

## DAY SIX

Henry awoke to the splash of water on his face. This in itself wasn't so bad, but like the day before he had a massive headache, which was made worse as the bucket previously containing water also landed on his face, very, very hard, quite possibly from it being thrown in his face. It was hard to tell because his eyes were still closed.

He opened them, one at a time, and the morning sunlight forced its way in, stabbing into his retinas like a curious child with a fork and an electrical socket to play with. A shape moved in front of the sun, blessedly, though as his eyes began to focus, he found the shape was not at all happy to see him.

"Morning, Cait. You seem jolly today. And thanks for the shower, I forgot to wash up last night."

"What are you doing here?"

Henry looked around. He expected to have woken up in his own place, but was a little surprised to find himself in the back alley of the Haunted Foghat. Apparently, in the wee hours that he could not remember, he hadn't gone quite as far as he had expected. "I'm not quite sure, but I think I could guess. Now, if you'll excuse me, my head is in blistering pain, no thanks to you, and I—"

"And what about that?"

"What about what?"

A pile of fabric next to Henry rolled over, and a hand popped out of it, resting gently on his chest. There was a slight, feminine groan from the pile, and then some light snoring.

"That."

Henry opened his mouth, then shut it. This happened again several times, as his brain continued to not only wrestle with the issue of how this situation took place, but that it had the audacity to take place at all. This sort of thing happened, yes, but not to *him*. At least, not until he was fabulously wealthy, sometime in the future. Some time when it wouldn't be so awkward.

"Believe me, I am just as surprised as you are."

Cait threw up her hands. "So is this it? Is this what you wanted? Did you pull off your bloody brilliant caper and you're starting your new career as man about town? Hmm?"

"No, Cait, I...I..."

Henry looked down and saw two obvious, heavy bulges in his shirt. He opened it and saw two objects, wrapped in cloth with a paper note pinned to them. He pulled the note loose and unrolled it. It read:

*There. We said we'd help you finish up, and we did. Here's your reward. Now give us ours by never bothering either one of us again. We don't want to see you, talk to you, or even hear about you.*

*Your friend,  
Pete Williams*

Henry crumpled the paper. "I guess I did pull it off." He held his hand with the note for Cait to read. She smacked his hand, making him drop it.

“Well, I’m glad you got it. Good luck. I hope it was all worth it.” Cait stormed off towards the door of the Foghat. Before she got to it, Nick opened the door, holding a plate of buttered toast. She pushed past him, then stopped, turned, and stood in the door. “Nick, if he tries to come in, twist his fingers off.”

Henry sat up, still a little confused. Apparently, before he’d gotten up this morning, his best friends had disowned him completely, his only girl friend had thrown a bucket on his head and threatened him, a new girl was sleeping next to him, and he was in possession of two extremely hot items.

And yet, this didn’t make him happy. At the start of the week, he would have thought that would be the case, but now something in the pit of his stomach felt hollow, as if tiny goblins had been clearing it out to make way for a new intestinal marketplace. He felt like punching himself, because this feeling went against everything he knew. Once you got everything you ever wanted, you were supposed to be happy, right?

The shape under the fabric stirred, then sat up. Gilly brushed herself off, got up, and smiled at him. “I really do have to thank you. I haven’t slept in the street in a long time. I had really missed it.”

Henry stood up and started twisting his toes into the cobblestones, holding his hands behind his back, eyes staring at the ground. “Oh, no...no problem, really. By the way, what happened last night?”

Gilly stepped back, startled. “Well, first of all, you came out to the tree, stole the—”

“No, no, I remember that, I mean after we left the sewers.”

Gilly leaned up against the wall. “You don’t remember anything past *that*? Wow, you must have been really drunk last night. You shook Pete and Jack’s hands, told them to meet you later here, and you spent the rest of the evening on a stool in there, shouting to the world that you were the greatest thief the world had ever seen. One fellow asked how that was, but you threw up on him, and he stopped talking.”

“How many drinks did I have?”

“Drink. It must have been a strong one, though, since you fell apart real quick. What’s in a pale ale, anyway?”

“Um, never mind. Did they ever show up?”

“Oh, yes, they did. You all got into another big argument, they gave you those packages, and left in a big hurry. You really know how to make people feel wanted, I’ll give you that.”

“And did we?”

Gilly cocked her head. “Did we what?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yes, I think you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“If you don’t, then we didn’t.”

“Listen, I don’t...” And suddenly, she understood. “Ohhhhhh.”

“Now you get it.”

“No, I didn’t. If I did get it, I wouldn’t be here right now, and you wouldn’t be standing here, perfectly healthy, without a dagger in your sternum.”

“So...you wouldn’t.”

“Sorry, I don’t. I’m just not like that.”

“Ah. Is it something to do with the whole...Pagan sort of...”

“No, no, I’m just waiting for the right person.”

“And I’m not?”

Now it was Gilly’s turn to look a little nervous. “Wellllll...you’re right-*ish*, I suppose, but I think I need a little more time.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

Some time passed without either saying a word.

“I haven’t, you know.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“Have you told anyone about this?”

“Just the one in the bar who threw a bucket on my head.”

“Did she say anything?”

“No. Sort of sniggered a bit, but then said she wasn’t laughing at me.”

“Sounds like she likes you.”

“Why, because she sniggered at me?”

“No, because she threw a bucket at you.”

Henry threw up his hands. “Why is it everyone thinks Cait likes me when she’s either yelling or throwing things at me?”

Gilly put her hands on her hips. “Well, I’m not exactly an expert on relationships, but generally when a woman gets angry over a human being, she either wants their shoes or she wants them. Not in a vulgar, wanton destruction sort of want, but in a general sense. At least, with relationships. Lord, I would murder for a good pair of shoes right now...”

Henry looked at the door, and though Nick didn’t seem angry at him at all, he knew what Nick was capable of. “So, um...should I try talking to her?”

Gilly shrugged. “I wouldn’t right now. Give her an hour, maybe two. She’ll be fine then.”

“Ok.” Henry started down the alley. Gilly grabbed him by the arm. “What?”

“You can’t just *leave*! You have to act like you’re trying to get in.”

“But you just said...”

“She wants to know you’re at least making an effort, even though you’re not supposed to succeed.”

Henry remained steadfastly confused by the whole thing, since his head still hurt and all of this wasn’t making things any better. He went over to Nick.

“Um, hello, Nick. Can I get inside?” He talked properly loud, and monotonously, so as to show he was ‘making an effort,’ even if it wasn’t very ‘convincing.’

“You could, but I’d have to rip your thumbs off. Wouldn’t like to do that, Henry, I like you.”

“Oh. Well, then, I guess I must be...” He looked over at Gilly, giving her a thumbs up, and she waved at him to continue. “No, I must be doing something other than what I’m doing...it involves me...” He watched her hand motions. “Making a large quantity of butter and serving it over rice?”

She shook her head and tried again.

“Oh. I mean, are you sure I can’t get in?”

Nick chuckled to himself, shaking his head at the charade. “Well, parts of you might get in, but that’s about it.”

“I see. Then I must be going.” He looked at Gilly for tips, and she made a couple of circular gestures. “I’m going to the roundabout for a...game of badminton with the gents.” Gilly slapped her face with her hand.

“I think you mean you’ll be back later, Henry?”

“Yes, exactly. Back later. After badminton. Good day.”

Gilly came up to him and grabbed him by the collar. “Don’t you understand simple sign language?”

“I do. What planet did you learn all that stuff from?”

“Oh, you’re impossible!” Gilly let go and stalked down to the end of the alley.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

Gilly fixed the bottom hem of her robe, making her appear as dignified as any person who spent a night sleeping in an alley can achieve. “If you didn’t notice, I’m not exactly in good graces with the Pagans anymore. I would very much like to stay someplace they can’t find me, and I know one that I used to stay at when I needed to get away from my parents.”

“Why did you need to get away from your parents?”

“Why does anyone?”

“How will I find you?”

“Why would you want to find me?” Gilly seemed genuinely surprised by this; someone on the street bumped into her and she didn’t even notice.

“Well...you did save my life. I’d like to repay you sometime.”

She smiled. The only other time he’d seen a smile like that, directed towards him, anyway, was with Cait. For a moment, Henry thought he caught the faintest glimpse of something magical in the air, a spark, a connection, a bond that held the two of them, a cosmic link between two people in a dirty alley in the depths of the City. He thought it might have been a twinge of love, or desire. But then, the feeling faded away, and then he thought it might have just been a little heartburn.

Which reminded him, he couldn’t remember eating anything since yesterday morning. “Maybe you’d like to get dinner sometime? You know, purely a ‘thank you for saving my life’ sort of thing?”

“You know, I’d like that. Listen, if you need to reach me for anything, my place is near Seventh Street. You’ll know it when you see it.” With that, Gilly waved and went into the street, already busy even at this time of day.

Henry folded his arms, shaking his head, and sat down on the steps next to Nick. “I don’t get it. Why do things with women have to get so complicated?”

Nick reached into his back pocket and removed a container, cylindrical and made of metal, and unscrewed its cap. He poured out what appeared to be tea into the cap, which was cup-shaped, and sipped it. “You know, I’ve spent many years searching for inner peace. I’ve read countless books about the wisdom of the ages, the nature of the soul, and even about the journey to the hereafter. And the one thing I’ve never found an answer for is the mind of a woman. I think it is just something we men can never fathom. That’s why I’ve pretty much given up on them.”

Henry chuckled. "That you, then, the permanent bachelor lifestyle?"

Nick finished his tea. "You could put it that way, yeah."

"Sounds like a good sort of life."

"Maybe, if you never want your parents to speak to you ever again. Anything else I can help you with?"

"No, not at the moment." Henry stood up and extended his hand to Nick, who shook it. "Thanks again, Nick."

Henry got to the entrance of the alley when Nick whistled to get his attention.

"By the way, Henry, did that pamphlet help you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes, yes it did, actually."

"Was it what you wanted when you got there?"

