

Light flooded into the empty chamber, coloured in faint hues of red and green from the faded staining in the glass dome above. Motes of dust fluttered through the air like tiny fireflies, tumbling ever downwards in lazy spirals. A peaceful stillness had taken hold of this place and refused to relinquish it, entirely at odds with the sinister darkness lurking in the catacombs below.

Grace stood in quiet contemplation of the scene, light reflecting from her pristine robes in a blinding glare. Her lip curled. She cared little for this place. A long-abandoned chapel built atop an ancient temple ruined some centuries past, the neglect of this sacred ground was an offence against Solthecius himself.

The Inquisitor's dilapidated surroundings offered little to placate to her condemnation. The elements had not been kind to a building standing unattended for so many years, her eye picking out places where walls had crumbled and fallen in, and dark metalwork was spotted with orange. Tall windows, once proud and vibrant, had grown dull in their frames; the panes from several others shattered over the floor in pointed shards of multicoloured glass.

This remote shrine would be impure forevermore, sins of the past having rendered it far beyond the limits of mortal sanctification. The order had allowed the lonely site to be quietly forgotten over the years as the trail of attendant worshippers had slowly reduced to a trickle, content that the pious should never know of its existence. It was probable the dusty flagstones had known neither foot nor knee for decades until the arrival of the Inquisition, the carpets once covering them having rotted away long since.

But, Grace was not here to kneel in supplication.

A warren of tunnels hid underfoot, a sprawling dungeon first created for the primitive temple a thousand years ago, made into a labyrinthian maze by the architects of the chapel erected in the time since. They had not been alone in their attentions. Nature too had touched the confusing hive of forgotten cells and foetid cellars just as it had the land above, shuddering tremors and flooding causing irreversible destruction in the depths. Fraught with collapsed ceilings and impassable corridors, even the most recent map was hopelessly obsolete.

It was the perfect prison for as vile a fraternity as the Union.

Despite the length of leash allowed him by the new Bacchus, Rage had quickly proven too wild a dog to be left to his own devices, his rebellious instinct too fractious to be of use. Grand plans for the treacherous cadre spoiled, Pious VI had not sat idle in retaliation. His Inquisitors' mission of stewardship soon become one of hunter and prey, Grace and Benediction ordered to entomb each member of the Union underground, far from the eyes of man.

Their first quarry had been Rage himself, the vicious thug now imprisoned in a cell as bleak as his blackened heart. His capture in particular had been a dark enough deed to cost of the lives of three initiates, each bloodied by his wicked cleaver until their bodies moved no more. Pursuit of the other wolves in his ruthless pack had been less barbaric, yet none had come easily.

The Saint would have lied if she did not admit to a sense of satisfaction in persecuting such reprehensible scum. She had readily paid penance each night, quickly reaching forgiveness for her behaviour in service of the August Lord. Her conscience remained as pure as her unbroken innocence.

Footsteps cut through the silence and from the corner of her vision, Benediction's immense frame appeared. Unlike Grace, he wore his armour and faceplate, his robes dirtied from travelling through the depths below. Behind him he dragged a long chain, metal links clinking together as they writhed, the final malefactor struggling in vain against the hard iron.

The witch had arrived.

The woman had been a dishevelled mess even before she had been dragged from her den, clothes a tattered collection of unwashed rags, her hair matted into thick dreadlocks. She reeked as only an individual with an aversion to bathing could, a musky stench of dried sweat and mould.

Grace's eyes narrowed, a sadistic smile creeping across her features. Hemlocke deserved cleansing in more ways than one. Amongst all of her miserable brethren the witch offended the order most, by defying the very word of Solthecius with her sacrilegious profanity. She belonged in the dark ages past, a slave to the pagan beliefs of man when he had paid fealty to the elements and the stars above.

Sensing the contemptuous stare, the witch turned her head towards Grace, only to wilt and avert her tortured eyes as she shrank away again. The brief glimpse revealed pupils dilated to monstrous proportions, all trace of colour replaced by heavy black orbs. Doubtless, Hemlocke had been sampling her own stock.

