



REQUIEM, IN BELLS

ARI MARMELL

THE BELLS NEVER let up. The stifling heat and the sour stench of people, human and otherwise, crammed together between streets, between walls, never meant to accommodate such numbers... those, Khulechtan was long accustomed to. He felt those things, hated them, splashed the sweat from his brow and the haft of his spear, snorted the rancid air from his nostrils, and dismissed them. The dull buzz of a dozen accents, the creaking of wagon wheels, the sharp panting of dwarven slaves, and the longer, rasping breaths of his more bestial companion; the sun beating down on boiled and sweat-scoured leather, the mistrustful and fearful glances of all whom he passed — directed often his way, even more frequently toward the rotting and fearsome cargo he guarded — all comingled into an oppressive shroud. A shroud he wore day after day, and also, more often than not, managed to ignore.

It was *all* oppressive in the great city of Redoubt. The *last* city of Redoubt. The hunger and the want; the dreary, unsatisfying fare that was all most could afford to assuage that want. The day and the night, the labor and the rest. The living and the Dead. All oppressive, but all capable of being set aside, at times, by the dour men and women who had lived entire lives in their shadow.

But not the bells. Crafted to chime high and painful to the ear, to clash with one another in horrible cacophony, the bells would not be ignored, for that would have defeated their purpose.

Khulechtan barked a sharp order at the dwarves hauling the wagon. Most didn't even look up at the sound of his voice, just kept beards matted with sweat and dust aimed roadward, but obeyed. Creaking and juddering, the great wheeled cage turned a sharp corner, continuing past the ramshackle huts and impoverished tenements — dilapidated, listing, packed well beyond capacity, more hives than dignified abodes — that made up the next street on Khulechtan's appointed rounds.

Through the endless din of Eastside, poorest and most crowded districts of Redoubt's Inner City, through a hundred conversations and the cries of children and the bleating of goats, those bells cut. And even the most oblivious pedestrian stepped aside for Khulechtan's cart.

All save those who had deliveries for him.

Doors drifted open, where the humble tenements *had* doors. Leather curtains swept aside where they did not. From homes, the occasional shop, even sporadic alleyways, men and women — mostly human, of this culture or that, but occasionally a free dwarf — shuffled out bearing their dead.

Not *too* many, of course. Even in the harsh environs of Redoubt, people weren't dropping dead constantly, and Khulechtan's wagon was but one of three or four that would pass through this district

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throughout the day and night. The Undertaking never stopped, never slowed.

It wouldn't dare.

So he would stop, and unlatch the wood-barred cage, and watch as the people said a rude farewell to their loved ones before dumping them into the growing heap of corpses. Sometimes, the dwarven slaves would assist. Most of the time, Khulechtan drove the tip of his broad-bladed boar spear through the shoulders of the dead, severing muscle and tendon and bone, before locking back up and continuing on his way.

It was, perhaps, an unnecessary precaution. Many of the dead would never rise, and they almost never rose before processing. It took most people days, on average, and not scant hours to join the ranks of the Dead.

But "on average" was not "always." Khulechtan's precautions wouldn't keep a revenant from rising, but it ensured the creature couldn't tear at the bars — or grab an unsuspecting passerby, or slave, or Khulechtan himself! — if it did.

The extra bloodshed meant a more thorough cleaning of the wagon come end of shift, but that was a price he would pay willingly, especially as it was the dwarves who would be responsible for the bulk of the extra labor.

Lost in thought, to what extent the bells permitted, otherwise struggling to keep one eye on the growing cargo of dead flesh and the other on the citizens responding to the call of his chimes, Khulechtan almost failed to notice when the other member of his entourage fell suddenly behind. Only when Rasuk, eldest of the dwarven slaves, called the others to a halt and addressed him with a questioning, "*erus?*" in a parched tone did their leader recognize something had changed.

"Hudai? What is it?"

The ghûl slave had halted beside the boarded window of an old shack — teetering, stinking of dry rot, but a veritable palace compared to the tenements. Hudai sniffed at the sill, canine snout swaying rhythmically. As he wore only a pair of breeches, awkwardly altered to fit his inhuman frame, the hyena-brown pelt that covered most of his body rippled visibly as he pondered. He turned only slowly at the sound of his name (or the closest a human could come to approximating his name), idly scratching one claw down the rough, leathery skin that armored his chest and belly.

