

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Demon Hunter: Hatred and Discipline

Micky Neilson

Valla smelled the rotting dead from a mile away.

The air was warm despite the clouds that blanketed Khanduras as the demon hunter arrived in what was left of Holbrook—once a tiny, struggling farm community, now a deserted ghost town. Or so it seemed; the heavy stench of putrefaction suggested that the residents were still present, just not among the living.

Valla's mentor, Josen, stood in the center of the village, considering a pile of debris: scattered mason stones, upturned rock and soil.

He was dressed in the attire of the demon hunters' calling. The soft light reflected dully off the plate armor that adorned half his body. His twin crossbows were slung from his thighs, within easy reach. His hood was down, and his cloak snapped in the gusting wind.

Valla was clothed in similar fashion, the greatest difference being the long, dark scarf she wore that even now covered the lower half of her face. The sawyer's daughter slowed her horse, dismounted, and waited for a moment, silent and still, assessing.

There was a barely discernible, persistent hum. The only signs of life came from Josen and two other hunters, one searching the derelict structures, another standing near a rundown storehouse. Whatever had happened here, they were too late to do anything about it. Now it was a matter of looking for survivors. That was, after all, the second most important thing her people did: feed and shelter those left homeless in the aftermath of unthinkable catastrophe. Guide them, encourage them, heal them, educate and train them... to do the most important thing, should they so choose: become a demon hunter and annihilate the hellspawn responsible for evils like this.

Josen continued studying the rubble intently as Valla approached. "I came as quickly as I could," she stated, lowering her scarf.

The faint thrumming sound droned on. Josen's eyes remained fixed.

"We should not be here." His voice was loose gravel. "Had Delios succeeded in his task, we would not be here." His shimmering eyes finally met hers. "Tell me what you see."

Valla gazed at the upheaval. The masonry and timber were familiar... as was a dark liquid spattered across them. But there was also a black substance throughout, like tar, that she did not recognize.

"The town well," Valla offered. "The demon emerged from here... wounded, given the presence of demon blood. Delios managed that much at least. I only pray that he died a hunter's death."

Josen kicked at the dirt. Beneath the surface, the soil was wet. "This happened not more than a day ago... after."

Valla waited for Josen to continue. When he didn't, she asked, "After what?"

The master hunter's expression was unreadable. "Follow me," he replied.

As they approached the storehouse, the hum rose in volume, a penetrating, vibrant buzz. As the thrumming grew, the fetid stench grew also. The hunter stationed out front swung open the tall doors.

A thick, dark mass, a living cloud of flies, escaped. And though the smell of degenerating flesh was familiar to Valla, the potency of its assault nearly drove her to her knees. She pulled her scarf tight and choked back bile.

Within the barn-sized enclosure, the townspeople were piled in haphazard mounds. Men, women... many of them bloated, their midsections distended. Some of the bodies had ruptured, insides spilling out, maggots working their way over and through the viscera. Fluid seeped from eyes, noses, mouths. Beneath the odor of decomposition was the unmistakable smell of feces. Hundreds of flies swarmed the carnage.

Valla frowned. The wounds, while gruesome, were not those common to a hellspawn attack. These were stabbings, impalements, crushed skulls—not the shredding, dismemberment, and decapitation associated with most demon slayings.

Josen spoke. "Delios was seen one day ago outside of Bramwell. He stormed into a bordello, killed everyone... then disappeared. Last night there was another massacre. Fifteen victims inside an opium den. Killed by crossbow bolt and blade."

Valla's eyes widened in disbelief. Josen answered her unspoken question.

"He fell to the demon's corruption. He's lost to us now. No better than a demon himself."

It was a horrific development, one every demon hunter faced, navigating the threshold between good and evil. All too easy for hunters to lose their ability to control their fear or hatred and cross over to the other side. But this... this was not the work of Delios. This was something different. Valla hid her unease. "Perhaps that is so, but no hunter is responsible for what we see here. No demon, either."

"Agreed."

"Do you think they turned on one another?"

"Possible," Josen answered flatly before departing. Valla scanned the corpse mounds once more, noting something odd: there were no children among them.

Outside, Josen stood at his horse. Valla hurried to him. "I completed my last assignment. What orders now?"

"We continue searching for survivors. Come sunrise I'll ride to Bramwell, and I'll find Delios. Perhaps... it's not too late for him," the master hunter said, but his minor hesitation spoke differently.

Valla squared her shoulders. "I'll go and seek out the demon, then."

"No," Josen shot back. "You're not ready."

Valla stepped closer. "Come again?"

The master hunter turned to her, his tone remaining even. "I said you're not ready. We know very little of what we're dealing with. What its methods are. We believe it's a demon that feeds on terror... but Delios had that information as well, and it wasn't enough to prepare him. A demon such as this..."

Josen's eyes fell slightly. "It will reach into your mind and uncover every fear, every doubt, every regret, no matter how deeply buried. It will pit you against yourself." The master hunter's eyes snapped up, locking on Valla.

"Remember your failure at the ruins."

"That was different. A demon of rage," Valla protested.

"Rage. Hate. Fear. They all feed upon one another. A demon hunter learns how to direct hate. But such a balance is precarious. And when that balance is lost, the cycle begins: Hate begets Destruction. Destruction begets Terror as Terror begets Hate as—"

"I've heard it a thousand times!" Valla blurted.

"Then mark it well. You're still young, and you have much to learn. If I've taught you anything, it's that a demon hunter must always temper hatred with discipline. So calm yourself. The demon is wounded. Inactive for now. I'll send another hunter."

Josen turned to leave, but Valla was not done.

"I'll go after Delios, then."

Josen looked back. "You'll stay and help search for survivors. Delios is mine. Those are my orders." The master hunter then strode away. Calmly. And somehow, that infuriated Valla all the more. She wanted him to yell, to scream, to show some damned hint of emotion.

Not ready? I'm not ready? After all I've been through... "How dare you tell me what I'm not ready for?" Valla whispered.

An instant later she was astride her horse.

Which way? Which way would the demon have gone? Valla glanced at the blood among the debris. There was no trail outside the radius of the castoff. No help there.

To the east sat only mountains. To the west, the Gulf of Westmarch. Far to the south lay New Tristram. But the demon was wounded. Would it take a chance on the longer journey south, or would it travel northeast... where it might find more small farming communities like this one?

More easy prey.

The closest village, Havenwood, was less than a day away.

The choice was made.

Ellis Halstaff was concerned for her daughter's health.

Sahmantha lay still in the downstairs bedroom, a cold, wet cloth draped across her forehead, her breathing shallow.

