight. We gotta get the job done, or Ma's gonna get angry."

So that was their game. The two of them were out on a job for their dear old mother. Unlike her sons, Ma Graham had a brain (though rumor had it that the woman was so ruthless she actually had stolen both of her sons' brains and kept them in a jar as punishment for sneaking out one night), and she used it... a lot. She was to the City what a foaming, rabid bulldog is to a local neighborhood: something that is clearly insane, dangerous, and to be put down as soon as the chance is given, but respected for the sheer amount of mayhem it could cause if you happened to look at it the wrong way one morning. When members of the organized crime syndicates in the City were invited for dinner, they hoped beyond hope that all they were coming in for was a 'spot of tea and biscuits.' Most of the time, they weren't.

"Job? What job is that?"

Dale, being the less violent one, merely smacked Henry on the back of the head instead of yanking his head off completely. "No questions! It's a secret!"

Ted dropped Henry like a sack of starch and laughed. "Yer, a secret! But it won't be in a few days. Soon the whole City will be talkin' 'bout us and how great we are!" He slapped the counter, causing all the drinks on it to rattle. "Oi! Barkeep! A couple of pints to go! We're thirsty and I don't think you're looking for trouble!"

Mildred was now on duty, giving Cait a much-deserved break in the lounge upstairs. She quickly poured a few pints in a dirty mug, visibly spat in them, and handed them over to the two men, then returned to the spot of the bar where she kept a crossbow capable of blowing holes in drawbridges. Mildred may have been sixty, but above the bar rested the golden trophy she had won in a shooting contest when she was in her teens. Others had tried to claim the title, but for nearly forty years each and every person about to beat her record mysteriously ended up shot dead just before the end of the competition.

Dale and Ted clinked their glasses, gave Mildred a wink, downed the drinks, slammed them on the counter, threw two grubby coins on the counter, and left. Mildred looked the coins over, and fumed. "Not even a tip."

Henry stood up and climbed back onto his stool. "Did you really expect them to?"

"No. But I know their mother. She did a terrible job of raising them."

"I think she did the best she could, considering all the evil she had to work with." He pulled out the little that remained of the small fortune he had used to buy his equipment and put it on the counter. "Give me any drink you want, in whatever size you want, and keep what's leftover for yourself."

Mildred smiled and started filling him a mug. "I thought you were going out with your friends tonight."

Henry shrugged. "They probably got themselves locked in the bathroom somewhere. Besides, I'd hate to think the Grahams would get to a big score before I do, and I'd like to be good and drunk when that happens."

Mildred poured off the head and put the mug on the counter. "Don't let them get to you, Henry. They're the kind dumb enough to piss on an electric fence."

---

“I really think we should go back and get Henry.”

Pete did not respond. Outwardly, his mouth opened in slack-jawed awe, his eyes staring at the sight ahead of him. Inwardly, his mind was screaming, banging its little mental fists against his skull, stomping its mental feet on his sinus cavity.

*It's just not fair. It's just...not fair.*

They had gotten into the tunnels without incident...well, mostly without incident. Jack had leaned against that button and set off the trap where the metal statues in the alcoves along the staircase came to life and started swinging their hammers, but their rhythm was easy to dodge. Pete never understood why statues that swung things always did it in an easily calculated rhythmic pattern, but some people never learn.

And then the locked door. The door was apparently designed so that only the two highest archbishops on campus could open it, one on each side, by inserting their special, top-secret probation rings into it and turning them at the same time. Again, this was easily dealt with by going back onto the campus grounds, sneaking into the archbishops' break room (where both of them were taking a well-deserved afternoon nap) and snatching the rings off their fingers. They didn't even have time to wake up. That was the thing about puppeteering; you learn the secrets of hands, and how to handle them.

After that, it was just a matter of dodging more traps. And boy, were there a lot of them; Jack nearly got singed by the Flamethrowers of Cleansing, smushed by the Rock Pillars of Judgment, and shocked by the Electric Devices of Giving You a Nice Shock in the Pants, but Pete got him through them all.

All the while, Pete thought to himself, “Maybe it is time to go back and get Henry; after all, we may need him,” but every time he encountered a new trap, another thought crept in: “Well, I'll get right to it, as soon as I figure out how to get past this next trap. He'll thank me later once we're ready to bypass it and get the Hammer.” And so it went, until he came to the room containing the Hammer, at which point the thought said, “Well, just go ahead and grab the Hammer while you're here, you're already so close as it is.”

But this...this wasn't fair.

The Builder's Hammer hung, somehow by its own holy power, in the middle of a circular room at least two hundred feet in diameter. Around its circumference, where Jack and Pete now stood, was a metal catwalk only about ten feet wide. The rest of the space between the catwalk and the hammer was just that: empty space, over an expansive drop.

This was not what made it unfair. What made it unfair was that, from a hole in the ceiling above the Hammer, a constant stream of liquid hot metal poured down, surrounding the Hammer completely, and it continued down into a gigantic pool of even more liquid hot metal. Even if Pete could somehow find a way to climb out precariously to the Hammer itself, be it by rope, climbing equipment, or even by a really long pole, there was no way to grab the Hammer without melting either one's equipment or one's limbs off.

