

DAY SEVEN

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

In all fairness to tradition, Melody opted to kiss Jack before he could reciprocate. The gathered crowd applauded.

Henry was a little taken aback by the number of people who had come to the ceremony, considering the guests had only been notified since about 10 o'clock in the morning. Jack's mother was in the crowd, of course, but many others Henry hadn't even expected had shown up. Henry's parents, still blackened from battle and reeking of cordite, had cleaned up as best they could, as had Amelie's parents. Nick had come, fresh from the doctor, still bandaged but looking as solid as ever. Even Lord Farnsworth had showed up; why, no one could tell, because nobody remembered inviting him, but when he threatened to let loose the cannons Pete begged for him to be let in.

But out of all of them, the Day Watch had been the strangest. Henry had gone in and informed them Constable Jack Roberts was getting married and the whole station had stopped what they were doing and attended. Henry couldn't help but imagine the numerous criminals getting away scot free, lucky bastards.

The worst thing about the whole affair had been the clothes. He had been a little surprised when Jack asked him to be best man, since it seemed to be such a bad idea, but he'd accepted without much fuss. Amelie, on the other hand, had gone completely out of her mind when Melody had asked her to be the Maid of Honor. During her fits of jumping for joy and screaming her head off she had nearly killed her new friend Charlie, the moderately injured fellow who she had pulled from the debris in the street. Even though he had received medical attention and was now sitting on the bride's side of the aisle, he seemed as confused as any as to what he was doing there and why this woman wouldn't leave him alone.

Pete seemed perfectly content to be ring bearer. He'd even brought a little ventriloquist fun to the proceedings by having the ring delivered by a finger puppet with abandonment issues. And Cait, for once, actually seemed to be enjoying herself outside of a bar room setting as an usher. Melody had begged for her to be a flower girl, but Cait refused, saying throwing small petals at the feet of another person was not her idea of a good time.

And who better to conduct the ceremony than an official justice of the peace? Though unusual for one so young, upon hearing of her encounter with the Hammer, Archbishop Bernard Spang felt it a wise decision to bestow numerous rights and privileges upon her lest the Builder smite him for being a little too hard and fast with the rules. She smiled and closed the official book as Melody and Jack finished, even going so far as to give a small, distinguished clap of the hands.

When it was all over, Jack and Melody walked down the aisle of folding chairs and out of the park. The park was an old, shady place on the outskirts of Auldale, one close enough to be considered upper-class without feeling too snooty. Soon the guests were all standing, shaking hands, and wandering out. Jack's mother ran on ahead to get their house prepared for party; she had stayed up all month cooking food, and still had a few cakes to finish before she passed out on the sofa for several days.

Henry gazed out over the park. So strange to think that only several hours ago the City had been in absolute chaos, and already had gotten back to a sense of normalcy.

Maybe it was because this park remained untouched during the whole mess, but even so most of the rubble had already been hauled away and businesses and street vendors had been hawking their wares since at least 9 o'clock.

That's what was so strange about the City; despite the stench, despite the class warfare and religious intolerance, it had a kind of mechanical perfection about it; even when a cog was bent or broken, the machinery found a way to operate without it, and when it got fixed, it just blended right in and added to the atmosphere.

He was so caught up in this thought that he barely noticed the figure watching him from a nearby tree. She had blended in so well that at first he thought she was just part of the canopy.

"So what have you been up to, Gilly?"

She leapt down, keeping in the shadows. "Not much, though I wanted to tell you that Mistress Eleana won't be bothering you anymore."

"Hmmm. I could tell you the same about Xochar the walking disaster."

"I would say that's nice, but it's not really nice to think about even nasty people being dead, is it?"

"Not my fault my horse thought he was delicious."

Gilly blinked. "Come again?"

Henry waved his hands. "Forget it. Listen, I know we talked the other day about dinner and what have you, but I don't know if..." He turned and looked wistfully at Cait, who was chatting up a few of the Day Watch by the entrance. One seemed to be trying to get her number, and she coyly laughed, then appeared to be threatening the man's genitals if he tried anything.

"No, I understand. Like I said, she likes you."

"She certainly doesn't act like it all the time, I can tell you that. Just this morning she told me my suit looked like something I had pulled out of a trashcan in the red light district."

Gilly smiled. "She does seem a little prickly around the edges, but I think she's just very protective...plus I think she's very lonely."

"She has a dog."

"A dog isn't a person. Do you think *you* could replace her with a dog?"