Sahm had woken up the previous night, screaming. It had taken a fair amount of time to calm the girl down; when Ellis finally did, and asked what was wrong, her daughter replied that "it feels like there's something bad inside my head."

Bellik, Havenwood's healer, had visited earlier in the day. He had provided a tonic that would allow Sahm to rest, and prescribed a cold bath when opportunity allowed.

But Sahm was resting now, and Ellis's little son, Ralyn, would need to be fed, and there was still work to be done before nightfall. It was easier before—in the days when Sahm's father was still present, before he left without a word, without so much as a note, never to return.

Ellis looked down at Sahm now and thought of the girl's most recent birthday, when the precocious seven-year-old had declared brazenly that she would "manage her own affairs, moving forward," and that her daily routine would no longer include chores. She thought of Sahm's laughter, a hearty, unbridled guffaw. She thought of the night less than a week ago

when Sahm had told her in the strictest confidence that she had a crush on little Joshua Gray, because his eyes were like a nice dream.

She thought of these things, and she prayed to Akarat that Sahm would get well soon, that she would have many more nice dreams and no longer be terrified by whatever ailment had befallen her.

Valla sat before the campfire, still a few miles outside of Havenwood, staring. She ran her finger absently over a long scar that traveled the line of her jaw.

You're not ready.

A demon hunter must always temper hatred with discipline.

Josen's words still stung. But the more she thought of it, the more she considered that maybe... maybe he wasn't exactly wrong. Her thoughts drifted back to the incident at the ruins...

She and Delios had journeyed deep into the southern Dreadlands, traveling together for several days. Delios was crude and abrasive and set her nerves on edge. Valla preferred to operate alone, but Josen had insisted they work as a pair.

They located the demon's hideaway among the long-forgotten ruins of some unknown civilization. Valla guarded her mind as Josen had taught her. He had warned them both that, with a powerful demon such as this, their battle would be much more than simply physical.

"You are the demon's greatest weapon," he had counseled.

As the two wound their way down wide, monolithic stone slabs, Valla felt her agitation mounting. The base of the stairs opened into a cavernous grotto where hundreds of gargantuan rocky pillars stretched upward, their caps lost in the darkness above. Flaming braziers cast pools of flickering light.

Delios surged ahead. He was reckless. Foolish. Valla's head throbbed. She could feel the demon infiltrating her thoughts. In her mind's eye its presence was black tendrils, probing, coaxing, provoking. Valla dwelled on every irritating habit, every negative quality, Delios possessed. Her agitation soon turned to anger, which turned to rage.

Delios darted ahead again, after she had yelled at him to stop. He spun, favoring her with a wicked smile. She became suddenly certain that he had been corrupted. He had crossed over. Her rage boiled over into a blind fury, and she knew that she would kill him. He was weak, pathetic. Ending his life would be a mercy.

She drove forward. Delios stood there, smiling tauntingly. She sprinted toward him. He ducked behind a pillar. Valla followed...

And he was gone. She *felt* the demon behind her, a hulking, otherworldly presence. Inside her mind, she could hear an echo of laughter. The demon had manipulated her with the ease of a puppeteer working the strings of a marionette. The Delios she had followed was not real. She had lost, and now she would die.

There was an explosion then, and much of what happened next Valla only remembered in brief flashes: Josen battling the demon. Delios rushing to help. Valla gathering her senses in time to fire several bolts from her crossbow. Josen shouting words of banishment. "I see you, Draxiel, lapdog of Mephisto. In the name of all those who have suffered, I cast you out! Begone and be damned, and may you never return!" Josen fired a bolt; an eye-searing brilliance flared; and the demon was gone.

The ruins had been a test. (Josen was fond of saying that everything was a test, that life was a test.) And Valla had failed. Now... now Delios had failed as well. And it had cost him his soul.

Valla was determined to defeat this demon, but she was also determined not to meet Delios's fate...

He's lost to us now. No better than a demon himself.

The sawyer's daughter suppressed a shudder. There was more than one way to banish a demon, but only one way that Josen had taught her. He had also told her once that "when a demon peers into you, you may peer back. But it is the most dangerous thing a demon hunter can do."

Valla's mistake at the ruins would not be repeated. She had grown too much since then.

The demon hunter retrieved from her pocket an etching of her little sister, Halissa.

"For you," she whispered. And as the flames of the campfire died down, she initiated a series of mental exercises taught to her by Josen.

I'm not going to make it, Ellis Halstaff thought to herself. I've lost too much blood.

Escaping through the front door and sprinting to Havenwood proper were not an option. Not before she reached Ralyn. He was practically helpless, barely a year and a half old. He hadn't even mastered walking yet, much less protecting himself in any way.

At the staircase she pulled with her good hand on the banister, dragging her worthless right leg behind her one step at a time.

As her strength ebbed she thought of Sahm and wondered desperately why her daughter was trying to kill her.

After finishing her work, Ellis had gone in to check on Sahm, to see if perhaps she was ready for a bath. Sahm had smiled, pulled Ellis's best carving knife from beneath the sheets, and stabbed her in the leg, then repeatedly in the torso. Five, six times, maybe more. Ellis had spent precious heartbeats immobilized by the shock of the attack before she had finally run.

Ellis's head felt foggy now. She was halfway up the staircase when she heard the rapid padding of Sahm's bare feet on the floor below.

She turned, and there, at the bottom of the stairs, her beautiful blonde-haired daughter stood, clothed in the lacy pink dress Ellis had saved up to buy her for the harvest festival. The cloth was spattered a dark crimson that glistened in the lamplight. Sahm held the knife in her right hand. Blood coated her arm from the elbow down, dripping from the tip of the blade.

"Wait, Mama, I still need to get you!"

She thinks it's a game; how can she think it's a game?

Ellis hauled herself backward up one more step.

Sahm bounded over two of the stairs in one leap. "I said WAIT!" She slipped in the trail of blood on the step, pitching forward, her right arm arcing overhead, burying the blade in the stair Ellis had just cleared.

The sound of her own screams drowned out all other noise as Ellis whipped around and hopped up the last two steps to the second floor. She closed the distance to Ralyn's room in desperate lurches, her useless right leg dragging behind.

Once inside, I can bar the door, then maybe—

Ellis hit the doorway and froze. Ralyn was not in his crib. What was more, the wooden railing had been broken, pieces of it scattered on the floor.

The lightheadedness was more persistent now as Ellis reached out to the broken railing for support. Her limbs felt cold, responding slowly to what her mind willed them to do.

"There you are!"

Ellis spun to see Sahm in the doorway, a huge grin on her face, the kind she got when she would play roughhouse with Papa in the days before he left.