It was also quite loud in the room. Although there was only the one walkway, it was cluttered along the outside wall with many different tubes, whistles, cranks, pulleys, doohickeys, and other probably unimportant but neat-looking thingummys that, when working in tandem, created a ghastly roar like a treant trying to pass a particularly large

and solid stool (if you have never seen a treant pass stool before, the best way to describe it is to continue not picturing it; you're better off that way).

And that wasn't all. Standing in front of Pete and Jack were two well-armed acolytes...large, unfriendly-looking acolytes. Next to one was a control panel which apparently operated some sort of controls, possibly granting access to the Hammer, possibly releasing a poisonous gas which would kill everyone in the room.

The guard on the left, who looked like a Connor (and actually was, oddly enough, as his nametag suggested), regarded the open-mouthed Pete with an inquisitive stare. "Can I help you at all?"

Pete closed his mouth, recovering his composure. "Just looking."

Connor shrugged. "All right. Just let me know if you need anything."

Connor went back to his post of staring straight ahead. Pete stroked his chin thoughtfully, which might have helped if he'd had any facial hair at all. If Connor's response had been any indication, it meant that he had barely paid attention to two acolytes who had somehow wandered in to one of the most important rooms in Hammer lore, which in turn meant Connor was either an idiot or was incredibly sleep-deprived. Either way, he could probably turn this to his advantage.

Jack watched Pete stroke his chin, and tried to do it himself before realizing he had far too many to stroke efficiently. "Why are you standin' like that, Pete?"

"I'm deliberating."

"Oh." Jack shuffled his feet. "Should I go around the corner until you're done, or..."

"It means I'm thinking."

"Oh." Jack shuffled his feet again. "I really think it's time we got Henry..."

The other, equally impressive-in-a-physical-sense-and-not-much-else guard, whose nametag read "If It's Monday, Please Notify So I May Change My Pants," squinted from his spot at Jack. "Henry? Who's this Henry of whom you speak?"

"Um, nothing." Pete waved nonchalantly, trying to brush this fellow's comment aside. "Nothing to worry about at all, um, Acolyte..."

"Stench."

Pete frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Stench. Augie Stench."

"Your name is Stench?"

"Yeah. What about it? Just a name, ain't it? I come from a proud, long line of Stenches."

Pete smiled cordially. "And I don't doubt that for a second. Would you excuse me and my fellow acolyte for a moment?" Pete pulled Jack by the collar back through the archway that led into this chamber, where the noise dropped to a blessed mild screech and they could actually hear their thoughts. Pete's thoughts were not happy. Jack's thoughts were a little hungry.

"Jack, what do you think about all this?"

Jack, not used to being asked to give his advice, felt a small surge of pride, which quickly dissipated when he realized he had no idea what to say. "Don't know. What about you?"

"I haven't a clue. I'm still wondering how they manage to keep acolytes alive in a room that can only be accessed by the archbishops' rings. It doesn't make any sense."

Pete pondered that little brainteaser for about five minutes until he heard snoring behind him. Turning, he saw Connor's head dipped low over his breastplate. Acolyte Stench prodded Connor into wakefulness by walloping him rather hard with his Hammer on the back of the head. Thankfully, the helmet did nothing to cushion the blow, and Connor stood back at attention.

"Jack? Exactly how far up the chain of command in the Watch are you?"

"Not very. Is that good or bad?"

"Depends. How often do you get yelled at?"

---

"You know, I've always loved you. And, and I sheen the way you shtare at me." Henry put up a hand. "No, no, don't deny it, I...I know you, you want me too. Come here and give me a bit, love."

And Henry waited for the stuffed moose head that hung over the bathrooms to come into his loving arms, but to no avail. "Oh, playing 'ard to get, is that it? Well then, maybe I'll jusht go over to *you* and we'll see what's what..." And with much bravado and machismo, Henry got to his feet. However, with much alcohol and peanuts, he fell to the floor, face down, with a slam. "Don't *you* get in my way, ground! I'll teach you a leshhon..."

Mildred simply looked down at the collapsed body on the floor, feebly waving its limbs in a poor imitation of someone giving the floor a much needed thrashing, and shook her head sadly.

The door to the upstairs lounge opened and Cait walked out, yawning. "Thanks for covering, Millie, I'm so sorry, I just passed out up there." She nearly tripped over Henry, not seeing him. "Oh, so sorry, I...Henry?" She grabbed him under what she hoped were his arms and pulled him up, giving an evil look at Mildred. "Why did you give him so much?"

Mildred snorted, and started wiping down one end of the bar. "He's had three. Didn't realize he was such a lightweight."

Cait moved her hands to Henry's shoulders and shook him, his head flopping back and forth. "What's going on?"

Henry, all the while his head still snapping around like a broken guitar head, began to sob. "They left me. They tossed me off like an old wrapper. And then that damn floor tried to take my sweetheart away..."

