

Darkest Dungeon

Fan fiction

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Special thanks to red hook studios

“Ruin has come to our family. You remember our venerable house, opulent and imperial, gazing proudly from its stoic perch above the moor. I lived all my years in that ancient, rumor shadowed manor. Bound by decadence, and luxury, and yet I began to tire of conventional extravagance. Singular unsettling tales suggested the mansion itself was a gateway to some fabulous and unnamable power. With relic and ritual, it bent every effort towards the excavation and recovery of those long buried secrets, exhausting what remained of our family fortune on sworely work men, and sturdy shovels. At last, in the salt-soaked crags beneath the lowest foundations, we unearthed that damnable portal of antediluvian evil. Our every step unsettled the ancient earth, but we were in a realm of death, and madness. In the end, I alone fled lapping and wailing through those blackened arcades of antiquity... until consciousness failed me. You remember our venerable house, opulent and imperial. It is a festering abomination. I beg you, return home, claim your birthrite, and deliver our family from the ravenous, clutching shadows...”

The OLD Road

There I sat, across from a man sharpening a dagger with a stone, a pistol sheathed by his side. No words uttered between the two of us through the entirety of our long coach ride toward the Hamlet. I need only a glance into the man's eyes in a brief of appearance of humanity to see that he is scared, but focused, and devoted to the task at hand. I too feel the same way. The coach was cramped. Provisions stacked to the low ceiling of the cart only left room for minor adjustments in comfort and even less room for any kind of meaningful conversation. Even the Old Road couldn't manage to escape the destruction that emanated from its evil source within my Ancestor's estate. Suddenly, the coach was overturned and the maniac that had been hired to deliver us to the manor now lay silent, head broken like a split melon, while his blood leaked into the dank, trodden soil. I crawled from the wreckage to find that familiar face, a Highwayman, brushing off the dirt from his coat. "Forward, to the Hamlet." He motioned.

We walked along the side of the Old Road for what seemed like hours. The shadows of the high walls surrounding the estate cast by the bright, full moon beyond it suggested a transient beauty of the place that made it all the more devious. Suddenly, my partner in travel spoke up.

"Dismas, Highwayman, and you?"

"Raynauld, a Holy Crusader." I spoke with false confidence.

"Holy... It seems your God has forsaken you, if this is to be your Holy Order."

I looked Dismas in the eye, the absence of reason made it difficult to form a reasonable rebuttal. I said nothing, and we continued down the Old Road towards the Hamlet. For more than a moment I was confounded by his words. Are these to be my Holy Orders, or is it rejection by the Divine that has lead me down this Old Road? I was almost completely consumed by the thought until out of my peripheral vision I spotted movement in the hedges ahead.

"Brigands ahead, ready your weapon." I whispered to Dismas.

He nodded his head, as if to silently agree that the men in front of us had been destined to die by our hands.

I readied my sword and began to walk more slowly, and with purpose. I could feel the tension grow thicker in the air with every advancing step we took, until finally, a couple of Brigands burst from the bushes a few paces ahead of us, blocking the path.

"You fucks can eith-

One of the Brigands began to speak, but before his thought was completed, Dismas had already thrown one of his daggers, piercing the Brigand below the eyeball, causing him to drop to the ground, squirming and wailing in unrelenting pain. Without a second thought I rushed forward to meet the second Brigand, I did so however without first examining the weaponry I would be up against. The Brigand rose his flintlock to shoulder height and pulled the trigger. I dove into the mud in front of me, half praying in the absence of my Holy Creator, and half assuming of the

possibility that maybe, I would have enough time to retaliate before the Brigand could load another shot. I looked up to see Dismas, standing over the Brigand with his head clutched in his left hand, and a dagger in his right. The Brigand was begging and pleading for his life to be spared. He muttered some words like “family” and “gold”. Dismas forcefully stretched the length between his head and shoulders, and sliced his throat with a single, deliberate stroke.

Dismas looked at me, and smirked in disapproval. “There’s no such thing as a dependable coward. If you plan to make it through this, you’re going to have to part with your “Divine Grace”. Your God will be of little use to you when your only choices are to kill, or die.”

Was he right? I didn’t want to admit. My whole life I spent devoted to my Creator, the one true God, guided by Holy light and purpose. As blasphemous as the thought was, it seemed true. From here, I would be solely focused on battle, and the glory of victory would be shared equally amongst those that fought beside me.

We continued on until we reached the Hamlet.

HAMLET

“You answered the letter. Now, like me, you are a part of this place.”

It was midnight by the time we reached the outskirts of the Hamlet. Dismas and I made camp on a narrow ridge overlooking the pathway into town, from here it would be easy to see any Brigands coming for a few miles, and we would be able to repel an attack if they came looking for the men that slaughtered their companions. With the little provisions we were able to salvage from the wreck of the coach, we stoked a fire and tried to stay alert throughout the night. I sat on a log, directly across from Dismas, as he chewed his turkey leg, he looked up and spoke towards me.

“What is your purpose here? What makes you so mad that you might consider coming to this malign place, knowing full well of the evils that lurk beneath it?”

Without letting me speak, he continued.

“You are a man of God, a Holy Crusader, as you say. Arriving at what is possibly the most evil place in the known world. Hahaha. Are you here because you think you are needed? Or are you here because you need to attempt to validate your beliefs? Let me tell you, death is certain below the estate. You will see nightmares manifest themselves before your eyes. Stress kills just as many men as swords and crossbows. You need to prepare for what you will encounter, otherwise your weakness will be will be an instrument in your funeral song.”

I finally had a chance to speak.

“Truthfully, I am here because my life has been devoid of meaning until my Ancestor sent me this letter. I am not here for fame, fortune, or any other form of personal recognition. I am here because I was instructed to return home to restore glory to my family’s estate, and wipe out every

trace of evil that lies within its walls. I have no interest in gold, or to have my name inscribed in books of myths and legends.”

Dismas looked at me, cracked a half-smile, and chuckled to himself. He laid back on the log, and closed his eyes. “Tomorrow we see what’s left of your Ancestor’s beloved estate.”

The morning sun shone through the trees we slept beneath on the outskirts of city where we made camp. When I awoke, Dismas was already awake, sharpening his daggers again. He nodded in approval when he saw that I was awake and ready to continue the journey to the Hamlet. We walked down the path, the last mile where we were met by the enormous dilapidated gates of our new home. We slowly walked through the gates to see the decaying ruins of a city that once was. Decrepit stonework paved into unrecognizable shapes. Once beautiful architecture now encrusted by layers of dirt and death. Only two buildings seemed to have survived the uprising of evil, The Tavern, and the Abbey. One, a place of deceitful revelry, the other, a place Holy contrition.

To my surprise, a stagecoach came bounding through the gates, and stopped on the road before Dismas and I. Emerging from the wagon were two, clearly lost souls. One dressed in a Holy garb, brandishing a sacred chalice, and another wearing an iron chest plate, and wielding a thick wooden crossbow. I looked at Dismas in confusion. I guess I didn’t yet get the chance to find out why He was here, what His purpose was for valiantly risking his life against the horrors of the estate. I was going to ask him, but I knew the answer would reveal itself in time.

I chose to speak up to the woman in the Holy garb.

“It seems your God had the same plans for you as mine has for me.”

The Vestal revealed her face from her hood and smiled.

“Holy Light is the only way to positively banish all evil from the world, I’m sure you’re familiar with the stories.” She said jokingly, she smiled again. “My name is Guernon.”