Henry was about to say, "Oh, yes, definitely, now shut up," but for both reasons of personal safety and lingering doubts, he didn't. "I'm not sure."

"Then, maybe, you should look deep down and see what it is you *are* looking for."

Just then, two hands clamped down on each of Henry's shoulders. He looked behind him to see two Hammerites, dressed in their finest reds, smiling evilly at him. One of them, wearing an eyepatch, coughed once and spat out a wad of what might have been phlegm, tobacco, and a tooth. "Well, I don't know about you, but I know *we've* found what *we've* been looking for."

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"The New Adventures of the Puppets of Pete Williams" read the sign above the hastily repaired wooden box that at one time had been a proper street venue. The crowd, having not had a puppet show in the area for a few days, had noticeably dropped in attendance, with only three or four children in attendance, as well as Gregory Wentworth, bum of ill repute, who sat in the back with a bottle of cheap whiskey and a laugh like a dying raccoon.

The torn curtains pulled open to reveal the majestic Pete puppet, astride a whimsical animal that (hopefully) existed only in the imagination, riding towards a burning tower. At the top of the tower was the off-kilter puppet used previously to resemble a certain Mr. Cresswell. The puppet waved its limbs frantically, as it screamed its puppetry scream at the top of its lungs.

"Oh help, oh, HEEELLLLPPPP! I climbed up this tower because I felt like it and now I'm trapped! Somebody come and rescue me!"

Pete the Puppet turned to the crowd, his googly eyes rattling. "What say you, folks? Should I rescue him?"

The children, not particularly amused, didn't respond. Gregory Wentworth, on the other hand, responded with gusto.

"Let the stupid bastard burn! Where's my potato?"

Pete nodded. "I agree. Where's my potato, indeed." Pete looked up at Henry. "Why should I bother? You got yourself into this mess. You should get yourself out of it. It's not like you ever gave me the time of day, anyway."

The Henry puppet looked down. "But I'm in trouble! You *have* to save me!"

"Well, not this time, you ponce. I'm staying right here and reading a newspaper." A small newspaper appeared at Pete's feet, and the puppet picked it up and started

reading it. “Hmmm, look at that. The City Frobbingtons won their last game of rounders 1-0 against the Waterbury Cardinals. Isn’t that something?”

One of the children took one of the other’s candies and threw it at Pete’s head. “This is boring!”

Pete dropped the newspaper. “You know what? You’re boring.”

Gregory took another swig of whiskey. “Sock him one right in the store!”

The puppet shook his head. “Sir, this is a children’s show. Please watch your language.”

“You don’t control me! You’re six inches tall! I don’t know why anyone elected you governor!”

“Sir, go away, or I shall be given no choice but to call the proper authorities.”

“Oh cripes, the authorities.” Gregory stood up and walked briskly away.

“Huh. Didn’t think that would work. Ok, then, we rejoin our story with the tower almost completely engulfed in flames, and…what?”

The Pete puppet felt a tap on its shoulder, and turned to see Sockman standing behind him. The puppet backed away.

“What are you doing here?”

Sockman shrugged. “I told you, you should be nice to Henry. You can’t just leave your friends stranded.”

The Pete puppet got into Sockman’s face, sticking a fingerless nub of a hand at him. “Listen, buster, you saw what he did the other night. I’m not his friend anymore. I tried being nice and it got nowhere.”

Sockman sighed. “I see I have no other choice.” He beckoned to somebody off stage right. “Come on, get out here.”

Behind the Pete puppet, a small cannon rolled out. “**Hello, Pete. Fancy meeting you here.**”

Pete turned. The cannon rolled closer, and Pete yelped and tried to get away. The children, picking up that this was somehow not part of the script, began to show much more interest.

“No! Stay away from me!”

“**I will not stay away! You brought this upon yourself! You’ve been very, very naughty, and it’s time you were punished! You know where to go! Or do I keep having to speak in a bold manner?**”

“No! I won’t!”

“**YOU WILL!**”

A flicker appeared on the cannon’s fuse. It went down, and a few seconds later a cannonball, the size of a pea, emerged with a pop, hitting the Pete puppet square in the chest. It bounced, and rolled over the edge of the stage and into the audience.

The scream started low at first, but crescendoed rapidly. Soon heads were turning a block away in both directions. The scream didn’t stop as Pete, the real Pete, smashed once again out of the front of the box, splintered wood flying everywhere, as he took off down the street. Puppets and bits of puppets dropped from him as he pushed people out of his way, disappearing into parts unknown.

The children stood and applauded the best puppet show they had seen in years.

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Amelie handed over what little money she had to the vendor, thanked him, and walked away with her corndogs. She was on her way back to Beggar's Alley to give Pete his lunch when she saw, up ahead, a strange group of individuals. They wore green robes with hoods, shadowing their faces, but what was visible was covered in intricate tattoos. Clearly the Pagans had mobilized and were out looking for the ones that got away.

This was, like, so not cool. She sidled to another street, bumping into something solid, large, and possibly made of metal. She turned and had to look up into the face of a Hammerite, female, with a cold look on her face.

"May I help you?"

Amelie gulped. She knew saying she was a Pagan or something would be a bad idea, but at the same time she was thinking: *Wow*. Amelie knew she herself was nothing to sneeze at, but she'd never seen anyone try to hard to make herself look so terrible when doing so was a lost cause.

"I'm, um, like, just on my way to get my man some lunch. I mean, jeez, can't somebody just walk down the street without being harassed, narc?"

Sister Janet's eyes narrowed. "What did you call me?"

"A narc. You know, the man, hassling everybody." Amelie tapped Janet's breastplate, which rang like a bell. "Are you ok in there? Can you, like breathe and eat and all that?"

"Do not waste my time. I am not a man, and I am very busy looking for somebody. He's wanted for doing some very bad things."

At that moment, a scream erupted in the air. Janet drew her hammer from her belt and prepared to attack any miscreant that gave her trouble. Instead, her expression of devoted smiting turned to incredulousness as Pete, puppets still on his hands, ran through the crowd towards her.

At the same time, Amelie and Janet asked, "Pete?"

Pete ignored them both, shoving people aside as he ran like he was on fire and wearing gelignite underroos. He reached the crowd of undercover Pagans, who recognized him and unsheathed poison-tipped daggers, ready to strike him down. They were unprepared for the sheer, unbridled fear that gripped Pete, and he bowled them over, some of them into their own weapons, and ran without slowing into a side street.

Amelie and Janet both took off after him, taking care to leap over one of the now-dissolving Pagans who had stabbed himself. When they reached the side street, they could hear the echo of his screams, but not where they were coming from.

"Damn it!" Janet sheathed her Hammer, grabbed Amelie by the collar, and slammed her, unnecessarily hard, into the wall. "How do you know him?"

"Hey, that hurt, narc! Like, simmer down a bit!"

"How...do...you know him?" It wasn't a question, it was a command that somehow ended with a question mark.

"I met him last night, okay? Why, you his girlfriend or something?"

Janet's eyes widened, uncharacteristically. She dropped Amelie, walked to the other side of the street, and sat down on a pile of refuse. "I had a date with him. I thought it went well. I was planning on dating with him again...if he survived his purification."

Amelie looked at her two corndogs, now sadly bent in half. She took a bite of one. “Yeah, well, it looks like he snapped, or something. Probably never see him again.” She held out the other corndog. “Want a bite?”

Janet looked up, grabbed the corndog, and nibbled it. “He was charming, in an annoying sort of way. I liked that. Everyone else I know is strict, but he was...different.”

“I just think he’s cute. So, are you still dating, or can I have him?”

Janet took another, larger bite of the corndog. “You touch him, and I will have you thrown into the Pit of Repentance.”

“Pit of Repentance? What a lame name for something.”

“The Pit is deep enough that you have plenty of time to repent all your sins before you hit the ground.”

Amelie swallowed a bite of corndog. “Okay, there.” Under her breath, she added, “Psycho-bitch.”

“But where could he have gone? What causes somebody to run off like that?”

Amelie shrugged. “I dunno. Red ants? Bee swarms? Long-repressed family issues? Could be anything.”

Janet snapped her fingers. “Long-repressed...of course. That has to be it.” She threw her stick onto the refuse pile and stood up. “Where is the other one, his blonde friend? I think we may need him.”

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“Ah, lovely to see you again.”

Confessor Titus lovingly stroked the cloth wrapped around the Builder’s Hammer. He turned to Henry, who was not only being held by the two Hammerites who had brought him up, but being given a thorough ‘interrogation’ by their fists. “I’m so glad you could return to us in a much more... ‘sober’ state. You’ve kept us waiting.”

They all stood in the Confessor’s chambers, an office more spartan than a city-state. There were no rugs, no windows, just a small wooden table lit by three candles. The only other object in the room was a silhouette of a hammer painted on the wall behind the table. There wasn’t even a chair; Titus didn’t believe in enjoying oneself while at work.

Henry smiled. He was happy they hadn’t smashed the Fruit in his shirt, though it was probably only a matter of time before they hit it. His one unblackened eye rolled a little bit before he focused on Titus. “Yes, sorry it took me so long. Enjoy. It’s safe and sound. Now, everything’s all settled up between us, right? You got what you wanted, and I’m probably going to piss blood for three weeks. It’s win-lose, and that’s fine by me.”

Titus laughed. “On the contrary, my dear fellow, we do thank you for returning before the 48 hours were up. Now we don’t have to pay anyone. But you still have to be punished for what you did, and the minimum penalty is death.”

“Minimum? How in the world can that be the minimum?”

“We sometimes add a little ‘penance’ beforehand, and of course we send along prayers to the Builder to teach you a lesson in the afterlife. What, you don’t think we account for that?”



Henry held up one of his few unbroken fingers, which was unintentionally in a rude gesture. "Point well taken. I would like some representation beforehand, though; got any good barristers in the afterlife?"

"We do have plenty of good ones, but you're not allowed to have them. Regulations, you know how it is."

