

## DAY SIX: PART TWO

Burtilda Cresswell sat across from her husband in an overstuffed armchair, trying her best to look over the silverware to make sure the help had cleaned it thoroughly. Darald Cresswell was enjoying one of his several books. It was one of those types of novels where most sentences are paragraphs unto themselves, sentences which, on further reflection, do not need to be nearly as long as they are, but yet, in their attempts to go on and on into constant digression and normally cause most readers to bend over in confused exasperation and profuse vomiting, somehow defy the odds and the book gets published, to the author's bewilderment, since he was simply trying to see how much he could annoy the printing house and make them spend an absolute bundle on ink and paper, which, unfortunately enough, was far much more than it used to be, considering how the price of paper had been going up in the last couple of years, due to a massive shortage of good harvesting trees, at least, trees that didn't hunt down and kill the lumberjacks attempting to harvest them.

Burtilda was in the middle of ogling a small water spot on a fork when she heard a noise outside. Noises coming from outside were not something out of the unusual, since sound was not a unique occurrence to the Cresswell household, but it was not the kind of sound one expects to hear around midnight; or, if one does hear them, knows to expect something nefarious. She stood up and walked over to the window to see if she could find the source.

"Darald, dear?"

"Mmmm?" Darald took only a mild interest, but noticed his wife had dropped all pretense at Richspeak, which meant what she had to say was probably a little important.

"There appears to be something going on outside."

"Dear, there's always something going on outside. That's what happens outside."

"Not just something, Darald. *Something*."

Oh. *Something*. Darald put a bookmark in his book, set it aside, folded his hands, and gave his wife his full attention. "Very well, then, what *sort* of something?"

"Dicky Lopson from next door. He's running down the street, screaming his head off."

"Oh, fantastic. They've gone and one-upped us again, and want the whole neighborhood to wake up and see what they've bought. What is it this time?"

"I can't really tell from here. It appears to be a large granite statue, and it is chasing him with a club."

This was new. The Lopsons were always trying to be the first on the block with the latest and greatest, but having statues chase you down the street in the middle of the night seemed like a very strange hobby to pick up. "Let me see."

As Darald came over to the window, he could see his unfortunate neighbor being grabbed by the large, statue-like being, get thrown thirty feet through the air, and land in some bushes across the street. "Good grief. That certainly looked like it hurt. You don't think he *intended* that, do you, dear?"

Burtilda sighed. "Just wait. He'll get up, laugh at us, and soon we'll *all* have to start getting thrown thirty feet through the air and into the bushes."

Dicky Lopson, however, did not get up and laugh. And at that moment, the statue, resembling a tallish man with a long beard, turned in their direction. Its eyes glowed bright blue, and started walking towards them.

Darald's eyes narrowed. "Burtilda?"

"Yes?"

"Get the servant who has my guns."

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Pandemonium raged through the streets.

Not since the Great Undead Riots of 1206, nor the Unfashionable Beer Embargo of 1409, had the City truly been witness to such chaos and devastation. Statues rampaged through the streets, smashing buildings and people with equal abandon. City guards were called to the ramparts to take down the threat, only to have the ramparts smashed out from under them. Hammers and Pagans alike had taken to the streets, though apparently with different goals in mind; each side fought bravely, but as soon as they saw each other they turned their weapons on their long-hated foes.

And the rumors were spreading fast. Some lucky survivors talked about the strange people with the masks, who never spoke, but killed quickly, quietly, and with great skill; those that survived said they did so only because those masked killers let them go. Another saw a huge, bloated, cackling monster that tore the skin from its victims. This creature kept showing up in different areas of the City, first the graveyard at Fort Ironwood, then the Docks, then...well, almost everywhere. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to it, other than its wanton destruction and skin rending.

But then the City Watch received reports of a second strange creature. And from the sound of those reports, this creature was nowhere near as pleasant as the first.

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Henry waved everyone back as he peered around the corner of the alley. He ducked back quickly as a large chunk of rock smashed into the wall right where his head had been moments before. He cowered back as a member of the City Night Watch moved backwards through the street, his sword clanging uselessly off of the armored rock skin of a gargoyle-shaped statue. The Watch guard's breathing increased in speed and desperation as no blow he landed did any good against the creature. Then, they both moved out of sight, their shadows dancing on the wall across the alley. Then, the shadow of the gargoyle grabbed the guard's shadow, lifted the hapless shadow above its head, and with both hands pulled the shadow in half. Blood sprayed along the walls, followed closely by the top half of the guard, which landed in a heap near Henry's feet.

Jack came over and looked down. "Henry?"

"Yes?"

"Did I ever say how much I enjoyed working on the Day Watch?"

"Not really."

"Well, I do. It's much less exciting."

"I can understand."

Down the street came more yells, more guttural cries of destruction. A Hammer acolyte came flying (that is, quite literally) around a corner, bouncing like a rag doll off of a light post and coming to rest face down in the gutter.

Henry turned to face the group. “Right. I think it’s best if we turned around and went the other…”

At the far end of the alley, there was a loud explosion, as if a cannon had been fired. That was confirmed as a cannon ball shot past the alley’s exit. There was a loud thud, as that of metal bouncing off of an incredibly tough rock. There was a grunt, and the cannonball went flying back in the opposite direction. There was a loud crash, and several more City guards flew by, landing in separate heaps in the street.

“So, moving forward? Everyone happy with that?”

They darted out into the street. Though thankfully there were no ghoulish rock creatures currently visible, practically everything else was. Guards shouted at other guards to barricade the gates, any gates they could find, no, not those gates, those aren’t worth it, try the ones over on Fifth. Dusty old cannons, not fired in years, were being pushed along the roads, loaded with cannonballs, old silverware, bits of crumpled up newspaper, whatever was at hand.

Pete looked around at the hubbub, in utter awe of its awesome nature. “Wow. The only thing missing is something popping out of the sewers.”

As if on cue, a manhole nearby popped up into the air, landing with a thud on a fleeing peasant. From the hole’s depths, a large, human-like fish creature emerged, scowling and making guttural noises. A portly gentleman passing by spent too much time watching it, and it rewarded him by chasing him down the street.

Pete shrugged. “Well, that was convenient.”

Henry looked around for another alley to duck into, but unfortunately the only one close by was filled with flaming wreckage. Then, a thought struck him.

“What street are we on?”

Gilly looked up and pointed to a sign hanging above their heads. “We’re on Willikers. I think that’s Cashbox Lane up there. Why?”

“Oh, no.” Henry shoved the two bundles into Gilly’s hands. “Hang on to these, I have to go somewhere.”

“What?” Gilly juggled them as best she could. “What now?”

“Two people very close to me live nearby, and they are not exactly used to situations like this. I need to go help them.”

Janet shook her head. “It would be best if we all stayed together. Besides, how bad off could they possibly be?”

Henry sighed. “Ever made a hard boiled egg before?”

“Once, yes.”

“Did you burn down the kitchen trying to do it when the servants were away?”

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Melody sat quietly in a rocking chair, knitting. It was a hobby she had picked up from her grandmother, a feisty old woman who was the only one in Melody’s family who thought she had any promise. Everyone else had written her off as “silly,” or a “daydreamer,” not worthy of following the footsteps of the family business. Often was the day her father, mother, and two older brothers left her at the gate of the old building, laughing as they went off for another day at Ol’ Salty’s Slaughterhouse and Moving Gear Factory.

Thus, it was really no surprise that one day her grandmother opened the door to find two workers from the factory, completely covered in blood, stammering out something to say. They finally came up with, "I'll give you four chances to guess who's not coming home tonight!"

So Melody stayed with her grandmother for two years. Her grandmother, along with knitting, had taught her a few other things as well, such as how to cook a meal for herself, how to mend clothes so they lasted longer, and how to make a fake ID in order to get her grandmother some cigars and brandy (her grandmother was physically capable of leaving the house, but hated everything and everyone on the outside of it). She might have taught her much more had she not left one of her cigars lit when she went to sleep. Melody had been out buying a few groceries when she came back to find the house had become a large pile of ash.

But Melody didn't let things like losing her whole family and all her worldly possessions get her down. After all, she had Amelie to help her out. Amelie lived down the street, and was more than happy to take Melody in (though her parents were a little harder to convince). The two then went to school together, and despite their propensity to goof off (and skip classes to go hang out with Gilly once she got kicked out), they managed to graduate. The decision to not go on to higher education had been mostly Amelie's idea; Melody just preferred to stay back and go with the flow.

Which was a shame, because between the two of them, Melody was more intelligent by far. The reason she didn't do well in school was more a question of application than learning. Throughout her school career, she saw other people trying their best to learn, and those people always got bothered by the stupid ones, always wanting to cheat off of them or asking questions that had been answered time and again by the teacher. She didn't want to live a life where people kept annoying her every twenty seconds because she knew more than they did, so she kept low and quiet. Until the other night, when Eleana suddenly went off her rocker with a vengeance, it had been working superbly.

Now, she knitted. She always did it when she got nervous. Those needles made her remember the comfort of her grandmother, foul cigar smoke and all, like a security blanket with sharp ends. The more nervous she was, the bigger the object she knitted. Before a big test, she made a few socks. Before her final exam, she made a sweater.