Dismas was busy discussing ballistics and tactics with the Arbalest that came along with Guernon. I motioned to her quietly to follow me into the Abbey. Looking up towards the ceiling, the sunlight shone through the holes in the stone just like it did through the trees in the morning. We walked up to the rotting wooden alter. The Cross was flipped upside down from being shaken loose during the eruption of evil my Ancestor caused by his own sheer greed and ignorance. Guernon grabbed the Cross and turned it right-side up. She looked me in the eyes, even peered into my wicked soul. She could tell that who I was on the outside did not match who I was on the inside, but it didn’t matter.

“We will restore this place. By the Grace of God and all that is Holy, we will defeat those demons and send them all back to the pits of hell from which they came.” She said with a kind of Holy luminescence.

“We will need more. Dismas and I, you and the other, we cannot do this alone.”

“There will be more. There is plenty reason for them to come. Fame, fortune, glory, and gold.”

“Welcome home, such as it is. This squalid Hamlet, these corrupted lands, they are yours now, and you are bound to them.”

The next day, much to my surprise, another stagecoach showed up outside of the Hamlet gates. Out of the wagon came a large man, shield on his back and spiked mace in hand. Behind him, a treacherously devious character, with a pickaxe, throwing knives, and a hat to cover her face. Behind her, a plague doctor, clad in black, cane in hand, and the mask, the telltale sign that the realm in which we inhabit is one of sickly evil and malevolence. A few more men and women emerged from the back of the stagecoach and headed into the tavern, presumably to drink ale and reminisce about the long ride here. I looked over to see Guernon standing near the front door of the Abbey. She waved me over but before I could begin to walk in her direction, I was pulled in the other by Dismas.

“I didn’t come here to sit around and drink ale with these hedonistic swine, Raynauld. I yearn for adventure, I thirst for the blood of my enemies, and I can no longer sit idly by while the Eldritch gain ground on the Hamlet.”

“I agree, but we must make sure that we have the manpower before we go in, we cannot underestimate the forces-“

“Ha... manpower. Have you seen these brand new faces? They are all here for the same thing. The same thing I am here for. Gold and glory my friend. The only difference between myself and them is that I will be coming back to the Hamlet alive, with pockets twice as heavy, filled with their spoils and mine. These men are expendable, and when one doesn’t come back, another two will show up tomorrow to take his place. We head into the Ruins tonight!”

“I will go with you Dismas. We need to maintain a strong presence within the Ruins in order to drive those ghastly creatures back to the pits. But I will ask Guernon to go with us, she has the power of the Holy Light within her, I think it would be smart for her to come.”

“Hahaha... Don’t get too attached, Raynauld. We will meet at the gates when the moon bleeds enough light to guide us into the night.” He smirked, and pushed off into the direction of the tavern.

I had looked over to see if Guernon was still standing in front of the Abbey, but it seemed as if she had went inside to pray. I felt the cold steel of a blade run gently across the back of my neck. I turned around swiftly, but the shadow moved quicker than I physically could in my Crusader armor. I felt a soft leather glove rub against my face, and the similar feeling of a blade, this time resting in front of my throat.

“A little slow for man whose veins flow with the Holy blood of his God, aye?” The shadow woman laughed. It was only until she removed the blade and swung around in front of me that I could get a proper look at her ghostly figure.

“The name’s Audrey, Champion Grave Robber at your service. If there’s anything you want off a dead man’s hand, I can get it for you, on the battlefield or in the crypts.”

“I’m happy to see someone so enthused to be here.” I said, jokingly.

“Little flesh and bones don’t scare me, live or dead. In fact the way I see it, the live ones probably have better loot anyway!”

“We could use someone like you, someone in good spirits. Would you like to come to the Ruins with us tonight Audrey?” I spoke in a tone reminiscent of a group going to theatre later that night, though the situation we were headed into was far from a jest.

“Well, hell, I’d love too!” Audrey said with a smile.

“Excellent, meet Dismis, Guernon, and myself at the gates when the moon is high.”

Audrey tipped her hat and skipped off into town. She seems unusually delighted to be here, in the midst of all its unwavering pestilence.

Later on, mere hours before Dismas, Audrey, and I were set to head off into the Ruins, I met with Guernon. I actually hadn’t gotten a confirmation on whether or not she would join our mission, but I was confident that we both had the same goal in mind. I walked into the Abbey to find her silently reading, skimming pages from a book that I didn’t recognize. She looked up, she spoke.

“Raynald? Is that you?”

“Yes” I said. How she knew my name, I don’t remember ever telling her.

“This text has your name written on it. It seems to have been passed down through generations. Your Ancestor was the last one to have it, and it says that in his absence you are the rightful Caretaker.”

“What does the text say?”

“Each page is a description of a malign, evil, force. Demons, monsters, unimaginable immorality.” She said with a tremble of the tongue.

“Is there a description of the Ruins?”

“Yes- I brought my colleagues back with much of their intellect intact, a remarkable triumph for even the most experienced Necromancer. Freed from the trappings of their humanity, they piled their terrible trade anew - the dead reviving the dead, on and on down the years, forever.”

“Guernon, I am asking you here and now, will you come with us down to the Ruins tonight? Bring the book, we will make sure the souls of my Ancestors colleagues are put to rest forever, and we will slay the Necromancer.”

Guernon looked up at me, took my hand, and we walked out into the night. As we looked into the sky above, the moon big, bright, directly overhead, it cast a beam of light upon the Hamlet gates. There stood Dismas, sharpening his dagger, and Audrey, twirling her hat on her fingers.

The RUINS

“A Devil walks these halls... Only the mad or the desperate go in search of him.”

As we walked through the gates of the Hamlet, down towards the Ruins. I couldn't help but notice an eerie silence amongst the party. We were focused, but we were silenced by fear. My mind began to manipulate my twisted thoughts into horrible, unimaginable things. I could only pray that what was in my head would be more abominable than what we were destined to meet within the crumbling walls of the Ruins. As we approached the giant double doors of the once benevolent place of worship, we could feel the abhorrence permeating itself through the cracks in the rotted wood. Once more, what was truly disturbing was that besides the feeling in the air, there was no sound. A deafening silence.

Once inside we closed the door behind us, stones and concrete from half shattered walls began to fall down. The high ceilings were adorned with vampire bats and cobwebs, a particularly fitting combination to match the unsettling atmosphere of the wretched place. As we walked further into the ruins, we spent more than a few torches without seeing anything but centipedes on the floor and old books decaying on their shelves. As the light slowly faded, that is when we began to hear noises, they could only be described as the most unearthly heavy breathing, followed by a damnable shriek, and so they were upon us.

A Cultist Brawler, A Bone Soldier, and behind them a Cultist Acolyte. Before now I had never seen such a horrid sight. Half-Man, Half-Eldritch Beast. These things must have been sent by the Devil himself. I looked on in a combination of great horror and amazement until my attention was recaptured by Dismas, grabbing me by the arm again and forcing me to the front line! He ran with the speed and force of a man on a horse, he plunged his dagger into the sternum of the Cultist Brawler and began a sort of short-ranged scuffle. I drew my sword and pointed it at the Bone Soldier standing menacingly in front of me. I walked right up to it and swung as hard as I could. Our blades met in the air and a violent twang rung out through the halls of the decaying Ruins. I ducked underneath the blades and swung low, severing the Bone Soldier's legs in a single, hearty swipe. As it crawled across the floor back toward the Cultist Acolyte, I followed almost tauntingly behind it, and before it could make any sort of respectable progress, I had stomped his skull right into the ground, jaws and teeth shattering like glass on stone. It was a very Righteous feeling, to be doing God's work and helping send these deplorable minions back to Hell. I looked up to see Dismas had already dispatched of the Brawler and had now focused his eyes on the Acolyte. As Dismas and I pushed forward, Guernon and Audrey kept at a safe distance, but were never the less focused on battle. The Acolyte shot out a horrible, supernatural blast of energy and sound, completely wiping out the torches we still had lit. The halls grew dark and the only light we could see was in the reflection of the eyes of that detestable creature. Its eyes gave off an ominous red glow. Guernon pulled out her sacred chalice, lifted it high into the air, and yelled with righteous indignation “Be gone fiend!” A burst of Holy light shot down through a hole in the

ceiling. The Acolyte's flesh turned to a black dust and floated to the ground. Just like that the battle was over.