"No, probably not." Henry then thought about it. "Maybe a pit bull."

"Oh, stop it." She punched him on the shoulder. "You want a tip? Try asking her about her day. Trust me, it helps."

"Thanks. Oh, I almost forgot. Since you're here anyway." He reached into his shirt jacket and brought out a small bundle. "I...I think you may want this back. I already gave Janet the Hammer, and hopefully this will make the Pagans feel a little better."

Gilly took it. "Thanks. I heard there was another item returned earlier this morning, so I think a lot of grudges are going to be overlooked."

The crowds were thinning now. Only Amelie, Cait, Janet, a reluctant Charlie, and Pete remained to say their last goodbyes. They still hadn't noticed Henry and Gilly talking.

"It really was a nice ceremony. And your suit doesn't look like it's from the red light district."

"Thanks. So, what exactly are you up to now?"

Gilly looked off to the east. “Do you ever think the Hammers and the Pagans will ever get along?”

Henry smirked. “Get along? They *hate* each other.”

“I didn’t say *like* each other. I said get along.”

“I don’t follow.”

Gilly pointed at Janet. “She just conducted a ceremony for a Pagan to get married. But do you think Janet is going to suddenly smile and shake the hand of every Pagan she knows?”

“No. But Janet doesn’t smile much anyway.”

“Exactly. I just wonder if there will ever come a day when a Hammer and a Pagan can pass each other in the street without one strangling the other to death.”

“I doubt it.” Henry paused, in thought again. “But you’re going to try, aren’t you?”

Gilly shrugged. “It’s worth a shot, isn’t it? What have I got to lose at this point?”

“You know, it’s funny...this morning, Janet was talking about reforms within the Church, too. I didn’t catch all of it, but she mentioned something about having a little talk with the Church hierarchy, starting with conversion through missionary work.”

“You’re kidding. Her, of all people?”

“No joke. And considering her newfound status with that Hammer, she thinks they might listen; she’s already nailed a list of theses to the door of St. Edgar’s, and asked to take charge of the Builder’s Retreat.”

They both stood for a moment in the shade of the tree, listening to the fading sounds of conversation and birds chirping overhead.

“It’s strange times we find ourselves in.”

“That it is, that it is.”

“Enough about me, though; what are *you* going to do?”

Henry looked at the bundle, then looked away. “To be honest, I don’t know. I don’t think I’m going to be a thief anymore; I’m not very good at it. In fact, I’m not very good at anything.”

Gilly came forward and slapped Henry in the face. He grabbed it, shocked.

“Hey! What’s all this then?”

“Henry, for Lord’s sake, stop thinking like that right now! I saw you in that warehouse last night. Do you really think that’s true, that you’re completely worthless?”

“But I am. For years I kept telling myself that the only way I’d be happy is if I became a real world-class thief, and even with all my years of study it’s amounted to nothing. I mean, *look* at me.”

“Henry, do you think the last few days have really been worthless? Sure, you don’t have the gold, you don’t have the fame, you don’t have the women. But look at what you *do* have. You have parents that care about you. Your friends like you again. And that girl over there, for all her big talk, needs you more than you need her. That’s more than you can say for a *lot* of famous people.”

Henry blinked, then looked off into the distance. “Did you ever read the story of Lord Frobbman?”

Gilly stared at him. “No. Who’s Lord Frobbman?”

And Henry smiled. “Oh, he’s just somebody.” He leaned over and kissed Gilly on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem, really.”

He turned to leave, and stopped. “See you around?”

“Maybe. Who’s to say?”

He smiled at her again, and went over to the others. Amelie and Cait were talking about something, and Charlie was doing his best to get out of Amelie’s grasp, but Pete waved him over. “Hey, buddy. Where have you been?”

“Oh, just...doing some thinking.” He looked over at the tree, but Gilly had already gone. He thought he may have seen a flash of cloak, but it could have just been his imagination.

“Well, while you’ve been thinking, the girls have been talking. No one’s seen Gilly around. Where do you think she is? Think something happened to her last night?”

Henry smiled. “Who’s to say?”

Mildred Roberts busied herself in the kitchen. She checked the third of her seven ovens. That cake wasn’t quite done yet, so she moved to the next one. For her little Pumpkin’s special day, it all needed to be just right.

She heard the front door open and shut. “Jack dear, it’s not ready yet. You and that lovely young woman should go around the corner a few times, maybe grab a cup of coffee.”