The world teetered. Ellis took a step back. She grasped a splintered piece of railing, long and deathly sharp at one end. She pulled it free and thrust it in front of herself with a shaky hand.

"What did you do, Sahm? What did you do to your brother?"

Sahm lowered her knife. Her puffy lips turned down at the corners, eyebrows knitted, her eyes wide and moist. It was the look she got when she did something she wasn't supposed to and was trying to escape punishment.

"Are you going to hurt me, Mama?"

The floor swayed like the deck of a ship on a restless sea. Ellis was vaguely aware that her hand and the stake were drifting lazily.

"I just want to know why..." Ellis sobbed, her voice sounding detached. "Is it because you're sick? We can get you help; we can go to Bellik and—"

She felt a sharp pain on the back of her good ankle then, a piercing clamp that shot an agonizing jolt through her entire body as she cried out.

Ellis looked down to see Ralyn where he had crawled out from under the crib. He gazed up at her warmly and offered a wide grin, his tiny teeth covered in a layer of bright red.

The world swam away as darkness closed in. Ellis's arm dropped; her head lolled back; and mercifully, she did not feel the long blade as Sahm plunged it through her chest.

Valla reached the outskirts of Havenwood shortly before midnight. The time of her arrival was not of her choosing, but it suited her nonetheless.

She would not be welcome in the town. Her kind never was; demon hunters were seen as dark omens, harbingers of death, even on the best of days.

The air was still warm as she passed moonlit fields thronged with barren cornstalks, and wide patches of land where rows of gathered wheat bushels stood like obedient soldiers. Harvest was under way.

Valla's ears were soon greeted with the sound of rushing water.

A river.

The sawyer's daughter felt a hollow tug in the pit of her stomach as she rode on.

The innkeeper turned pale at the sight of her, even though she had removed her hood and lowered her scarf to put him more at ease. He responded to her queries in minimal sentences. There had been no signs of trouble, nothing outside of the ordinary. No cause for concern. She gave him a note to pass on to the town healer come first light: *Any trouble, send for me.*

Upon entering her lodging, Valla went through her routine checklist, noting several details: a sturdy sideboard suitable for use as a barricade, if necessary. No connecting door to the adjoining room. A bed positioned against the far wall, with a clear view of the entry. A single desk and chair, and one window with a ten cubit drop to the ground outside.

Valla then removed her plate armor and numerous weapons. She placed the twin crossbows, daggers, darts, bolas, and quiver of bolts—taking special care with one bolt, crimson with runes adorning the shaft—within easy reach on the bed. She began to unpack. Throughout, the sawyer's daughter could not escape the nagging sensation that had vexed her on her ride in—that she was forgetting something. Something important. Something vital. It was as if there were a void in her mind, an emptiness where some essential knowledge had once been stored.

She finished her unpacking, then sat on the floor and closed her eyes, quieting her mind. She focused on the rhythm of her pulse.

Whatever it was that she had forgotten was not coming to her. Other thoughts then intruded as well.

What if she was wrong about all of this? What if she had disobeyed Josen for nothing?

Worrying about that now would do her no good, she decided. And the errant memory would return to her in time.

Valla moved to the desk and wrote a short letter to her beloved sister, Halissa. She recounted details of her journey, told her that all was well, told her that she loved her and that she would come visit her soon.

And she hoped that was true. Maybe after this demon was dispatched... maybe she could take some time away.

She folded the letter, placed it in an envelope, then deposited the envelope in her travel bag.

Valla snuffed the candle and lay on her side, facing the door, her mind working to retrieve what she felt was lost.

She sighed heavily and wished desperately, as she did every night, for a sleep without nightmares of the attack on her village. She wished, as she did every night, that just once she could dream of something good.

She had forgotten what it was like to dream of anything but slaughter.

Keghan Gray stumbled through the doorway of his farmhouse, having relieved himself in the flower garden outside moments earlier. Seretta would not be pleased if she found out, but she would also keep silent on the matter if she knew what was good for her. She *hadn't* known such things when they were first married, but over the years she had learned. Sometimes the lessons were hard but necessary.

The lamp beside the door was unlit... a matter Keghan would take up with Seretta come sunrise. A man could break his damn leg walking into a dark house. After three tries, Keghan succeeded in lighting the wick.

Keghan absently wondered where Rexx was as he headed for the scullery. On the nights when Keghan would come home late from the tavern, Rexx would normally greet him at the door, tongue lolling, tail wagging excitedly. Of course, Rexx preferred to sleep in Joshua's room... He was most likely there now, curled up at the foot of the bed.

The scullery table was bare. Keghan felt the aggravation well up inside, causing his hands to reflexively curl into fists as his jaw clenched. Seretta had been told to have a helping of supper waiting for him. She couldn't be that foolish. Keghan considered that perhaps Joshua had eaten his portion. If so, the boy would have to be punished. Punished sternly, as was warranted in such matters.

For now, though, it looked as if Keghan would be forced to cut his own meat. The ride from town had stoked quite a hunger, after all. Snatching a knife from the table, Keghan thrust the lamp before him as he stalked toward the larder.

He barged into the long, pitch-black room, lamplight revealing a few sizeable chunks of butchered pig hanging on hooks lining the wall to his right. He stood at a thick hog leg and smiled.

Keghan bent over to set down the lamp so he could cut off a slice, and as he did so, he noticed a puddle of something dark like wine on the floor. He held the lamp closer.

Blood.

The sight sobered him slightly... There shouldn't be blood on the floor. The hogs were gutted and cleaned outside.

It was pooled between his legs, emanating from somewhere behind him. Rising and turning, Keghan lifted the lamp, then nearly dropped it as he stepped back.

Rexx was dangling from a hook on the opposite wall, hung by the soft flesh under the jaw. Blood matted his fur and was still dripping from his tail. Most of his insides had been scooped out and were piled in the corner.

A warm breeze rolled in as the door at the end of the larder was opened from outside. The lamplight could not illuminate far enough for Keghan to see. He held the lamp down and away to let his eyes adjust. A voice drifted to him.

"Father?"

"Joshua! Get in here, boy; what are you doing outside?"

Keghan still could not make out much more than a dark blur beyond the light.

"I said get in here! Someone's killed the dog. Do as I say, boy: move!"

His eyes adjusted enough to see his son's silhouette then, standing motionless in the doorway, a long-handled scythe held in both hands, its curved blade etched in sharp relief against the moon and clouds.

"But there's still reaping to do, Father."

Keghan's mouth hung open as he stumbled forward.

"What did you say, boy? Have you gone soft in the head...?"

A few steps more, and the lamp cast light on Joshua. His work clothes were stained... the same wine color that covered the floor.