I looked back at Guernon, nodding my head in approval, and as a personal thank you. She smirked and carried on. I knew there was something special about her, a true Vestal blessed by the Grace of God.

The deeper we tread into the decaying Ruins, the blacker and thicker the air got with each passing step. We walked slowly and methodically, while Audrey skipped along a few paces in front of us all, she was touching and moving everything she came across and I wondered why, right up until she pushed a wall to the side to reveal a secret room.

"Well I'll be damned" she said with a boisterous smirk across her face.

"I knew there'd be some good loot in the House of God."

"Are you sure you want to steal a Holy relic in the face of God for a bit of gold?" Guernon, said in her Rightousness.

"In the *absence* of God now my love, look at this place, if God were here, do you really think we'd be here right now? Don't fool yourself, faith is nothing but blind ignorance." She said with a smile.

Guernon said nothing, just as I did when my faith was questioned by Dismas, but I saw it, we all saw it, and it would be blind ignorance to deny that whether or not it was by the Grace of God, she was able to conjure an energy that was something remarkable.

As the group continued down the long hallways of the Ruins, the dusty stone floor quickly turned battered and shaky. Light gave way to darkness, and the walls began to shimmer from a thick, black ooze. The group abruptly stumbled upon a large wooden door, shackled in worn, rusted, chains from top to bottom, with the lock conveniently unlatched. Something was expecting us.

I waited a moment to see if any one of us dared to push open the door, and after a few moments passed, I pushed forward with the courage of a fool that knew the kind of evil suppurating on the other side. The room was large, dark, but lit by a few candles attached to the chandeliers that hung from the crumbling ceiling. As Dismas, Audrey and Guernon crept through the door, a cold breeze rushed past us all, slowly latching the door behind us. The center of the room was scarcely lit, only from the candles above, but a clearly visible pentagram marked in red lay dormant on the floor below. We walked forward, tauntingly standing at the four main points of the upside down star, then we felt the floor begin to shake. From the depths of the void arose a stunningly horrid, unholy beast. Its elongated boney fingers were a combination of what was once human, and a mass of tentacles that could only be described as an explanation of its evil origin. Its spiked collar wrapped firmly around its inhuman neck, and a blood-soaked cloak with a hood that was shut tight, as to hide the true face of this monstrosity. The Necromancer Lord was upon us, floating above the ground by some unholy phenomenon. It let out a terrifying shriek, and the battle had begun.

The floor shook as a trio of Bone Soldiers rose from beneath the stone rubble. A Bone General, along with his Bone Sergeant, and Bone Shieldwall stood in front of us awaiting our first move. Without hesitation Dismas ran forward. He launched himself into the air and used his leading foot to kick the shield that was being used to block the trio, he kicked the Shieldwall back sending the soldier tumbling to the ground. Thinking he had the upper hand, Dismas recklessly pushed forward again, only this time to be met with a slash from the grave. The Bone Sergeant was a formidable foe. It was clear that however these otherworldly atrocities got their experience in battle, that they must have had centuries to perfect their craft. The slice from the Sergeant sent Dismas back, leaking blood from his abdomen, he gripped his wound tightly. From behind all of us, Guernon revealed her sacred chalice and pointed it towards the sky. Compassion is a rarity in the fever-pitch of battle, but she healed Dismas' wound with Divine Grace. While the Shieldwall was still stunned I moved forward with vigor. I smashed the shield aside and smited my enemy with a second vigorous thrust. The Sergeant and the Bone General now stood in front of the Necromancer Lord. From the shadows Audrey lunged forwards with a pickaxe to the face of the Bone Sergeant, killing him instantly, but Audreys pick was still stuck it its hardened skull. The Necromancer began to conjure up a sinful spell, attempting to raise the dead in front of us. Dismas pulled out his pistol and shot it at the Necromancer, dealing considerable damage, enough to temporarily delay the casting of the curse. Guernon came forward with me as I singled out the last remaining Bone Solder, the General. It was focused on Audrey and was preparing to unleash a heavy blow. Fortunately, Audrey noticed its approach and was able to swiftly fade into the shadows. Guernon and I approached the Bone General with Holy synergy and as I lunged forward with my Holy lance, she used her mace to bash in its skull. My sword skewered the soldier and her mace caved in the brow of its skull all the way into the eye-socket. The bones disintegrated in front of us, and now that the minions had been dispatched, the four of us could focus on slaying the Necromancer Lord. The evil being let out a hideous shriek yet again, this time shaking the chandeliers on the ceiling, stone from the rafters began to fall endlessly, and we now we had come face to face with the propagator of this evil.

I charged the Necromancer with my Holy Lance, but the spirit shifted, avoiding all contact. I was evaded and was now trapped on the other side of him, separated from the rest of my party. Dismas and Guernon attacked together to try to gain the attention of the beast. Dismas sliced at the Necromancers chest and opened a vein. Blood and black ooze began to leak out of the gaping gash. The beast let out another terrifying wail before Guernon cast her Holy Judgement upon its hellish soul. The crumbling roof gave way, and a surge of Holy Light struck a chandelier and sent it plummeting downward. The fixture would have killed me had it not been for Audrey, who lunged out of the shadows and tackled me out of its path. Audrey promptly jumped back to her feet and pulled out a noxious vial and launched it into the chest of the Necromancer before flipping backwards and out of harms way in a masterful display of agility. The Necromancer Lord's wound began to fester and bleed profusely, the end of the battle was close. I zealously drew my longsword and lunged again with my Holy Lance, this time piercing the creature viciously through the same gaping, festering wound that had been made the focus of the battle. The monster wretched in pain as its legs gave out, dropping to its knees as if to relinquish its unholy power. I withdrew my sword and with its dying breath the Necromancer grabbed my throat, made me look into its terrible face, I was looking straight into the void.

“You will all perish in your pursuit of purification.” The void spoke with a malevolent cadence.

I was trapped in the void. My mind was confined a swirling, blue and black, terrifying representation of absolute nothingness. I could not escape. Suddenly, I was snapped out of the illusion by the sound of a cracked bone and severed flesh. Dismas had used my Lance to slice off the arm of the beast, setting me free. I stumbled backward, trying to regain consciousness and reason. I looked around to see Dismas, Audrey, and Guernon, sweating and breathing heavily, with smiles on their faces.

As everyone caught their breath, Dismas put forth his hand. I shook it firmly.

“Thank you, all of you, for coming here with me, we make a magnificent team, tried and true.” I was trying to substantiate my role as the brave-hearted, unshakeable team leader, but the group could see that it was only a façade. Guernon walked up to me slowly, and graciously gripped my hand.