Right now, her fingers feverishly darted through what appeared to be a horse blanket. For the first time in her life, she actually felt afraid. Sure, she was sad when she found out her family had been chopped up in various horrible ways, and she missed her grandmother terribly, but none of those events made her fear for her life.

She knew something terribly wrong was going on, both with her friends and to the City in general. At first, it was just a feeling when she woke up in the morning. But as the day drew on, the feeling got worse, and when the screaming started her worst fears were confirmed.

Maybe she should've gone to see if her friends were okay. She certainly wanted to let them know something was up. But she also assumed that if they had left the house before she had woken up they hadn't planned in inviting her along with them. That was one of the problems with keeping a low profile; people figured that they could get along fine if you weren't there. Melody had missed a few parties that way. And, well, if they

didn't want her along, then she didn't feel the need to rush right out and give them the time of day. See how they liked it for once.

Melody looked down at her knitting. The blanket was getting really big.

With a sigh, she put her knitting aside, pulled on her boots, and went over to the front door. She was about to open it when she heard a voice from upstairs.

"Melody? Is that you, dear?" It was Amelie's mother, Mrs. Chestnut.

"Yes. I'm going out for a bit."

"Are you sure? It looks like there's a siege going on out there."

"I'll manage."

"Well, put on a coat, at least."

"It's not winter."

"What, a mother can't be concerned?"

Melody went and got a coat. She didn't need it, she knew, but Mrs. Chestnut was one of the few people that actually noticed her from time to time. It wouldn't pay to talk back right now. She returned to the front door and opened it...

Just in time to duck back as a large shape passed in the street. As she watched, the shape was followed a few seconds later by a woman dragging another, struggling woman behind her. Melody recognized the first woman immediately. She waited for them to turn the corner before she moved. Then, she stepped out into the street, and followed.

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Henry had been prepared for anything. He expected the house to be aflame, to be in a pile of rubble, for his parents to have (Builder forbid) been broken in half by a very angry statue.

What he did not expect was to see his father, pipe in mouth, staring out of the broken front window, waving a hand cannon around and shouting action hero lines at an ever-growing army of statues. His mother, wearing something more in tune with guerilla warfare than anything a fine fashionable lady would wear, stood on the front stoop with an assortment of tubes slung over her shoulder. Henry recognized the tubes as those objects Zantar had fired something explosive from back in the Boneboard days.

The scene would have been almost awe-inspiring, had Burthilda's hair not still been unable to fit through most doorways without bending over.

"Uh...Mum? Dad?"

"Have a lead sandwich, you rotten stone bast—, oh, hello, Henry. Come to join the fight?" Darald pulled the trigger and blasted the arm off of a very angry statue of an early City patriarch.

"Sort of." Henry stepped aside as a rocket flew from one of the tubes and smashed into a large gargoyle walking up the front walk behind him, sending bits of rubble flying in every direction. "This another hobby you picked up on holiday?"

Burtilda shook her head. "Oh, heavens, no. Two years ago your father and I decided to mix things up and take a few lessons at boot camp. The neighbors thought we were mad to do it, but who's hiding in whose kitchen now, eh?" She pointed at the other front room window. Henry could see a badly bruised and terribly frightened Dicky Lopson peeking up over the windowsill. Henry gave him a small, friendly wave.

"Ah. Well, I see everything's well in hand here. I'll just be on my way, then."

“Sure you don’t want to stay? I’ll let you use my new shotgun. Works really well on them.”

“No, I think you’ll be needing that.” Henry was tempted to get a few weapons, say about three dozen, but doing so meant walking in the Dead Man’s Land that formerly consisted of his mother’s petunia garden. He felt things would be much better off if he left now and got back to the group.

And again, he was left with the knowledge that, out of pretty much everyone he knew, almost everyone was a lot better than he was at just about everything.

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Tonight, Stonemarket wasn’t just a clever name.

Jack sat in the back of the group, who were again hiding in the small courtyard near the remains of the clocktower. He couldn’t really see much of the action from here, so he settled in under the small gargoyle statue (this one didn’t seem much like wandering the streets wreaking havoc) and munched on some trail mix he found in the bottom of his pocket. He couldn’t remember putting the mix in there, but then he couldn’t remember the last time he’d washed this pair of pants either, so guessed it had been in there awhile. Not that that would stop him anyway.

Pete was pacing back and forth. “So, what do we do now? We can’t just keep running around the City all night hiding.”

Janet pushed a small cobblestone that had worked itself loose back into the ground with her toe. “I do not see what we *can* do. I am not sure what is going on, but I know we were not the cause. We just have to keep moving until we reach somewhere that is safe.”

“Safe?” Gilly harrumphed. “Great idea. I think the closest point of safety is about 15 miles from here.”

“Do you have a better idea, then?”

“No. I’m just pointing out that the word ‘safe’ is a relative term.”

They continued arguing as Jack heard a rustling coming from the other entrance to the garden, behind him. He turned to see Henry sliding up behind him.

“What’s going on? What did I miss?”

Jack shrugged. “We were arguing about what the word ‘safe’ means, I think. Trail mix?”

“No. So we don’t have any plan at all?”

“Nope. How are your parents?”

“They’ll be...wait, what?”

Jack ate something that may have at one time been a raisin. “Oh, come on, Henry, give us a *little* credit. We’ve known your parents weren’t dead for years.”

“How did you find out?”

“Dead people don’t send you birthday cards.”

“Oh. You saw those.”

“Well, *I* saw them, and Pete went to go visit them a while back. They’re very nice people.”

Henry slumped a bit, even more so than he already was. “So, you don’t care that even though my family is incredibly rich I still try to make a dishonest living try to steal fabulous riches?”

“Hey, everybody’s got a hobby, right?”

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A little ways off in Stonemarket, the shape stopped, sniffed the air, and smiled.

“**He’s near.**”

Eleana smiled. “Then gets him, and soonies.”

The shape pounded away down the road. Eleana whipped around to her captive, whose wrists were bound by a vine which grew out from Eleana’s right arm, tethering them together. “Won’t this bes a wonderfuls moment? I gets what I wantsies, and yous gets what bes coming to yousies.”

Cait looked up at Eleana, fire burning in her eyes. “You touch one hair on Henry’s head, and I *will* burn your whole damn forest to the ground.”

“Really? And how wills you be doing that, when yousies are here with mes?” Countering with her own icy stare, Eleana stuck the index finger of her free hand under Cait’s chin, lifting her face to the sky.

Cait just smiled. “Why don’t you untie me and we’ll see?”

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The arguing grew more and more heated until Amelie waved for everyone to be quiet. “Do you guys hear that?”

The group waited. Nobody heard a thing for a moment, above the general hubbub in the City. But then, there it was. At first, they didn’t hear it, they *felt* it, a rumbling heading down the street in their direction. The cobblestones rattled. The stone Janet had pushed into place popped loose again, tumbling away into the bushes. And then, just as soon as it started, it stopped.

They waited, but nothing further happened. Gilly cocked her head to one side, listening. “So, where did it stop?”

Henry was watching the wall behind the park statue, pointing at one spot right by him. “I think it stopped right about...”

A fist, larger than Henry’s head, burst through the wall and grabbed his extended hand. A second fist punched through, and Henry found himself quite suddenly pulled through the hole both fists had created. The wall, unable to withstand such a severe blow and remain standing, collapsed. Bricks tumbled everywhere, and every man and woman dove for cover towards safety.

Through the thick rising dust of ancient mortar, Jack stood up, coughing. He brushed the dust from his face, blinking to get it out of his eyes, and looked around. He was alone. Across from him, the wall had fallen, blocking a way through to the other side of the park. He could hear voices over the rubble, but wasn’t sure if anyone had gotten caught in the rockslide; all he could make out were a few shouts and a lot of coughing.

He made his way over to where the hole in the wall had been made, but the way the bricks had fallen made the hole too small for Jack to squeeze through (an occurrence Jack had, over the years, become very accustomed to). Not much renowned for his climbing abilities either, Jack looked at the near insurmountable pile of rubble and quickly concluded that he wasn’t going to get around that any other way than by going

back through the streets. Luckily, he wouldn't have too far to go; the little court and the surrounding streets weren't that twisty.

He peeked out into the street, and all seemed quiet. He stepped out and immediately a large militia appeared around a corner, waving all manner of handmade weapons and torches. Before he could retreat, the wave of people had swept over him and he found himself jostled along with the rest of the troop, at the head of which he heard a familiar voice leading them along:

“Come on, then, fellows! These monsters will never take our streets, just like those mongrel heathens out in the hinterland never took our fort! Today we win, or my name isn't Captain Eustace Roberts!”

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Henry blinked, those purple eyes still burned into his retinas. He looked down at the monster that held him, which had a huge grin on its face.

“Xochar! You're, uh...looking well.”

Xochar continued to stand there, admiring his prize. Henry did have to admit, for someone who he had recently assumed to be completely and thoroughly dead, Xochar *was* looking well. But when that book had talked about ‘new life’ it hadn't just been whistling Dixie. Besides gaining about four feet in height and about a ton and a half in weight, Xochar also resembled a redwood in much the way a redwood had bark, leaves, and a primitive root type system. In fact, the only things that now separated Xochar from the plant world in general were his arms, legs, still recognizable face, and the sort of temperament that bees exhibited when a young child has decided their home is the best target for his startup rock throwing industry.