But no verbal response came. Instead, a pair of firm hands placed themselves on her shoulders from behind.

“Hello, Millie.”

She turned to see Eustace standing behind her.

“Oh, Eustace, if *that’s* what you want, it will have to wait. Last time we did that I had a roast in and it dried out completely.”

“No, Millie, it’s not that. It’s...” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m not around more for you...and for Jack.”

She went to the next oven, waving a hand at him. “Oh, nonsense. I know you have your things to do in the army and all, protecting us from...”

He grabbed her wrist, gently. “No, no it’s not. I had a few words with Jack last night, and I...I realize that even when I’ve come home, I’m not really here.”

Mildred’s other hand stopped, pulling away from the oven handle. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that I miss you, and...I love you. I don’t get to say that much, but I wanted to today.”

Mildred’s eyes began to water. She held Eustace’s hand in hers. “Oh, Eustace...I love you too.”

And they embraced, kissing warmly and passionately. It might have gone on forever, had the soufflé not fallen with a tremendous wheezing noise, and Jack hadn’t come in a moment later.

“Hey, Mum, how’s it...OH MY SWEET BUILDER!”

They pulled away, Mildred getting back to the cooking, and Eustace stammering and hemming and hawing. “Oh, Jack, yes, hello.”

“Would you please? There are bedrooms for that! I was just about to go to mine for just that reason!”

Captain Roberts, for the briefest moment, had a terrible image of his son in his bedroom doing just that, and had to suppress a shudder. He was trying to turn over a new leaf, but his son wasn't making it easy. "Look, son, I wanted to let you know that I'm very proud of you. I know we didn't leave on the best of terms, and I said a few things that someday I may very well regret. But that doesn't mean I don't care about you. I apologize, and congratulations on the wedding." He held out his hand.

Jack looked at the outstretched hand. "You knew about the wedding?"

"Of course. I was there, in the back. I was behind the corporal with the terrible sweating problem."

"That's Corporal Swiggens. He's seeing a doctor about it."

They went silent then. Then, with a sigh, Jack shook his father's hand. "Thank you, Dad."

"Jack? Everyone's wondering where they should..." Melody poked her head into the kitchen and saw the two standing there, with Jack's mother bustling away in the behind them. "Oh, sorry. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Eustace smiled at her. "No, not at all. And you are Melody, correct?" He walked over, took her hand, and kissed it. "It is an honor to have you for a daughter-in-law. Take good care of my son."

Melody blushed. "Jack, your father is not at all like you said he was."

Eustace looked back at Jack, who looked down on the floor and blushed even deeper than Melody. "No, he was correct, my dear. But hopefully not anymore. And it is with his permission that I stay for dinner."

Jack looked in his father's face, and smiled.

Dinner was, as usual in the Roberts' home, a wonderful, if cramped occasion. Family and friend alike shared glasses of fine champagne, delicious roasts, and endless candied delights. And for the first time, Jack was delighted to have his father there with him.

The sun was setting in Beggar's Alley, and Pete still had a number of boards to nail into place. The old box was finally beginning to look like herself again, but even when he was finished he would still need to add a fresh lick of paint.

Amazingly, Beggar's Alley had remained virtually untouched by the carnage, but from the way he had vacated his premises yesterday one couldn't tell the difference. Janet was still finding splinters of wood under benches, behind rain barrels, and even in trees...literally. She pried another board from the bark it had embedded into and put it all into a neat little pile in front of the stall.

"You made quite a mess when you left."

"Yeah, I did, didn't I?" He smacked in another nail, whacking his thumb with the hammer. He hissed and pulled his hand away. Janet came over, and signaled for him to hold up a nail in the board. Using her own hammer, she whacked the nail in with a single stroke. "You should've gone into construction."

"I considered it...briefly. But I have to ask...will the midday puppet show continue to end with you running into the streets screaming your head off?"

"Not so far as I know. Why? Does it matter that much to you?"

"No...but it would be a bit inconvenient."

Pete smiled and held up another nail. With a whack, Janet sent it in. “So, uh...are the heads of the Church listening to you at all?”

“What I would like to see them do and what they will actually accomplish are two very different things. The Church is not an organization that changes lightly...which is good, I suppose. Stability and tradition are very important. But I think many of them are beginning to see that the changes promised in Euclidian II should be more widespread.”

“So, no more torture chambers and crazed Confessors running around with unchecked power, or shouting ‘Death to Pagans’ in the street?”

“I said the Church may change. I did not say we would lose our minds completely.”