“What is it?” Khulechtan asked again.

When the ghûl replied, it was in the series of growls, snarls, and barks that were the only sounds the race could produce, a primitive language that had taken Khulechtan no small effort to learn.

“Smell death. Sick. Fresh.”

The human tried not to shudder at the hunger those words seemed to evoke in the ghûl even as he spoke them. “Are you sure?” Few in Redoubt would hide a corpse when the bells pealed. The consequences — legal and otherwise — were dire indeed.

“*Sure.*” Hudai paused, head tilting like a curious hound. “*Almost sure,*” he amended, grunting and pointing back toward the wagon. “*Smelly.*”

“Oh, *is* it?” Khulechtan cursed under his breath, but he’d worked with Hudai for a while, now. He found the carrion-eaters vile, had no idea how the Ouazi had stomached living side-by-side with them in the days before the Fall, before Redoubt, but... Hudai wasn’t too unreliable, too dumb, as ghûl went.

And, Khulechtan reminded himself in a moment of shame, as a near pure-blooded Surinzan himself, it wasn’t as though he had *any* right to criticize another culture’s interaction with their non-human neighbors.

“Keep the bells ringing,” he commanded Rasuk. “I want everyone to know this is official.” Then, as the dwarf relayed his

orders to the slave responsible for shaking the framework of chimes — and who had stopped when the wagon did — Khulechtan moved to join Hudai at the shack.

“All right,” he told the ghûl. “Let’s see.” He raised a fist, pounded on the door so that it nearly shook from its frame, then took a step back so he had room to wield his spear if need be, and called out. “*Taker!*”

In the instant of the door creaking open, he’d taken it all in. The young man in a mantle standing before him, hair ragged and unwashed, face puffy with tears and distended in anger. The older relatives back in the room, hunched on rickety furniture, gawping fearfully; parents of either the bereaved or the deceased, reluctant to say anything but terrified of defying the Undertaking.

And the odor, of course.

“*Sure now,*” Hudai gruffed, but it hardly mattered. Khulechtan’s own merely human nose was more than sufficient.

“There’s nothing for you here, Corpseman,” the younger man snarled. “Not today.”

Between his patrician features and the sharp edge to his consonants, he struck Khulechtan as Angat. Even in Eastside, where poverty and want laid all people low and ostensibly equal, so many of the arrogant bastards still held themselves above the law.

This, despite — or perhaps because of — the fact that the Angat had come up with or codified most of that same law.

Still, the Taker saw this now and again, and held some sympathy for the grieving. On occasion, even knowing the laws and the risks, some people simply weren’t emotionally equipped to let go. Not criminals, not bad folks — and, assuming they could be handled swiftly, not worth the effort of detaining or reporting.

So it was, between his fatigue and his compassion, that Khulechtan — whose legal authority permitted so much more —

delivered the blow with knuckles rather than with blade, and to the young widower's stomach rather than to any spot that might readily break.

"I grieve along with you," he said, his tone flat. "But if that body is not in my wagon before this moaning idiot catches his breath, it won't be the only one I collect from this house today."

Despite their advancing age, the dead woman's relatives had her in the cage with time to spare. Khulechtan spun on his heel, nodding a brusque farewell to them and an equally short "well done" to the ghûl, and resumed his rounds, accompanied once more by the screech of wheels, the tromp of dwarven boots, and those God-forsaken chimes.

It was hours later, the sun having only begun its westward plummet, when those rounds were finally complete. Tired, sticky with perspiration, the Corpseman and his team turned their wagon toward the yard, where the bodies would be processed — dismantled not only so they wouldn't rise anew, but for daily use; bones carved for tools, skin gathered for tanning, fat for rendering into tallow, hair for yarn, every possible piece used in resource-starved Redoubt. From there, the slaves would take to their pens for food and rest, while Khulechtan returned to a home not much more comfortable.