**“Hand over the fruit now. I mean it.”**

His way with words, however, hadn't improved much.

“I...I don't have the fruit here.”

Xochar pulled back his fist, ready to strike. Then, oddly, he seemed to think better of it.

**“Then you'll tell me where it is.”**

“Why would I do that?”

But Xochar said nothing. He merely wrapped his gigantic free hand around Henry's waist and threw him roughly over his shoulder. And then he rumbled down the street. Henry didn't know how Xochar would get him to talk, but if it was as surprising as Xochar's suddenly ability to plan ahead, he didn't think he was going to like it.

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Pete pulled hard and Janet came out from under the rubble. Despite the weight piled on top of her, Janet's uniform consisted mostly of metal designed to resist crushing pressure of up to and including two tons, and thus she escaped relatively unharmed. Amelie had not been quite so lucky; though she leapt clear of the initial slide, a brick had tumbled down and landed on her foot, and upon closer examination her ankle had clearly been broken. Gilly had suffered some scrapes as she slid along the rocks, and Pete, who hadn't been all that close to the wall in the first place, suffered only a small bruise from a bouncing chunk of debris.

Gilly was now helping Amelie over to a bench that had suffered only minor damage, and Pete was getting a full damage report when someone approached them through the cloud of dust.

“Is everyone all right?”

Pete turned to see Melody coming into the courtyard. “How did you get here?”

“I was following the walking tree when I saw it grab Henry. Where’s Jack? Jack?”

Gilly shook her head. “We haven’t seen him. I think he’s on the other side somewhere. At least, I hope he is...” She hopelessly waved a hand at the rock pile.

Pete, meanwhile, was still wondering if Melody realized what she had just said.

“Wait. Walking tree?”

Melody pointed. “It went toward Canary Row, with Henry. Whoever it is, I think it’s working with Eleana. She had some girl with her, too; I’ve never heard so many obscenities in my life.”

Gilly perked up. “Short hair, sort of pale, looks like she can throw a bucket pretty hard?”

“I think so. Why?”

Gilly handed the two bundles over to Pete and headed for the open archway, turning back to him and Janet. “Get everyone over to South Quarter. I’ll catch up later.”

Pete raised an eyebrow. “Why South Quarter?”

“Because it’s the only place we haven’t gotten to yet, and it certainly can’t be any worse than here.”

“And where are you going?”

Gilly looked wistfully off into the distance, which ended up being a bad idea, as the distance contained several acts of extreme, unprintable violence. “I have to go check up on something.”

“You’re going to try and rescue him, aren’t you?”

Gilly stayed silent for a moment. “Yes.”

“Without our help?”

Gilly leaned in close to Pete and whispered, “Does it look like anyone here *wants* to help?”

“Well, I...” Pete then thought better of it, and shrugged. “All right, see you in South Quarter.”

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Jack fought his way to the front of the crowd, eventually reaching within arm’s distance of his father. He tugged on Captain Roberts’ sleeve, but his father made no acknowledgement until he came to a complete stop. The rest of the mob followed suit.

Ahead lay the area known as Stonemarket Proper, just outside of the imposing St. Edgar’s Cathedral. People from all walks of life were running away from something around the corner and in the distance. Shouts rang out, warning of the “Skin-Stealer” menace that patrolled nearby, as if waiting for something...or someone.

Captain Roberts turned and faced the mob. “We are clearly nearing the source of the trouble in our city, the scourge of which we must be ready to wipe out.” Captain Roberts began pacing back and forth, appearing more like a motivational speaker or one-man theatrical production than a military leader. “Now, I realize many of you are not

classically trained...or trained at all, for that matter. And I warn you, some of you may not be coming back. But it is clear that this menace is far beyond the capabilities of our noble City Watch, and we must...excuse me, this is not the time for questions.”

A short, mousy looking man in spectacles near the back lowered his hand. “Sorry, but I don’t remember anyone saying we wouldn’t be coming back.”

“Well, I’m not saying you *won’t* come back, but as in any situation where weapons are involved, there is a chance that someone can get hurt or killed. I thought that was obvious.”

Another man wearing tattered clothes raised his hand. “Well, you could have made a mention of it before I went and got this here pitchfork. I sort of figured that just waving a pitchfork at someone might make them a little less inclined to act up.”

“The pitchfork helps, yes, but there are other variables at play here...”

A woman buried under a pile of pots and pans poorly arranged as armor straightened herself to her full height, which wasn’t very full at all. “And what about us up front? Does our spot in the mob have any adverse effects on our chances of returning home to our loved ones?”

Captain Roberts buried his face in his hands. “I don’t know, I would assume so. But look, you’re all here already, you’ve gone to all this trouble, and asking these sorts of questions only serves to lower morale. If you trust me, I will make sure that most of you get to go home when this is all over. I know it sounds harsh, but there it is. So, prepare your weapons now, and...oh, what is it now?”

The newest intellectual scholar to join the debate was wearing a burlap sack for a shirt and the wind in place of pants. “Sorry, but I didn’t really go through all that much trouble for this. I don’t even have a large stick or anything. Is it all right if I just go?”

A murmur started to pass through the crowd. The murmur built into more legible sounds of dissent, before becoming outright cries of mutiny. Captain Roberts yelled out for quiet, for a return to common purpose, but he was drowned out as the voices of the mob were joined by the clatter of metal and wood on the cobblestone street. Pitchforks, torches, shillelaghs, knives, rattan sticks, ninja death stars, jack-in-the-boxes, bucklers, ducklers, pantooklers and flankers, and even a ratty old magazine for porridge enthusiasts hit the ground. The mob then slowly but surely dispersed. All that remained in front of Captain Roberts was a pile of post-weaponry and his son, whom he didn’t notice at first. He was too busy fuming about the loss of his makeshift militia.

“What’s coming of this world? No discipline at all anymore. You’d think in this day and age people would be more willing to face certain death in order to stop a deranged monster from destroying their homes.”

Jack shook his head, even though his father couldn’t see him. “They’re not soldiers, Dad. They’re just people. They’re not trained for this.”

Captain Roberts stopped fuming and looked up at his son.

“So. You’re here.”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

Captain Roberts placed his hands on his hips and tapped his foot. “Aren’t you supposed to be in prison?”

“I was. I got out.”

Captain Roberts waved a hand. “No matter. As long as you’re here, grab a pitchfork and follow me. The plan goes ahead as scheduled. We’re going to put a new hole in that monstrosity.”

“What?” Jack stayed precisely where he was, not wanting to put a new hole into anything. “You...want us to stop it? Just the two of us?”

“Do you have a better idea? Our forces have deserted, the City Watch is apparently incompetent to deal with this menace, and traditional firepower is ineffective. Our best bet is to study it up close and learn its weaknesses, then exploit them.”

“Dad, this isn’t a training exercise out in the wilderness. I’m barely any good at being a copper or a thief. I don’t know how to exploit anything. We really should have a few other people with us.”

“Do you think *I* like this situation? Of course I’d rather have my troops behind me! At least they have some backbone, willing to look the enemy in the eye before gouging it out with a set of toothpicks!”

Jack slumped. “Dad, listen to me. I don’t know much, but I know certain death when I see it. I don’t want to go. And I don’t want you to go, either.”

Fire once again burned in Captain Roberts’ eyes. “Don’t want me to go? Why? So I can go crawl back home under the sofa, like you want to? I don’t know how you could possibly be my son; you haven’t got any grapes under all that flab!”

Jack had been called many things by his father over the years: coward, lazy, and yes, even fat. But his father had never said it to his face. It had always been in a sort of roundabout way, or in complaints to his Mum. “What did you say?”

“I said you’re fat, O Great Butterball! One little insult got in through some hole other than that mouth of yours, eh? Well then, tell you what: I’ll go kill the bloody great monster, and you can go eat it afterwards. Will that make you happy?”

Captain Roberts waited to see how his son liked the sound of that. Well, maybe if simple discipline and encouragement weren’t doing their job properly, maybe a few well-placed insults would. He expected his son to do a variety of things: start blubbering like a baby, stand there like an idiot dumbfounded, or maybe even try to slug him in the face. If any of those things happened, he’d be ready.

What he didn’t expect was for Jack to start laughing.

“Stop laughing! Those were insults!”

Jack slapped a leg, still chortling. “Like I haven’t heard any of those before! I get called names from everyone I know at least three times a day; even people that *like* me have to get jabs in here and there.” He wiped his eyes and folded his arms. And then, he got a little more serious. “Since we’re playing the insult games now, you mind if I might throw a few of my own?”

Captain Roberts couldn’t believe his ears. “What? Insult *me*? Fine. Go ahead. Let’s hear what’s so wrong with me!” He folded his arms as well, smiling and chuckling a little.

“All right.” Jack paced back and forth. “Dad, you are a great war hero. You’ve faced down countless monsters and barbarians that want to kill us all.”

“That’s an insult?” Captain Roberts threw back his head and laughed a large, phony, over-the-top laugh. “I’m so hurt, boy.”