Cait sighed. "Listen to me, Henry. Your friends didn't abandon you, as much you might like to think that they would. Whatever happened, I'm sure they have a very good reason as to why they haven't come back yet. In the meantime, I think you might feel better on my couch back home than on the floor here. Sound good?"

Henry nodded, and chuckled to himself. "You're sho much nisher than that moosh. Better looking, too. And you talk more."

"I would certainly hope so. Millie, can you cover for me for another hour?"

Mildred waved her off. "Darlin', I can cover for as long as you need. You've got your hands full, and it's not like I've got anything better to do."

Out front, Huge still stood in the street, the cart still waiting to go. Cait carried Henry, still going on about moose and, strangely, the inherent inconsistencies of the

various systems of government, and lifted him as best she could onto the seat. She clambered up next to him and grabbed the reins.

“Now, in the morning, we’re going to have a little talk about all this thieving business, and this time you are going to listen to me. Got it?”

All she got was a snore. Henry had mercifully fallen asleep. Cait smiled. It would be good enough. She shook the reins, and the normally reticent Huge, apparently taking a shine to his new driver, got moving.

---

Jack hadn’t sweated this much since he entered that hot pepper contest when he was eight years old. He was never much of an actor, and what Pete was asking him to do now went against every bone he had in his body. But what he lacked in spine he hoped he could make up for in experience, for Jack, if nothing else, knew very well what it was like to be yelled at, constantly. Even if one never did it to anyone else, the routine remained exactly the same.

He took a deep breath, and stepped up to Connor and Stench, straining to reach his full height, which was at least two heads shorter than them. But he’d also learned that, besides routine, the second most important thing in a good disciplining was that voice overrode anything else.

“RIGHT, THEN! WHAT’S ALL THIS, THEN?”

Connor and Stench, apparently not recognizing in their sleep, food, and brain-deprived states that this was the same fellow who had been talking to them not too long ago, snapped to an attention that seemed unbecoming to human beings. “Yes, sir! Guarding the holy relic, sir!”

“Shut yer gobs! I didn’t ask what you were doing, I asked what’s all this, then?” Jack pointed to the control panel.

Stench immediately went to the controls and demonstrated them in turn. “This lowers the bridge to the Hammer, sir! This turns off the molten metal flow, sir! And this one turns on the poisonous gas, si—”

“Er, that, that one will not be necessary, acolyte.”

Jack heard a noise behind him and saw Pete standing in the archway shaking his head. “No, no! Stay angry! Don’t give them time to think!”

As if in response, Connor’s eyes narrowed at Jack. “Who are you, anyway? Why are you asking all these questions?”

Jack, recovering, quickly moved into Connor’s chest and started prodding it with a very agitated finger. “Who am I? WHO AM I? Listen, you cheeky bastard, I have worked too long and hard within this organiza...I mean, religion, to be talked to like that by a lowly twit like you!”

“Lowly? But I’m nearly a full fledged initiate.”

Jack bounced his sizeable belly against Connor and nearly knocked him over the ledge and into the swirling cauldron of glowing death below. He then turned on the sarcastic, high-pitched voice his superiors always seemed to use at times like this. “Oh, nearly an initiate now, are we? Think we know everything about everything, eh? Well, why don’t you show me what an initiate does?”

Connor, all suspense put at ease, saluted smartly. “Sir, immediately, sir!”

With that, Connor stood in place, doing nothing. Stench returned from the controls to his spot, also doing nothing.

“WELL?!? I’m waiting!”

“This is what initiates do, sir! Stand and guard and do their duty to the Hammer Brotherhood and the Builder!”

“Oh, really?” Jack began to pace. “That’s what you do, is it?”

Connor and Stench exchanged glances. “Yes, sir. That’s exactly what we do. It’s written in the textbooks and everything.”

Jack stopped in front of Stench and, from seemingly nowhere, extracted a truncheon and began slapping it on Stench’s shoulders, a bit hard, but certainly not life-threatening. “Bloody textbooks! I’m talking here! You make me sick, Stench! You make me want to retch until my own intestines crawl out of my mouth, see your wretched, pathetic excuse of a face, and start vomiting of their own accord!”

Stench cleared his throat. “If you pardon me, sir, what you just said seems a little unbecoming to one of your station.” He swallowed. “And besides, it’s a bit disgusting.”

“Feeling ill? Can’t control your stomach in the face of a metaphor? Then how will you be able to deal justice to a heretic? Face down a snarling Pagan? What you both need is a little *discipline!* I want you both to go marching up and down the square!”

Stench and Connor, once again, exchanged glances. “How does that give us discipli...”

“I’m counting! One, two, three fo...um, one, two, one, two, left, right, left, right, MARCH!”

Connor and Stench immediately began marching out of the room, as quickly as they could. Jack stopped shouting once they turned a corner, and both he and Pete waited until their footsteps had faded completely before moving. Pete came up and patted Jack on the shoulder. Not used to praise, Jack shuddered a little from the physical contact.

“That was really pretty good, Jack. You really picked all that up from your time with the Watch?”

Jack shrugged. “I think so. I think some of it is my Dad, too.” Jack’s shoulders sagged a little as he said this, and Pete knew it wasn’t time to argue the point.