"Did you do this? Did you kill the dog, you sick little—"

Without a word, Joshua stepped forward and swung. Keghan raised his left arm to block, but at the last second the boy brought the scythe down and across, between Keghan's ribs, ripping through his guts, the blade penetrating deep enough to leave the gore-soaked tip exposed on the other side.

A gurgling sound worked its way up Keghan's throat, escaping as a rattle from his open mouth. The boy had stuck him! Stuck him like a damned pig. He would answer for that. Come what may, the boy would be punished. Harshly.

Joshua pulled the blade free, a mistake that Keghan took full advantage of. Advancing quickly, he buried the kitchen knife to the hilt in Joshua's throat.

His son fell back like a stone. Despite the scythe blade's absence, a searing pain scorched Keghan's belly. He coughed up and spewed a massive spout of blood... and then he ran. He had killed his son! Now all he could think to do was get away, run as far and as fast as he possibly could. He headed straight into the cornfields, heedless of the stalks he crushed or drove aside, stumbling, spitting blood, dizziness threatening to topple him at any instant.

He ran as fast as his feet would allow, until the pain in his stomach at last forced him to his knees. He had ended at the base of the field's scarecrow. He needed to get away. If only he could regain his feet. If he could reach town, if he could get to Bellik the healer...

Keghan clenched the pants of the scarecrow, pulling himself up, a long stream of mucous and blood dangling from his chin. The material beneath his closed fist, however, did not feel like straw.

And there was blood soaking the cloth. Was it his blood?

Consciousness was slipping. Keghan hacked violently, pulled himself up the rest of the way, and raised his head to see the face of the scarecrow...

And saw instead the slackened, horror-stricken visage of his dead wife.

Just before dawn the following morning, Valla stood beside a sheet-covered corpse in Bellik's study. The blood spreading out from the head had already begun to dry on the cloth.

"Who is it?" Valla asked.

"Durgen, the blacksmith. He—he could barely speak when he came to my door... only said a few words before he passed on, but that was more 'n enough."

"What did he say?"

"Heh?"

Bellik was a relic of a man, thin and stooped, and hard of hearing despite his overgrown ears. His discomfort in her presence was palpable.

"The smith's words, what were they?" Valla asked louder.

"Oh..."

The healer attempted to pull back the sheet, but the drying blood held it fast. Bellik yanked and the cloth came free, revealing a weathered man, one half of his head misshapen from the blow.

"He said, 'My boy did this to me.'"

Valla was silent for a long moment, looking, and there was that sensation again, the worrisome notion that she was forgetting something important. She pushed it to the back of her mind, focusing once again on the situation at hand, on the dead man betrayed by his own son.

There was a scream then from the street outside— the desperate death wail of someone whose life was coming to a violent end.

Valla spun for the door. "Stay here."

An instant later she stepped into the pre-dawn light. In the street a boy, perhaps thirteen, stood over the body of a female merchant. The boy held a smith's hammer, its head covered in pulp. What was left of the merchant's skull was strewn among the wares arrayed nearby on a ragged blanket.

Valla thought of the fact that there had been no children among the bodies in the storehouse in Holbrook, and suddenly she understood.

There were no children because they had done the killing. Pawns doing the demon's bidding. For a brief instant, Valla was so shocked, so unsettled by the very idea, that she was off her guard. Vulnerable. She came to her senses and continued to assess the situation. She must act soon, or die.

The scream had drawn others out now as well, but Valla took special note of a little blonde-haired girl in a pink dress at the end of the thoroughfare; she held a crimson-stained knife in one hand and supported a bloody, ravenous-looking infant on the opposite hip. Her eyes were wide and bright.

There was a creaking noise on the overlook above Valla's position, someone stepping out, but a short, high creak—indicating a person of light weight.

Another child.

The smith's boy was approaching Valla now with an open-mouthed smile.

Two other kids appeared in the gathering, one small boy dragging a sheathed sword, and an older girl with a large stone held in both hands.

Then, a final child, a fiery red-headed boy missing two front teeth, skipping with a hatchet in his right hand. A small crowd of five adults had emerged onto the street as well. A few faces peered from windows.

"Anyone of a mind not to get hurt best get behind locked doors," Valla commanded from beneath her hood.

"Now!"

The adults in the crowd complied.

Bellik stood at the window, watching.

He would have considered the woman beautiful once, back when he cared about such things. Now he saw only a harbinger of doom. It was known: where the demon hunters went, death followed.

The townspeople had moved inside, but the children... the children had stayed out, and they were positioning to attack. The smith's words came back to Bellik...

My boy did this to me.

What sort of madness had overtaken the world to turn children into butchers? And the woman... the demon hunter, surely she would kill them.

A cloudburst of smoke exploded from the woman's feet and immediately billowed, obscuring her from sight. An instant later, a small form dropped down into the haze from the lookout above Bellik's viewpoint. As the cloud began to clear, a hatchet flew end over end, missing the child who had jumped down by scant inches.

Bellik's head swiveled to see a figure rise to a stand several feet away in the thinning, dark mist. It was her. The smoke had been a distraction executed by the hunter. Her wrist flicked, and a little red-headed boy who had skipped into view—the Travers boy, Bellik thought it must be—slapped a hand to his neck as if he'd been bitten.

Bellik's chest tightened.

She's killing them!

The smith's son, Kyndal, rushed forward, eyes bulging, spit flying from his open mouth. He swung the hammer in a wide arc. The demon hunter stepped in, grabbed the boy's wrist, and turned into his swing, circling him around and sending him crashing into a boy Bellik didn't recognize, who was in the process of trying to pull a sword that was larger than he was out of its sheath.

That boy went flat on his back. The demon hunter snatched the hammer and swung it underhand, smashing the head into the bottom of Kyndal's jaw. Teeth flew. The woman sidestepped, and Kyndal toppled onto his face, out cold. A few feet away, the Travers boy, hand still pressed to his neck, fell down in a heap.

The demon hunter's hand flicked outward again, toward the child who had dropped from the lookout, someone else Bellik didn't recognize, like the boy with the sword. Visitors from Holbrook, perhaps?

Bellik's hands tightened into fists. Outside, two children rushed the woman—Sahmantha Halstaff, bounding forward as if playing a game of kickball, waving a bloody dagger before her, and Bri Tunis, hefting a weighty stone above her head.

Bellik had seen acrobats from the distant land of Entsteig years ago in Caldeum. They flipped and tumbled, somersaulted and cartwheeled, with an ease that was nothing short of incredible. The healer was reminded now of those acrobats as he watched the woman leap upward, tuck, and roll in a ball, unhindered by the hard-edged plate mail she wore, landing behind Sahmantha. It was a blur of motion and almost too quick for the eye to follow, but

most amazingly of all, after the demon hunter's passing Sahmantha stood bound in a thin rope.