"So, what, I'm stuck with a public defender? Those guys are awful; I know, I've used quite a few of them in *this* life."

"Well, I suppose we could lend you someone, on the condition that you...oh, what am I saying? This isn't up to debate! You're going to die, slowly and painfully, because that's the only way you're going to get rid of all that sinfulness that's built up in you after all these years."

"So if I die quickly, I stay naughty? That's what you're saying?"

"Yes, exactly. Think about your soul! How will we ever save it if your body is so corrupt?"

"I'm thinking about how best to keep the two together for the time being, thank you very much."

"Silence!" Titus waved a hand. "Continue 'The Tenderizing.' It must be done before we can begin any other rituals."

The two Hammerities nodded, and the one without the eyepatch (with the nametag 'Bentley') punched where Henry was keeping the Fruit. Instead of the gloppy noise and wetness Henry expected, there was instead a horrible crunching noise, and Bentley clutched at his fingers, bent and bleeding. Titus looked at him, then at Henry. "What did you do?"

"Nothing! He punched me in the fruit!"

Eyepatch shook his head. "Nah, sir, he punched *way* higher than that."

Titus pulled open Henry's shirt and pulled out the wrapped bundle. He shook it open, and a rock fell out of it, nearly catching his toes. "A fruit, you say!"

Henry sheepishly looked to one side. "It was a fruit *last* time I checked."

Titus unwrapped the bundle containing what he thought was the Hammer, and found a second, heavier rock. He threw it across the room. "Where's the real Hammer? Tell me!"

"Believe me, Confessor, this is just one of the many surprising things I have encountered since this morning. Want to hear about it?"

Titus turned to Eyepatch. "Go find Connor, and have him help you throw this one into the holding cell with the other one! We'll get our answers soon enough!"

Eyepatch hauled Henry out of the room, and though he was thankful not to be dying just yet, something Titus had said worried him...

*Other one? Who do they have?*

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"So this is what it's come to, boy? Stealing? I thought I told your mother to raise you better than that!"

"Yes, Dad."

"And leaving your post for days at a time?" Captain Eustace Roberts paced back and forth in front of the cell. "In my work, Jack, we call that desertion! You can be shot for it!"

Jack nodded, leaning his head against the cell bars. "I know, Dad. You've told me that at least seven times now."

"So what is it, then? What drives you to a life of crime?"

Jack sighed. He went over to the bench in his cell and sat down. He didn't really want to talk to his father right now. He was glad that his father had pulled some strings to get down here and talk to him, but speaking to one's father from the inside of a jail cell doesn't put one in a talkative mood.

"See? No answer! You can't think of any good reason to do...whatever it is that you did! What was it, anyway?"

Jack sighed. "We stole the Builder's Hammer and the Seed of something or other from the Pagans."

"See! What in the world would either of those do for you?"

"Well, Dad, it was Henry's idea, for one. He just sort of...brings me along. I don't know why, he doesn't seem to like me all that much."

"Ha! Another clue!" Captain Roberts twisted his moustache in triumph. "Bad influences! I told you to stay away from people like that. All it does is get you into trouble. Now, the army, *that's* the place to be! Keeps your mind focused, away from the gutter!"

Jack watched his father wistfully recalling what must be by now countless battles, long nights spent around campfires, cheating death on a daily basis to keep his country and his family safe. And then, a thought struck Jack. He didn't get them often, so for one to strike like this it had to be good. He just hoped it came out all right.

"Dad? Why did you join the army?"

Captain Roberts broke from his revelry. "Why? Because I thought it would do me and the country some good! Why else would anyone join it?"

"But why did you stay?"

Captain Roberts had never been asked questions like this before, especially not by his son. "Well, I...I stayed for the adventure. Every day is an adventure in the army!"

"But why not leave? Why not stay with us?"

"Because I want you and your mother to be safe! What's wrong with that?"

Jack got back up and clutched at the bars. "Because I don't think you even know who it is you're fighting for. How many stories have you told me about the field?"

"Why, it would have to be dozens, certainly. Maybe hundreds."

"And how many have you heard about me?"

Captain Roberts opened his mouth to answer, but then realized he had no answer to give.

"You want to know why I go off with Henry and Pete and steal things, Dad? Or try to steal them? Because they're my friends, Dad. They treat me like dirt, but they've always been there for me. The Watch treats me good, yeah, but all I ever did for them was sit behind a desk or arrest somebody occasionally. But being with Pete and Henry, Dad, it's an *adventure*. I get to go out and do things nobody else has done. You've been fighting enemy armies, but do you know where I've been? I've been shot at by cannons, nearly killed by zombies and carnivorous plants, eaten and thrown up valuable works of art, chased by monsters in a gigantic tree, and I'm still here to tell you about it. Without stealing...my life is empty."

Captain Roberts lowered his head a bit. For a few minutes no one said anything, but in that span of time the silence they shared told more than any words could say.

“Son, I...I never realized. You’ve done all of these things?”

Jack nodded. “I’ve never been very *good* at doing all these things, but I done ‘em. Just yesterday we probably outran at least seven big, hairy monsters through the sewers.”

“Seven?” Captain Roberts puffed out his chest. “Seven? Why, on a slow day in the army, I’d have to outrun a dozen or so fellows, some of them with as many as six heads! I remember one time I was running through the driving snow, it was uphill, *both ways...*”

Jack let go of the bars. He thought that maybe, just for a second, he could have a real moment, like people in books he’d never read had. Instead, he learned the cardinal rule of the military branch of the Roberts family: if they could one-up you, they would. As his father rattled on about how once he had to pry fifteen leeches off of his eyeballs while being fired upon by a battalion of armored chimps, he went back to the bench, put his head in his hands, and waited for something, anything to happen.

He didn’t have long to wait. The doors to the cell block opened, and two Hammers came in, dragging a very beaten Henry behind them. Jack recognized one of them as Connor; the one with the eyepatch he hoped never to recognize. They unlocked the cell and tossed him in, locking the door behind him with the sort of clank that only years of rust can achieve. Eyepatch sneered at Henry through the bars, cackling and coughing in a mixture that could only be called a “clough.”

“Hope you like yer spacious accomo-dations, mess-sewer! He he he.” Eyepatch continued to clough as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a massive wad of tobacco. At least, in this light, it was preferable to think it was tobacco than any other alternative. He placed the whole thing in his cheek and began to chew.

Henry groaned and sat up, rubbing the parts of him that hurt. He had a lot to get through, and figured he should start now. “Are you even a Hammer?”

“Wot? Wot makes you think o’erwise?”

“Well, for one, you have *way* too many vices to be a Hammer.”

Eyepatch shrugged, his jaw churning like a freight train. “All right, ya got me. I used ter be a pirate, and I decided to get out of the game. Wot, don’t I look respectable in my new digs?”

Henry shook his head. “You look like you just mugged a bishop as part of the world’s worst escape plan.”

Eyepatch scratched his head. “I don’t get it.”

“Not surprised.”

The guard gripped the bars tightly. “Ya know, ya got a smart mouth for sommon’ who just got the snot kicked out of him.”

Henry checked to see if his arms were busted anywhere. “You’re not the first, and you won’t be the last, so no prizes for you...except maybe filthiest breath, but even that’s a toss-up.”

Eyepatch was about to run into the cell when Connor stopped him, shaking his head. “Believe me, don’t make him angry. You don’t want to see what he’s capable of.”

Restrained, Eyepatch merely gave Henry a gold-toothed grin, spit tobacco in Henry’s eyes, and cloughed his way out of the cell.

Henry wiped the glob away, looking up at Captain Roberts. “Are you going to say something, or just stand there doing nothing?”

Captain Roberts stood at attention, facing away. Jack shook his head. “No good, Henry. He doesn’t like to talk to criminals.”

“Oh, one of *those*.” Henry hobbled over to the bench and sat down. “Thinks he’s too good for the rest of us, eh? Come to watch? Have a little fun at our expense? Stick up your nose like you own the bloody place?”

“Henry...”

“Well, let me tell you something, you voyeuristic bastard. You come traipsing in here, expecting those about to die to do a little song and dance for you, eh? A little entertainment before the main attraction of us roasting over an open fire? Well, you can take your spotty behind, with its cloak, and your posh military uniform, and just move along! You’re not getting anything from me!”

“Henry...”

“Lord High and Mighty. Look at him, Jack, now’s he’s just ignoring us. Builder, this pillock’s got some nerve. He’s worse than your father.”

Jack put his face in his hands. Henry’s mouth stopped moving and his brain got in gear.

“That *is* your father, isn’t it, Jack?”

Jack, face still in hands, nodded.

“Ah.” Henry stood, presenting himself as boldly as he could. “Perchance, dear sir, if I might ask, we poor souls are imprisoned here, and we were wondering if...”

“If I could leave?” Captain Roberts eyes squinted in furious anger. If it were possible for eyes to actually blaze with fire, Henry was certain the fire in the Captain’s eyes would shoot out, burn a hole through his chest, and come around and throttle him before he could even hit the ground.

“No, not *leave*, exactly, but...”

“Oh, but I will. I have fought against too many enemies, too many charlatans, thinking they can rule the world, to know better than to release the likes of you back onto the street. May the Builder have no mercy on your soul.” The Captain pointed at Jack. “This is the company you keep? I have no son.” With that, he turned, his cape fluttering melodramatically, and went out, shutting the door loudly behind him.

Henry continued to stand, in the near-dark, his hand still raised in a bargaining gesture. “Jack, I believe I may have made a mistake.”

He heard no reply from Jack. Instead, he felt fingers grab him from behind, choking him mercilessly. He fell forward, his face cracking against the stone floor, and he rolled over to face his attacker. Though the fingers slipped from his throat, he began to gag as a large roll of flab smothered him. He pushed against Jack, but his surface was simply too yielding.

“This is all your bloody fault, you great big, stupid, stinking, half-witted bastard!”

Henry wanted to respond to the irony of Jack calling anyone a half-wit, but his air was quickly running out. He thought about his next course of action when Jack made it for him; Jack rolled off of him and sat against the bench, sobbing uncontrollably.