“I will remain by your side until my last breath, Raynauld.” Those words alone made the entire expedition worthwhile, but I could tell that Dismas did not have such faith, and Audrey was still wavering in terms of her commitment to the cause.

“I say we loot the bastard and be on back to the Hamlet.” Dismas cleared the air.

“Already ahead of you!” Audrey was knelt down next to the corpse of the Necromancer, holding a bright golden ring she had removed from its ghostly hand. She reached into the blood-soaked robe and pulled out a blood-soaked key. She wiped it off, then presented it to the group.

“Aye, You see this? Must have something worth locking up down here. We ought to find it!”

“There will come a day when we must return to the Ruins, but as for now our quest is finished, let us return to the Hamlet and quell the anxieties of battle.” I wanted to appear calm and logical, but in truth I just wanted to get the hell out of the Ruins.

“Awh, you’re no fun.” Audrey teased. She slipped the key into her satchel and capered down the gloomy hall.

Dismas walked up to the corpse of the fallen Necromancer and forcefully ripped the collar from its cloak. From a glance I could see the thing in Dismas’ hand, emanating a powerful red glow. An energy flowed through him, I could tell by the way he froze in place for a moment before shaking himself loose, dropping the collar into his rucksack.

“Aye, let’s get on then” he said.

Guernon and I nodded our heads in agreement, and the three of us turned around and followed Audrey out of the Ruins.

Hamlet

“My obsession caused this great foulness, and it is shameful that I must rely upon you to set it right.”

We approached the gates of the Hamlet to be greeted by yet again another stagecoach. This time, a tall woman brandishing a giant battle-axe stepped forth from the back of the cart, followed by a small man, with an antique-like robe and a couple unscrupulous vials. The man headed around the back of the Abbey, which was a strange destination considering the only thing behind the Abbey was the Graveyard, but I didn't have a second thought about it because I was approached by the tall woman, a stripe of red war-paint was drawn down across her face, it grabbed my immediate attention.

“Raynauld” I extended my hand in a welcoming gesture. “Welcome to the Hamlet. Find rest or a drink in the Tavern, or make peace with your Gods in the Abbey, we are still looking for a good blacksmith and guild leader, but all in due time.”

The woman spit at my feet, shuffled the dirt over her blackened saliva.

“Claville.” She brushed past me and headed for the Tavern, I could tell that she was a Hellion, driven by barbaric rage and unrelenting savagery, and that she could make a powerful ally.

“Such a sweet gal.” Audrey chimed in, just as Claville was out of earshot. Her joke made Guernon grimace, while Dismas and I shared a short laugh.

“So what's the plan now, my Lord?” Dismas said with a dash of heavy sarcasm.

“I am not Lord of this place, though this is my Ancestors estate, we are all equal here.” That may have been the most genuine statement I had made since I arrived. The group could sense it.

“However, I have an idea for what we are to do next. We need to begin work on the blacksmith workshop and guild. We will need men that are willing to put in hours of constant and rigorous work.”

“Constant and rigorous work, my arse!” Dismas scoffed. “I'll be the one in charge of telling the bastards how to arrange the stones!”

“Then see to it that you can recruit as many men as possible, wait for the morning for another coach to arrive. Guernon and I will head back to the Abbey and decide the next quest.”

Dismas gave me a look, he smirked.

“Even a Holy man has to purge his demons after a while, aye. You two have fun.” His joke came off as amusing at best.

Dismas walked away towards the Tavern to see if he could recruit some of the new arrivals to help build the blacksmith workshop. I was still standing by the gates with Guernon and Audrey, then Audrey whispered to the both of us.

“Aye, you see that man? That small, nasty, little man that crawled out from the back of that wagon? He went to the Graveyard. It’s mid-day. I’m gonna go find out what the little prick is up to!”

By this point, Audrey was a wandering soul, dancing to the beat of her own drum, and she alone decided what was worthy of her investigation. I had no words for her, and like that, she was off to satisfy her curiosities.

I looked at Guernon and she looked back at me, without a word we began to walk back to the Abbey. When we got inside of the Abbey we gazed upon the Holy alter, still in shambles. No significant repair had been done since before we left for the ruins, but to think, we expected some kind of Divine force to have come down and left us some tangible reward for the evil we slayed down there, but there was no such reward to be found. Moss was beginning to grow near the holes in the roof from the combination of the moisture of the rain and the heat from the sun. There was a certain beauty about the aesthetic of the whole place, even in the darkest of times, we can still manage to find glimmers of hope if we search hard enough.

Guernon grabbed my hand and walked me towards the alter. We stood underneath the beam of sunlight that shone down onto the ground beneath us. The warmth caught us both by surprise and we basked in the glorious sunlight for what seemed like a lifetime, though it was only mere minutes. The heat was radiating off of my steel plated helm, I removed it from my head and Guernon removed her hood to feel the cool breeze. Her hair flowed gracefully to her shoulders, a ripe strawberry color that added more beauty to her benevolence. Thinking of the words to say, but I had none. Instead, Guernon spoke first.

“Raynauld, what happened in the Ruins, we can do it again. We can conquer the evil that resides beneath your Ancestors estate. I truly believe that we have the power to change this world for the better.” She grabbed my hand and caressed it softly.

“I know we can do it, just at what price? Will we have to see our friends die just to protect these crumbling walls?” I looked away from Guernon. I gazed around the collapsing Abbey, then my eyes came full circle and met with Guernon’s again.

“We will fight, Raynauld. It is the Righteousness within us that will lead us through all of our hardships, and help us overcome all of our obstacles. Not only do I believe in the Divine itself but I believe in you. I can see your Light.”

Guernon gripped my hands tightly, pushed herself up to my face and placed a gentle kiss. She slowly let go of my hands, and looked me again in the eyes.

“We will do this, Raynauld. Believe in me.”

We spent more time in the Abbey than we had originally planned. We rose when we heard the Abbey doors latch shut, knowing surely that we had not left them open when we arrived. Before I could even speak a word, or place the helm back on my head, Audrey slid into the vestry where she met Guernon and I with a smug laugh.

“Well I’ll be damned. Not a sight I thought I’d see in this beloved House of God. Not a matter to me, I’ve got more important things to show you now. Follow me to the Graveyard.”

I pushed on my helm. Guernon, embarrassed as she was, dawned her sacred gown and followed me out of the Abbey. She kept a firm distance.

The sun was sinking into the pale orange sky. Soon the bats would reclaim their domain and feast upon the pests that ruled the morning hours. Guernon and I followed behind Audrey to the back of the Abbey, into the Graveyard, where a familiar face from earlier was sitting in silence next to a gravestone. Audrey went and stood beside the man, he seemed to be in a deep trance. He was speaking in tongues and had candles lit in a specific pattern in front of him. Without regard Audrey kicked dirt onto the man's candles and interrupted his meditation.

"Aye, little prick, snap out of it!" she said, half joking, but all intentional.

The man slowly opened his eyes, his demeanor changed and his eyes revealed the fiery fury of frustration.

"My name is Omand. Not 'little prick' and I was about to make contact with an Eldritch deity. It was not something that I needed to 'snap out of.'"

"Well what is Satan's name are you doing trying to contact an Eldritch deity when we just spent the last night in the Ruins trying to kill those sons of bitches? Seems to me like you're on the wrong side of the fight."

"To fight the abyss, one must know it." Omand responded, thinking that would be enough to satisfy Audrey's inquisitive nature. It wasn't.

As Omand closed his eyes in an attempt to return to the spirit realm, Audrey grabbed the little man by his legs and dragged him out of the graveyard. She was laughing hysterically, while Omand was shouting curses in her name all through the town, until all four of us ended up at the front doors of the Tavern.