Pete sighed. “Well, I’m not marrying you for your politics.”

“Then why do you want to marry me?”

“Because as strange as it sounds, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He stood up, threw a few stray nails into his toolbox, and took her hands. “I’ve never met anyone quite like you, and that’s a compliment. Plus, I think if any cannons come around, you can take care of them for me.”

“And I would gladly burn alive in the Builder’s Furnace for you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Then I will not.”

They gazed into each other’s eyes until the sun dipped below the horizon completely.

“Shall we eat?”

Pete grinned. “I know a great coffee shop around the corner.”

The Haunted Foghat was as busy as it ever was. Henry stood behind the bar, wiping a few filthy glasses until they were dry (but, to be honest, no less filthy). Due to the rush, he had volunteered to help out for a few hours. He was going as fast as he could, but the glasses kept piling up.

Cait was waiting the other end, doing about as well as she always did. He sighed. The work was honest, sure, but it still didn’t feel right. He knew, of all the things he had done, if thieving wasn’t the right thing, this wasn’t either.

The hardest part would be telling Cait. He wasn’t sure if she’d rip his intestines out through his ears or be utterly relieved when he threw in the towel, but either would be devastating. Her wanting him out from behind the bar would be less *painful*, sure, but...

“Cait? I just needed to say...”

“Hang on, can you clear table two first? I don’t trust leaving the bar with these two around.” She pointed at two elderly souses who had been eyeing a bottle of rare whisky behind the counter. They occasionally stopped to eye her for a few moments, but the lure of getting drunker would win out eventually.

Henry walked over to the table and grabbed the empty glasses, placing them in a bucket of cold water. He turned and slammed directly into a particularly inebriated fellow about twice his size in all directions. The man shouted something incoherent, but Henry assumed it was something about watching where he was going; either that, or he had been mistaken for a fisherman with a lactose deficiency. Either way, it was intended to be something unkind.

Henry held up the bucket. "Excuse me, sir, I'm just trying to clear this table."
"Clearrrr tble? Wha, yuuu thinyour btter thnme? Ipnc h yerfach."

Henry didn't have time for this nonsense. The man had a friend standing nearby who seemed more open to reason. "Sir, could you tell the Living Boulder here to learn to speak a proper language? I'm very busy and you should really stop him before the Watch puts up signs around him warning small mountain villages not to speak too loud for fear of avalanches."

The friend looked at Henry dumbfounded, then burst out laughing. He slapped his gigantic companion on the back, who then fell over onto his face.

"Oh, my, looks like it's a bit too late. Somebody check the crater for signs of life."

Chuckles began to reverberate throughout the bar. The friend collapsed in a barstool and continued to laugh. The laughter only grew more intense as the enormous heap in the middle of the floor began to wet himself.

"Oops, too late. Spring thaw everyone. Step back."

The laughter grew cacophonous. Henry was about to step over the man and back to the bar when someone in a booth raised his hand. "Hey, hey! Do me next!"

Henry, confused, looked at the man. "I'm sorry, I wouldn't do you if you had a million gold pieces and a platinum codpiece. You look like something a burrick vomited up on a hot summer day in the midst of a fondue convention."

To Henry's consternation, the man laughed even harder, at least, until he started to choke on his own phlegm, which only made the place roar once again. Soon, everyone was raising their hands, asking Henry to do them, or their friends, or some guy sitting by himself at the end of the bar who, upon finishing his bowl of peanuts, had begun gnawing on the bar for its high salt content.

And Henry realized: they wanted to actually *hear* what he had to say. He looked at Cait. She just smiled, shrugged, and waved for him to go over to a raised platform near the entrance. He went onto it, and, not knowing what else to do, took a bow. A man threw a gold coin onto the stage and demanded a routine. Henry studied the man for a moment.

"Sir, I'm terribly sorry, but I don't know if I can take this coin. You see, it's the other way around; the *monkey* is supposed to dance and the *people* throw the coins."

And so on it went, and Henry had never felt so useful in all his life.

Huge was happy.

Granted, it didn't take much to make him happy, but he knew it when it happened. Mostly it involved a juicy carrot, maybe an apple, and several tons worth of oats, but tonight he dined on an entire pile of carrots, a pile of apples, and the oats? Well, they just kept coming.

Someone had draped a sign across his back earlier, and then led him to a park. He couldn't read the sign, being a horse and all, but there had been a big fanfare for the two people who had ridden him to their house earlier. He didn't mind the female, but the male could stand to lose a little weight. Even a horse as big as him had its limits.