“I’m not finished.” Jack paused mid-pace. “Yes, a great war hero, facing down enemies that are clearly monsters, evil, vicious, probably armed with all sorts of nasty,

sharp implements. Pity you can't say the same facing down a small, pleasant woman with a rolling pin and a...what did you call me? Oh, right, the Great Butterball."

Captain Roberts smile fell. "What?"

"What is it that's so interesting about that outpost that you have to stay out there for years at a time? A couple of people to talk about the *last* battle you had? I suppose it's better than having to face the fact that Mum couldn't give two twits about your war stories, or that I'm a constant disappointment."

Jack came right up to his father's face, sticking his finger almost in his father's eye. "That's why I want to say, right here, right now, that my father, Captain Eustace Roberts, is the biggest coward I've ever met. And that includes my friends. So, Dad, tell *you* what: I'm going to go home and see Mum, and kiss her goodnight, and you can go kill your big monster and brag about it to all your 'friends' afterwards. Does that make you happy?"

Jack walked away down the street, leaving his father standing there, perplexed, puzzled, even unable to call him back and demand an explanation for the accusations directed at him. Him? A coward? The very notion! But then the words began to sink in, and Eustace Roberts had a small, niggling doubt. A thought, fleeting at best, that his son was right.

As he blinked in confusion, looking for all the world like a living version of the statues that were murdering citizens by the truckload, the few stragglers that remained behind to watch began a slow clap for the young, flabby gentlemen who, for the first time in his life, showed more common sense than anyone else in the room.

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Henry couldn't see where he was; being swung around by Xochar made direction-keeping too much of a chore. But eventually Xochar came to a stop, and when he did Henry was flung to the ground like a sack of dried meat (which, for those who don't know, is slightly rougher treatment than for a sack of potatoes, but not quite as rough as a sack of dirty laundry). He blinked once or twice, trying to make out details in the gloom of the room he now found himself in.

The room wasn't so much a room as a cavernous chamber, and after a few moments of deduction he realized he was inside a warehouse of some sort. By the crates stacked up around the place, it looked like it might be a food warehouse. By the smell, he guessed the contents of the crates had been here a long time. Above him, a small amount of moonlight shone down through broken skylights and cracks in the roof, and by that light he could see that the warehouse had a second floor...or some sort of level, as much of the floor above him had been destroyed, like an asteroid had fallen from the sky, missed the ceiling, and detonated only twenty feet above.

Xochar stalked off to a corner and folded his massive arms. He watched Henry with his purple eyes, unblinking. After a few moments of this stand-off, there was something like the sound of a pop gun going off. Xochar reached behind his back, and with a slight tearing sound and a grunt, his hand returned holding what appeared to be a large rutabaga. Xochar bit into it, munching it loudly.

Henry wrinkled his nose. "You know, that's possibly one of the most disgusting things I've ever seen. And I've seen Jack Roberts eat."

Xochar finished off the rutabaga in a second bite, then wiped his hands together.  
“Care to make something of it?”

“Not really, just pointing it out.”

“Ah, you brings him heresies. Shalls I begin?”

Henry turned to the familiar and highly unpleasant person who had come up behind him. “So, he’s alive, you’re alive...and I’m guessing you want something back, is that it? Well, fat chance. I don’t have it, and I don’t know where it is.”

Eleana came up to him, looking into his eyes and chuckling. She held her hand up, and from her wrist a small, very thorny, very pointy branch grew out of her skin, aiming towards Henry’s face.

“But you misunderstand me. I *would* give it back to you if I could, but like I said, I don’t have it on me.”

“How cans I knows yous isn’t lyings to mesie?”

“I think you can be quite sure that aiming a stick at my head is a good way of getting the information you need.” Which was true; granted, he knew *who* had it, but who knew where she was right now?

“Hmmm.” Eleana frowned, and the branch retreated back under her skin. “This may bes more difficult than Lies thought.”

“Yes. And since I’m no use to you, you might as well let me go, and I assure you, I will never, ever bother you again.”

“Lets you go? Hardlies. Even if you don’t *thinksies* you know where it is, I have my ways.”

“Like talking in that ridiculous Pagan accent until I crack or something? I swear, if I have to hear one more second of...” Eleana grabbed Henry by his collar and lifted him bodily into the air. He stared down at his dangling feet. “I’m sorry. I really don’t know where that came from. I’ve had a very long week and my mouth is working faster than I am.”

Eleana dropped him, hard. “Very well. I don’t likes to perform this ritual, but it seems as if wes has no choice.” She knelt down in front of Henry. She pulled the bandage off of her injured arm, swinging the extremity and popping it a few times to see how healed it had become, and placed her hands on her head.

Xochar, who had apparently grown a small potato on his shoulder, was now eating and watching the strange ritual from afar. “**So, what is this, exactly?**”

“Quiets! I must concentrate.”

Xochar pounded one fist into the other. “**You didn’t answer my question.**”

Eleana sighed. She took a deep breath, and reminded herself that a tree was a tree, and must not be harmed, no matter its pre-tree condition or level of annoyance. He had proven useful, after all, in retrieving the young Cresswell and the other one. Eleana only wished he could be more like the true treants; powerful, frightening, *and* willing to cooperate. “He has been in contact with the Seedsie. If his mind is still attuned, I can ‘speak’ to the Seedsie through him to its current place.” She turned back to Henry, as vines began to wriggle out her fingers. “All plants have roots; I must simplies taps into it. It is very painfuls.” She smiled. “Not that I cares, but I thoughts you should knowsie.”

Henry could feel one of the tendrils begin worming up against his skull. Suddenly he felt a quick, sharp pain, as one of the vines seemed to be biting through his

scalp, trying to drill down into his brain. He reached up to grab it and yank it out. Eleana hissed and clutched his head tighter.

“Hold stills! Fighting only makes it take longer, and my patiences runs thin!”

Henry didn't care. He pulled his whole body backwards and felt her grip slide away. He scooted backwards away from the still angry Eleana, who crawled after him.

“Gets back here immediately!”

“Like hell! You keep your bloody plants away from my head!”

“Do as I says, or elses...” Eleana pointed at Xochar, who shambled over to a dark corner and pulled someone roughly out into the dim light. Henry looked on in shock.

“Cait?”

Cait, who seemed to be having an exceptionally rough day, blinked and looked back at him. “Henry?”

Eleana reached out a hand, and tendrils on it coiled into a much larger, pointed stick, which slid further and further out of his hand towards Cait's face. “Dos it, or she dies...rights in front of yous. Capichesies?”

---

“Is it just me, or do you feel useless right now?” Janet looked around at the others, waiting for an answer.

Pete shrugged. “I've felt that way most of my adult life. But why does that matter now?”

“I am saying that because we are hiding under an ox cart while monsters are destroying our city.”

They were, in fact, all hiding underneath an overturned cart in South Quarter. Fortunately, South Quarter seemed to be relatively untouched by the chaos, but from the sounds of it, it wouldn't be too much longer before things got out of hand.

Amelie punched Janet on the arm. “Like, duh, Gilly wanted us to stay here. She knows what she's doing.”

Janet gripped the head of her hammer tightly. “That is what concerns me. People who know exactly what they are doing need more help than anyone else.”

Pete smirked. “Sounds like Henry to me. I hope he isn't dead.”

Melody sat against an upturned carton of apples, pouting. “I hope Jack's okay, too.”

Janet peeked under the cart as a large boom sounded over the City. “I am sure they are. I do not think we are that lucky.” She then noticed something further down the street, and waved for everyone to stay quiet. “There is a large group moving down the street. They are wearing Hammer vestments. And Confessor Titus is leading them.”

Pete looked down at the two misshapen objects poorly hidden in his shirt. “You're not planning on jumping out to meet them right now, are you?”

Janet got up into a kneeling position as quietly as a metal-clad woman could. “I have broken a multitude of codes tonight; sitting under an ox cart at this time of night counts as one of them. The last thing I wish to see tonight is my superior.”

There was a moment of quiet passed between them. Pete sighed.

“You're going to see them, aren't you?”

“Life as a Hammer is not about comfort, it is about honor and devotion. You may stay here if you like, this does not concern you.”

She was about to leave when Pete grabbed her arm. "Wait."

"What?"

"You don't have to give in to them."

"Pete, this is my faith. You would not understand."

"No, I don't. But I know idiots can't be reasoned with. Look, I saw that facility. There's a way to be a Hammer without having your head jammed in an iron skillet for the rest of your life. You can live a life, a good life, without Titus and without giving up everything you believe in. Just because he believes what he believes doesn't make him right, or even what the Builder wants. I know, because he brought me to you."

"Peter, do not make me question my..."

Before she could get another word out, Pete leaned over and kissed her. He hoped it was a good one, as he hadn't had a lot of practice doing it before, but he read a lot of books where exactly that sort of thing happened. They always mentioned things like fireworks exploding, and passion, and wonder, and enchantment.

He really didn't notice anything like that, but it was pretty nice nevertheless. And underneath the tight grip he had on Janet's arm, he could feel her go slack; all in all, not bad for a stolen kiss.

Amelie started making small, disgruntled noises. "Hey, like, buddy, I'm over here! Girlfriend watching you!"

Melody rolled her eyes. "Oh, Amy, give it a rest. Everybody knows you were never going to end up with him anyway. You're a ditz."