“Well, either way, I think we’ve got it.” Pete went over to the controls, and based on what he’d seen when Stench had fiddled with the controls, pulled the ones he hoped were the right ones. There was a lot of loud clanking noises coming from the ceiling, then some whirring, then some scraping, then some groaning. The flow of liquid steel began to slow to a trickle, and then stop, leaving the Hammer floating in the middle of the room. Then, a catwalk began to lower, slowly, too slowly for Pete’s liking, before dropping into place with a clank. It was simply a straight line of chain-link walkway, leading up to the Hammer.

As if pulled forward by its heavenly glow, Pete and Jack made their way down the catwalk. They stopped right in front of it.

Up close, it was an artistic wonder: from the head all the way down the hilt were embossed ancient symbols, each one neatly aligned with its neighbors. It was easy to tell that the glow that radiated from it pulsed subtly, giving it a feeling like it was breathing. Stone didn’t breathe, but maybe, just maybe, the Builder was willing to make an exception in this case. It was worth it; such an exquisite, beautiful object was clearly not



the work of any mortal hands, and it wouldn't have surprised Pete if it was alive in some sense.

Adding to its mystique was, now that it was close enough to touch, Pete could hear a low hum, like that of electrical lines on a summer evening, but much more pressing. "Are you seeing this, Jack? And do you hear that?"

Jack nodded. "The hum is making my bits feel funny."

"Mine too, Jack. Mine too." Pete reached out and took the Hammer in his hand and pulled. Whatever ethereal tether kept it airborne broke loose, and it came into his hand like a dead weight. It so surprised him that he nearly dropped it into the swirling pool below, but he held on.

He stared at it. They'd actually done it. They'd actually pulled off one of the heists of the century. He was ecstatic. He was elated. He...he...

His hand was on fire.

Pete had thought of nearly everything, but, not being a student of the scientific arts, Pete hadn't thought clearly about the aftereffects of grabbing an object composed of conductive materials that had been subjected to high temperatures for an extended period of time. He let the Hammer slide onto the catwalk with a thud, then grabbed his still sizzling hand with the other and ran up and down the catwalk, jumping and screaming.

"Jack! Get me water! A bucket, an ocean, something, anything! Gaaaahhh!"

Jack thought quickly, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, yellow object. He went over to Pete and started rubbing the object on Pete's hand, which had turned bright red. The horrible pain suddenly got much worse and Pete pulled his hand away. "Yaagh! What are you *doing*?"

Jack looked at the stick of butter in his hand. "I thought you put this on burns to make them feel..."

"I'm not trying to *cook* it, I'm trying to get it to stop hurting!"

"Well then, what do you want me to do? This is all I have on me!"

Pete looked around, but all he saw was endless rows of machinery. Not that they would be of any help; if anything, the Hammers were not known for building any sort of machine or product that provided aid and relief. In fact, most of their devices were most likely designed with the opposite effect in mind. "Well, don't stand there! Go find something!"

"Sir! Maybe we can help!"

Pete stopped dead in his tracks, the pain in his hand forgotten, as he saw Connor and Stench had returned to their guard posts much earlier than expected. Behind them were Jessup Krinkles, whose smile did not appear quite so friendly anymore, and about six or seven angry-looking Hammerites.

Krinkles looked at Pete, Jack, and at the Hammer, lying forgotten on the catwalk behind him. "Not exactly one to stick with the guided tour, are you?"

---

Cait finally maneuvered Huge onto the small street where stood her apartment. It was tough, since the street was incredibly small, but she managed it, and once she got there pulled the horse to a stop. She carefully guided the snoring Henry to the curb, and, making sure to give Huge a pat on the nose and two carrots, shouldered Henry up to her door, at which point he blearily opened his eyes.

“Cait? Where am I? This isn’t the tavern...did I get kidnapped by those ferrets again?”

“What? Ferrets? *Again*? No, you’re at my place, until you dry out.”

Henry pushed himself away, and by ‘pushed’ he weakly slid out of her hand and plopped against the doorframe. “Thass very kind of you, but I have things...things to do and I...I think I may have to change my pants.”

Cait did a quick check. Thankfully, he didn’t. “You’re fine. Now will you please just get inside before...”

Some distance away, the belltower finished chiming the time. Just as Cait put the key in the lock, she heard a second chiming. This bell was much higher-pitched, and closer by. What in the world could that be?

A citizen happened to be walking by, so Cait stopped him. “Excuse me, do you know what that bell is?”

The citizen, who was probably not very reputable by the set of gold dentures he was wearing, stroked his unshaven chin. “Sounds like that new Hammer place. They ring the bell to announce the start of classes or mass or something.”

Cait relaxed. “Well, that’s...”

“Oh, and when they’re about to punish grievous offenses. Hey, you think they might’ve caught somebody stealing somethin’ and they’re going to burn ‘em? Haven’t seen a good burning in awhile.”

Cait’s key clattered to the stones.

“Er, you dropped your key there, miss.”

“Henry? We have to...” She turned to where Henry had been leaning to find that ‘had’ was the key word...he was no longer there. “Henry?”