All as it had been for days beyond counting before this, and almost assuredly would be for days beyond counting afterward. Except that, today, Hudai remained restless. His feet fell heavily, his snout working, his voice a constant mumble, rumble, deep in his throat.

"Not enough... Not right... Not enough..."

Ignore it, Khulechtan told himself, time and again. Just a ghûl slave gibbering nonsense. Meaningless. Shift is over. Go home.

"Not enough..."

"God's name, Hudai, what are you *talking* about?"

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So much for ignoring it.

Hudai's snout swung, aimed almost accusingly. *"Not enough. Too few dead today."*

"Oh, for... More people die some days than others. It happens."

"Not this way. All one neighborhood. Too few. Feels bad. Not right."

"What, do you actually count the dead we collect? Do you even know *how* to count?"

The ghûl squinted, showing only slivers of black, predatory orbs. *"Don't need counting. Don't need three, four, six. Only much less, much more. Today, much less. Too much. Not right."*

"*Erus?*" Rasuk, the dwarf, approached with gaze only just downcast, voice pitched low, a slave's proper diffidence. Here, the worst of the road dust splashed from his face, the piercings that were the mark of his station showed in sharp contrast to the sun-painted hue of his skin and beard. "Will you be needing anything further this evening?"

"No, I don't think... Rasuk, you didn't happen to notice if today's collections were particularly shy of normal, did you?"

Rasuk flicked a peculiar questioning glance at Hudai before answering. Khulechtan realized he had no idea if the dwarf understood any of the ghûl's speech, or how much of the conversation he might have overheard. "I can't say I did, *erus*. Although... Now you mention, the wagon might have felt a measure light on our way back to the yard. But if so, it was nothing I could swear to."

"All right. Fine, you're all dismissed for the day. Good job, everyone. Hudai, that means you, too."

"Mmm."

And that, Khulechtan was determined, was that. He was too tired, and his duties too important, to disrupt what little resting time he had on the vague and ill-defined suspicions of a ghûl slave. He was going home for a meal, might treat himself to a drink or

a few rounds of dice with neighbors, and then to sleep. He was certainly not going to spare another moment's thought to the precise number of corpses he'd collected.

Not one.



"IF THIS PROVES to be nothing more than a figment of your primitive mind," Khulechtan snapped for what was far from the first time, "you'll wish you'd kept your damn muzzle shut."

Hudai, as had been his wont since the irritated Taker had come to collect him from the slave pens at the yard, grunted softly and otherwise said nothing at all.

Nothing about Khulechtan's current garb announced who or what he was. When he'd finally clambered out of bed and gotten dressed, unable to keep his mind from chewing over the ghûl's concerns, he'd known his off-hour efforts might require a certain subtle anonymity. Rather than the leathered armors he wore on his rounds, he had dressed in a mundane tunic and leggings of drab, undyed grayish-browns that appeared almost bright against the ebon tone of his own skin. They were also nothing compared to the more ornate and more colorful garb that was the tradition of the Surinzan people, but Khulechtan lacked the wealth to afford such a wardrobe.

The only nod to his heritage that he carried, indeed one of the few he even owned, was his *sleaghar* — a short-hafted spear of long, leaf-shaped blade, designed for cutting as well as thrusting. The traditional weapon of the Surinzan, it was more versatile and far less conspicuous than the massive boar-spear he carried on his rounds. Currently it hung over his back, strap slung loosely across one shoulder.

Hudai, of course, carried no weapon. As a slave, it was not permitted. As a ghûl, it was hardly required.

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The foot traffic at night was only marginally lighter than the daylight hours', but that lessening of the ambient scents — as well as the pair's choice to walk directly beside the buildings, rather than keeping to the streets — made sufficient difference. They had only begun retracing their earlier route through the neighborhood when the ghûl drew up short, snuffling up at a second-story window.

"Hmm. Here. Death. Fresh."

"Body?"

"Not now. But recent."

"And you're sure?"

"Mostly."

"Wonderful."

So Hudai couldn't be positive. And even if he was right, couldn't another Taker have come through on rounds after Khulechtan? Could the ghûl be smelling the traces of a corpse that was properly disposed of? Khulechtan did some quick subtraction on his fingers and decided that, while it wasn't *likely* one of his brethren had come through since his own earlier visit, it was possible.