Amelie folded her arms. "Some friend you are, sticking up for me!"

Melody shrugged. "Hey, it's the truth, what can I say?"

The crowd was growing nearer. Suddenly, Janet pushed Pete away, wiping her mouth and giving him a severe look. "That is enough of that! Now, if you will excuse me..."

Janet crawled out from under the cart and stood up in front of the group, which pulled to a stop. Pete couldn't see the proceedings, but he recognized the voice of Confessor Titus, as frumpy and unpleasant as ever.

"Sister Janet."

"Confessor Titus."

"I heard word that the cells were broken into. There were reports of a large monster having killed Brother Fondue in a most gregarious way. Very little of him left that could be boxed up."

"What a terrible thing. We have certainly suffered a great loss." From the sound of it, Janet probably felt about as terrible about Kip's death as a beggar feels about finding a winning lottery ticket.

"Yes...too bad it also appeared young Henry Cresswell is not in his cell, either."

"Perhaps the monster ate him."

"I did consider that, but none of us are that lucky. Also, it appears the door was broken off of its hinges by a P-37 Modular Hammer. Brother Johnson, would you lift up that cart the sister was under for me, please?"

Brother Johnson, a thin man who probably couldn't lift an empty wicker basket without help, called upon three other acolytes to right the tipped cart, revealing Pete, Amelie, and Melody underneath. Pete stood up quickly, clearing his throat, when the two

bundles slipped out and landed on the ground. One unrolled to reveal the Builder's Hammer, in a glorious example of an ironic situation.

There was a small pause, where Confessor Titus' grin became one of sinful gloating. "Well, then, all we need is the final piece of the puzzle, before we sentence you all to the furnace. Tell me, Sister Janet, what model of Hammer hangs from your belt?"

Another short silence. "Forgive me, Confessor Titus, but what hangs from my belt should be none of your concern."

Pete's jaw dropped. There was silence again, followed by sputtering. "Wha...wh...how *dare* you speak to me like that! I am your superior!"

"Again, begging your forgiveness, but if you would like to know my Hammer better, then perhaps you would not mind if I stuck it up your ass?"

The other acolytes made small "ooooohhhh" noises, and began to back away. Confessor Titus turned beet red. "Do you know what I am capable of, you despicable harpy? This is treason most foul!"

"So what? The Builder knows my thoughts and actions better than you could ever possibly know, and my soul belongs to Him. It is *you* that doesn't own me."

Pete turned to Janet, surprised even more. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'you *don't* own me!' What, have a problem with that?"

"No, I didn't say that...just never knew you were capable of saying contractions, that's all."

Janet took a deep breath. "For years I bent over, following every word you ever told me, telling me what I should and should not do. I believed every word you said, even though the words I read sometimes contradicted. I came with you to the Builder's Retreat to keep an eye on things. But it took this man, here..." She pointed at Pete, who nervously stepped back, "To show me that the Builder works in ways far more mysterious than you."

Small flecks of spit began to foam up at the corners of Confessor Titus' mouth, slowly crawling up his face towards his eyes, and weaving a pattern of phlegm down his beard as well. "You shut up, you lying heretic! Remove your emblem! You have no right to wear His symbol!"

"Very well. Come take the Hammer from me, then. If I truly do not deserve it, then it should be yours."

Confessor Titus laughed. "I will not even deign myself to come to you! Place it in my hand, please."

Pete noticed a small glint in Janet's eye. She reached down, rewrapped the Hammer in the bundle and hefted it. Confessor Titus smiled as she approached, but the smile disappeared she grabbed his outstretched hand roughly, and with her free hand ripped the Hammer from its bundle and placed it directly in his hand.

Titus felt something worming into his brain. Never had he held the sacred Hammer with his bare flesh before, and he was not prepared for the onslaught that delved into his mind, seeking out everything he had ever done, from his nasty childhood, to his unpleasant adolescence, to his elitist young adulthood, to his crotchety middle-age. He watched Janet step away from him, her arms folded in defiance.

"Have something to *confess*, Titus?"

And when the dam broke, it broke magnificently. He told everything; how he had bumped off his own brother for not sharing a loaf of bread with him, how he'd stabbed

every single one of his colleagues in the back – some literally – to further his own standing in the Church, how he plotted and schemed even now to obtain a Cardinal position so he could turn back all of this rotgut nonsense and go back to the days of torturing the heathens just for the hell of it. Atrocities not yet committed flowed from his lips, plans to remake the Church as he saw it, in ways even the current Church elders would have been aghast to hear. And lest we forget, all the chronic, unending masturbation as well.

The acolytes watched in stunned horror, as the man they had been so respectful to, so frightened of, turned out to be one of the most ghastly human beings to ever worm his way up the chain of command in the Hammer hierarchy.

“I believe that is enough for one day.” Janet reached out and took the Hammer from him, and Titus’ mouth finally closed. He fell to his knees, gasping.

Janet looked over the rest of the group, and at the Hammer, which sat nice and calmly in her hand. “Would somebody tend to Confessor Titus, please? And be quick about it.”

Connor and Augie Stench were the first to the front, grabbing Titus roughly by the arms and lifting him up. He struggled, watching as she admired the Hammer.

“This is nonsense! I spent my life in His service, and He considers you more worthy than I? Rubbish! Rubbish, I say!”

Janet shook her head. “His service, you say? Sounds like someone needs to *learn* what it means to serve. Death is too good for you. I think a little time spent reflecting on our tenants, say, while keeping an eye on the Hammer in the basement, will help you see the light? Anyone agree?”

The other acolytes began nodding in assent.

“Do *not* be Yes men. I hate that.”

They all began shaking their heads in dissent. Janet rolled her eyes.

“Oh, Builder. We are going to have to work on that.”

Titus began kicking at the air. “You’ll all pay for this! All of you! You cannot do this to me! It is heresy for an acolyte to, to...mutiny against a Confessor!”

“Heresy? For holding the Builder’s Hammer and not have my tongue spill forth the wretchedness of a thousand lifetimes worth of sin?”

“Heresy, I say! Heresy! This has all been a parlor trick, a series of lies, to make you forget what good I have done for the...”

Janet had had enough. She brought the hilt of the Hammer down on Titus’ head. There was a nasty clunk, followed by his eyes rolling up into its sockets and collapsing into the arms of Connor and Stench. With a nod, they carried him away. The rest of the crowd stood in abject awe.

“What? What are you all standing around for? Get back to the business of protecting the City!”

The crowd nodded in mutual assent, moving in a nice, orderly fashion to wherever they were originally supposed to go in the first place. Pete walked over to Janet, watching them go. “Wow. I certainly didn’t expect that.”

Janet smirked. “I thought you said I should loosen up a little. Did I choose a wrong time?”

“No, no, perfect timing.” Pete shuffled his feet, then cleared his throat. “So, uh, good thing you knew it would make him confess and not you, right?”

Janet didn't say a word.

"Oh. You didn't, did you?"

"No. A little surprising, actually. I have always felt I have been *very* sinful."

Pete spun Janet towards him. She didn't pull away. "Maybe the Builder's willing to overlook some things lately."

He leaned towards her to try and kiss her again. She put a hand to his lips.

"Perhaps before I do any more 'sinning' today, should we try and rescue your friend Henry?"

Pete frowned. "Oh, right. Henry."

---

Cait, even as beleaguered as she looked, had summoned the strength to pull against Xochar's immense grip. It didn't accomplish much, but then, not much could be expected against something his size. "Don't worry about me, Henry! Just don't give that looney tart a thing before I get a piece of her first!"

Henry looked back at Eleana. She beckoned him with the hand not currently coated in foliage. "Comesie. It does not do to waits."

They all watched Henry closely, waiting for him to leap to his feet and try something heroic.

None of them expected what Henry actually did. For a moment, it was quiet. Then, his shoulders started shaking, then shuddering. Then the noise began. He...he was crying. He looked up, tears streaming down his cheeks, watching the three of them watching him, quizzically.

"What? What did you want? What did you bloody expect? Did you want me to whip out a sword and start dancing around like I know how to use the bloody thing? Am I just suppose to...leap up and save Cait, then make some sort of getaway? Or do I go and sacrifice myself to save everyone by letting my brain get yanked out of my head?"

Cait blinked. "Henry, what..."

"You were right, Cait. You were right, all along." Henry slumped forward. "Look at me. I'm no hero. I'm no great thief. Ever since I read that newspaper last week I've been nothing but a mess. All I've accomplished is to put everybody's lives in danger, and for what? A stupid old hammer? The world's most dangerous fruit? Even the people I thought were dead are better off than I left them."

Xochar, without really thinking, nodded.

"And the worst of it, the absolute worst, is that everything that's gone right has had nothing to do with me. Pete's had better plans than I did. Gilly and her friends got us out of a jam that we had gotten into. My parents were apparently superheroes in their spare time. Even Jack, *Jack* of all people, has done more in the past week than I've done in my entire life. I mean, he's even held a steady job."

Eleana watched all this without moving. Something inside her told her to just get on with it and put the bawling dope out of his misery, but she couldn't. She couldn't put it into words how she felt, but she simply couldn't attack something so, so...pathetic.