Henry rubbed his throat. “What is wrong with you? You could’ve killed me!”

“Maybe I should have! Do you know I just tried to defend you and Pete to my father, to make him think I’m not a complete dunce, and here you go coming in and making an ass out of yourself? What is wrong with *you*?”

Henry put his hands on Jack’s shoulders in a consoling manner. “Now, hang on, I’m sure we can all work this out. By the way, do you know what happened to the Hammer and the Seed? All I had on me were these two—”

A hand slapped Henry across the face. Henry had been hit by a lot of people before. Heck, it happened on average nine or ten times a day. But this was an altogether new experience. Jack *never* hit anyone, especially not him.

“You don’t care, do you? You don’t care whose lives you ruin, just as long as you get what *you* want. Don’t you see what you’ve done?”

“Jack, I...”

“No, Henry. Shut up. I’m going to say what I have to say, and I don’t want to hear a peep out of you, do you hear me?”

Henry sat down. He didn’t know why he was listening to Jack, but his body was acting under a force greater than himself. Maybe it was self-preservation, maybe it was conscience, maybe it was just sheer surprise, but he stayed where he was and shut up.

“Ever since we first met, I admired you. You always seemed to have a plan, a grand plan to do something with your life. And I liked that. My father was gone off to war all the time, so I didn’t have anybody to look up to. With you and Pete, I had friends, somebody I could trust.

“But then things changed. I didn’t see the fellow with the grand plans, the one who would make us all rich and famous. Instead, I saw someone who wanted everything for himself, who wanted us all to fall into line behind him, that *we* always came second. It was like you only wanted Pete and me around so that you could prove how great you were. You want to know why we left? *That’s* why. We were tired of being pushed around, being bullied into going on these grand adventures.

“And so we got jobs. And you know what? We were *good* at them. Maybe not the greatest; we weren’t going to be remembered as famous coppers, or brilliant puppeteers, but we could do the job. And even if we weren’t thanked everyday, we weren’t told how idiotic we were. Somebody *appreciated* us for once.

“And then you came back. And even though I was reluctant...and yes, you did try to blackmail me...I did it anyway. Why? Because I missed the adventure, because I missed the challenge, because I missed *us*. I don’t know why I ever missed us, but I did. It’s sort of like remembering being a kid, you look back and think about all these great times you can never get back, but it’s only because you forget all the shite that happened, too.

“So what was it, Henry? Was I wrong in the beginning? Did I just think there was a great visionary, and the real you was this great pillock all along? Or is there, somewhere, deep down, under all the bragging and sarcasm, the person I met all those years ago?”

Henry, about halfway through Jack’s pouring out of his heart and soul, felt his eyes falling to the floor in absolute shame. He never knew Jack looked up to him like that. He always thought Jack just hung around because he had no place else to go. But then, the more thought about it, he too wondered why Jack hung around. He’d never given him any reason to. In between the insults, the hitting, the general disregard for his

well-being, he'd never treated Jack like a friend. But Jack had always treated him like one.

And Henry realized, right now, in this cold dark cell, Jack was the only friend he had. He'd had nightmares about this very sort of thing, being alone in the world with only Jack for company, but now he was grateful. Here they were, about to die, penniless, practically unknown, and hated by everyone they knew and cared about. But with a friend, it didn't feel quite so bad.

Henry sighed. "I don't know, Jack. What do you want me to say? 'I'm sorry I was such a giant arse, let's be friends again?'" Do you think that's going to set right every horrible thing I've ever said to you, or to Pete? I don't even know if I *can* stop saying all that stuff. I think it's just the way I am. I'm not trying to hurt anyone...I just sort of...shoot my mouth off from time to time."

Jack pulled himself onto the bench. "Henry, it's not even about the insults. It's about trust. Can I ever trust you to get my back as many times as I've tried to get yours? I know I'm not very good at all this stuff, but at least I try. I just want to know of you're willing to do the same for me. I mean, don't Pete and I mean anything more to you than just an extra set of hands?"

Henry didn't answer. He didn't know if he ever could.

---

Night had fallen outside the Haunted Foghat. Normally, the bar would be hopping at this hour, but so many patrons had had glasses thrown at their head by the angry bartender that it was officially closed for the evening. Not that Nick minded any; he remained on guard outside, reading another book.

As he placed the bar on the door he heard voices from the end of the alley. The faint light from the lantern hanging up outside didn't allow him to see too far, but he could make out shapes in the gloom. He figured one was a very short woman, the other a very tall man, based on their heights relative to each other. The man's voice sounded awkward, heavy, thick.

"He was hereses?"

**"Yes. I can smell him. Can I kill him yet?"**

"In good time. He has something we wantses."

The woman entered the circle of light. Nick had been very wrong; the woman was quite tall, only a little shorter than himself, actually. And she was dressed as if she had been robbed and left for dead by a brigade of bridle enthusiasts. She had a bandage around one arm and a purple bruise on the side of her face.

"Where is the manfool who stoles our Seeds?"

Nick shrugged. "I don't have a clue who you're talking about." Of course, he did know, but he wasn't about to tell her; he'd already talked to those two young women about it earlier, and they had the decency to ask him nicely.

"Do not lies to me. Wheresies?"

Nick cracked his knuckles, giving the woman his most bouncesque face. "I think it's time you left, before things got out of hand. I would say before you got hurt, but it looks like that's happened already, hasn't it?"

The woman snapped her fingers. The tall figure emerged from the shadows, and once again Nick realized he had been wrong again; the reason he had thought the woman

was short was because the one now emerging from the alley was *huge*, far larger than anyone had a right to be. Though as the figure stomped up the cobblestones towards him, the word *anyone* didn't seem to fit, somehow.

Nick had spent his whole life looking for inner peace and tranquility. As it cranked back its fist, ready to punch, he thought wherever he landed, that was where he was finally going to find it.

---

Cait sat with her chin in her hands, mentally alphabetizing the liquor bottles on the wall behind her. She didn't have much else to do; Nick had been keeping away customers all day, for their own personal safety. When the Foghat's owner heard that they had closed today without his permission, he had of course inquired as to why, but when Nick informed him that today would not be a good day to enter, he went home. Sometimes managers *are* smart enough to know better than to get involved.

It just didn't seem right. Granted, she knew she hadn't exactly thrown herself at Henry, but she'd thought she'd given enough hints to make it clear. Now she knew better: sometimes, some people just had to be led by the hand...or, at least, be pulled around by certain other anatomical regions.

And to be honest, she didn't even know why she liked him herself. He was absolutely pathetic on even his good days. He couldn't hold a drink, much less a steady job, was incompetent in the simplest of circumstances, and had the charm and charisma of a vampire at a sunbathing convention. But there was that mystical *something* about him, that *something* that people always seem to see in people that would be better off friendless and alone getting menial wages doing something like nuclear waste disposal. "So, why'd you marry Gerald?" "Oh, I know he's only got one leg after losing the other one in a knife fight, and one eye after that headbutting incident with the rhino, and likes to scream insults at schoolchildren, but there's just *something* about him!"

Maybe, she thought, she simply hadn't tried as hard as she could have. She certainly never saw a day coming when Henry would wake up next to somebody and it wouldn't be her. Now that somebody had gotten there first, she felt like an opportunity had been lost, like putting off climbing the world's tallest mountain until Tuesday and finding out some charming billionaire climbed it first, making you look like a complete twit for coming in second.

So here she'd sat, all day, just staring at the bottles, wondering what in the world she was going to do. What could she say? She couldn't exactly blame Henry: she didn't think he was capable of understanding, like swatting a puppy with a rolled up newspaper two hours after it made wee in the kitchen. But she couldn't say it was her fault; it would make her look stupid, and besides, she was pretty sure she hadn't done anything wrong either.

This mental conundrum, thankfully, was interrupted as Nick entered, rather suddenly. It was not the typical way one entered a door; one tended to be vertical, with one's feet on the ground, not headfirst and flying through the air. He crashed into the bar, making a wicked hole through it, and groaned as he lay in a pile of splintered wood.

Cait bent over and checked him. "Nick! Are you all right?"

Nick's eyelids fluttered. "Did...did someone beat me in a fight just now?"

Cait blinked. "I...I think so."

Nick smiled. “Then I’m fine. Finer than I’ve ever been.” He shut his eyes and passed out.

Cait checked his pulse: faint, but still there. Whatever had hit him had packed an absolute wallop. She was about to wonder what had happened exactly when a giant man pushed through the previous-occupied doorway of the Foghat. He was too tall for it, but he didn’t attempt to duck; his head simply pushed right through, leaving a clean, head-shaped hole where he passed.

Cait looked up into the man’s face, as his shadow extended over her. She held Nick tightly around the chin. She didn’t know exactly how she would fight this...this monster, but it would have to go through her before it hurt Nick any further.

The man’s eyes glowed as he watched her, the pupils lost in a thick silvery color. He pointed what may have once been a finger at her. “**You know a Henry Cresswell, right?**”

The words, thick and bold, bellowed out of the man’s mouth. Cait, without realizing it, nodded.

“**Then you’ll do.**”

---

Brother Kip Fondue was always assigned desk duty. This wasn’t something done by accident, nor did Kip mind; he was just one of those people who sat at desks and answered questions for people. It was something that had evolved into an art form over the years, and if awards were given for such service, Kip would best be known as a “Grandmaster” of his art. His thin frame was never threatening, but that thinness was as tough as old meat; anyone over the age of five could probably take him in a fight, but such a master at stares was he that Kip could pull the fight out of you in a glance. He might even send you on your merry way, feeling relieved that he was able to help you, before you realized you didn’t get what you came for in the first place.