And with the snap of reins, she knew. Henry, his eyes bloodshot and his hair wild, had taken control of Huge, and the horse was careering down the street, smashing through a street stall in the process.

None of this would probably turn out well. “Henry! HENRY! YOU’RE NOT WELL!”

She did get a response. To Henry, it probably sounded heroic. To everyone else, it sounded more like, “Barragleaggleblagh! Gargamargooooooooo!” But before she could give chase, the cart was gone. She sat down on the curb, her face in her hands, as the sounds of an enormous animal splintering through wood faded into the distance. A hand touched her shoulder.

“If it’s not too much trouble, could I ask you out for a cup of coffee sometime?”

Cait looked up at the earnest, unkempt, golden-toothed smile. “Touch me again and I’ll use your dentures to bite your own arse off.”

The smile stayed in place. “Is that a promise?”

He never even saw the fist coming.

---

The interrogation chamber of the Builder’s Retreat, like the rest of it, had a sort of strange “Revisionist” air about it. Oh, sure, as Pete lay on the rack he could see the iron maiden on the other side of the room wiggling about furiously, and a man howled in pain as his interrogator turned the thumbscrew, but the walls were painted to look like a

seaside resort and a pleasant sort of music was being piped in from somewhere. It was a surreal experience, sort of like going on a pleasure cruise with Hieronymous Bosch.

The chamber door opened, and Jessup Krinkles entered along with the six bodyguards he had been with earlier, as well as a much older Hammerite, one with a really big wand hanging from his belt, who stood nearly a foot taller than the tallest guard. Krinkles smiled his smile again and clasped his hands as he stood between the two racks where Jack and Pete now hung. “Well have I some news for you! You will not be tortured on the rack!”

Pete smirked. “What’s the bad news?”

“Oh, that *was* the bad news! The good news is that we’re moving right along to the purification! You’re to be burnt in the courtyard following the recitation of your crimes.”

Jack frowned. This did not help much; he already looked about as ridiculous on the rack as one might expect. “Hey, hold on, we only committed *one* crime!”

“Oh, trust me, if you think you’ve only committed one crime that you’re guilty of, you’re not digging far enough. But that’s not for me to say, I’m just the messenger. In a moment, you can give all the necessary crimes, both physical and spiritual, that you’ve committed since your last confession...” Krinkles looked them over. “Which I’m assuming was ‘never,’ to Confessor Titus here. Any questions?”

Pete tried to raise his hand, though being on the rack as he was, it was pretty much already raised for him. Krinkles, again, looked as if he regretted asking that question. “Yes?”

“Yes, well, I’d really like to say you’ve shown a great deal of hospitality and everything, but I was wondering if, maybe, just maybe, you could find it in your hearts to let us go? Really, we’ve learned our lesson, and we’ll just go and stay out of everybody’s way...”

The man referred to as Confessor Titus waved a hand, and Pete stopped talking. This was not some sort of magic gesture or anything like that, it was simply because the man did it in such a way that deeply and truly frightened Pete. With a second wave, Krinkles and the six bodyguards left the room. With a third, the rest of the torturing crew left, with the man in the thumbscrew casually following, and the iron maiden hopping after, until only the three were left in the room.

Titus leaned toward Pete, his breath surprisingly fresh and minty for a man his age; this only added to the overall horror. “Do you think this is funny? Do I make you amused?”

Pete swallowed. “Amused? Really, I don’t know what you’re talking abo—”

“You thieves think you’re so bloody clever, don’t you? Just wandering around through life, looking at things that belong to other people and going ‘Ooh, look at that bit of stuff, that would look lovely hanging over the fire.’ Well, let me tell you something, you sack of offal and smelly bits. You wouldn’t last two seconds in my job. Stealing from an ancient tomb filled with traps? Try teaching a little morals and decency to a group of 8-year-old students who couldn’t give two figs about the Builder and eternity. I’ve seen grown men driven mad at the task.”

“Wait. Go back a moment. What’s this about a sack of offal?” Jack looked around, first in excitement, but when the bag didn’t immediately present itself, he sagged back against his shackles.

Titus continued, ignoring Jack. “Do you realize how much trouble that little scandal with that Thompson woman cost us? Not a word of truth in it, not a word, and yet the whole thing gets blown out of proportion by a bunch of reporters who have it out for us. So what if they’re a bit miffed because we burnt down the newspaper presses two years ago? Did you *see* the personals they were running?”

“But no, we’re made to all look like a bunch of biscuit-crazed maniacs who can’t tell the difference between a crumpet tin and a funerary urn. I tell you, it’s maddening!” Titus began to pace back and forth, lost in his monologue, like a Shakespearean actor who can’t tell the theatre is burning down around his ears. “It didn’t use to be like this in the old days, oh, no. There used to be *respect*. People see you going down the street in your red robes, and they *knew* to get down and plead for mercy and forgiveness. Even the bloody Pagans, as insane as *they* used to be, had the decency to run somewhere and hide out for a bit.”