Not far away, the stranger who had jumped from the lookout collapsed, just as the Travers boy had done.

Enough!

Bellik ran to the door and opened it as the demon hunter spun, swinging Sahmantha next to Bri, her movements impossibly fast, arms whipping like a flag snapping in a gale. When she was done, both girls were bound.

Sahmantha's brother, little Ralyn, was crawling forward, seemingly in an attempt to gnash his teeth on the demon hunter's leg. She lifted him up, drew her dagger—

"No!" Bellik called out.

—and drove it through the back of the boy's shirt, into a nearby support beam, leaving the child kicking and flailing harmlessly. She turned and strode toward Bellik.

"The children," he breathed.

"Are alive. I used darts coated in a strong sedative. They're safe, for now, and will remain so only with your help."

Bellik's fists unclenched. His shoulders sagged in relief.

"You're surprised?" Valla asked.

"It is said by some that your kind..." Bellik looked down.

"Say it," Valla challenged.

Bellik summoned his courage. "... are no better than the demons. That your eyes burn with Hellsfire. That everywhere you go, death follows."

Valla stepped closer to Bellik, who stumbled backward.

"It is said that when a demon peers into you, healer, into the deepest recesses of your mind, then you may peer back if you know how. And then you will see only vengeance. Only the hunt. And your eyes will burn with its obsession."

Bellik's lower lip quivered. "Your eyes... do not burn."

Valla's features softened. "No. I live for more than just vengeance." Valla turned. "Now, I need a place where the children can be held. Separately."

The healer thought for a moment.

"We got no more than one jail cell... but we got stables for the packbeasts. Stables could work, surely."

Valla stood looking through the small barred window into the stable stall. Sahmantha sat there, hands and feet lashed together, head inclined, straight blonde hair concealing her face. The rest of the children were held in the remaining stalls, two or three in some, but Valla had insisted Sahmantha be kept alone.

When the children had been transported here, a throng of townspeople had gathered around the wagons used to haul the young ones to the stables. Many of the citizens had grown violent, and much of their ire was directed at Valla. But Bellik, Bellik they trusted, and it was his counsel that had averted catastrophe, for the time being at least. The people waited outside the stables even now. Valla could hear the echoing din of their curses and lamentations.

Bellik had just finished speaking to them. "They want to know: why is this happening? Why the children?"

Valla opened the stall door, stepped inside, and kneeled in the dry straw.

"Lock the door behind me."

"But—"

"Do it."

As she heard the latch being slid into place, Valla parted Sahmantha's hair. She tilted the girl's chin up. The little one's eyes were closed.

The blonde hair, the fair skin... reminded her so much of Halissa. She thought of how Halissa's face always lit up at the sight of her older sister. She thought of Halissa's bright, inquisitive eyes and boundless energy.

Valla could not show weakness to the healer, but now, now a wave of nausea rolled through her, a tide of sadness and disgust, and suddenly Valla felt very tired, tired in both body and soul.

She remembered her village in Westmarch. She remembered her family. She fought back the rapidly unfolding memories of the massacre, when she herself had been little more than

a child, the same flashes that plagued her night after night: screams of the dead and dying; blood; a demon claw swiping at her neck but cutting her jaw instead; running, Halissa's hand in hers; hiding near the river...

And, later, being found by others who had suffered similar fates, learning of the demon hunters. Being mentored by Josen, remade into an avatar of vengeance, a weapon forged to strike at the heart of darkness.

Valla had been absently rubbing the scar on her jaw. She leaned close now to Sahmantha. "Speak, demon."

Valla waited. No response.

"Do not play coy with me. This is a game you cannot win. Your only hope is to be sent back to your light-cursed master, to pray that perhaps the Hells will show you mercy, because I will not. Now speak your name."

Sahmantha did not stir.

Lowering the girl's head, Valla rose and stood at the barred window.

"Healer! You asked if there was a reason this demon chose the children... and I tell you yes. This pathetic wretch of a hellspawn chose the young ones because it is weak and the fledgling are vulnerable, easy prey for the scum that begs for scraps discarded by its masters."

Bellik was standing just inside Valla's view. He stared at her, eyebrows raised.

Valla felt it then: movement behind her, accompanied by the faintest sound.

The sawyer's daughter turned to see the girl standing on her toes, back arched, head tucked against her shoulder... Her hair had fallen from a face broken out in veins, her eyes wide, unfocused, bloodshot. When her mouth opened, it seemed almost to struggle in forming the words at first. Then...

"TURN NOT YOUR BACK, OH PRIDEFUL ONE!"

The voice was a loud, grating strain, like a continuous intake of breath.

"SEEK YOU TO STAND BEFORE ME?" The girl's head whipped from one shoulder to the other. "SUCH REACHING EXCEEDS YOUR GRASP, SUB-CREATURE. A DISTRACTION, NONETHELESS I MIGHT FIND AMUSING. RELEASE ME, THEN, AND SEE..."

Valla drew a blade. Bellik protested, his hands pressed tight against his ears, lips quivering. Valla appeared not to notice as she severed the bonds holding Sahmantha.

Let us see indeed.

Settling back on her feet, the child took two halting steps. Valla moved to the side, and the girl lurched forward to stand before the barred door. Her head rotated, chin rolling over her shoulder, vacant eyes staring.

"COME."

Valla called to Bellik, "Unlock the door."

Bellik's eyes shot back and forth between Sahmantha and Valla. "Is it safe?"

"No harm will come. I'll see to it."

After an instant's hesitation Bellik did as he was instructed. The girl, chin to her chest and hair hanging so that it was impossible for her to see where she walked, nonetheless proceeded unerringly into the stable.

Bellik gave her a wide berth, and then he and Valla followed as the girl passed the first stalls where the other children were held. To their right, the older girl who had hefted the stone earlier stood at a door, grasping the bars, and when she spoke, it was in the gushing voice of the demon.

"I AM OLPHESTOS. I AM THE INFILTRATOR, PROCURER, HERD OF THE WRETCHED, AND FLAYER OF THE WRITHING DAMNED..."

Bellik glanced about in horror, his palms pressed once again to his ears as Sahmantha shuffled on. The boy who had dragged the sword in the street pulled himself up to peer through a window on the other side, the voice continuing, issuing now from his mouth.

"THE FOMENTER, GATHERER, INFLICTOR, AND THROAT OF THE SILENT SCREAM..."

Another child spoke from a stall on Sahmantha's right. "THE FERRYMAN OF LOST DREAMS, SHATTERED HOPE, AND WITHERING DESPAIR..."