Kip’s desk duty for the evening was the front desk of the dungeon area of the Hammer church, which was accessible through a wooden door labeled, “Employees Only: Janitor’s Closet.” His area was clean enough, a stone reception room with a few comfortable seats; it was the area down the circular steps behind him that led to the more dingy bits, complete with old, rusty manacles, torches, skeletons, the stuff most people read about in the pulp novels sold on the street corners. For some reason, the older dungeons were the only places not brought up to the new “Euclidean II” standards; according to what Kip had heard, the higher-ups had made them off-limits, claiming, “We have to put the dank *somewhere*. What good are some confessions if not earned in the dank?”

The evening had been livelier than most so far, but certainly not action-packed. A couple of newcomers had been chucked downstairs, and one even had a visitor (very rare, if Kip said so himself). He’d marked them down in his extensive ledger, which was actually almost full. He’d have to remember to pick up another one after he left today...as long as he could find the same model. It didn’t work to have two different kinds of ledgers; they’d look terrible next to each other on the shelf.

He grabbed his ink pen and was about to doodle a little in the corners of the book, as he did every night, when he heard voices outside the church, clearly audible through the arrow slit that served as the window.



“This, like, is never going to work. I mean, come on, like, you really think we’re just going to waltz in there and...”

“It will work. Stop doubting me and everything I do. I am very capable.”

“Yeah, capable of being a complete loser.”

“Will you stop doing that?”

“Stop what?”

“Taking what I said and adding an insult to it. It is very unpleasant.”

“*You’re* very unpleasant.”

“That is what I mean!”

Kip, curious, went over to the slit and peered out. The street was very dark, but he could make out the talking figures standing near a wall on the opposite side of the alley. There were two of them, in brown robes, whispering loudly enough to be heard a street over.

“Just, like, stop it before somebody catches us, okay? Don’t be such a lamewad.”

“I am not!” The taller of the two gripped the other one’s robe tightly, drawing her in close. “I am a dedicated servant of a power greater than myself! I am important! I am special!”

The shorter one rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you’re special, all right.”

The other one nodded, apparently unaware of the various meanings of the word ‘special.’ “Thank you. Now, if we can get underway, the door should be...”

The two stopped talking as they looked up. Kip wondered what they were looking at, until a dark shape leapt down from the roof just above his head. He whistled to himself; he didn’t even know anyone was up there. It, too, was wearing a brown robe.

“What are you two doing here?”

The shorter one pushed herself out of the taller one’s hands and tried to show some dignity. It didn’t work. “What are we doing here? What are *you* doing here?”

The newcomer shrugged. “I have an old place here in the church I used to stay in when I was a kid. It’s pretty cozy. So what’s up?”

Kip had been here for years, and had never found any sort of secret hideaway. Whoever she was, she was good. Very good.

“You mean, like, you don’t know? That Henry guy’s locked up in the dungeon here.”

“What? How? When?”

“This afternoon. The bouncer guy at the bar was really nice, told us they came and got him.”

“Well, we have to go get him, don’t we?”

“Duh! That’s, like, why we’re *here*? We need him to go talk to his friend, you know, the cute one?”

The taller one cleared her throat. “Excuse me. I believe I am the only one who can call him the cute one.”

The newcomer waved her hands. “You can call him whatever you want later! Where’s Melody?”

The shorter one shook her head. “Oh, come on, like Melody would be of any help to us.”

The newcomer thought for a moment, then nodded. “All right, then. What’s the plan?”

The three gathered in a circle and started whispering too low for Kip to hear. He smiled and returned to his desk. Now that he knew what they were up to, it would be simple to get rid of them. A quick stare, a few cutting words, maybe a story about needing “proper clearance,” and they’d be out of his hair...what remained of it, anyway...for at least a day or so, and by then their friends would be long departed. He doodled once more, creating something so ribald he quickly crossed it out before anyone could see it.

About five or so minutes later, the three girls in the brown robes came through the wooden “Janitor Closet” door and approached his desk. All three shifted uncomfortably, almost nervously. Kip didn’t blame them; in his presence, he would be nervous, too. “May I he—”

Kip was silenced as a fist flew out of the taller one’s robe and smashed him across the face. He flew backwards out of his chair, rolling twice end over end, stopping at the top of the spiral staircase, out cold.

Janet rubbed her knuckles, and turned to the other two, who were staring at her in shock. “What?”

Gilly pointed at the unconscious Kip. “That wasn’t part of the plan!”

Janet looked back at Kip, whose crumpled form looked like it would be painfully uncomfortable to get up from when he awoke. “I know Kip. Never liked him. He plagiarized my stares. Come on, we can not stay here all night.” Janet led them down the stairs.

At the bottom, they came to a hallway, dank and moldy, lit poorly by low-burning torches (as opposed to the classic high-burning torches, which were being phased out for being too contributive to city-wide smog). Along the hall were many doors, behind which came either nothing, groans, or pleas for release. As they passed one door, a plerous hand shot out from the small, barred window set into it at head level.

“Please! Please let me out of here! I don’t belong here! I didn’t do anything! I only *tried* to bludgeon that high priest!”

Gilly, who had been ready to open the door and let the man out, thought better of it and went on ahead.

At the end of the hall was a larger door, with a sign over it reading “Fore Speciale Casese Onlye.” Amelie stared at it for a moment. “Did they, like, lock up the guy who made that sign in there? Because that is *way* too many e’s.”

Janet folded her arms, haughtily. “Special Cases are reserved for those who have committed the most grievous offenses against the faith.”

Gilly pointed her thumb back at the room they just passed. “What about the guy who attacked the high priest? Sounds like a special case to me.”

“That was an attack against the body, not the soul. Grievous offenses include major theft, blasphemous or heretical remarks, or desecration of sacred materials.”

“Isn’t that something the City Watch should handle?”

“Absolutely not. The City Watch would not have a clue what to do. Most of the time they just throw people back out on the streets. Besides, outside of the City, we *are* the police.”

Gilly shut her eyes and quietly mouthed to herself, “Wonderful. I’m so relieved to hear *that*.”

Janet pushed the door open. Inside was another hallway, this one filled with more doors. These had no bars allowing anyone to look in, but the same kinds of sounds emerged from behind them, though exponentially more pitiful than the ones outside.

Gilly pulled one open and saw a room beyond with the far wall barred off, and a thin woman with lash marks along her back crying in a corner behind the bars. “So, um, Janet, what makes these cells so different than the other ones?”

“It is not the cells themselves, it is the punishment meted out to those within. Why?”

Gilly shut the door. “Why is lashing such a horrible punishment? I mean, I know it’s pretty *awful*, but...”

Janet nodded in understanding. “Lashing, eh? That would be a heretic. Lashing is just the first part, to beat the untruths out of the sinner. Then comes the hobbling, to keep the heretic from running away from the Builder’s wrath. And finally, the heretic is prevented from ever speaking untruths ever again.”

Gilly put her hands over her mouth. “You don’t mean...”

“Oh, yes.”

“And you don’t see a problem with that?”

“No. I do not plan on ever speaking untruths.”

Gilly stopped in the hallway. “But...how...it’s just so...barbaric!”

Amelie sighed. “Um, hello, we were, like, almost eaten thanks to our Den Mother last night? I would say that’s a little harsh, wouldn’t you?”

“But that’s not the same, that’s...I mean, she was really a...that’s not the way...” But Gilly stopped. In the end, she really couldn’t see a difference between the two. No wait, scratch that. There was one key difference: who got to beat the stuffing out of your eternal soul after you died. She wasn’t sure if that was the way the Builder or the Woodsie Lord had planned it, but if it wasn’t, somebody *really* dropped the ball somewhere along the way. “All right, fine. We’ll argue about it after we get Henry rescued.”

They tried a few more doors, finding a few wretched figures in various states of ‘rehabilitation.’ Amelie was the one who finally opened it. She was about to close it again, seeing two figures in the same cell, but as usual (and fortunate in this instance), Henry tended to stand out in a crowd. She beckoned to Gilly and Janet. “You guys! I think I found them!”

“Them?” Janet came over and looked in. “Ah. Looks like the fat one is here as well.”

Gilly sighed. “Maybe we should’ve told Melody after all. She’s probably worried sick about him.”

Amelie scrunched up her nose. “Melody actually *likes* him? Eew, gross.”

Gilly smacked Amelie. “Don’t be mean. He’s a very nice boy.”

“Yeah, but, like, you couldn’t take him out to eat anywhere. They’d, you know, call the Watch or something, ask you to leave, like, before the salad bar is gone.”

The three walked into the room. The two fellows were passed out on the cold, dirty stone floor. Jack was snoring pitifully, while Henry rolled around trying to get comfortable. It looked more like he had a ferret trapped in his shirt than anything else.

Gilly went up to the bars and hit one, making it ring. Henry sat up with a start. Normally someone in a situation like this would say something ridiculous, such as “Yes,

I'll get started with the pumpkins right away," having woken from a dream of ambiguous and possibly disgusting situations. Instead, Henry said nothing, but jammed his finger into his eye in what appeared a very painful manner. By 'appeared,' he yelled very loudly and woke up Jack, who seemed disappointed at being woken up in the first place.

Henry stood up, clutching his eye, stumbling around the cell. "What in the hell was I thinking? What in the world could I have been dreaming about to do that?"

Gilly banged the bar again. "Ahem."

Henry let go of his eye, blinking it as it teared up and turned red. He acted as if nothing had happened, which convinced nobody, not even himself. "Oh, ah, good evening, Gilly...Amelie...very tall woman with an incredible set of..."

Janet grabbed two bars and grimaced. As she grimaced, the bars pulled away from each other. "Finish that sentence with what I think you are about to say, and I do the same to two parts of you that do not want to be pried apart."

Henry gulped. He looked at her outfit a bit more closely. "Incredible set of...beliefs?"

Amelie nodded. "Whoa. Nice save."

Jack stood up, dusted off as much of himself as he could reach, and he came up to the bars. "You're here to rescue us, right?"

"No, Jack, they're here because they're going dungeon to dungeon selling cookies."

Jack brightened. "Fine with me. I'll take anything at this point!"

Henry was about to berate him again, but then thought about their last talk.