Titus turned and pointed a finger at Jack. “But not these days. When they aren’t trying to trip you, the little monsters are whispering about you, telling jokes about ‘old Brother Who-sis’ and ‘fuddy-duddy Sister What-sit.’ Crude woodcut drawings hang from lampposts, showing us getting something generally obscene directed to our backsides. I mean, what is this world coming to when everyone laughs at the Hammer instead of fearing it?”

Jack shrugged. “Well, I would have thought that...”

“I’m being rhetorical, you bloated waterskin. I wouldn’t expect you to have an answer if it showed up in your vomit, you wretched lump of bottom scrapings.”

“Now hold on, I’m not a lump of...or, uh a bloated...” Jack paused as the words floated through his brain in a vain attempt at understanding. “What does rhetorical mean?”

Titus smiled. Unlike Krinkles’ smile, this one made no attempt to be friendly, or provoke anyone to ask stupid questions. “It means, you two are going to be the first of a new age for the Hammerites. You see this wretched compound all around you? It’s all an attempt to be ‘new, daring, more people-friendly.’ I prefer to call it ‘pompous, overblown, Pagan-esque drivel.’ The heads of the Church seem to think if we have some sort of community reach-out program we’ll get more people involved, build the numbers of the Church.”

Jack frowned. “That’s an awfully specific definition.”

Pete wiggled in his restraints. “Um, and, what’s wrong with that? If, er, you don’t mind me asking, of course.” Pete giggled nervously as Titus shot him a sneer.

“What’s *wrong* with that? This is a Church, not a bloody social club. People have to *want* to be here, not sign up because they get a nice little watch and a few drinks after chatting up the priest! For Builder’s sake, there’s a *coffee bar in the cathedral!* I tell you, when the day of Reckoning comes, and the Builder descends from the heavens to decide how we are to be sorted, you won’t be seeing *me* sipping at the bar. I’ll be right there, to welcome Him in all His glory, and I’ll help him send the whole lot of these new age miscreants to the fires of his furnace! And he’ll keep it cold, so they’ll roast for a *very long time!*”

Pete tilted his head. “You like to talk in italics a lot, don’t you?”

Titus grabbed his wand off of his belt and whapped Pete along the side of the head. It felt about as pleasant as it sounded. “Just for that, I’m going to make sure your

fire is *extra* cold. It does me good to see a real smartass slow roast for a few hours.” He strode over to the door, again, like his breath, a very impressive showing for someone his age. “In a few minutes, some acolytes will be coming to take you to my private chambers for a last little chat. Then, they’ll lead you out to the front square, where you’ll be tied to a stake and promptly burned at it. Be sure to get to know the acolytes who will be tying you up. They’ll be the last people you get to see in this life; with any luck, the Builder will take pity on us all and mould you into a brick in the stableyard of the tavern of Heaven, and keep you as bloody far away as possible from the rest of us.”

“Last little chat?” Pete was puzzled by this.

Titus smiled evilly. “Oh? I thought you knew about the little artifact you tried to steal. You see, the Builder’s Hammer has an interesting little quirk; when wielded by someone other than those lucky few whom the Builder has handpicked as His chosen Leaders of the Faith, it makes them confess all of their most important sins. And those sins are repeated back to Confessors in private, so that they may write them down and repeat them for the whole congregation to hear.” Titus looked Pete and Jack over again. “Something tells me you two may take a little bit of time, so we’ll try to move quickly.”

Finishing, Titus opened the heavy door, which opened cleanly. “Damn. I *told* them to make the torture room door squeak.” As the door shut behind him, his voice faded off as he continued. “I mean, what the hell is the point of *having* a torture chamber if you’re not going to have a good, rusty squeak? Might as well start wearing pink tights, the whole load of sis...”

The two hung from their separate racks, mostly in silence. Then, as it dawned on him that, yes, he was about to die and he should start doing something about it, Pete struggled at his chains frantically. To Jack, it appeared as if his long-time friend was either having a seizure or trying to invent a new type of dance. He found it to be a little inappropriate at the moment to do either.

Before Jack could tell him this, the door opened again, and they both turned toward it to await the arrival of the acolytes assigned to prepare them for their demise.

And when they saw them, their jaws dropped.

---

Henry heard the terrible clanging bell, and deep within the pits of his alcohol-soaked brain knew that something had to be done to stop it. In one of those pits was the thought that his friends were in trouble, and he had to do the right thing and save them. In another, the thought that when he found them, he would be well justified in beating the stuffing out of them for making him worry. A third just wanted to go to sleep and wake up in the morning with a splitting headache, and those bells simply had to shut up.

It is interesting to note that a fourth pit mentioned something else he could do, but as it involved Cait, a watermelon, and a vulgar act that would make Caligula blush, he ignored it. Sometimes, it pays *not* to listen to the smaller thoughts of the mind.

In any case, he simply directed Huge towards the ringing and let the animal take things over from there. Unfortunately, this involved driving straight through a number of obstacles, including vendor stalls, some unfortunate late-night stragglers, and the occasional building or two. This led to much wiping of wood splinters from his face and yelling at the groans coming from under the cart to shut up. But even as he laid waste to a good eighth of the City Quarter, he could hear the bells coming ever closer...