"Aye, this witty bitch dragged me all through town, made a mockery of me, and took me out of my trance when I was finally about to make some meaningful contact. And you, you fucking Crusader, you just let it all happen, hell, you watched her do it!" Omand was ferociously upset.

"Forgive me Omand, I am truly sorry about how my friend handles her business, but it was all done with good intentions I assure you. She makes a good point, why would we want someone trying to get in contact with an Eldritch deity when that's precisely the enemy that we've all vowed to stand against?"

"I get into contact with these deities in order to harness and control the powers of the abyss. You may not believe me, but I am actually on your side. Or at least I was. Definitely not on *her* side though." He glanced over at Audrey, she shot back a laugh and a playful glance as if to mock him.

"Let's head inside and make peace over an ale, whatt'dya say Omand?" Audrey was teasing him now.

Omand bowed his head, and surprisingly, in the most unlikely expression of good spirit he replied.

“Aye, if you’re buying, I’m drinking.” The two walked into the Tavern.

Guernon and I were again alone, left outside. We walked back to the Abbey to secure some rest before the morning sun signaled the birth of a new day.

“Can you feel it? The walls between the sane world and that unplumbed dimension of delirium are tenuously thin here.”

The morning sun rose again in what seemed like the blink of an eye. I searched around the Abbey through my crusted eyes to see if I could find Guernon, but she was nowhere in sight. I put on my armor and grabbed my longsword. Before leaving the Abbey I glanced over at the alter and the book that rested on it. My Ancestor’s memoir, a long scattered collection of missing pages, unfinished quests and forgotten translations. I turned the pages until I came across the page with the long description of the Ruins again. I read through the horrified scribes of my Ancestor. We had slayed the Necromancer Lord, but there was a continuous mention of a Gibbering Prophet, a man that knew of the evils that my Ancestor released upon our lands. The book said that this Prophet was to be found in the deepest depths of the Ruins, serving as the leader of their evil crusade. I tore the page from the book. I knew the objective for our next expedition.

Once outside I scanned across the Hamlet to see Guernon standing alongside Dismas. Dismas was pointing at the beginning of a structure that would soon be the blacksmiths workshop. There were already a few men working on shaping the stones and fixing them into place with a clay mortar mixture. I walked over to them to get a firsthand look at the progress.

“Things are looking fantastic here, Dismas. Marvelous architecture, assembled by a right brain and strong hands.” Dismas caught my sarcasm and flung it right back.

“Only time I like to get my hands dirty is when I visit my bitch in the brothel!”

Guernon turned away in disgust and walked alongside me.

“What happened to our good friends Audrey and Omand?” I asked.

“Let’s go see what’s left of their stinking corpses in the Tavern.” She smiled, she was happy to be by my side again.

We walked across the Hamlet, and through the front doors of the Tavern. The smell of ale and sin permeated the air, stools were broken on the floor, tables were flipped on their ends, and there were more than a few bodies lying unconsciously across the bar. Guernon and I walked up to meet the corpses of our two friends. Audrey and Omand were lying face down on the bar, both still gripping onto a full pitcher of ale. I tapped Audrey on the shoulder to wake her up, and she slowly came to. Guernon tapped Omand on the shoulder, once, twice, then unexpectedly, Omand released a hellish belch and vomited all over the bar counter in front of him, luckily not on Audrey. Guernon and I both grabbed Audrey by one arm, and carried her back to the Abbey.

At mid-day I met up with Dismas near the blacksmith construction site. They had made surprising progress in the hours that passed.

“If you and your men continue to work this hard, we’ll have the blacksmith workshop up and running in less than a fortnight” I spoke to Dismas with confidence, waiting for a reply.

“Aye, by the looks of it, we’ll have it running in 10 day’s time.”

“Guernon, Audrey and I are going to be heading back into the Ruins tonight.”

“I’m all for a bit of adventure, what time shall we meet?” Dismas asked me, I was not hoping for that kind of reply.

“Dismas, you’ve been able to show incredible progress heading the construction of the blacksmith workshop, I have no intentions of halting your progress to take you back into the Ruins.” I spoke with shameful reluctance. “We need to have the blacksmith workshop up and running by the time of the next expedition, we need better swords and armor...”

“Aye, Raynauld, I hear ya. You don’t want me coming into the Ruins with you, and to be honest, that’s fine with me. That’s another few nights I don’t have to worry about getting chopped in half, and another few nights I get to spend in bed with my bitch!” Dismas laughed from his belly. Notably, he seemed relieved to not have to go with us.

“Then who’s the fourth?” he asked.

“I’ve yet to find one, but I have someone in mind.” I knew exactly who I was going to ask.

“Aye, good luck Raynauld.” Dismas grabbed my hand and shook it firmly, then returned to yelling at his men and telling them they were ‘doing it all wrong’. It seemed to be working.

I walked around the Hamlet, on the lookout for Claville. She had to be here somewhere. I searched the Tavern again, not there. I searched the Abbey, nowhere in sight. I walked into the Graveyard, nobody there but the dead. I began to think that maybe she had decided that this wasn’t for her, and maybe decided to return home. Lastly, I checked near the gates of the Hamlet. Maybe the gatekeeper would be able to tell me whether she had gone or not. I walked up to speak to the gatekeeper, asleep on the job of course. However, I could hear the sounds of swords twanging and yelling in the distance beyond the gate. I walked outside and down the lonely path to find Claville, in the midst of a battle with a senseless Brigand. Her footwork was elegant and athletic, and very powerful. She was side-stepping the Brigand with ease. She taunted him with her battle-axe by extending it out and nearly touching his nose. The Brigand grabbed a part of the long axe handle. Certainly a mistake, but it was exactly what she wanted him to do. While the Brigand gipped the axe with one hand, Claville lifted the axe up with incredible strength, and the Brigand went with it, flying through the air and slamming onto the rocky dirt road. He got up and charged the Hellion, another mistake. Claville spun around to avoid the charge, this really pissed off the Brigand, and that made Claville laugh. The Brigand charged her a final time, Claville swung her battle-axe and sliced off one of the Brigands legs with ease. He fell to the ground, reaching for the leg that was no longer there, and screaming loudly in intense pain. I don’t know if I’ve heard such a terrible scream out of a man, it made the hairs on my neck stand upright. Claville walked up to the

bleeding Brigand, she shoved his face into the bloody dirt, he uttered a few quiet words to her. She pushed down on his head with so much force that over the next few seconds the screams got quieter as she pushed his skull deeper into the ground. Claville pushed one last time with all of her weight. The Brigand's skull actually burst beneath her hand. She swiped away the brain matter and scattered skull fragments and wiped her hand on her gown.

I was surely a bit intimidated but I knew that I had come here to ask her to be a part of a larger battle, with a greater purpose. I spoke to her.

“Claville, I remember you from when you arrived with Omand.” I said.

“How do you know Omand?” she asked suspiciously.

“My friend Audrey and him are... good friends, as you might say.” I knew that was a bit far-fetched.

“I’ve come to you with an offer, I would like you to join us on our expedition into the Ruins tonight. There will be gold and trinkets for all of us at the end of our journey.” I tried to make the quest sound as enticing as possible, though I knew firsthand of the horrors that awaited us down there.

“What’s the quest?” she asked, again, rightfully suspicious.

“We will slay the Gibbering Prophet. A man that once new my Ancestor that is now the cult leader of their evil campaign.”