A vicious yank of her collar dragged the witch under the light of the grand dome, painting her in dappled hues. She reacted by clawing at the chain and shrieking at her tormentor.

'No blind man should see as you, giant. You are unnatural, an abomination!' The sudden outburst was the first collection of legible words the woman had offered since her capture, the rest only gnashing of teeth and forlorn wailing.

Hemlocke's spite earned her a backhanded slap across the mouth, the impact whipping her delicate neck backwards. When her head swung back again she glared murderously, bloated eyes unblinking. A thin trail of red trickled over her chin, and the witch defiantly spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm onto the floor, crimson covering a cross carved into the stone.

She grinned, teeth stained pink. 'The Old Ones care little for your pretend lord, or the misguided fools who follow him. You are as powerless as the lies your kind peddle, and these worthless icons crumbling under my heel.'

Benediction punished her blasphemy again, a huge hand seizing Hemlocke by the throat and roughly hauling her into the air. His head swung around to Grace as the witch's hands scrabbled at his grip, blank mask somehow conveying his silent question.

Grace took a moment to savour the undiluted panic over Hemlocke's features. Her face was turning a painful shade of purple, her legs frantically kicking on tiptoes. The witch was clearly running out of breath, her sullen tongue silenced but for a strangled gasp.

The Saint shook her head.

Benediction gave one last cruel squeeze before hurling the Union scum away, her body tumbling through the air until she landed amongst the rotting remnants of a row of pews. The witch struck the wood with a sickening thud, an agonised scream torn from her lungs on impact. Her voice trailed into a rasp as she slipped to the floor like a child's discarded ragdoll.

Hemlocke lay still amongst the splintered wood, only movement a tremble as she sobbed pathetically. The line of red across her chin had become a wide river, pooling on the old stone beneath her.

'I will not pretend you do not deserve death for your sins, witch. You are barely a trial in our holy mission, a trivial distraction at most. Perhaps death would provide the best form of censure for one such as you, rather than imprisonment.' Hemlocke didn't react to the words, her eyes still closed.

Grace glanced at her companion. His mask hid any hint of expression, but Grace knew his judgement would match hers regardless. The heathen woman's fate was sealed in a moment of unspoken communion.

'Illuminate her.' With the slightest nod, the Virgin Sister signalled her guardian into action once more. An armoured boot stepped forward from under his robes, catching the light in spite of a thin layer of grime.

Hemlocke lurched up into the air, a marionette with her strings suddenly pulled taught. Her hands scratched at the air, nails clawing like talons clutching invisible rungs. Back straight as a rod, the witch's head snapped towards Grace, eyes rolled back to become milky orbs. She bared her teeth in a feral grin.

Benediction broke into a run, hands reaching for her, but the witch slipped away as though possessed by a devil, her nimble agility at odds with how erratically her limbs moved. She reached the nearest window in moments, the tall glass pane already shattered inwards. Without breaking her unnatural gait Hemlocke launched herself through the opening, disappearing but for a bloody scrap of cloth.

Benediction roared in frustration, punching an armoured fist into the wall. He looked back towards Grace, tilting his head downwards in self condemnation.

The Saint's smile returned. It was time to persecute the hunt once more.

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Hemlocke's eyelids slowly parted, her vision blurry and indistinct. Whatever spirits had aided her escape had scattered, leaving her entirely mortal once more, a broken shell stretched over weak and bruised flesh.

As her senses returned she became slowly aware she lay at the bottom of a shallow ditch, muddy water soaking through her clothes, icy cold against her clammy skin. It seemed some time had elapsed since her flight, the avatar of the Father fallen from the blank skies to usher in the dominion of the

Goddess. The landscape was coloured a pale hue, the faint and ethereal light birthing a deep shadow in the recess where she now languished.

Her ears detected nary a hint of pursuit, but Hemlocke knew the accursed holy men would still be searching for her. She was the last of the Union to have evaded them, and their kind did not rest easily. They would hunt for her until her last breath, the chase as relentless as their passion for their falsehood god.