Henry looked up to the roof, through the cracks in the timbers to the sky beyond, raising his fist. "Are you happy now? Is this what you wanted? To show me that I'm nothing? I'm worthless? I mean, for Builder's sake, I can't even die with a little

dignity.” He wiped his eyes, looking at Eleana. “So what are you waiting for? Go ahead, do it. Crack my skull open, steal all my secrets, do me a favor.”

Henry sat back, burying his face into his arms. “So this is how it ends, eh? Henry Cresswell, the ‘great’ nobody thief, never did anything right in his whole miserable life. He was a constant disappointment to his family and friends, who he couldn’t even rescue when the time came. He died as a coward, friendless and alone to the very end.”

Cait watched as Henry rolled over, onto his side, completely beaten. She should’ve been angry that even now he couldn’t do anything right. She should’ve felt hollow and empty, knowing that she probably didn’t have long to live. But she didn’t. Tears started in her own eyes, as she realized that this was the most honest Henry had ever been to anyone in his entire life. In a flash, all the ego, all the pretense, all the lashing out was gone.

She heard the phrase ‘soul laid bare’ before, but never really understood its significance. But as Henry spoke, she understood. She’d always had days where she really didn’t want to get up, because she’d been up far too late the night before and going to work didn’t seem like the best way to spend the morning. But this was different.

This had to be how Henry felt every day that he got up. That he tried and tried and tried, but he never, ever succeeded at anything he did. She never, ever wanted to feel that way, and in that moment, she didn’t him to wake up like that ever again.

In fact, she wanted them both to wake up the next morning. Together.

She didn’t know how it happened. Some superhuman strength came from a reserve she didn’t know existed. But with a twist, a branch snapped, and the wooden hand around her neck loosened. There was a roar as Xochar stumbled back, clutching at his torn arm.

Everything moved in slow motion after that. Cait leapt forward, arms outstretched towards Eleana’s throat. Eleana, still confused about the babbling pile of humanity on the floor in front of her, didn’t see Cait until it was too late. Cait knocked her to the floor, hands throttling Eleana, smashing the Pagan’s head against the stone floor. Eleana gasped and choked, reaching up to pry Cait’s hand away from her neck. Cait simply switched tactics, letting go of her throat and smashing fist after fist into Eleana’s face.

“I *told* you not to touch my man! I told you what would happen! First I’m going to shut that mouth of yours, and then I’m going to take a lighter, and a bunch of bottles from the Foghat, and some old newspaper, and we’re going to take a little trip to the world’s biggest goddamn bonfire!”

Eleana brought up a knee into Cait’s abdomen, winding Cait briefly. With a quick movement, she brought her hand under Cait’s chest, and Cait suddenly found herself in the air, hitting the floor on her back. Eleana was on her in a flash, one hand holding her neck to the floor, the other raised and beginning to glow an unpleasant green color.

“Foolish girlsie! Don’t you know what Iies is capable of doing?” She smiled, blood trickling from what remained of her broken teeth. “You has no magicks!”

Then, something large, bright and green flew across Eleana’s arm, and she shrieked in pain. Letting go, she clutched at what remained of her hand, which wasn’t much; just a burning stump with a few shrunken digits.

Mad beyond belief, Oleanna looked upward to see a familiar shape standing on the broken floorboards of the level above, silhouetted against the moonlight.

“No, she doesn’t.” Gilly put her hands on her hips. “But I do.”

---

“Where do you think they could be?”

Pete shrugged, still running around. “Who knows? They could be anywhere by now!”

They came to an intersection, when a flood of people crashed into them coming from the opposite way. Once they all regained their feet, they realized one of the people that had run into them was very familiar...and very winded.

“Jack?”

“Pete?”

“Jack!” Melody wrapped her arms around his neck (which was quite a feat) and started kissing him profusely. “I thought you were...”

“Well, I’m not. And anything Pete tells you is an absolute lie!”

Melody looked puzzled. “What? No, I thought you were dead! What are you talking about?”

Jack frowned. “Nothing. Don’t worry.”

Pete gently guided Melody away, which was difficult, because she had a near death grip on her beloved. “So, where have you been?”

“Stopping my Dad’s own private war. What’s going on with you?”

“Looking for Henry. And Gilly.”

Janet spun on Melody. “You are sure they came this way?”

Melody nodded. “Positive. But I don’t know which way they went from *here*. I saw it leaving when I ran into you.”

Amelie looked up and down the street. “Man, you’d think, like, a walking tree would leave a decent trail to follow.”

Janet watched a man on fire run by. “It would, but there are too many other large creatures making the same sorts of trails. I am afraid there is not much we can do.”

Suddenly, Jack tugged on Pete’s clothing. “Um, I think there is, actually.” He pointed over to a nearby alley, where an exceptionally large and ugly gargoyle had just trumped out of. It saw them, and its eyes glowed bright blue. “I think we should run. Very quickly.”

The group (except for Janet) screamed in unison and took off in the opposite direction. But the gargoyle wasn’t going to let *this* group get away. It had let several people off the hook already, and gotten quite a scolding. Its footfalls treaded nearer as it built up speed chasing them, shouting, “KILL AND CRUSH, KILL AND CRUUUSHHHH...”

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“Gillian! How dares you comesie here, after what you did!”

“How dare I? Well, if I remember correctly, the last time we talked you were busy trying to fry a human being from the inside out. Sort of like what you’re doing right now, I might add?”

Eleana growled, and closed her eyes. A green glow appeared from her stump, and soon a small clutch of vines grew from her cauterized wrist, knitting themselves together into a crude but serviceable hand. “Dos not interferences. I am working in the services of the Woodsie Lord!”

“Working in the...I don’t think tearing people apart should really be considering working for the Woodsie Lord. Planting a tree? Adopting a puppy? Taking a Ratman for a walk every once in a while?” Gilly hopped back and forth between the shaky floorboards. “Those sound like the right idea. Not having the creatures of the forest eating people when they walk out of meetings in the middle of them.”

“You don’ts understands what the Lord has planned.”

“Really? Then why don’t we talk about it? Up here?” Gilly spun, her cloak flourishing behind her, and she leapt into the shadows.

The girl and her blubbering friend forgotten in the brief moment of anger, Eleana jumped onto a nearby series of crates until she could pull herself up through the massive hole. She too disappeared into the darkness.

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Cait looked around. Xochar was still looking the branch on his arm that Cait had broken, though like Eleana Xochar had apparently studied at the school of regenerative medicine; even now the branch was knitting itself back together. She knew it wouldn’t be long before he came back to his old, murderous senses.

“Henry, come on. We need to leave.”

Henry sniffed. “Just leave me here. I’m not worth it.”

Cait sighed, bent over and lifted Henry like she was carrying him over the threshold. She carried him off into the warehouse as fast as her lower back could carry.

Xochar, satisfied with the way his arm turned out, turned so that he might smash the two prisoners into a nice, fine paste. Seeing them gone, he became very angry.

---

Eleana gazed into the dark warehouse, seeing naught but boxes and more dark. She always wished the Lord could have given her the ability to see in near darkness. Not that she was complaining or anything, for he had already given her so much in the way of gifts, but it certainly would have been nice. The only sounds she had heard for the past few minutes were roars and crashing downstairs, but then there was only silence.

“So, what was it, Mistress? Why so angry?”

Eleana turned to where the voice came from, but she saw nothing. But she at least had a small clue as to Gilly’s whereabouts. She stalked in that direction, scraping the fingernails of her new hand along the box.

“The Hammers took everythingsie from me. They killeds my whole families.”

There was no reply for a moment. Perhaps the girl was contemplating those words, finally understanding why Eleana had embraced nature and thrown off the shackles of the world of industry. And when Gilly finally spoke, maybe Eleana could get a better reading on her location, so the punishment could begin.

“You know, that’s very funny, actually.”

“Funnies? FUNNIES? You finds the death of my families funnies?” The words had come from close by, and Eleana homed in on the voice.

“Well, not ha-ha funny, but ironic. You know Melody, right?”

“Melody?”

“My friend Melody? Oh, right, you never bothered to remember her name, I nearly forgot. She lost everything, too; family, house, everything. Last time I checked, though, she didn’t go around swearing revenge and killing everybody who looked at her cross-eyed. A temper is a terrible thing to lose; believe me, I know. And I think *you* know what I’m talking about.”

Eleana balled her wooden hand in a fist. “Yes...and you thinksies you knows better than I what the Lord wishes? You thinksie that we must embraces the manfools that dwells in the cities? This...is...war. One side loses, the other winsies. They destroys, we reclaims.” She turned a corner, arm outstretched, but Gilly wasn’t there. Her voice came again, from somewhere twenty feet in the opposite direction.

“Embrace? No, I don’t think the Hammers would like that...I’ve spent the day with one and I wouldn’t hug her even if she gave me a baby burrick for Solstice.” Eleana heard soft footsteps, close by, but she still saw no movement. “But you know? I sort of like her. Underneath all that armor beats the heart of a pretty decent human being...which is more than I can say about present company.”

Eleana, now enraged, punched one of the boxes with her new hand, shattering it to bits. Cans of Spum meat flew everywhere, though in the cloud of flying tins she saw a cloak on the other side try to escape. She jumped over the boxes and gave chase.