---

“Would you hold still, please? These ropes do not exactly tie themselves.”

Pete found it very hard to hold still. He couldn't understand why that was, as he really wanted to do whatever the ravishing young lady was telling him to do; only a small brain of his brain dedicated to his continued survival fought against the deluge of romantic thoughts that assaulted it, and despite its best efforts, was losing.

From the small bits of information he had been able to glean from such beautiful phrases as, “Come on, this way” and “Step on my toe a third time and I will rip your foot off, that clear,” she was the kind of person who tries desperately for everyone to appreciate her mind by wearing a uniform instead of something revealing. She was also the kind of person for whom wearing a uniform actually made matters worse, as this particular uniform, in its designer's initial attempt to reduce the desirability of its wearer, would have done its job admirably on someone far less proportioned in the areas the uniform was designed to conceal.

In other words, she had tried to convince the world to look at her brains instead of her breasts. And she had failed spectacularly on every conceivable level.

Pete tried to hold a conversation with her. “I'm trying my brea—er, best, darling, but...”

He suddenly felt his face being squeezed very hard by a hand that smelt like strawberries. “You call me darling again, and you will not live to your own execution. Understand?”

Pete nodded, weakly. “I'll call you whatever you want. Precious? Sweetheart?”

The girl groaned and went back to her tying.

“What? I'm trying here. Give me a clue. Sweetcakes? Muffin? Sugarlips?”

“Please, Pete, stop. I'm getting famished, here.” Jack was unconsciously licking his lips. Unlike Pete, he did not have a grand physical specimen of feminine beauty tying his ropes. Instead, he had a five-foot-tall, four-foot-bearded man of indeterminately old age preparing him for his doom. Somehow, it did not have the same effect.

With a good yank, the girl twisted Pete's wrists tightly together. “If you must know, you may call me Janet. I would prefer it if you did not call me at all, thief.”

The man tying Jack's wrists waved cheerfully. “You can call me Ricky!”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Yes, thank you. But, Janet, if I may be so bold...”

“I would not be, if I were you.”

“Humor me. You don't like me because I'm a thief, right?”

“One of many reasons, yes.” Satisfied that the wrist knots were securely tied, Janet went on to make sure his ankles were fastened properly to the pole.

“But what's wrong with being a thief? You get to hang out all the time, don't have to sit in drafty rooms reading over a bunch of boring books...”

“I like reading. It teaches me things...things like ‘how to not get set on fire for being a prat.’ It is overall a much safer profession.” Finding the ankle knots to her liking, she began inspecting the big pile of wood around Pete's feet, adding a few twigs of drier brush where she thought necessary.

“Safe? What about fun? Thieves don't just read about adventure, they get to go on them, too. Have you ever thought of going on a grand adventure? Especially with a dashing young fellow at your side?” He gave her his slyest, most charming smile.

Janet stood, folded her arms, and stared back. “When I find a dashing young fellow to go on one with, I will tell you how it all turns out.”

Pete frowned. “That was hurtful.”

“Oh, was it? Dear me, I thought it was devastating. I will have to try harder next time.”

“All right, fine, be that way. Just make me one promise.”

Janet sighed. She hadn’t been to many executions...well, hadn’t been to *any*, actually...but she didn’t think anyone acted like this at them. She decided to humor him. “All right, what promise?”

“If I get out of this, will you promise to get a cup of coffee with me?”

Janet looked around. Near the front gate were twenty Hammerites, all armed with their standard issue hammers. Nearby were some of the high priests, all armed with wands. Confessor Titus was approaching from the chapel. Both of the accused were standing on piles of logs, ready to be put aflame.

“I do not see why not.”

Before they could continue, Titus came to the middle of the square. He waved a hand, and the tolling bell was silenced. Pulling forth a scroll from his belt, which unfurled down to the ground, he adjusted his glasses and read. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...wait a moment, ah, there we go. The Hammer Church, under the guidance of Confessor Titus...that is me, for those who don’t know...has accused these men of the crime of attempted theft.”

At this, Jessup Krinkles appeared from somewhere behind Titus, holding up the Builder’s Hammer. The handle was loosely wrapped with a small cloth; apparently Jessup, though surely devout, had no desire to let loose every secret he had this evening.

“Yes, our great artifact, the Builder’s Hammer, almost fell into the hands of these blasphemers. I wish now to read a list of their crimes, great and small, so that all those gathered here may decide if these two are guilty and deserving of the punishment of embroilment. In no specific order...attempted grand theft...impersonating a high-ranking official...making an order of marching up and down the square at *this hour*...‘wheezing’ from the many flavor dispensers from the...” At this, Titus rolled his eyes. “‘Sacred’ coffee bar...”

He continued for nearly five minutes listing off their various offenses. Even though the words had flowed from him when the Hammer had been placed in his bare hand, most of them Pete didn’t remember doing, except by himself in private years ago when he was absolutely certain no one was looking. In fact, the last 27 or so he was pretty sure *everyone* was guilty of.