“Raynald, I will come with you and your team under one condition.”

I was afraid to hear what Claville was going to suggest, but I needed her skills in battle more than I needed to relish in my own vanity.

“What is it you propose then, Caville?”

“I get to lead your team into the Ruins. Everybody listens to me, everybody follows my directions. I will make sure that we all make it out alive.” She spoke with a hardened tone, leaving no room for negotiation.

“Aye then. You will lead us tonight. Guernon, Audrey, and Myself, we will all follow in your direction.”

Giving up my role as leader was hard for me, and I didn’t even want to think how it would affect Guernon and Audrey. They didn’t know Claville at all. I barely knew Claville except for the display of brutality I witnessed just minutes before our conversation. I returned to the Abbey to speak with Guernon. She questioned my reasoning at first, but she understood. I knew she would. She knew me better than anyone, better than I knew myself.

Audrey met with us in the Abbey in the hours before nightfall. We prepared our gear and sharpened our weapons. We ate a hearty meal together and packed the rest as provisions for the journey ahead of us. We slept for an hour to pass the time. Then, when the moon was at its peak, we headed out to the gates to meet up with Claville.

THE RUINS

“The echoes of his mindless tittering reverberate maddeningly – he must be silenced!”

The wind was howling along with the wolves as we walked down the sullen pathway towards the Ruins for the second time since my arrival at my Ancestors estate. There was a distinct disconnect that I sensed from the beginning of our trek towards Ruins entrance. I hadn't spoken a word to either Guernon or Audrey, and I remained silent, awaiting my orders from Claville. Audrey and Guernon were exchanging whispers between one another underneath the gusts of wind in order to suppress the nature of their conversation, though I was still confined to the thoughts within my own mind, and Claville was certainly not interested. Half way to the Ruins entrance, the four of us were taken aback by the distant shouts and screams of townsfolk in terror. From where we were, we could look back and see the Hamlet in the distance, torches ablaze casting a magnificent orange glow over the top of the outer walls and towers. I didn't want to focus on what was happening back at the Hamlet. On a second thought, I was happy to know that everything was in good hands with Dismas around.

As we continued down the path the screams muffled into complete silence. We were far from the Hamlet now, soon to be reaching the doorway of the Ruins. Claville turned around and addressed the group.

“Your Lord has chosen to put me in charge of this expedition, if anyone has any objections, take it up with him.” She refused to call me by my name.

“As your leader, I expect that all of you do as I say, when I say it. I have no intentions of dying in this place any time soon, and if you plan to leave this place alive we will have to work together, flawlessly.”

“Claville is right. I put her in charge of this expedition because I believe that she has the skills and knowledge of battle necessary to lead our team to victory and Righteousness.” I tried to justify why I had given up my role as lead, but my exposition fell on deaf ears.

“As you say, my *Lord*.” Audrey's sarcasm was usually uplifting, this time however, it wasn't meant to be.

Claville let out a deep breath from her nose, almost an audible grunt, and swung back around into position. I swung around to face forward as well, then I felt a subtle tap on my shoulder, it was Audrey, I turned my head to see her dragging her thumb across her throat, a gesture that signaled that death was imminent. I looked back at Guernon, she was despondent and unfocused. We had only reached the doorway of the Ruins, and already the team was falling apart, morale was low, and the uneasiness from the lurking fear began to creep its way into my bones.

Claville pushed open the door unapologetically, and with so much force the echoes of wood on stone resonated throughout the damp, darkened halls. Claville lit a torch and began to

walk down the stone pathway. As we walked, I kept my eyes peeled for any small refraction of light that might give away the position of our enemies. I remembered the red eyes of the Cultist Acolyte that we faced on our first journey into the Ruins. The blood-curdling, malevolent shriek that it produced, ever present in the back of my mind. As the group walked to the end of the corridor we pushed forward through another set of wooden doors. Behind this door was an empty room with a lone confession booth, lit by a suspicious torch placed nearby. Guernon walked up to the confession booth and pulled back the worn velvet curtain, she screamed in intense horror.

“Ahhhhh!” Guernon unleashed a painful shout.

She gripped both sides of her head in pain, as if to try to physically snap herself out of whatever had just happened to her. She dropped to her knees, then to her side and lied there. She kept screaming, relentlessly screaming. I ran over to Guernon and lifted her half way off of the solid stone ground in an attempt to comfort her, in hopes that she would calm down and regain some composure. Guernon’s eyes were shut so tightly that even though she had been crying in pain, the tears never touched her cheeks. She didn’t want to open her eyes. The human mind - fragile, like a robin’s egg.

All of the screaming had led something sinister to our location within the ruins. The conveniently placed torch that lit up the confession booth was snuffed, and soon after we were ambushed by a ghostly figure, tall, and evil. The only visible portion of the monster was its glowing blue skull, surrounded by a makeshift cage that confined its being to the clutches of the underworld. The twisted faces of the damned, piled high, and cloaked in malice.

“The Collector!” Audrey screamed, somehow she knew.

“Get behind me!” Claville postured up with her massive battle-axe and maintained a defensive position.

I gently laid Guernon back onto the stones where she continued to sob endlessly. It seemed like she was losing her mind, losing her grip on reality, all right in front of us. I rushed up behind Claville and Audrey took up a position behind me. Before the Collector could cast its Collect Call, Claville and I rushed forth. I lunged into the air and struck the beast with a hefty swing of my Holy lance. Claville’s swing was only timed a second behind mine, but her swing missed, as the beast was pushed back due to my attack. Then, The Collector peeled back its cloak to reveal a horrifying amalgamation of severed heads and twisted spines from past victims so unfortunate to cross its path. The sight made me want to look away, but I knew that I couldn’t. I had to stand up and fight this beast, for the group, and for Guernon. Audrey sprung forth and struck the beast with a pickaxe to the chest, again the monster gripped its ribcage with one hand and floated backwards. Suddenly from the ground arose two ghostlike figures. One that resembled Dismas, and another that resembled Guernon, except they were entirely contrived of the same glowing blue substance that encapsulated the Collector’s skull. The floating Highwayman attacked Claville. Her skills in battle were unmatched, even by the undead it seemed. She weaved side to side, with astonishing footwork. As the ghost lunged in for a wicked slice, Claville swung her battle-axe straight through the abdomen of the ghost, turning it instantly to vapor. Audrey was behind me, trying to pick Guernon off of the ground and get her into the fight. I looked in front of me and saw

the ghost of Guernon that had been summoned by The Collector. Strangely, the ghost did not attack, instead it ominously waved its hand towards me, as if to try to get me to come closer. I knew that the ghost in front of me wasn't Guernon, and I knew that it had to be destroyed. I revealed a sacred scroll from one of the mesh pockets underneath my chainmail. I screamed out my Zealous Accusation for all to hear, and the ghostly figure vanished before my eyes. The Collector howled again and was about to call for more reinforcements, but Claville unleashed a Barbaric Yawp, absolutely stunning the beast for more than a few seconds. I yelled for Audrey to begin throwing daggers at The Collector, she did so with fervor. The beast was being struck over and over with sharpened daggers that flew through the air at incredible speeds, slicing through decrepit flesh and bone. Claville ran forward and used her Wicked Hack to slice off an arm of the beast. I ran directly into the center of the monster's body and forcefully pushed my sword through the front and out the back of the Collector's chest cavity. It spouted a sorrowful wail, then the collection of bones fell peacefully to the ground, finally able to rest after all those years.

After the battle with The Collector was over, Claville seemed very unimpressed with the team's chemistry and battle tactics.