At the final stall appeared the smith's son. There was a bloody vacancy where his front teeth had once been.

"THE READY RIGHT HAND OF TERROR. THE INWARD-STARING EYE. KNOW ME, AND KNOW THE UNSPEAKABLE."

Bellik stayed close to Valla as Sahmantha stepped out into the sunlight.

Valla exited behind her, pushed back her hood, and forced her way through the gathered crowd.

"Make room! All of you! Bellik, a hand!"

The townspeople pressed in, questioning, accusing. Bellik shouted for the throng to make way as Sahmantha staggered forward.

Valla parted the crowd ahead of the little girl, who continued on. Her movements were erratic, spasmodic at some points, yet graceful and almost liquid at others. The knot of people proceeded past the shops on the eastern edge of town.

Sahmantha sped up her pace, and several of the townspeople fell behind. Bellik gasped for air, his face red with the exertion.

They had made their way along a desolate stretch of dirt road, little more than a path out into the fields beyond. Sahmantha stumbled out onto a patch of dead grass, stopped, turned. Her head straightened, and the demon's gale-speak burst forth once again.

"SEEK YOU TO STAND BEFORE ME? THEN COME..."

The girl grinned slowly, but when she spoke next, it was with the voice of only a child, of little Sahmantha Halstaff. "We can play roughhouse together."

Without warning the girl's eyes closed. Her body went limp and collapsed.

Valla rushed forward and leaned close to make sure Sahmantha still lived. She could hear the child's breath.

Most of the townspeople who had fallen behind caught up now, circling the demon hunter. Bellik stood nearby, steadying his breathing. Valla looked up as if expecting the demon to fall out of the sky.

Then, she looked down. She took note of the blighted grass, running her fingers over it. It spread out over a large expanse, stretching far and tapering on either side, forming the general shape of a massive eye. There were black spots throughout as well—demonic contamination.

"Healer, what's below us?"

Bellik's eyebrows lifted. "Nothing."

"That ain't 'xactly so."

Both Valla and Bellik turned to one of the observers, a rotund farmer with a bushy white mustache.

"The river Bohsum would be right 'bout underneath our feet."

Bellik watched Valla, and whether or not it was a trick of the light, he was unsure, but it seemed that she had gone slightly pale.

"But I heard the river as I rode in last night. I hear it faintly even now."

The mustached farmer's brow dipped in what appeared to be mild annoyance.

"That ain't the real Bohsum... Just a channel dug out by the settlers ages ago, meant ta divert the water... 'Cause the real Bohsum flows outta the Deadfall Mountains—"

The farmer turned and pointed northeast.

"—and pretty soon comes to a sinkhole. Then it goes underground... runs through these parts deep below for quite a ways 'fore comin' back up two days' journey to the west."

Valla scanned the immediate surroundings.

"No well?"

"Soil outside o' town's fertile enough, but the ground right here's harder 'n iron. Easier for the old timers to dig the channel."

Valla sighed as she replied, "This sinkhole and the place where the river resurfaces... there are no other ways to get down there?"

The farmer spat. "Nope."

"And where's the sinkhole?"

The farmer nodded toward the mountains. "'Bout half a day that way."

Bellik peered at Valla inquisitively. "So... so what now?"

The sawyer's daughter raised her hood and swept the crowd with her gaze.

"Stay here, and stay together. There is strength in numbers. Take Sahmantha back to the stables. Bind and lock away any other children under sixteen summers." She looked again to Bellik.

"And get me my horse so I can go kill your demon."

It sounded like a thunderstorm.

Valla stood at the lip of the cavity into which the Bohsum flowed, her eyes lost in the swirling waters of the sinkhole. The river entered the depression here and spiraled slowly at the edges, more vigorously inward, before finally disappearing into the darkness at its center, down into the unknown below.

The spray of it felt cool on her face as the twisting vortex and the sound like a gale took Valla's mind back to a night weeks after the attack on her village...

Valla and Halissa were huddled together for warmth as the rain pounded the earth. Halissa had fallen into an exhausted sleep. But, as had been the case for so many nights before, she was beset by nightmares of the massacre. Halissa woke up, screaming, and ran...

Nearby, the swollen river raced. Halissa ran too close to its banks, and she slipped in the mud... Halissa reached out her hand...

Valla had feared that Halissa would be swept away, lost forever... lost like the rushing waters that spiraled now into the core of the sinkhole, so very much like an eyeless socket.

Her heart sank at the recollection, but she had grasped Halissa's hand. It had worked out. Everything had worked out in the end.

Back in the here and now, the absence in Valla's memory was more pronounced, a persistent nothingness. Whatever the missing piece was, Valla vowed, it did not matter. She felt more tired than ever, but she would finish this. For Halissa.

She knew that her armor would only weigh her down, and so she shed it, piece by piece. Her weapons she placed in a satchel given to her by Bellik for just such a purpose. In the satchel also were flint and tinder wrapped in goatskin. To these she added her bolas and various explosive-tipped bolts.

She removed her cloak and hood and placed them in the satchel as well so they would not encumber her in the water. Once stripped of her vestments, Valla cinched the satchel and stepped to the edge of the cleft.

Valla could think of nothing more unconscionable than a demon that would corrupt children. She felt a heat rise within her core, a seething fury. But that was what the demon wanted, wasn't it?

She thought of Delios. Of his failure.

A demon hunter must always temper hatred with discipline.

Part of her knew that she might not survive the plunge, that the churning waters could pull her to a watery death.

Valla took a deep breath and jumped.

It was a kind of isolated chaos within the roiling eye of the sinkhole. The world surrendered to obscurity as her muscles struggled to negotiate her body's orientation. Her chest burned with held breath. She fought to maintain her grip on the satchel in the midst of it all. She was whipped, rolled, thrust, and submerged deeper and farther until her consciousness threatened to abandon her completely. The darkness and lack of positional awareness were absolute.

There was a sense of rapid movement; various parts of her body struck stony protrusions as she was carried by the river.

And then...

Her fingers found a snag. She had grasped a thick stalagmite and was bracing against the rushing tide. She pulled her head clear and drew in as much air as her chest could hold.

She felt the satchel in her hand and was relieved. The water in her eyes made it impossible to see, and even after she wiped her face against her arm, her vision still did not clear.

The air was cool down here. Valla probed with her foot and felt a wall of stone. Finally, the blurriness diminished as she swung the satchel onto a ledge and dragged herself out of the raging torrent.

She sat, allowing her body a moment to rest, taking in her surroundings. The immediate area opened into what appeared to be a warren of tunnels and alcoves. Luminescent algae coated the walls, stalactites and stalagmites, rocky columns, and parts of the roof. The light cast by it provided an eerie, unearthly glow that rendered a torch unnecessary.