“Enjoying a strawberry tart when everyone knows the vanilla ones are perfectly suitable for everyone...and, finally, though they did not say it, I believe we may safely assume that they engaged in chronic and unending masturbation. How does the gathered respond?”

As expected, everyone gave a thumbs down.

“So the judgment has been passed. Sister Janet, Brother Richard, take the holy flames and place them to the wood, so that upon entering the Builder’s eternal realm, these two may be cleansed, as unlikely as it may be, and with purged souls enter into his justice.”

Two acolytes ran up with cheap wicker torches and handed them over to Janet and Ricky, who put them to the piles of wood. Jack's lit almost immediately, whereas Pete's started very slowly. Titus hadn't been kidding about an extra cold flame.

So, this was it. After all the cannons, the zombies, and the therapy sessions, this was what it all came to. It seemed a little anti-climactic in a way. Pete never really had thoughts about how he would go; he always assumed he would find some cozy place, a little out of the way, where he could stick a sock on his hand and chatter away into full-blown insanity in peace. But, the world sometimes has a different plan for you, whether you like it or not.

If only he had a few more minutes with Sockman...

---

Meanwhile, on a very different errand, a figure hid in shadows near the bottom of the City clocktower. Waiting for his moment, he ran over and pulled the switch, causing the coal chute to remain open. He then waited for the Hammer operator to come over and check it before knocking the man senseless. Without the operator, the coal would just keep coming, and soon the furnace would reach critical mass.

Just as he hoped for...

---

Titus raised his hands in the air. "Oh, Great Builder, thank you for the strength and guidance to bring your word to the people...is that fire going out? Well, keep it going, man, I'm busy here...May we always have a sign that we are doing your great work..."

The huge clocktower struck the time. Once, twice, three times...and then its base erupted in a massive explosion. Titus' eyes bulged as he looked across the way. The tower, thankfully, seemed to be collapsing in the opposite direction, but debris from the explosion flew what later reports would say was thousands of feet through the City. Rubble bounced off of the square, shards of metal zoomed past unwary faces and jammed into doorposts. The very ground shook from the force of the explosion...enough to send the posts of Jack and Pete toppling over to the ground and away from the fiery death that awaited them.

To the gathered masses, it was as if the Apocalypse had come. Thus, it came to much shock, but no one's surprise, when the front gates burst apart and a gigantic horse and cart came through, its rider speaking in tongues.

"Arrgh grat! Gert oorf it you twanking graarrgh!"

Bedlam erupted. Many sought cover within the buildings of the compound. Some merely bent over and prayed it would be over soon. Others, like Jessup Krinkles, merely stood, frozen in fear and wonderment, then screamed as Huge barreled over him.

Henry looked around, shouting gibberish, looking for his friends. He pulled the horse to a stop and stumbled onto the cobblestone paving. He began yelling their names, brushing wood fragments from his clothing and sending more than one Hammer acolyte running in abject terror. He finally managed to stumble over Pete, who had fortunately managed, when the pole toppled, to protect his body from harm by landing on his face. Grabbing the pole with a superhuman effort of will, he raised Pete up and threw him, pole and all, into the back of the cart. He tried to do the same with Jack, but even superhuman



strength has its limits. He rolled his compatriot over to the cart and started hoisting him up, using the side of the cart as leverage. Once that was done, Henry turned as a group of Hammers, braver than the rest, came up to him, brandishing their weapons.

Henry raised his arms, snarled, and shouted, “GAAAHHHH! BUGGERS! THRASHING! THRASHING!”

One braver than the others ventured forth, ready to swing his hammer most mighteously. His bravery, however, was no match for a drunken haymaker, which Henry used to flatten the poor chap to the ground. The Hammers decided, right then and there, that this man was possessed by a demon far more powerful than they, and decided to run away.

Henry turned to get back onto the cart, when he noticed an arm, twitching slightly and most likely attached to the man underneath the cart saying, “I’m so sorry, Great Builder. I repent! People can ask me whatever questions they want, I won’t complain!” The arm had a hand, and in that hand rested the Builder’s Hammer.

Henry didn’t recognize it as such, but as it was shiny and probably quite valuable, he wanted it. “Get yer hand orf, thass mine, you sodding...graaah!” He slapped Krinkles’ hand, who very politely let go of the Hammer, and Henry tucked it into his belt. At that, he clambered onto the cart, slapped the reins, and drove Huge right through the chapel, the lounge, and out the back side of the compound and onto the streets of the City.

As the horse and its mad driver vanished, the compound descended into silence. Slowly, the Hammers returned to the square. Their once magnificent new compound lay in ruins. Assorted bits of the clocktower were scattered all over. The front gates lay as splinters on the ground. The chapel was practically split in half. Jessup Krinkles, bruised and battered from his encounter with the biggest horse he had ever seen, stood and held his broken shoulder. Titus knelt down on the cobbles, frozen in utter shock. Ricky stared at the partially burnt pyres with tears in his eyes.

The only words spoken at all for the remainder of the night were those of Connor, standing in the gathered crowd, who said, “Should I go marching up and down the square again?”