"Get that crying bitch up off the ground." She rattled off orders to Audrey and I.

Guernon's sobbing had subsided but she continued to gently weep on the ground, using her sacred gown to wipe the tears from her face. I walked over to Guernon, Audrey and I helped her to her feet. She finally came across the words to describe what had been tormenting her over the last few minutes. She wrapped her arms around me and gripped me tightly. She spoke.

"Raynauld, I don't know if I can go on. I need to return to the Hamlet, my mind is not sound." She didn't wish to describe the true nature of what she saw in her vision, and I couldn't blame her.

"Guernon, we have to continue. We came down here to find this Gibbering Prophet and bring back sanctity to these old Ruins." I tried to invoke the Holy Light so Guernon could see the importance of our mission, but her mind already past the point of illumination, she was stuck in a state of complete darkness.

"Okay..." she gently whispered, and released a deep, reluctant breath.

I could tell that Guernon did not want to continue, self-preservation is paramount - at any cost. I let go of my firm embrace and held Guernon by both arms and looked her in the eyes.

"We will see the end of this. Room by room, hall by hall, we reclaim what is ours."

Guernon nodded her head softly, and didn't speak a word.

Claville was walking down the hall alone. It was obvious that she had already dismissed us as a team, but she remained level-headed and focused on completing her mission to justify her coming down here in the first place. I picked up the pace and followed closely behind Claville. The usually spritely Audrey was no longer skipping, but remained vigilant and concentrated. Guernon woefully dragged her feet behind Audrey. She was not in a good place. We were getting tired, walking through endless corridors and into rooms that all looked frighteningly familiar. We

decided to make camp inside of the forsaken chapel in order to ease our minds and get a grip on where we were, and what we would do next.

Surrounded by wooden pews on all sides, I decided to break of some scraps for a fire. I placed the wood in the center of our stone pile. I built a miniature pyre that I thought would catch flame quickly, but I mostly assembled the wood into such a formation thinking that maybe the Divine would recognize it as a sign of distress and grant our team some kind of Holy authority over our deepest, ever-encroaching fears. Unfortunately, the wood just smoldered. A grim portrayal of how dire the situation actually was. For the next hour, there was no firelight, only cold provisions, and silence.

After enough time had passed, Claville stood up.

“I’ve had enough of just sitting here, wasting precious time. We could be well on our way back to the Hamlet by now. The Prophet is close, we just need to keep moving.”

The disconnect between the group was even more noticeable now. I looked over at Audrey, who was sitting on a stone. Audrey shot a look back at me, and shrugged her shoulders to signal that she was fine with moving on. Audrey flicked her gaze over towards Gernon, who was sleeping on the ground, using her hands to support her head on a rough stone. We both walked over to Guernon, I shook her gently by the shoulder in an attempt to wake her.

“Guernon, wake up. We have to keep moving.” I said, loud enough that she would hopefully open her eyes.

Guernon laid still on the ground, not moving. Barely breathing. I shook her again, this time a little more forcefully.

“Guernon, you must wake up!”

“Ahhhhh AHHH!” Guernon woke in a panic, she was experiencing another hallucination.

Guernon screamed and flailed her arms and legs, kicking and punching me and trying to crawl away in horror. She crawled backwards until her back was against the wall, she laid her head in her arms and began sobbing again. She was fearful, and hopeless. I looked over at Audrey, who took a few steps back during the whole ordeal and she looked saddened and discouraged.

“We have to get Guernon back to the Hamlet, if we don’t, she’ll never make it out alive.” I said.

I couldn’t believe the words I was saying. All this time, I thought that it would be her Holy Light to guide us through the darkness, but now I realized the true power of this evil. Fear and frailty finally claim their due.

“And so what then? We just give up the expedition?” Claville looked at me, disgusted.

“I say we need to get Guernon back to the Hamlet and treat her. She needs time to heal her body and mind before we try to take on anything else.” I spoke up to Claville, her selfishness was really showing through now.

“I’m not leaving without the gold and glory I was promised. If we have to leave that bitch here and come back for her, then that’s what we’ll do.” Claville said.

“You put me in charge, remember Raynauld? Now I say we keep moving and-“

Out of the shadows we heard the tittering sounds of teeth chattering and eerie, maniacal laughter, followed by the ringing sounds of rusted chains being dragged across the stone floor. Audrey and I backed ourselves up hovering over Guernon, forming a protective shield to make sure she couldn’t be harmed. Claville looked over her shoulder, then turned around completely. In horror, Claville looked into the face of a giant man, his eyes were missing, and his face was smeared with dried and coagulated blood. We no longer had to go in search of the battle, in fact, the battle came to us.

The Gibbering Prophet let out a delirious laugh and the walls of the Ruins began to shake. Somehow it was able to make books fly from the shelves and bricks fly from the walls at will, no doubt an ability granted by years of studying texts from beyond our known world. Out of nowhere a brick flew through the air and smashed Audrey on the jaw. Audrey fell to the ground, nearly unconscious. She pushed herself up by her hands and looked over at me. I was horrified to see that one side of her jaw had been completely smashed by the brick, it was dislocated and crushed. You could see teeth pushing through the skin near her lips and flesh hanging and bleeding. Amazingly, Audrey rose to her feet and spit out a mixture of blood and teeth onto the ground, then smeared it away with her shoe. She ran up to the Gibbering Prophet and swung at him relentlessly with her pickaxe. Claville let out a battle cry and ran toward the Prophet and Audrey.

The Prophet kicked Audrey back a few feet, sending her falling to the ground again. I watched Claville run up to the man and begin hacking at his flesh with her battle-axe. The Prophet picked up a heavy wooden pew and swung it sideways catching Claville in the abdomen and sent her flying into the crumbling wall. The Prophet laughed hysterically and juggled his eyeballs in his hand. I looked down at Guernon and she was still sobbing against the wall, she was useless in this state, and I knew that if I wanted to save her and have the rest of us make it out alive, I had to act quickly. I ran to Claville and picked her up from the ground, Audrey was already back on her feet and hopping around the Prophet, making him miss with ease. Claville looked at me and nodded, then we both sprinted towards the Prophet, but he somehow made more stone and bricks fall from the ceiling. I was struck with a stone on the helm, luckily the steel was strong enough to withstand the force and I was able to shake it off. Claville was not so lucky, she was struck in the head by a large stone that knocked her to the ground, her head began to bleed from a sizeable wound. I kept running and joined the fight with Audrey. While the Prophet was busy flailing at Audrey I took the opportunity to strike with a Holy Lance and stab him in the side near the kidney. The Prophet winced in pain and swung back at me with his hand, dropping the large wooden pew in favor of a more close-quartered battle. Audrey looked back quickly to check on Guernon and Claville. Claville was still on the ground unconscious, but Guernon was no longer on the wall where we left her. From the back of the room, Guernon mustered enough energy to cast Divine Comfort with her sacred chalice. I could now feel a rush of energy through my body and I continued to swing forcefully at the Prophet. Audrey threw a dagger at the Prophet and it stuck into the backside of his shoulder. We were attacking the Prophet from two different angles and it