She finally emerged back into the moonlight, near the gigantic hole that led back down to the first floor. The tree and the other two were gone; not that it mattered right now. She’d find them eventually. The only one that mattered right now was the one standing on the opposite side of the hole. How Gilly had gotten there, Eleana didn’t know; she would either had to jump thirty feet or know how to run across walls.

“So you believes them, then? You turns against us?”

Gilly shook her head. “No...but I can tell character when I see it.” She thought for a moment. “Eventually, anyway. But I know your character ran off years ago. Whatever you used to be died inside you, and what’s there now has hollowed you out. Don’t you see? You don’t need the Hammers; you’re destroying yourself.”

They stood facing each other at the end of the precipice. Both of them held their hands at their sides, their fingers twitching, getting ready for what the other would throw.

It was the sort of time when tumbleweeds normally rolled by, in the whistling wind. All that went by was a loose can of Spum, tumbling into the hole.

Cait’s back had had enough. She dropped Henry rather roughly to the ground. “Henry, I’m sorry. But if you want to get out of here, you’re going to have to walk.”

Henry sniffled, blowing his nose into his sleeve, not budging from his curled up position otherwise. “Why are you even bothering, Cait? I’m not who you think I am at all!”

Cait looked back at the warehouse, hearing a roar of anger. “Henry, believe me, you are *exactly* how I thought you are.” She bent down to his level. “Look, I know you think you’re a coward and everything, and...” She frowned. How could she put this without destroying him again? “From time to time you *have* leaned in that direction, but...” A light bulb went off in her head. “You know, it takes a very brave fellow to

admit his faults in front of everyone.” She leaned in close to whisper. “Especially in front of their girlfriends.”

Henry’s sniffles immediately stopped. He turned, gazing into her eyes. “So, you...you like me? Like that?”

“Yes, I do. Why, I don’t know, but I do.”

“And you really think I’m brave?”

“Well...” Loud footsteps started coming her way. “Close enough in my book. Come on, get up.” She pulled Henry to his feet.

“You know, Cait, I’ve liked you for a long time. And everyone said you liked me, but I didn’t believe them because you yelled at me and threw a bucket at my head.”

Cait pushed him along. “I did all that stuff *because* I liked you.”

“That’s something else I wanted to ask you about. Why is it that...”

“Can we talk about this later? I think we’re a little pressed for time.” In response, a large crate flew over their heads and smashed open, spilling its contents: piles and piles of old, rotted fish. Cait turned once more to see a very angry Xochar staring at them, about a hundred feet away, eldritch smoke pouring from his flaring nostrils. “Our friend might be a little unhappy with us.”

Henry, still a little bleary-eyed, turned to Xochar as well. But it wasn’t the steaming nostrils that got his attention. Nor was it the glowing purple eyes. Nor was it Xochar’s rude hand gestures that suggested imminent death.

No, what got his attention was the small vegetable that popped into existence just above Xochar’s forehead. And Henry smiled.

For he had an idea. No, not just an idea, but an Idea. As soon as he had it, he knew it was a good one. It was the sort of Idea that comes along once in a lifetime. And for once, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it would work.

“Cait. On my signal, follow me.”

“What? Henry, this isn’t the time...”

“Cait. If you really meant what you just said, please, listen to me. I know what to do.”

Cait, despite her better judgment, saw Henry’s eyes. They were the most sincere she had ever seen them. And she nodded.

“Right. Then on my count...one...tw...”

And he ran. Cait, suddenly realizing Henry had not gone to the three-count as everyone would have expected him to do, took off after him. Xochar, on the other hand, didn’t quite get it for a few seconds, but then gave chase.

For a tree, he moved surprisingly fast.

---

“Pete! Do you have an idea as to where we’re going?”

“Not a clue! But I don’t think stopping’s a good idea!”

“I’m getting tired...”

“Just hang in there, Jack! Keep an eye out for someplace safe!”

“I’m, like, getting tired, too.”

“You are not allowed to be tired right now! Only the fat one!”

“Don’t call him fat!”

“KILL AND CRUSH! KILL AND CRUUUSHHH...”

“Oh, my, Lord, can somebody, like, shut that thing *up*? It’s getting *so* annoying.”  
“You want to tell him? Be my guest. We’ll come back to get what’s left of you later.”

“Like, don’t even joke, Pete.”

“Who’s joking?”

“KILL AND CRUSH! KILL AND CRUUUSHHH...”

---

“Only one of us is leavings tonight.”

“I kind of figured that. But believe me, Mistress, that short temper of yours is going to get you in a lot more trouble than I ever could.”

Now was the time. Eleana flung her hand, and a ball of green energy skyrocketed towards Gilly. Gilly jumped out of the way, balancing on a very wobbly beam sticking out over the drop. The energy ball smashed into a support pillar, where masses of moss and flowers began to grow. Eleana fired off another ball, and another, but Gilly leapt nimbly out of the way each time. Now, the upper floor where Gilly pranced more resembled a meadow than a warehouse.

Gilly looked back at the scene, then gave Eleana a huge grin. “My turn, now?” She wound up like a rounders pitcher, and threw something. Not at Eleana, but at the hole. No glow, no nothing. Just an object wrapped in a bundle...

The Seed! She was throwing the Seed away! From this height, the delicate object would not survive the fall!

Horrified, Eleana shot out her wooden hand, the vines lengthening as they reached into the pit, wrapping around the precious item. She yanked her arm back to a proper length, and held the medium-sized bundle in her good hand.

“How dares you! This is *treasons* against the Lord!” But despite her anger, she felt elation. What better way to start the new dawn of the Lord than here, in this filthy den of civilization. Even more wonderful, she would infuse it with her own energy, and the Lord would know who his most blessed disciple was.

Eleana carefully looked for a careful placed to climb down, and found some boxes stacked near the hole. She clambered down and stepped into the middle of the room, the weak, fading moonlight still strong enough to conduct the ritual.

Gilly looked down at her, and even in the dim light she looked puzzled. “What are you doing?”

“I’m bringing the new day, child. With this Seed, the Lord shall take this City, and all its inhabitants will know his wrath! Soon we will dance in the moonlight, with His children, and glory in his wisdom!” She raised the bundle up high, shouting ancient words of power, and her pushed energy into her hand, until it glowed with such sickly green light that it became blinding.

Then, it stopped. Eleana blinked. Something didn’t seem right. Maybe the moonlight wasn’t enough, or maybe she had spoken something wrong. But then Gilly said words that made her blood run cold.

“But that’s not the Seed.”

Eleana opened the bundle. Gilly was right; there was no Seed. All there was buried deep within the thick cloth, was a small, white pebble. She took the pebble in her hand, and gasped, as it pulsed with green light.

“Noes...what has I dones?”

The pebble jumped and shook, and then cracked. The small plant growing out of it took root in her skin, and began to grow. Unlike the vines and plants she could summon with her magic powers, this was different. The plant's roots dug their way painfully through her skin, seeking out her veins and arteries. When they did, they followed the stream. She could feel them moving up her arm.

No. No, this wasn't supposed to happen. This *couldn't* happen. She was the Lord's chosen. She could not...

More pain hit as the roots hit her chest. Now she could feel them wiggling closer and closer to her heart, and elsewhere; they pushed their way through membranes, into her lungs, her throat. It became hard to breathe.

Eleana collapsed to her knees. She tried to scream, but no noise came. But something else did. A branch, then two, then three. They forced their way out of her mouth and raised up towards the warming moonlight.

The pain was getting worse and worse, all over her body. Then she felt the tickle behind her eyes, pushing up towards her brain. And then she felt nothing more.

---

It was over in a minute. Gilly watched as her former mentor disappeared under the shoots and leaves of a gigantic fern. Or at least, she thought it was a fern, until two large, white flowers grew out of the top, buttercup-shaped, with a small stamen drooping over their edge. They were the most beautiful flowers Gilly had ever seen.

She didn't know how such a lovely plant could come from such a horrid woman. But then, Gilly remembered what Eleana had always said: Whatever you plant, if you want it grow big and strong, use plenty of fertilizer.

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Chunks of rock and concrete flew in front of Cait and Henry as they ran down the boulevard. Xochar stomped after them, roaring as he once again missed them. He wasn't used to missing, but his fingers didn't work quite the way they used to when he was human, so his accuracy had plummeted quite a bit. He tore another chunk off of the nearest building and hurled it at them.

Henry and Cait dodged onto the next street as the boulder whizzed by, where a Watch officer tried to stop them. “Hey, what? You're not supposed to be in this district! You're coming with me!” They ignored him, running right by the surprised officer, who suddenly found himself face to face with a very large, and angry tree with a face. The officer tapped his truncheon nervously on Xochar's chest. “Um...you're under arrest?”

Xochar kicked him. His body flew through the air and crashed through a wall. This gave Xochar some satisfaction, but not as much as he would've liked.

Cait saw the officer make his introductions to polished granite, and shook her head. “Henry, I hope this works...”

“It will work, I know it will.”

“How much farther?”

Henry grabbed her by the arm and pulled her through an open doorway. “Right here.”

She looked around at the building they were in. “What is this dump?”

“My home.”

“Oh.” She looked around again. “You live in this dump?”