*Cripes, he is not going to make this easy, is he?* "Anyway, what is your plan?"

Jack scanned the room further. "And where's Melody?"

Gilly looked around. "She's...um...she couldn't make it. Listen, just step away from the bars while we get this door open." She turned to Janet. "You have the keys, right?"

Janet shook her head. "I thought you had them."

"So, nobody got the keys off of that guard upstairs?"

"He would not have the keys. Those are kept at the head office and taken only when transferring prisoners. Escapes happen less frequently that way."

"But what if a prisoner gets sick and needs medical attention?"

"Your point being?"

"I'm beginning to notice a pattern here involving the way you treat your inmates."

"I did not make the rules, I just follow them."

"Wonderful. Well, let me try something here." Gilly grabbed the lock, closed her eyes, and focused her mind. After a moment, the image of the lock appeared, and she imagined it opening, tumbler by tumbler. Under her hands she could actually *feel* them sliding into place...

Janet chuckled. Gilly lost her concentration, and the tumblers all fell back to their original spots. "Would you mind? I'm trying to open this lock!"

"With what? A touch?"

Gilly put her hands on her hips. "For your information, I can do lots of interesting things. Just the other night I shot something green out of my hands."

Amelie raised her hand. "I can vouch. It was killer awesome."

Janet pushed Gilly gently aside. “I do not know what powers the Trickster has bestowed upon you, but believe me, when a key is needed, the Builder provides. Stand back, please.” Gilly backed away from the door as Janet came forward. She pulled her hammer out and raised it up high. Henry and Jack had already taken a few steps back, but at this point they both dove for cover underneath the bench.

They made a good decision. Janet swung the hammer, striking the lock dead center. Not only did this free the lock on the door, it also freed the door from its hinges, violently. The door flew across the room and struck the far wall, imbedding itself about half an inch or so in the rock. As Henry and Jack peered out, admiring the object that almost beheaded them, Janet sheathed her hammer and walked back out into the dungeon. “Are we staying, or are we going to rescue Pete?”

Nobody moved for a moment. A light went off in Henry’s brain.

“Jack? Do you know if that was Pete’s ‘sour date?’”

Jack crawled out and felt the now horizontal door. “I...I think it might have been, yes.”

“I hope she doesn’t still think they’re dating. I don’t think he could survive one night alone with her.”

---

Kip Fondue awoke to the sounds of rumbling, and also to being jostled around like a rag doll, before feeling himself lifted bodily off the floor by two rough objects that felt far too large to be hands. He opened his eyes to see a pair of eyes very much unlike any he had ever seen. They had no pupils, and glowed with a silvery light.

**“Where is the prisoner named Henry Cresswell?”**

Kip had no idea what was going on, but he knew damn well his collection of stares wouldn’t work in this instance; the eyes staring at him were doing much better than any of his ever did. “I...I...I don’t know. He should be downstairs.”

**“He’s not.”**

Kip nervously waggled his feet, which hung at least two feet off the floor. “Well, don’t look at me. These three girls came in and one of them sucker punched me.”

**“Then I guess you’re not very useful, then, are you?”**

And then a hand closed over Kip’s head and squeezed. After five seconds, it became clear that Kip Fondue would never stare at anyone ever again.

---

The group stood in front of the stone wall that guarded what remained of the Shalesbridge Cradle. That seemed to be about as far as any of them wanted to go. The gate itself had been padlocked until recently, though fingers much more dexterous than Pete’s had had a go at them. As Henry observed, Pete was probably thin enough to just squeeze between the gap in the gate without opening anything.

Which brought him to the question he’d been wanting to ask the entire way here. “So, um...why, exactly, do you need me to go in here?”

Janet folded her arms. “We believe Pete is in there. I believe he had a nervous breakdown.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

Amelie grabbed Henry by the shoulders. “Look, he’s your friend, right? Like, he might come out if you, you know, talk to him and stuff.”

Henry shook his head. “No. The last time I spoke to him - at least, the last time I *remember* speaking to him - we didn’t exactly leave as...well, friends. He’s not going to want to listen to a thing I have to say.”

Amelie threw up her hands. “Geez, what’s with you guys? You’re, like, always fighting. You don’t have to take things so seriously.”

Gilly wagged a finger at Amelie. “Uh uh uh, you don’t have a right to complain. Remember Missy Bendert?”

Amelie stomped her foot. “Shut *up!* She totally used my lip gloss. She was *so* on my shitlist after that.”

Henry looked up at the building beyond the stone gate. The shuttered windows almost seemed to be beckoning him forward, into its icy black depths...well, somewhat lit black depths, it seemed somebody turned on the power in there...but he’d heard all the stories everybody else had heard, and it didn’t make him any keener on going in.

Jack saw Henry’s apprehension, and leaned in closer. “Henry. Listen, I know Pete’s always going on about how he’s better than you. But I don’t think he actually *thinks* he’s better; I think they call it an ‘infuriating complex.’”

“That’s ‘inferiority.’”

“No, I swear, there really is a complex.”

“No, Jack, ‘inferiority’ means—”

“It doesn’t matter. But I think he’s always felt sort of down on himself. I don’t know why, but I think talking to him might get him to open up, talk about it, you know.”

“Since when did you become an armchair philosopher? And no, I don’t think that will work. He *hates* me, Jack.”

“Who doesn’t right now, Henry?”

Henry fumed, turned his back on Jack, and folded his arms. Jack sighed.

“All right, fine. You do know Pete’s the only one who knows where the Hammer and Seed *really* are, don’t you?”

“Pete? Pete, you in here?”

Henry stepped cautiously around the corner, slipping a little on something slick and greasy. He decided to not look down; in the Cradle, ignorance wasn’t quite bliss, but it was damn close enough.

He’d found his way in through the basement, where he noticed that, indeed, somebody had been down here recently and switched on the power. Not that it mattered too much; what light did exist was sparse, and though he didn’t dare come close to the asylum area of the Cradle he noticed occasionally that the lights in there tended to flicker madly for a few moments at a time before springing back to life. He even heard what may have been signs of life, but not the kinds of life that pointed to either Pete or anyone Henry wanted to meet anytime soon.

Thankfully, the front area seemed to be empty, with only the occasional ghostly whisper or gust of wind coming from out of nowhere, so he stayed there for the time being. He came to a room with two large, winding staircases, of which he climbed one to a series of small upper rooms. He went through them one at a time, and was about to

give up until he heard faint noises, very unghostlike, coming from above. Searching around, he found a staircase that led to an attic.

The attic was cold and uninviting, but when he approached the top he could see a shape huddled in one corner that he hoped to whatever deity watched over him that it wasn't a monster that would attack him as soon as he came close. Avoiding an old bloodstain in one corner, he approached the shape and tapped it on the shoulder. The shape turned, surprised, but calming as it saw it was just Henry.

"Evening, Henry."

"Evening, Pete."

They didn't say anything for a little while. Pete picked at the floor, and Henry simply stood, hands behind his back.

"Er, nice...attic?"

"I used to come in here a lot when I was younger. It helped me relax."

"I honestly don't know how this place could relax anybody."

Pete waved a hand at the surrounding building. "It didn't used to be a complete lump of crap, you know. It just...went wrong. People say it's..."

"It's alive, and it eats people. I heard all the stories. Which reminds me, we'd probably better get going before it gets hungry..."

"I did come back a few times before, after it all went wrong. It's usually thinking about the cannons that did it. Dr. Wences helped, but never as much as coming back here. It's weird, but even if it is alive, I've never had any trouble here. It's almost like it doesn't care about me."

Henry heard a whispering behind him. He turned and thought he saw a small child with a demonic face holding a ball disappear around a corner, but it was gone too quickly to make a judgment call. Not that it made him want to investigate.

Pete continued. "Do you know what that's like, Henry? Ever had a time in your life when it seemed like nobody noticed if you lived or died?"

Henry watched the floorboards near him move up and down, as if some invisible force was walking on it. "No, not really. Can't say that I have."

"You know the only time anyone here paid any attention to me at all? It was when I did funny voices. I did one during one of my classes, reading a segment out loud from a book we were supposed to be reading silently. The teacher told me to shut up; it was the first time she'd ever spoken a word to me. So, naturally, I kept doing it. The other kids loved them. One even said I should go into acting. But I never thought I was good-looking enough."

"Good-looking? Oh, pshaw, you're quite a handsome fellow, Pete. Say, wouldn't you like to talk about this later?" The invisible walker had moved to a nearby wall and, in the dust, was writing the words "Won't You Stay with Us?" on it.

"It wasn't until I met you and Jack that I thought of making puppets, and it all fell into place. Here it was, a way I could finally get people to notice me, in a way that was...well, relatively healthy. But then it got too easy speaking through the puppets. I could say whatever I wanted through them, and when I didn't have them, I just sort of...put on a show. Even now when I get nervous about something my hands start getting all...I guess you could say 'puppety,' even though that's not really a word."

Pete finally looked Henry in the eyes. Henry could see Pete had been crying, his eyes red enough to make Henry's own eyes start to hurt. "Listen, I know you've been

through a lot, Pete, and I've been talking with Jack, and I'm sure you want to continue talking about this some more, but maybe we could go to a place that is...well, less pants-wettingly disturbing?"

Pete stood up, waving a hand toward a window, which would have been a little more dramatic had it not been boarded over. "Don't you get it, Henry? All this..." He tugged at the black clothes he was wearing. "This isn't me. I'm not some big action hero-type. It's just another act, liking the fake voices. But I thought, maybe, if just once I put on a part, and kept at it, at some point maybe that would just be me." Pete's hand began to scrunch up, but he fought it back. "But it isn't."

"So, uh...who were you trying to be?" Henry tried not to look at whatever was placing a hand on his shoulder, a hand that was incredibly cold and bluer than seemed healthy.

"I was trying to be you. But now I know I can't be that way."

Henry pushed the hand aside, and smiled. "Tried to be me? Well, I, I don't know what to say..."

"No. I could never be that big of an asshole."