Good, Valla thought. I can keep both hands free.

Detecting any noise other than the gushing water was impossible, as the thunderous roar echoed throughout. Valla removed her cloak—which, remarkably, had remained mostly dry—from the satchel and fastened it for warmth. She unpacked her weapons, relieved to see that the crimson bolt was still among them, then set her crossbows and stood, one in each hand.

She gazed into a cave with jagged limestone spikes protruding from top and bottom like a shark set to swallow its prey, and she spotted a shadow against the blackness beyond, flitting from one side to the other.

Valla pressed after it, and as she did she felt the first brush of the demon's mind against hers, a malefic, detestable presence lurking just outside her awareness, a wolf prowling at the edge of a dark forest.

The sensation became more insistent as she stepped into the cave, senses fully alert. Her pulse raced.

WELCOME, a voice spoke in her head. Valla moved to the back of the cave, where a tunnel receded into darkness, the algae much sparser upon the walls. Here and there were patches of the same black substance found at the well in Holbrook.

She knelt and dipped her fingers in the viscous muck.

WHAT PERSISTENCE YOU HAVE. WHAT DESIRE.

WHY?

THE EYE WILL SEE.

Valla stood and snuck into the tunnel, crossbows ready. There was movement across the floor, a slithering, and then she saw it, its skin glistening just a bit in what little light existed, a black tentacle that rose, unfurled, and whipped out at her. Valla fired a bolt and the thing jerked backward, but the crossbow was a poor weapon for this task. She slung one crossbow and removed a dagger even as she felt the demon probing inside her head now, a dull ache. She envisioned black tendrils within her mind, not unlike the oily appendage that attacked her.

SAWYER DAUGHTER.

Valla sliced across, shearing the tip off as the tentacle shot forward. It retracted quickly, but the presence in her mind was burrowing deeper.

DELIGHTFUL MEMORIES YOU KEEP INSIDE, BLOOD SACK. RIPE FOR PLUCKING.

It felt as though needles were piercing Valla's head as she pressed on. The walls here were thick with the black, glistening sludge.

VILLAGE. FAMILY. FRIENDS. WARMTH, SHELTER. HAPPY TIMES.

THEN...

DEMONS. SWARM LIKE LOCUSTS.

The walls seemed to squirm now as more tentacles emerged from the mire and uncoiled. Valla slung her second crossbow, removed another dagger, and lashed out, left and right.

RUNNING.

COWARD.

ABANDONED FAMILY. LEFT THEM TO DIE.

Valla wrestled with the part of her that said it was true.

You are the demon's greatest weapon.

"There's nothing I could have done but die myself!" Valla shouted as she somersaulted over a massive coil, slicing deep. "I did what I had to do. I survived."

She then found herself in a larger circular gallery that opened into a grander space beyond, an outer half ring fronted by rock columns, thin in the middle, wide at top and bottom. Her head pounded. The demon was driving harder.

SCREAMS. DEATH. VILLAGE... PURGED.

FAMILY... PURGED.

"You will not manipulate me as you did Delios!"

BLOOD...

YES. BLOOD LIKE...

RIVER.

"Enough! Face me, and let's have done with this!"

THE EYE SEES.

I SEE YOU.

The thunder of the water was more distant in this area, and Valla thought briefly that she heard a little girl's giggle. She saw movement in the outer ring and gave chase.

The curved chamber led to another tunnel, another bend, and she was again surrounded by darkness, her feet making squishing sounds in the black ooze on the ground, and then... the squall roar of the river muffled all other noise.

She was circling back around toward the water. A form, a light haze that seemed to be a head peeking from behind a corner, appeared and was gone.

Valla switched once more to crossbows, rounded the bend, and saw briefly what looked like a child. The hellspawn must have brought one of the children down here with it.. to use as a mortal shield.

The figure ran. Valla pursued. They were drawing closer to the river. Valla could see now that it was a girl. A girl with long blonde hair.

THUNDER. RAIN.

The child stopped and stood eerily still. Valla slowed her approach, ready for any surprise, her heart hammering within her chest.

SISTER.

The girl turned, and Valla saw Halissa's features.

RIVER. RUNNING. MIND BROKEN.

It couldn't be Halissa, of course. But it looked so very much like her. This girl was pale, as pale as death. Her waterlogged skin had begun to fall away in strips. One eye bulged.

Valla froze. The pain in her head was unbearable. But the wall that had blocked her from the memory obscured since before her arrival, that wall was crumbling.

And she remembered...

YES.

She remembered the night Halissa ran, maddened, completely unhinged by weeks of nightmares and living like an animal, tormented by the carnage she had witnessed. She remembered chasing her through the storm.

The little girl in the cave smiled, and the claw of a black crab reached out.

Halissa had slipped, and Valla's heart had turned to ice. Halissa had stretched forth her hand, and Valla had taken it...

But the rain-soaked grip could not be held. Halissa had screamed once and was gone.

BURIED IT, YOU TRIED. BURIED SO DEEP. BUT THE EYE SEES.

NO GOOD DREAMS FOR YOU.

Valla dropped to her knees before the girl in the cave. A black tentacle squirmed out of the rushing river, sliding snakelike across the floor. It closed around Valla's arm and pulled. One of her daggers fell from cold fingers. It didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered.

WHY THE CHILDREN? CHILDREN ARE HOPE. I AM THE DESTROYER OF HOPE. I AM THE TERROR OF MURDER BY THE BELOVED. I AM THE RAGE OF INNOCENCE LOST.

Destruction begets Terror as Terror begets Hate as Hate begets Destruction—

YES.

DELIOS. SO MUCH HATE IN THAT ONE.

BENEATH IT ALL A SCARED BOY. EAGER TO DESTROY.

She felt the stone rough against her as she was drawn to the river's edge.

YOU ARE MINE NOW.

But there was one more piece of the missing memory.

She remembered the campfire.

The tentacle pulled her under. Another reached up and grasped her free arm. The water was much deeper here. Valla closed her eyes, unwilling yet to let out the last of her breath. What final piece was left?

The campfire. The mental exercises. She had buried the recollection of Halissa's death. But why?

Remember.

So the demon would go searching for it. In her mind's eye, Valla saw the infiltration as hundreds of smoky tendrils.

When a demon peers into you, into the deepest recesses of your mind, then you may peer back if you know how.

Valla imagined her consciousness locking on to a tendril, following it back to its source...

WHAT IS THIS?

It is the most dangerous thing a demon hunter can do.