“Just hide somewhere. I’ve got this all in hand.”

Cait found what remained of an old barrel and jumped in. Most of her didn’t fit, but it was the best she could do considering the circumstances. Besides, of all the things she could’ve hid in or under, it looked to be the cleanest.

Henry stood out in plain sight in the middle of the room (which wasn’t so much a room as it was a floor, a few pillars, and a ceiling) and waited. It didn’t take long. Xochar smashed through the door frame, bits of brick and wood falling in a cloud around him. He came forward and pressed a finger very hard into Henry’s chest.

**“I’m going to kill you.”**

“I don’t doubt that you mean that. But not here.”

**“Why not?”**

“Because I want to keep this part of the house looking nice.”

Xochar looked around at the shabby, ill-kept, dusty, and ramshackle digs that Henry had referred to as ‘this part of the house.’ **“This place is a dump.”**

“So I hear, but this area is far *less* of a dump than the rest of it. Please, this way? Then you can try to kill me all you like.”

Xochar hesitated. **“No. This is a trap.”**

“What makes you say that?”

**“Stuff like this is always a trap. I’ll just kill you here.”**

Henry shrugged. “All right, be that way. I just didn’t want to have to clean up in here when I was finished.”

Now Xochar chuckled. **“Clean up? I’m killing you!”**

“Not necessarily.” With that, Henry stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. A few seconds passed, and then there was the growing sound of loud feet, coming closer and closer. And then, what wall there was behind Henry exploded.

Emerging from the dust cloud, Huge shook his large, shaggy head and looked around. Having devoured most of the boxes and a good supply of old candles over the past few days, he was starting to get a taste for something more exotic, something with...nutrients.

And his ears perked up, as his eyes made contact with the delicious, juicy, succulent carrot dangling from Xochar’s head. He blew and moved forward.

Xochar simply stood there, stunned. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of a creature bigger than he was. Shaking his head, he prepared to fight. But his movement only swung the carrot around, making Huge move even faster. And then, the horse was on him.

He punched, but Huge didn’t even respond. This confused Xochar more than anything else; his punches had *always* worked. He threw another one. At this Huge simply reared up and kicked him in the face with a hoof. A moment later, he was staring up at the ceiling. And the horse was on top of him.

Huge didn’t know why the giant plant below him was yelling, screaming, and leaking chlorophyll from its nether regions. But he didn’t care. He wanted that carrot. And just to make it all the sweeter, he would eat it last.

Cait emerged from her barrel to the sounds of crunching and yelling. Seeing what was being eaten, she immediately looked the other way. Henry, covering his eyes as

well, moved as close to his giant pet as he could and gave him a pat on the side. “Good job, boy. Enjoy. I just have to...leave for a few minutes.”

Both Henry and Cait walked out of the building. They stood out on the street, where the horrible sounds were still audible, but muted.

Cait felt the gorge in her throat go down a little. “Well, that plan was...interesting.”

Henry’s gorge relaxed as well. “But it worked, didn’t it?”

Cait cocked her head. “You know, you’re right. It did.”

**“What are you...no, no! Don’t eat that! I need that to live! Stop it, stop...AAAGHHH!”**

“Does it count as murder if the victim is a plant? And a total ass?”

Cait shrugged. “For Xochar? I think you’ll get a medal.”

“So did I do good?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Cait smiled at Henry. He blushed and looked away. Then, he frowned. “What? What is it?”

“Oh, I just...you know that girl in the alley?”

“You mean the one that saved us in the warehouse?”

“Yeah, her. I...I sort of asked her if she wanted dinner some night. I thought, at the time, we may have been sort of...well, we were never actually *dating*, but do you understand what I...”

Cait pulled him close and kissed him. Henry, not used to the sensation and unsure as to what to do, simply closed his eyes and let Cait figure it out for him. For a moment, they embraced, as the City burned around them and Xochar screamed aloud for the return of his leg. But for Henry and Cait, the world slipped away...all there was, in a space somewhere between a second and eternity, in which there was only them.

When Cait finally pulled away, Henry’s eyes were still closed. “You can open them now. We’re done for a little while.”

He did. “That was nice. Can we do it again?”

“Later. Why don’t we make sure everyone else is okay?”

“All right. I hope they’re still in South Quarter where I told them to go.”

---

“We should’ve stayed in South Quarter!”

Janet rolled her eyes. “I think we are a bit late for that.”

Thanks to one wrong turn, they had piled into a dead end. There was easily room to make a joke about it being a ‘real dead’ end, what with all the bodies piled up on the sidewalks, but no one was in the mood to laugh. They all huddled against a stone wall (except Janet, who held out her hammer threateningly) as the gargoyle statue came mercilessly closer.

Melody grabbed Jack. “Jack? I don’t want to die...alone.”

“Me neither. Isn’t it good that we’re all here, then?”

“That’s...not what I meant.”

“Then what...” She pulled Jack closer and whispered in his ear. “Oh.” He looked around nervously at the group. “I’m not sure everyone else would like it. Plus I don’t think we’d have enough time.”

“Would I be your first?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’d have enough time.”

The gargoyle came within range of Janet. She swung her hammer, hard, into its side. She managed to annoy it, but that was about it. She backed up. “Pete, I would like to say that it has been nice to know you. I want to tell you now, because I think we might be heading to two different places.”

Pete nodded. “Well, if we are, I’m glad I can be with you now.” He grabbed her hand. Melody took Jack’s hand. Amelie, feeling a little left out, grabbed a fellow from the pile of bodies who wasn’t quite dead and held his hand.

The gargoyle raised its fists.

“KILL AND...”

“Yes, we know the drill.” Pete closed his eyes, and waited.

---

Meanwhile, in South Quarter, a figure in dark clothing moved past two of the statues, standing guard by the old fountain. The Hag was there as well, searching, but as of yet she hadn’t seen him. The figure moved forward, and pulled a small jewel, shaped like an eye, from his robes, holding it in front of the fountain.

He heard a screech. She had seen him. But he wouldn’t let her distract him. He leaned forward, seeing the indentation, and prepared to slam the Eye home.

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Meanwhile, in Stonemarket...

“Hey, Cait! Check out this crown I found! It just fell out of this hole!”

“Henry, put it back. It looks important.”

“Oh, all right.”

---

Pete opened his eye. The gargoyle had stopped, its hand inches away from the top of his head. Its eyes still glowed blue, but other than that it seemed to be nothing more than a normal statue.

A small wind began to blow. The wind increased in strength, reaching almost hurricane-like strength. He held onto Janet tighter, and then had to shut his eye again as he was suddenly surrounded by an insanely bright blue light. It even stabbed through his eyelids, so he had to bring his free hand up to cover them.

A roaring sound came next, but this was not the wind. Particles struck Pete’s face with greater and greater frequency, until it all came to a sudden end. Opening both eyes once more, this time with greater caution, he saw the gargoyle was gone. The only evidence of it was a pair of stone legs, broken off at the knee.

Slowly, everyone else became aware that death was not to be forthcoming (except for the man Amelie had pulled from the pile, who kept asking her to stop squeezing his broken hand so hard). Melody threw her arms around Jack, kissing profusely all over his face. “We’re okay! We’re okay!”

Jack smiled. “Yes. So, do you want to...”

Melody frowned. “Are you crazy? If we’re doing anything we’re getting married first.”

“Wait. I thought that just a minute ago...”

“That was when I thought we were going to die! Now that we’re not, we’re going to do this the right way!”

Jack looked to Pete in puzzlement. Pete shrugged. “I don’t know. Just go with it.” Politely, Janet coughed. Pete turned to her. “Oh, right. What about...”

“We will date for two years. If we are found to be compatible, then we will be married. And do not get any ideas about anything else.”

Melody waved to get Janet’s attention. “Will you marry me and Jack?”

“I do not see why not.”

“What?” Pete groaned. “But...they just met, and I...you...the cart...doesn’t that...” Pete looked to Jack for help.

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. Just go with it.”

---

Gilly sat on the roof of the warehouse. She had seen the whole thing with the blue light, and the pattern it made. She had no idea what it was, but she knew it meant whatever was causing all the trouble in the City was over. Lots of things had come to an end tonight: lives, livelihoods, and even...relationships. She had arrived early enough in her rescue to see the way that other girl cared about Henry, and knew it was too good to be true. Besides, if she could beat up Eleana, Gilly didn’t want to stand in her way.

She twisted the flower in her hand, the flower she had plucked from the bush that had once been Eleana. She should have felt a little ghoulish about taking it, but she couldn’t resist. It gave her a sense of wonder to look on it, as if it were a final message from her mentor.

Below her, citizens of all kinds entered the streets, realizing they were not going to be destroyed. They began the long process of cleaning up, of rebuilding. Concrete was loaded into carts and hauled off. Brooms swept away the dust. Bodies of the dead were identified.

And for the first time, in the midst of such a great threat to life and limb, the Hammers and the Pagans had finally had enough fighting to work side by side. Sure, they gave each other evil glances, and unkind words were shared, but the swords and wands stayed at their sides. At least for now, the violence was over.

It was a beautiful sight.

She twisted the flower idly again.

*Something beautiful from something so horrid...*

She stood up. Light pierced the horizon. A new day dawned.