Henry scowled. "I see."

Pete slumped down again. "I don't want to be rich and famous. I don't want to have to be an asshole to be helpful. I just want somebody to remember me, and not in that 'well, he certainly was *interesting*' sort of way. But look at me. I put puppets on my hands to amuse kids for pennies at the end of the world's smelliest alley. I've taken on so many different roles that I don't even know who I am anymore." Again, his red eyes looked into Henry's. "Henry, who *am* I?"

Henry wanted to slap himself. He really didn't need this. Two friends having emotional breakdowns in one day was just too much to deal with. What did they want him to do? Hug them? Give them a pat on the back, tell them everything was going to be all right? Didn't they know the kind of trouble they were in, with Hammer and Pagan death squads probably marching up and down the City streets looking for them right about now?

But Henry couldn't say anything of the kind. Like Jack's slap in the face, Pete's stare, his pleading for a small favor, a small word of kindness, was so unlike him. Or was it? In fact, Henry wasn't sure if he had ever really known Pete. Heck, until a few minutes ago he didn't even know he'd been an orphan here in the Cradle. He didn't even know the Cradle had *been* an orphanage; he just knew it as the town nuthouse until that fire ripped through it years ago.

The words began tumbling through Henry's mouth before he could even think. "Well, Pete, I don't know. Somebody managed to steal the Builder's Hammer, all without my help, thank you very much. That same person spoke up on Jack's behalf when my own mouth started going a little overboard. And he even managed to get himself a proper date, which even I haven't...um, well, he got a date, all right? I'm not quite sure which Pete that was, but he certainly managed to get the job done. To be honest, I..." Henry shuffled his feet. "I was a little jealous myself. I thought the whole thing turned out to be a damn good job."

Henry sat down next to Pete, partly because he felt this might be one of those 'bonding' moments that everyone kept talking about, but partly to keep an eye on the stairs and make sure nothing could sneak up behind him. "You want to know who you



are, Pete? You're my friend. I don't care if you're a hero, or a sidekick, or anything like that. And for the love of Builder, don't try to impress me...it's not worth it. Just be whatever it is you need to be."

It sounded like absolute piff, but Henry didn't care. It sounded like just the sort of thing that needed to be said. He just wished he knew where it came from; it would make life a lot easier if he could talk like that more often. And Pete responded; the sad look faded, and was replaced by a warm smile. "Thanks, Henry."

"Don't mention it. By the way, did you really mean all that stuff you were saying by the tree, about how terrible I was?"

Pete nodded. "Yeah, but I was feeling pretty angry at you at the time, so maybe I was a little over the top."

"No, I think you may have been right. Jack tried to beat some sense into me earlier, and I think I'm finally noticing that I have been a complete prat to everybody close to me."

Pete chuckled. "Jack tried to beat you? Literally?"

"I'm as surprised as you. So are we going?"

Pete stood up, and sighed. "Yeah, but we have to do a few things first."

"Like what?"

"I, um...put the Hammer and Seed somewhere for safekeeping. We have to get them before we leave."

"Safekeeping?" Henry's eyes drifted towards the inner sanctum of the Cradle. Thankfully, it was not visible from where he was sitting. "Oh, no. You didn't!"

"I did."

"But that's a haunted asylum! Why would you ever put anything in there?"

"Because who in their right mind would go there?"

"Nobody! That's why they put people in their wrong minds in there!"

Pete folded his arms. "So, come on, then. Or is our great leader a little scared?"

Henry paused. "All right, then, we'll see who really is better at this, shall we?"

Pete wagged his finger. "You do know I *really* wasn't kidding about that."

Henry stood up and folded his arms as well, in defiance. "Har de har har. Now come on, how hard can this be, really?"

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"PETE?!? Would you get them already?"

Henry was holding the door shut as a crazed, monstrous being pressed against the door, making horrible sounds somewhere between a squeal and a gurgle. On the one hand, he was thankful it was solid enough to hold a door against (unlike some other things he'd seen floating around here), but on the other, something this solid had the capability (and, apparently, the desire) to rip Henry's head clear from its shoulders. And in the Cradle, ripping off someone's head was probably one of the nicer things one of these monsters did.

Pete, on the other hand, was leaning over a crack in a wall in one of the cells, carefully digging around for something hidden underneath the rotting plaster. "I told you not to taunt it! It only makes them angry!"

"All right, I'm sorry! Just get them!"

"I'm working on it! Just keep an eye on Harvey there, would you?"

Henry pressed against the door again, this time forcing the wire-wrapped figure on the other side backwards. The hand groping around the edge of the door slipped, and the door clamped almost shut on its fingers. “Harvey? You know their *names*?”

“No, I just gave them names based on what I thought they should be. He looks like a Harvey to me.” Pete pulled another chunk of plaster away. “You know, I wasn’t here when this place was an asylum...I might be a little absurd, but I’m not *that* crazy.”

The fingers still wiggled around in the doorframe. Henry slapped at them. One of the fingers managed to get a grip around his pinky, and squeezed. As undead as these inmates might be, they apparently found plenty of time to bench press, and Henry almost fell on his knees yelping in pain. He grabbed an old plate from the table next to him and brought it down on the fingers until they let go.

“Ah! Here we go!” Pete pulled away another bit of plaster to reveal a metal safe hidden underneath, the lock since fallen apart. He yanked it open and pulled out two wrapped bundles. “Now let’s get out of here!”

“Good idea! Once you figure out how, let me know!”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Come on, Henry! We’re thieves! Don’t you know what we’re supposed to do in a time like this?”

Henry could think of a lot of different answers, mostly involving the words “and not dying.” None of them seemed applicable to the current situation. He did, however, manage to get the door shut enough to allow the latch to catch. Not that it would help much, since the lock was on the other side of the door, but he no longer had to fight to keep the creature on the other side from forcing its way in. He backed away from it, hoping the thing would take a second to remember how a door handle worked. It indeed had seemed to have forgotten, but latch or not, the door wouldn’t hold up to the way that thing was slamming against it.

“All right, Pete. I give up. What do we do in a time like this?” Henry spun around, but Pete was nowhere to be seen. “Pete? Where are you?”

From somewhere, Pete shushed him. “Exactly!”

“What do you mean, exact...oh. Right. Silly me.” Henry looked around in the rubble, but he couldn’t see anywhere to hide. Not that hiding had ever really done him any good in the past, but he was bound and determined to do it this time. He tried diving underneath a broken table, but even with all the electric lights flickering on and off he would still have been far too visible. He crawled back out.

The door was beginning to splinter heavily. Henry looked down at the ground, and, amidst the remains of an old nightstand, he found something that might just be of help. If he could get it ready...

---

The door smashed open. Clive, whose name was not Harvey and would have, in fact, taken offense to being called Harvey if he hadn’t died in a raging inferno years ago, stepped in. He wasn’t quite sure why he went around killing anything that wasn’t a wire-wrapped, straight-jacketed monstrosity like himself, but he figured it probably had to do with the constant anguish, torment, and other horrible emotions that constantly flooded his unbeing; that, and that Clive’s descent into undeath hadn’t exactly left what little sanity he had before the fire intact. Never a particularly violent fellow, Clive had been a man plagued by a small goblin named Gerald (who, of course, only he could hear) who

lived in his stomach, and demanded a constant supply of shiny objects. His family could deal with him swallowing the occasional bit of loose change; it was when he tried to swallow a man in full armor that they decided to take matters in their own hands.

He'd been a recent addition to the Cradle, before its incident; he hadn't even had his name added to the list of patients currently being treated. No, he'd just tried to sit down for a nice meal, when he very quickly found himself alone in the dining hall and inhaling massive amounts of smoke. It happened so fast he didn't even think to drop down to the ground. He died of inhalation, face down in his mashed potatoes, not even getting enough time to finish his fork.

Now, just being in the presence of anything living sent him into an insensate rage, wanting to maim and destroy the source of that life so he could go back to wandering the halls endlessly, moaning and complaining about the horrible woe that filled his mind. There were moments when he did question the whole reason why he preferred to wander the halls endlessly when having a nice cold beverage and a lie down would seem just as reasonable, but then the Cradle would tell him to stop doing things like think, and the woe would catch up to him and he'd be back to his old routine.

Things had been a bit light recently, though. Time was something of an out-of-date concept to someone to whom age no longer applies, but he was fairly certain nothing living had been in here for at least a few years. Well, nothing larger than a rat, anyways. He liked rats. They were bite-sized treats for a quick pick-me-up. But then, just recently, he couldn't be sure when, but somebody had gone through here. He never saw who it was, but he could tell from sharing woe with the others that somebody had gone through here and nicked some of their stuff. And had the nerve to switch on the lights again, of all things! Here Clive was, enjoying himself in the nice, cool darkness, when some bloody taffer had to go and flip some switches and then it's strobe light city all over again! It was so annoying, having to watch those lights start flickering every bloody time he passed by them. It filled Clive with very deep anguish...and woe.

But after that, it seemed every bloody fool and his neighbor had to come in, spoiling the nice quiet stroll through the desolate corridors. First somebody had to go and sneak into Jerry's room and leave something there, and now he'd brought a friend with him, who wasn't very nice, either, making rude noises and waving his behind in a mocking sort of way. Well, this simply would not stand! Nobody got to stroll in and out of here as they bloody well pleased!

Clive grunted and snuffled as he searched around the room, trying to smell out the intruders. His eyes, though able to see light and dark, hadn't worked quite the same since he died, with them now having been mostly sewn shut by barbed wire, so he had to rely on his other senses...

*Good. Seek them out. I want something to remember them by.*

Clive didn't like how that voice was always pushing him around, telling him to go out and kill people. Wasn't he doing it already? But even so, he felt pulled forward, compelled even more to rip and tear, fold and spindle, box and ship, and so forth.

Trouble was, he couldn't seem to find anybody in here. Even the smells didn't seem to be helping; the whole room stank like a three-day-old sheep's bladder. He was getting disappointed, and he knew the voice wouldn't care for him to walk out of here empty-handed. He sighed, which sounded more like a cat being shook around in bag than a sigh, and walked past the lamp and back out...