She groaned, knowing she was poor game presently.

Her forehead was warm and fevered; from her short breath and a dull ache in her flank she was likely wounded inside, the taste of coppery blood painted over her lips. Two of the fingers on her left hand were broken, pointing in unnatural directions. With her frenetic scramble apparently ceased some hours before, Hemlocke feared that if she tried to move her body would not obey.

She was a shattered figure, collapsed in a bolthole and awaiting death.

Hemlocke closed her eyes once again. If the gods wanted to take her, she would gladly relinquish her life to them. Even in this state, she was their servant, and she dared not betray the ancient oaths of her order. In a faltering mumble, she began to mouth ancient words from the rite of ending.

An image appeared in her mind, her voice faltering as the words inexplicably caught in her throat. She felt herself frown outwardly as the vision expanded and a fine lunar mist eclipsed all, covering every surface and leaving her numb. Somewhere in the distance faint silhouettes moved, their forms indistinct and wreathed by billowing clouds. Whenever she would strain her eyes to concentrate on one it would become intangible, only to maddeningly reappear some distance away.

Their voices echoed through the murky gloom, words illuminating each spirit momentarily with sparks of colour against the grey background.

‘What do you want for this one’s release?’ Even distorted the first voice was deep enough to be undeniably male, strong and powerful, the speaker glowing bright amber.

‘A gesture, support in coming trials.’ The second voice was a sinister hiss, the slither of a serpent baring its fangs.

‘Very well.’ Hemlocke felt uncertainty creep into the first speakers tone, and saw a shard of cold ice break through his aura, a jagged line of canker, twisted and bitter. He reluctantly spoke again after a pause. ‘We shall enter into agreement with you.’

The second spirit did not reply, instead sweeping around to face her as the mists surrounding them whipped up into a storm. His eyes bored into hers for a moment through the turmoil, and a cold sweat dripped down her spine. The vortex span faster, accompanied by the shrieking of a thousand crows, swirling forward to envelop her within a cloak of charcoal feathers.

His face coalesced inches before her own, the spirit become a horrific visage of a cloaked devil, a skull with sharpened teeth leering from the folds of blackened sackcloth.

‘You are not supposed to be here, witch. Why have you transgressed into this past?’ His dark words were the chill of the grave, morbid and flat, bereft of any trace of warmth.

Hemlocke found herself unable to answer, terror seizing her breath and suffocating her. Her knees buckled as her essence ebbed away, drawn on strings leading to his skeletal fingers.

The devil's hold was broken in a howl of agony, a spear of light skewering the enveloping darkness, warmth flooding through the rent to return life to the world once again. On the other side, she could see the first speaker, his golden aura strong and restored. He shielded another figure, a bestial creature which snarled furiously, and clacked her slavering jaws.

'Come, Hemlocke! Quickly!' This voice was female, the animalistic snarl familiar somehow. 'Salvation!'

Hemlocke's reply was drowned out by the murder of crows, a jagged cacophony which lashed at the golden figure and reopened the rent in his soul, allowing the ice to pour in.

She felt herself slipping away, the vision pulling itself to the edge of her consciousness. She desperately tried to reach her hands outwards, still unable to wrest meaning.

'Run! Run, Hemlocke! Whilst you can, come to us!' The urgent voice broke through once more, faint and quickly fading, swallowed by a tide of rolling mists, retreating away into the aether.

Hemlocke's head recoiled, a great breath forcing itself into her lungs with a violent shudder. Her eyes open, she saw that day had come once more. Somewhere nearby, she could hear footfall in the undergrowth, dried leaves cracking under booted heel.

It was time to flee her hiding place. The gods had seen fit to send her portents once more, and where they beckoned she would follow without question. She scrambled to her feet, forcing herself to ignore a sharp spike of pain in her chest. Her role in the machinations of the Old Ones was far from over, her future undecided, a path untraveled.

And her side yet to be chosen.