seemed to be working but the Prophet shook the ground, walls, and ceiling again, casting more stone and bricks downward upon us. Agile Audrey flipped and shifted backwards and sideways in order to avoid the falling rubble, she was nimble and graceful even in her battered state. I sliced at the arm of the Prophet and hacked it nearly in half, the limb was hanging at an angle now and spraying blood throughout the room. The chapel was physically falling apart from the battle. The walls were crumbling and the stones from the roof were now almost completely gone, now all cracked and broken on the floor. I kicked the Prophet in the chest, he fell backwards onto the ground. Surprisingly it seemed that he was giving up. He laid on the ground, breathing heavily, and bleeding profusely. I walked up to the man on the ground and placed my metal foot on his chest. I rose my Holy Lance into the air in Righteousness, and made sure that my God could witness this cleansing act. Before I struck him down, the man let out his last devious laugh, the room shook again, and it sent me falling off of the Prophets chest. The massive quake sent more giant rubble tumbling down from the ceiling. Audrey dove at Guernon and tackled her out of the way, just as she did to save me. She made sure they avoided being crushed by the rubble. I was lying on my back watching to make sure that Audrey and Guernon were safe, then I looked directly upward to see another giant boulder falling down onto me. I rolled hard to my left as many times as I could. The boulder smacked the ground only a few feet away from me. I let out the large breath that I had been holding in. I looked over to see that the Gibbering Prophets head had been crushed by his own rubble of ruin. I picked myself up and looked around the room. I spotted what was left of Claville, a battle-axe sticking out from beneath a pile of large stones and rubble. She would not be returning to the Hamlet with us.

When the dust was settled I met with Gernon and Audey in a semi-circle surrounding Clavilles body underneath the rubble. Together we picked the stones away, one by one until she was fully uncovered. Her head been completely decimated by a large stone, blood and brain matter coated the rocks and floor beneath her. Her body was heavily bruised and scraped from the mass of stones that fell all over the rest of her. There was no point in trying to bring her back to the Hamlet with us, so Guernon and I said a prayer, and Audrey unlatched a necklace from what was left of Claville's neck.

"What a nice little pendant." She said with a smile, before slipping the necklace into her satchel.

We all looked at each other before deciding that it was time to return to the Hamlet. There was more silence on the way back, it seemed like even though we were able to slay the Gibbering Prophet and make it out alive, that we were fighting an uphill battle and it was becoming more apparent that this battle wasn't going to be over in a matter of days or weeks. It was going to take months, years, an eternity. I don't know if any of us were truly ready for that realization.

HAMLET

“Once, our estate was the envy of this land...”

On our way back to the Hamlet, the first thing the three of us noticed was that the gates were unlocked and opened. Normally the gates were closed before nightfall and stayed shut until the morning hours, but this time the gates looked like they had been left open all night. We walked up to the large metal gate and examined the padlock. Hanging from the lock was a Tassel adorn with a golden wolf head. I grabbed the tassel and plucked it off of the padlock, I showed it to Guernon and Audrey, neither of them knew what it was or where it came from. The three of us walked inside the gates of the Hamlet to see a terrible sight that none of us expected. Our buildings had been burned and looted, there were still remnants of flames picking away at the last few patches of dried grass. A thick coating of ash had fallen upon the Hamlet.

Guernon, Audrey, and I walked over to the front door of the Tavern. The double wooden doors looked like they had been bashed in from the outside. What we walked into was a scene that told the story from the nights before. Blood and bodies were strewn across the floor and walls of the Tavern. It was clear that the patrons of the Tavern were involved in a struggle for their lives. We walked amongst the several bodies to see if there was anyone we could recognize, fortunately for us the dead were nameless, we didn't have the opportunity to meet them, or protect them. We walked out of the Tavern and headed over towards the Abbey, but while we walked, Audrey spotted something.

“That's Dismas isn't it?” she said.

Audrey pointed up to the top of the half-built blacksmith workshop, Dismas' body was hanging from the roof. We walked over to him and stared up at his lifeless body.

“Audrey, cut him down.”

Audrey took out one of her daggers and flung it upwards at the rope, severing it on her first go. Dismas' body came crashing to the ground. We all stepped forward to remove the rope from Dismas' neck and pat the dust off of his clothing, while doing so I noticed a scrap of paper inside of his chest pocket. Scribbled shakily on the paper were the words “Flames on the horizon, sulfur in the air. The wolves are at the door.”

I showed the note to Audrey and Guernon, they didn't know what to make of it. I stuffed the note into my pocket and picked Dismas up from off of the ground and threw him over my shoulder. We headed for the Graveyard.

The three of us walked behind the Abbey and into Graveyard only to be greeted by a familiar face, a welcomed sight in the midst of all the madness. It was Omand, sitting quietly next to a gravestone surrounded by candles. He opened his eyes and looked at us before we could even exchange a word.

“His name is Vvulf. Leader of the Brigands. He is who is responsible for all of the death and destruction before you.” He said.

“And how did you manage to survive the incursion?” I said to Omand, genuinely wondering.

“Not everyone is willing to look into the Abyss, Raynauld.” That was all Omand said.

“Claville was killed in battle in the Ruins. She fought valiantly and hard.” I gave her an honorable backstory.

“I know, I seen it.” Omand said. He had some sort of abyssal ability.

“Come with us Omand, we are going into the Abbey to say a prayer for the fallen, then we will bury Dismas and then we will take our time to mourn. After that, the work begins again.”

The four of us now, Guernon, Audrey, Omand, and I headed inside of the Abbey. The walls inside were still crumbling and the roof was almost completely missing. Rocks and rubble coated the pews and floor, but surprisingly the sun shone through on to the alter even more now that it had before. A great feeling of grace came over me as I walked Dismas’ body up the small set of stairs and onto a large stone. The sun was shining down on his face, and he looked like he was finally able to rest, after years of constant confrontation and an endless desire to fight and win, it must have been relieving to know that he no longer needed to fight for anything. Guernon and I said a quiet prayer while Audrey and Omand bowed their heads and closed their eyes. After the prayer was over, we all took some time to take one last look at our lost friend. I picked Dismas up again and slung him over my shoulder. I walked him out to the graveyard where there was an open grave awaiting his arrival. I laid Dismas’ body in the grave and began to shovel the dirt on top of him. Soon after, Guernon, Audrey, and Omand joined me. We finished the burial and decided to make a fire in the center of town. Omand and I gathered some large pieces of wood that were lying around, and Guernon and Audrey gathered up the scraps of food that had been left inside of the tavern. We sat in a circle around the fire and shared ideas about what to do next.

“Well it’s obvious isn’t it? We track down that bastard Vvulf and bring back his head as a reward!” Audrey said.

“Yes, but there’s much more that needs to be done. We are going to have to make sure we have decent warriors watching over the Hamlet at all times. But we can’t just fortify our positions and not expect the enemy to be planning another invasion soon. We have to bring the fight to them.” I said, speaking to the group.

“And there’s more evil to be destroyed. The Ruins have been cleansed, but what of the Warrens, Weald, and The Cove? Evil still lurks in these places, I’ve seen it.” Said Omand.

Guernon was still considerably quiet, but I think she was beginning to get a grip on reality again. She was functioning normally, just more reserved than she was before. She was poking a stick into the fire and gazing into the flame.

“Guernon, what do you think we should do next?” I said.

“I think we should get ready to fight for our fucking lives.”

The fire crackled and the group fell silent. After a while Omand went back to the Abbey to rest, then Audrey. Guernon and I were the last ones around the fire. I was going to speak to her but before I could, she got up and walked away into the Abbey, too. I was left alone by the fire wondering about all of the decisions I have ever made, all of the paths I could have taken, would all of them have lead me here? Was this my destiny or my damnation? Only time could tell, and so with that, I got up and walked away from the fire, and into the Abbey, so I could get some rest before the sun rose, and everything started all over again.

End