Hang on a moment. He went back over to the lamp, which he'd never noticed before. There didn't seem to be anything unusual about it; it was a tall floor lamp, with a shade over it, and a pull chain coming out from underneath. It was an ugly lamp, to be sure, with those arms and legs attached to it, but it seemed to be in order. Just as a test, Clive pulled the chain.

"Click."

Clive certainly didn't expect the light to come on; all the stuff in here was surely old enough to not work anymore. But some small glimpse of his humanity came to the surface for a moment, enough to make him wonder if lamps ever actually *said* "click" or merely clicked on and off. But before he could come to an unfortunate deduction, the woe came back, and all knowledge of electrical devices ran away from its presence.

Clive turned around again and went to the door. He got three feet out of it when he felt a tap on his shoulder. Before he could move, something came down over his head and he felt someone boot him in the behind. He fell over on his back, and he tried in vain to stand back up, dazed, confused, and most of all, angry.

---

Henry stood over the fallen form, chuckling now that it had been incapacitated. It thrashed around on the ground, unable to get up because the lamp shade and pull chain had become entangled in a pile of rubble, and had snagged its jacket collar to boot.

Behind him, Pete dropped down from the ceiling where he had been hanging. Contrary to popular belief, hanging from the ceiling is not as effective as it sounds, because it is a well-known fact that people have a thing called "peripheral vision," in which they can quite clearly see anything attached to a proper ceiling. Most anyone who has tried this technique in history has generally met his end from a particularly pointy spear or a long-handled broom and a supply of armed guards. In this case, though, a nearly blind undead creature does not have good peripheral vision, and thus Pete's choice of hiding spot was adequate enough.

He came over to Henry and looked down at the flailing creature, shaking his head. "You shouldn't mock him. It wasn't his fault, really."

Henry looked at Pete, amazed. "Wasn't his fault? The thing tried to rip my head off!"

"But look." Pete pointed down the hall. Two more of the things skulked past each other, moving in jerky motions, the lights flickering madly as they passed.

Henry nearly made in his pants. "Cripes! Warn me next time before you point out something like that, would you?"

"But look at them, Henry. They're not in control of themselves. It looks like someone's pulling them along, making them do things they don't want to do. They're almost like...marionettes or something."

"Yes, yes, I know, everything's puppets to you, Pete. Shall we go now?"

They made their way back towards the front entrance. The boarded up doors waited for them invitingly.

Henry took up a runner's stance, spitting into his hands, and making a dash for it. Pete sighed, and ran along with him. The doors fell open as the two smashed into them with a thud.

On the other side was the same front entrance, with the front doors at the far end. Henry looked backwards at the door they just came from. “Did I just miss something? Weren’t we just...”

Pete sighed. “Wouldn’t you know it. The Cradle’s trying to remember us.” A faint smile danced across his face. “It actually noticed me for once.”

“So, what? Now it remembers us. How do we get out of here?”

“Technically, we don’t. We’re sort of supposed to be trapped here forever.”

Henry looked over his shoulder, in the direction of the asylum portion of the Cradle, and shuddered. “So, we’re going to end up like them? Wandering this burnt out, disgusting, pile of wreckage forever, just because a couple of wooden timbers are feeling lonely?”

*“There is another way.”*

They stopped. They didn’t want to turn and see who spoke. They didn’t need to. A puff of mist blew in front of them and formed into a small, pale boy, dressed in what appeared to be a school uniform. Pete’s jaw fell open.

“R...Roy?”

The boy nodded. *“Hello, Pete. Still doing those impressions?”*

Henry pointed at the small, nattily-dressed child. “You know him?”

“Roy was one of the ones we thought would make it, real smart, friendly, positive attitude. He got adopted a year before I left here.”

Henry scratched his head. “So, did he make it?”

The boy frowned. *“I am right here, you know. You can talk to me.”*

“Oh, right. So, did you make it?”

*“Does it look like I made it? Of course not. The day after I was adopted, I heard the bell of the ice cream cart. My new parents gave me some change, and I ran out to get some.”* The boy looked around, embarrassed. *“Let’s just say I, in my excitement, forgot exactly what happens when small children dart out in front of large, horse-drawn carriages unexpectedly.”*

“But why are you here? I thought you got out.”

The boy pointed off somewhere. *“I dropped one of my marbles in the basement somewhere, and I guess the Cradle just sort of hung on to me because of it. If you can help me find it and get it out of here with you, I’ll show you the way out. Now, don’t worry, my marble’s not anywhere dangerous, I just can’t exactly pick up objects and walk out of here with them anymore, as you might have noticed. Besides, we have to go to the basement anyway if you want to get out.”*

Henry folded his arms. “So, if we find your marble, you’ll get us out of here, right? What exactly does this entail, then?”

The boy lowered his head. *“I shouldn’t tell you yet. You’re not going to like it.”*

“Humor me.”

And the boy told him.

---

About fifteen minutes later, the Cradle felt the loss of three of its memories. *Huh. That’s odd. That’s five in the past few days. I really need to get that window fixed.*

---

Amelie sat on a sideways barrel. Gilly leaned against a wall. Janet stood neatly at attention, but even this amount of waiting had forced her to pull out her hammer for extra support. Jack, meanwhile, had found a tasty bit of moss in a corner that was currently tiding him over.

Gilly looked at a nearby clock and saw it was nearing midnight. “You don’t think anything’s happened to them, has it?”

Nobody said anything. Chances were quite high that something *had* happened to them, and they weren’t coming back, but putting it into words would merely give the idea weight.

Gilly stood up and went over to the gate. “Well, if nobody else has the guts to do something, then I will!”

Janet looked up at the Cradle. “You will do nothing of the sort.”

“How dare you tell me what to do! Why, you’re the most...”

Janet pointed. “No. You do not need to.”

Gilly followed Janet’s finger to see two shapes silhouetted against a broken window high up on the Cradle’s wall. After a second, the shapes leaped through, smashing what little debris remained around its edges, and while holding each other fell screaming towards a lower rooftop. They bounced, rolled, and fell off the side into a large thicket of brambles, shards of wood and glass tumbling in after them.

The group watched as the two shapes began to groan and pull themselves painfully out of the foliage.

Janet smiled. “Now, what were you about to say about me? That I am the most what?”

Gilly sighed. “Nothing, okay? Let’s just drop it and get them.”

Gilly, Janet, and Jack went over to the brush and helped Henry and Pete out. Both seemed to have survived with a few minor scrapes and bruises, though Henry seemed a little dazed.

Gilly brushed him off, as he seemed incapable of doing it himself. “What happened in there?”

“Hmmm?” Henry finally noticed Gilly brushing him off and did nothing to stop her. “Oh, not much, just crazed, violent undead, foggy memories, nonsensical doors, people made entirely out of black matter.”

Gilly sniffed. “Sounds like the show that modernist theatre troupe put on last fall.”

“Close enough.” Henry turned to Pete and snapped his fingers. “You got them?”

Pete nodded, and reached into his shirt and pulled out the bundles. He handed them over to Henry, and shortly thereafter found himself looking up into the face of Janet. “Hello, again.”

“Hello.” Janet, who had once again sheathed her hammer, tapped continuously on the head of the hammer with the tip of her finger. “So, are you all right?”

“Me? Oh, yeah, nothing wrong here. The Cradle has to do more than that to...”

“I am not talking about the Cradle. I am talking about the little episode you had earlier.”

“Little episode? What do...” Pete’s memory jogged. He remembered quite clearly screaming through the streets of the City, but only had a vague recollection of the

faces that he passed. As he thought back, the large, attractive Hammer statue he remembered passing wasn't a Hammer statue at all. "Oh. You saw."

"Yes. We both did."

At that moment, Amelie stepped in and threw her arms around Pete. "Oh, I'm *so* glad you're safe, I mean, I was like, all kind of weirded out when you ran away, but then I was talking with Janet, and I realized that, like, I really hoped you'd be safe because I finally found a guy who really *got* me, you know? Sorry I didn't help you out of the bushes before, but I'm, like, ew, sticker plants, I hate those, even though I'm totally into nature, just not sticker plants, and wasps, I hate wasps, they're always hanging around when I'm trying to drink my pop."

As Pete leaned back a little, trying to get some air before Amelie crushed his lungs, Henry unwrapped the bundles, looking at both the still shimmering silvery fruit and the Hammer. He carefully held both in their protective wrappings. "So here they are. I've got them both."

Gilly looked down at them, admiring them closely. She looked up into Henry's eyes. "So, what are you going to do with them?"

Henry blinked. "Well, I'm going to..." *What? Sell them? Who would take them? Nobody in their right minds would buy these; if the Hammers and the Pagans didn't kill them first, they'd probably turn themselves into trees, or...or something horrible would happen to them with the Hammer that you don't know about. Maybe it sneaks up behind people at night and clobbers them. Who knows? It's a frigging magical hammer.*

Henry blinked again, clearing away his thoughts. "I...I don't know. I thought once I got them it would all fall into place. But now I..."

Henry looked around. Something didn't seem right. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he was definitely feeling something in the pit of his stomach. "Everybody, stop. Be quiet for a minute."

The group fell silent. Henry tried to listen for something out of the ordinary. It wasn't long before he heard it.

Nothing. He heard nothing. No late night vendors, no snoring, no cats, no dogs. Just silence. And then, everybody else noticed it, too. The City never slept, but tonight it had gotten a little dozy.

Henry put a finger to his lips and motioned for everyone to follow him. They came down the street a ways, wandering over to an alley leading back through the Old Quarter. They ran into no one for about five minutes. And then they did hear sounds.

Sounds of battle. Sounds of screaming.

And, faint but very distinct, the sounds of many monstrous beings shouting, "KILL AND CRUSH, KILL AND CRUUUUUUSHHHHH..."

And just then, a clock in a nearby street struck midnight.