He sighed, shrugged one shoulder so his *sleaghar* dropped to his fist, and started up the stairs. The roaches and beetles were a noisy carpet beneath his steps, not even bothering to scatter. The rats were fewer, and small on average; the survivors left behind to breed, while their larger compatriots had doubtless already been trapped and eaten.

"Through here?" he asked, stepping into the hall and stopping before a doorway that, like most of its neighbors, boasted only a worn curtain for privacy.

Hudai sniffed. "Yes."

Well, if someone inside had indeed kept a deceased relative from the Undertaking, they weren't going to casually admit to it. Khulechtan hefted his spear and lunged inside with a fearsome shout.

He emerged some minutes, many threats, and a few bone-bruising raps with the haft of the *sleaghar* later, lost in thought. Hudai, clearly puzzled despite wearing nothing resembling a human expression, held his questions until the pair had returned to the streets.

“Why pay for dead flesh? Men don’t eat it.”

“You heard the old woman. She doesn’t know. Nobody in the neighborhood knows.”

“Thought you might have a guess.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Hmm.” Then, after a few moments and several dozen passersby, *“What now?”*

What now, indeed? He could, probably *should*, simply report this to the Watch, or even the Magisterium’s Hoodsmen. Either organization had the authority to investigate this sort of crime. As a Taker, Khulechtan’s duties technically only required the collection — and, where necessary, suppression — of the dead.

But then, if this threatened the Undertaking as a process, that *was* his responsibility. That it was happening on his rounds, didn’t that also mean he ought to look into it? That he might be liable — or at least blamed — for anything that went wrong if he did not?

And of course, if those absconding with these bodies failed to take precautions and an outbreak of the Restless resulted, that was *everyone’s* problem.

So be it. Khulechtan studied the homes up and down the street, searching for... There! A pair of candles, placed side by side on the leftmost edge of a windowsill. That, according to the elderly couple he’d interrogated, was the signal by which members of the local street gang would know a body lay, available and not yet collected, for purchase.

“Go back to the yard, Hudai.”

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"Mmm?"

"Go back. Get some sleep. If I fail to report for duty tomorrow, tell the others what we've learned." Many of them would, most probably, doubt the word of a ghûl slave, but Hudai's experience working with several, along with Khulechtan's own absence, would at least get them moving.

"Back? You continue alone?"

"I'm going to have to follow them to God-knows-where. I can blend in through most of the Inner City, but there are places where a ghûl would be far too conspicuous." He frowned. "You do know that word? Conspicuous?"

"Yes."

"Good. And you understand your orders?"

"Yes."

"So go."

"Mmm." But that lone grumble aside, Hudai obeyed, vanishing swiftly into the darkness. Khulechtan wandered around a bit, found a darkened doorway that allowed a good view of the tenement he'd selected, and waited.

They arrived, three of them, with a goat-drawn wagon full of burlap sacks. Far away as he was, Khulechtan still got a brief whiff of near-rotten vegetables. Smart, if they planned to smuggle a body that way. And indeed, they went inside for only moments, returning with a man-sized parcel. This, they carefully placed beneath the sacks they already had before continuing on their way.

Struggling to appear oblivious and casual, the Corpseman followed.

They covered a great distance, stopping once to collect a second cadaver. The tenor of the streets changed, as did those who walked them. Khulechtan realized that they were approaching the edge of Eastside; not remotely a wealthy neighborhood by any measure, but

markedly better off than where they'd started. The passersby wore nicer garb, the homes were ever so slightly larger and definitely in better repair. Even the air smelled fresher, though the place remained crowded enough, the people sweaty enough, the labors of daily life hard enough, that it really oughtn't have.

Had they continued much further, into neighborhoods nicer still, Khulechtan might have begun to stand out. As it was, however, they hauled their bleating goats to a halt before a long structure of multiple storefronts. Several boasted signs, but the moons were insufficiently full, the streetside torches too far apart, for Khulechtan to make out whatever illustrations they bore. In any event, they should all have been closed up for the night, but the door on which the first of the trio knocked opened almost immediately. Several more men emerged to assist them, and they swiftly had both bodies inside and out of sight. The door slammed shut, while one man returned to the wagon and drove it off down the road.