But the sign with the strange symbols "Just Married" on it had been removed, and he had been taken to the stable by the nice girl who seemed to like the man who had

bought him. She talked to the stablehand for a little while, and then he had received this enormous bounty.

He just wished that man and the little girl would go away. They hid in the shadows a few yards away, across from the stable. He seemed to be showing her how he was able to almost blend in and disappear into the darkness. He spoke in a gruff voice, and his eye, when Huge could see it, glowed a strange color, and made odd clicking sounds. It was certainly putting him off his apple.

Suddenly, both the man and the child seemed to melt into the wall and disappear. A minute later, Huge realized they were gone. Vanished, into thin air. He chewed thoughtfully, then continued eating.

Yes, he was happy. Very happy.

EPILOGUE

The former Confessor Titus grumbled in his new position. Two weeks had gone by and still no word from above if he was to be put to death. He was hoping they would hurry up; the waiting was agonizing.

Since nobody had ever been quite as corrupt as Titus since the days of Karras, the Hammers had demoted him to a level for which they had no title, so they had to invent one, one which carried with it such baggage he was sure to be embarrassed every day of his life.

And it had worked. He had come to relieve Augie Stench and Connor from their rotation of guard duty, and they gave a smart salute to Assistant Hotdog Peddler Titus. He'd been down here ever since, with food brought every other day or so, and with no place to comfortably lie down he'd been driven slightly mad from sleep deprivation. He took cat naps standing up, only to wake up seconds before realizing he was about to fall into the molten metal below. He often thought about simply jumping in, but he reminded himself what the Builder did to those who committed suicide, and figured the short swim wouldn't be worth it.

The worst was having to see the Hammer, floating out there in empty space. It taunted him, teased him with the knowledge that it had been the source of his ruination. Most would have contemplated the irony of it, but he was far too pissed to let a little thing like irony get in the way.

"Excuse me, good sir."

Titus snapped to attention, but then relaxed a little as he saw who spoke. It was a small man, dressed in simple brown robes, with a balding head and a pleasant smile.

"Yes, what do you want?"

"I humbly ask permission to cross, please."

Titus laughed. "Are you joking? *You?* You have any paperwork?"

The small man frowned, taken aback. "Paperwork? No, I have no paperwork. I would like to see my Hammer."

Titus really guffawed. "*Your* Hammer? Who do you think you are, the bloody Builder?"

"Actually, yes. Does this surprise you?"

Titus pulled his plastic trainee hammer out and pressed the butt of it into the small man's chest. It squeaked like a rubber burrick toy. "Listen, my friend, I've spent way too many years in high office to fall for *that* old trick. You can run your little parlor games on somebody else, but not me!"

The small man became indignant and red-faced. Considering his appearance and stature, it made him look like a strawberry who begged door to door. "This is a most grievous offense!"

"You're damn bloody right it's an offense! And so's your stench!"

"Why, you...if you say one more word, I'll...I'll..."

"You'll what? Demote me? I'm already a bloody Assistant Hotdog Peddler, what more could possibly happen?"

The small man shook once more with fury, and extended a hand. A bolt of lightning shot from his fingertips, enveloping Titus in a brilliant blaze. Moments later,

the empty, smoking uniform fell to the ground. The plastic hammer fell on top of it, wheezing slightly.

The small man took a deep breath, and as he blew out he grew in stature. Soon, standing on the platform was a seven foot tall man with long flowing hair, a heavy beard, and shining armor from head to toe. He went over to the contraption to lower the bridge and pressed the switches and buttons to make the walkway extend to the Hammer.

He took it, and held it in his hand. It had been a long time since he'd held it, and now was the time to reclaim it once again. He only hoped he wasn't too late...

A small buzzing went off in a belt pouch. He popped it open and pulled out a small globe. He peered into it, and a face appeared.

“What is it, Daniel?”

“It's Constantine, sir. It's as you feared.”

The scene changed to the Eternal Battlefield, at the Gazebo of Decision. He saw Constantine, tail twitching, eyes blazing. And then he did it.

He turned the chessboard around.

The Builder raised the Hammer up high. “Damn you, you cheating bastard! I tell you, Armageddon isn't coming fast enough!” He raced back down the walkway and past the control box.

He stopped. He looked down at the pile of clothes that had recently held the fellow he had just smited. He shook his head.

“Honestly, it's like nobody listens to me anymore.”