Her consciousness invaded the presence that had so deeply latched on to her. A malignant red eye dominated her mental vision. She pressed toward it, seeking. Her surroundings

were alive with squirming, crawling things. But as she probed deeper, as her insistence mounted... they took form.

With a sudden clarity, she understood what she faced.

Valla's eyes opened beneath the water. And there in the inky depths...

They burned like fire.

I see YOU.

She felt the presence retreating from within her mind, felt the grip on her arms loosen. She slashed outward with her remaining dagger, slicing the tentacles. The river threatened to sweep her away... but not this time. The river would take nothing else from her.

Olphestos is not even your true, cursed name.

Valla kicked toward the surface and dug her fingers into the rocky ledge. She pulled herself up, and the corpse of Halissa, a look of fear now upon its face, took a step back.

I see you, Valdraxxis—foot soldier. Outcast. Derelict.

The dead girl turned and ran.

During the wars against the Prime Evils, you led a failed campaign. Maligned and scorned... you once were a demon of import in the Hells but now are considered anathema even to your kind.

I...

Something shambled out of the darkness to her right, something that might have at one time been a toad, malformed now, bloated, with massive lambent eyes. It reached for her.

I WILL NOT BE DENIED.

Valla bit down on her dagger, dug into a pouch under her jerkin, and was happy to find that her bolas were still there.

She cast a bola, which wrapped around an amphibian arm. The creature raised the appendage to its face, staring at the rope and spheres stupidly.

The bola exploded, vaporizing the thing's arm and taking the head with it as Valla grabbed the dagger from her mouth and stalked after the little girl.

Not really the corpse of Halissa, just a form taken by the demon to weaken her.

It is you who are weak now, lapdog.

More things came from recesses in the walls, monstrous things; the first scuttled sideways and swung a single massive claw. Valla vaulted above the creature and drove her dagger through its carapace. The fiend's legs buckled beneath it. She retrieved one of her crossbows.

Another aberration lunged. Valla fired one bolt that shattered something resembling an arm, then shot a second through a bulbous eye, moving all the while, chasing the impostor of her sister. She tossed her dagger and drew her second crossbow.

A long passage greeted her. The walls came alive as countless insects—roaches, centipedes, beetles... a slick, wet tide of pestilence—surged toward her almost as one.

The demon hunter stopped, took a knee, and fired multiple bolts from both crossbows. There were several small explosions. She felt the heat on her face, and when the flames dissipated, the squirming host was little more than a slimy paste on the walls. The rest she crushed as she sprinted forward.

Valla rounded a bend, but what she saw was no longer the little girl.

It was a mirror image of herself. Valla stepped up, removing the crimson bolt from beneath her leather. The mirror-Valla opened her mouth, and a thick black sludge bubbled out, pouring down her chin. Runnels of the substance bled from her nostrils. The scar on her jaw split apart and ooze seeped through. Her eyes filled with the black liquid, and the mirror-Valla cried tears of demon blood.

No. That is not me. That will not be me.

The mirror-Valla darted away past a darkened alcove, around a massive stone pillar. The demon hunter followed, crossbows prepared to fire. She rounded the pillar, spun, and dropped to one knee, speaking...

"I see you, minion of the Burning Hells..."

She spoke the words even as the demon emerged from the alcove, swinging a thick arm that ended with a chitinous serrated blade, a strike that would have surely beheaded the sawyer's daughter an instant before.

"In the name of all those who have suffered, I cast you out!"

The demon was a hulking monstrosity. Its body was like those of the creatures that existed deep below the sea, where light never reached. Tumescant black tentacles served as legs. Its upper torso was covered in an armor-like shell bursting with spiky protrusions, and the entirety of the nightmarish thing was coated in a viscous, midnight-hued ooze.

"Begone and be damned, and may you never return!"

A massive red eye with a narrow slit stared back at her. The slit widened as Valla fired the crimson bolt.

The bolt struck the eye, popping it like a grape. The runes on the shaft of the bolt glowed, and there was an explosion of light.

The weather had started to turn cold.

Valla stood, hood down, looking at the large wooden cross that marked Halissa's grave. Several weeds had sprouted since she was last here. The graves of her parents, where she had finally buried what remained of them, were here as well, and surrounding them were the burial sites of all the other villagers who had been butchered.

Josen approached but stayed silent, the light breeze stirring his cloak.

Valla knelt and began pulling weeds.

"Word from the village," Josen said, his tone irritatingly even, as always. "All is... as well as can be expected, given the circumstances. The children are themselves once again, with no memory of their actions... though many of them will grow up without parents. Bellik and others are offering their homes to the orphaned."

Valla set her jaw. "Good."

Josen shifted his weight slightly. "There is word also that the townspeople are... thankful."

The sawyer's daughter rose, glancing at Josen as she did so. There were three gashes, still healing, across the left side of his face.

"What of Delios?" Valla asked.

"Taken care of," Josen replied. Valla waited for further explanation. The master hunter only eyed her impassively.

"I've heard whisperings..." she said. "Premonitions from those gifted with precognitive ability... that a star will fall in Tristram seven days from now."

Josen's eyes took Valla's measure. "You heard true. The falling star is believed to be a sign of the Prophecy. The others have asked that I send our best hunter to investigate."

Valla pulled an item from beneath her armor. A moment of silence passed between them, broken finally by Josen.

"What you did—"

"Was a gamble. But it worked."

The sawyer's daughter unfolded the letter she had written in Havenwood, bent down, and placed it before the grave, setting a rock atop it. "Told you I'd come visit," she whispered.

She stood and looked at her mentor.

"Everything's a test, you're fond of saying. Life is a test. I failed at the ruins... but this is a test I passed. And I learned much from it. I learned that we truly can be our own worst enemies. But I also learned that no matter how much the demons may destroy, they cannot destroy hope."

The setting sun reflected in Valla's eyes. "It may be effective for you to simply turn off your emotions, but that is not my way. It was liberating, for a time, to live with the promise of a different life. To live a contented lie."

How easy it would be to go back to living that lie, Valla thought. Josen stared at her with that appraising gaze of his.

Valla went on, "It was a good dream... but for now it must remain just that—a dream."

The sawyer's daughter pulled her hood up. "I'm back. I'm back, and I'm ready... to continue the hunt."

She turned away.

"Where do you think you're going?" Josen asked flatly.

"Tristram. The others asked you to send the best. I am the best. I'm going, and you have less than a few heartbeats to try and stop me."

Valla waited with her back to the master hunter, then lifted her scarf... An instant later she strode away, crested a rise, and was gone from sight.

Josen watched, and if there had been an observer present, that person would have witnessed an anomaly: something playing at the master hunter's lips, something that resembled... a smile.