Khulechtan dashed across the way, flattened himself in the doorway, and tried the latch. He was disappointed but not remotely surprised to find it locked.

Break it down? It wouldn't be difficult, but neither would it be quiet. With a sharp sigh, he returned to his prior waiting spot and hoped the wagon-driver would return.

As luck had it, he did, only moments later. Khulechtan waited until he heard the thunk of a heavy key in the lock across the way, then sprinted once more.

The stranger gave a juddering sigh as the *sleaghar* slid into his back, angled upward to catch heart and lungs. He slumped, with only Khulechtan's grip on the spear holding him upright.

The Taker swiftly dragged the body inside, swung the door shut with a heel, and leaned back against it. The room was dark save for a single guttering oil lamp, but the heavy shapes bobbing in the

liquid shadow suggested a potter's shop. Khulechtan dropped to his knees, carefully dragging the edge of his spear across the dead man's every major tendon, and jabbing the tip through a great many joints as well. It would have to do until he figured out what was happening here and got the body — or bodies, as he knew might well be the case before he was done — properly collected.

Now that he'd grown accustomed to the feeble lighting and could see the man up close, his confusion only mounted. The rough features and rougher garb, the scars and the various blades, all confirmed what he'd already known: These were members of a street gang purchasing the corpses of the poor and desperate. Why? How could they afford it, and what use could they possibly have? Whatever answers Khulechtan hoped to find tonight, they wouldn't come so easily, and certainly not from this one.

As a door at the rear of the shop provided the only other obvious egress, it was there — after cleaning his blade on the dead man's tunic — he headed next.

It did not, as one might otherwise expect, lead to a back storeroom or the shopkeeper's quarters.

A brief sloping passage carried Khulechtan downward, through shattered stone and tunneled earth, into a series of underground chambers that might once have been an offshoot of the ancient dwarven catacombs. Once, but no longer. Any religious or funerary symbols had been crushed or scraped from the walls and the floors had been deliberately smoothed, the footsteps of ages ground away. Once well beneath the roadway, the corridor twisted several times, until the intruder had no solid notion which direction he faced. Still, getting lost seemed no real threat; the passage only went the one way, and even had it not, he had begun to hear the rumble of voices — a surprising number, echoing over and around one another — from ahead.

There was also a sentry, another gang thug by the looks of him, waiting in the corridor between Khulechtan and his destination. He was barely watching, however, presumably secure in his belief that nobody but his wagon-driving compatriot would be coming this way. By the time he recognized Khulechtan as a stranger, let alone a potential threat, the Corpseman's *sleaghar* was already between his ribs.

This time, for all his training, Khulechtan was nearly too stunned to take precautions, to mutilate the body enough to slow it down should it rise. For in falling out of his path, the dead sentry had provided him with his first clear view of what awaited.

The chamber was massive, more an artificial cavern than a room. Multiple scores of people were gathered within, laughing and shouting and cheering like spectators in one of the city's great arenas. Their garb, their stature, their skin marked them as members of all five of humanity's great nations, and every possible mixture thereof. For all its variety, however, the group wardrobe was only the finest available. Many of those present, though not all, wore masks of various styles, flaunting their riches but hiding their faces.

Of course. Khulechtan nodded absently. *That was why this — whatever it was — was happening at the very edges of Eastside. Couldn't ask the wealthy to lower themselves to come any further into the realms of the unwashed, could we?*

At numerous points throughout the crowd stood men and women in cheap, piecemeal armor — mostly of boiled leather, like the Taker's own, which he had rather fervently begun to miss. Armed with heavy axes or long-hafted spears, they clearly served as guards, though Khulechtan couldn't immediately guess to what purpose. Surely the crowd itself didn't require that sort of control, and they weren't positioned to watch the various entrances to the great hall.

No, they had to be standing sentry against whatever was within the pit.

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Located in the center of the chamber, it was this great, gaping hole on which the shouting spectators had fixed their attention. Unfortunately, from his current position Khulechtan couldn't even begin to make out what might be within that hollow that was worth such focus, nor could he possibly hope to hear what might be happening over the roar of the throng.

Nothing for it, then, but to move closer. His own outfit was poorer than theirs, but if he kept his distance from the guards and acted as just another member of the crowd, he might pass unremarked. Fortunately, though few in number, several of the attendees had also come armed, so his spear wouldn't instantly give the game away.

One deep breath to steel himself, and he strode boldly from the corridor.

He needn't have worried. Nobody so much as glanced his way, save for when he elbowed past this onlooker or that in hopes of a better view, and even then he got only a snarl or a sneer before they'd forgotten he existed.

The sour scent of rotting blood assailed him before he neared the pit, until he struggled not to gag, but he felt no shock to accompany his revulsion. That these wealthy and powerful bastards were here for some illegal bloodsport or other was the obvious conclusion, one he'd already reached; this merely confirmed his suspicions. What he failed to understand, still needed to learn, was how the illegal purchase of the deceased could possibly play into—

Khulechtan finally saw the contents of the hole.

At first, he couldn't be certain what it was he witnessed. A trio of figures circled one another, locked in combat, while a fourth held back, lurking on the outskirts, perhaps watching and waiting for an opportune moment. Details and specific features remained difficult to discern, as all four combatants were drenched in thick,

dripping blood. Far, far too much to be their own, or the result of any struggle; it must have been poured freshly upon them, in amounts beyond what any human body could hold, before the contest began.

Grotesque as it was, it wasn't merely the blood itself that bothered him. In staring, trying to determine precisely what was happening, he saw the foul stuff dripping from three of the figures below, splashing and dangling in viscous strings, but from the fourth... It was hard to be sure, at this distance, but it seemed to be clinging, shearing off only in tiny flakes as though... frozen?

Khulechtan's breath caught in his chest as if it had claws; the hair on his neck stood so straight it might well have broken against his armor had he worn it. It couldn't be! It *couldn't*! Nobody would!

The centermost combatant lashed out, fingers splayed like claws, faster than a bolt from an arbalest. Flesh flew, and bone, a length of rib tearing free and embedding itself in the soft earthen wall of the pit.

The victim of that inhuman assault did not fall, did not flinch. Instead it lunged, jaw gaping wide, wider, until skin and muscle tore, so that it might take a bite from the body of its foe.

His scream of horror and disbelief was lost amidst the cheering of the crowd.

Fighting for breath he looked away, forcing himself to swallow his bile, to squelch the urge to flee, to think through the fog of emotion.

And the first question his frantic, panicking thoughts settled on was *How?* During the occasional outbreaks within the city, amidst the ebbing and flowing tides that flooded the world beyond Redoubt's walls, the Dead attacked only the living, never one another.

Was that why they were covered in blood? Fresh enough, and in such quantities, could it trick them into mistaking one of their own for something alive? Some, perhaps. The Dead could be cunning, but many were all but mindless and none were particularly intelligent. Those that were bestial enough, and who relied on senses more mundane

than eldritch, could probably be fooled. Did those responsible for this travesty of a sport simply destroy any who weren't? Did they...?

Over his shoulder, in the corner of his vision, Khulechtan caught a glimpse of movement on high. Situated above and adjacent to the corridor through which he'd entered was another room, one with an open window allowing a full view of whatever went on below. It was, he decided, almost assuredly an office or overseer's post of some sort. No need to wonder and guess at what was going on if there was someone who could simply tell him.

With new determination, the Taker began pushing his way back to and around the edges of the audience, seeking the stairs.

They weren't hard to find, and led to a smaller hallway that ended in a single door, and a single guard standing outside it. "Not allowed up here," the man growled, barely glancing up.

Clearly, these people had grown too comfortable with their secret. They might have been anticipating difficulty from the Dead, but not the living. Khulechtan could only marvel at it, as he once again wiped blood from his spear. He'd killed more men — men who weren't already dead, anyway — this evening than in his past year, and none had had the opportunity to voice a protest, let alone fight back.

Readying himself, he reached out, clicked the latch, and slipped inside.

There wasn't much to see. A few chairs, several of which were pulled right up to the observation window. A few heavy strongboxes with iron locks of a quality rarely seen in this day and age. And a single inhabitant, slowly turning away from that window. "Yes, what is—?" His eyes widened at the realization that Khulechtan was not the guard he'd clearly been expecting.

"Go for a weapon and you die," Khulechtan told him, *sleaghar* raised. The other nodded.

He didn't look especially imposing. The pale features and gaunt

build suggested Menhada blood, but he was remarkably short for any grown human, let alone one of those long-limbed folk.

But it was the large mole or similar growth on his forehead that, combined with his height, ignited an ember of recognition.

“You’re ‘Little Goat,’ aren’t you?”

The street thug blinked. “We met?”

“No,” Khulechtan told him. “But I’ve worked enough with the Watch to have learned a bit about the gang leaders and other criminals in my neighborhoods.”

“Your neighborhoods, huh?” He was quick, was Little Goat. It took only a moment for him to ponder through the possibilities. “You’re not Watch, and wearing no hood, so... Corpseman, yeah?”

“Yes.” There didn’t seem any purpose to denial.

Little Goad nodded and began idly passing a small ceramic bauble back and forth, hand to hand. “We figured it was too risky approaching any of you,” he said, “but since you found us... We could use a Corpseman on our side. Wouldn’t require much of you, and we could make you rich.”

“Are you *mad*? Have you any idea how dangerous, how stupid, this is?”

“I assure you, we’ve taken precautions.” Little Goat’s bauble all but danced between his fingers. “We’ve—”

“Drop that.”

The bauble froze, caught between finger and thumb. “What? Why? It’s just—”

“It’s irritating.” *And I’ve no way of knowing it’s not a charm or talisman*, Khulechtan thought but did not add. “Drop it. Now.”

Little Goat sighed, and obeyed. The ceramic clattered to the floor by his feet.

“You’ve put all of Redoubt in danger!” the Taker snarled at him. “You’ll be fortunate if they execute you instead of exiling you

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beyond the city walls! You want to play audience to the Dead? That'll be opportunity enough!"

"We're not endangering anything, Corpseman. We keep careful watch on the bodies we collect. They are caged, and any that haven't risen in a few days are burned. We observe their behavior. Any that won't fight, or seem too potentially clever, are destroyed."

"And did you happen to notice one of them down there, right now, is holding back and letting the others do its work for it? How blind are your 'observers'?"

"We're still judging that one. It may be put down, yes. And we do the same to any that show signs of abilities that might make holding them difficult."

"You have four of them in a pit surrounded by people! Some of the Dead climb walls like spiders. Everyone out of his shit-filled swaddling cloth knows that!"

Little Goat shrugged, waved a hand at the observation window. "The sides of the pit are soft soil. Even one that could climb would be slowed, more than enough for our guards to meet it. We know. We've tested it. And before you ask, no, none of the Dead are strong enough to leap that distance."

"That you *know* of, you idiot! But nobody knows what sorts of powers undiscovered Restless might possess. For all you know, some may fly!"

"In seventy years, there's never been a single instance—"

"But you can't *know*."

"We consider it worth the risk. Have you any idea how much the rich boar-fuckers down there are paying for this opportunity? To witness something they haven't already seen? To take back some power over a shadow that has stretched over their entire lives?"

"People *should* fear the Dead. They're a plague, a curse, not... entertainment."

“They can be both. We’ve *made* them both.”

In the midst of Khulechtan’s disbelief, a sudden understanding struck. “This is too big for a street gang. You haven’t the resources, or the contacts among the city’s wealthy, to pull off something like this. Who’s behind you, Goat? Some bored Angat patron? The Old Wolves? Or... the Iron Moon, I’d wager. This *does* seem the sort of scheme the Nightcoats would have their hands in.”

For the first time, the expression on Little Goat’s face fell. “You want to be careful the names you throw around that way, friend. These are people who don’t care to be spoken of.”

“You play with the Dead! Forgive me if I don’t trust your judgment on who is to be feared.”

“Look, we’ll have plenty of time to argue this... if you join up. You could be of real use to us, and we’ll more than make it worth your while. You’ll be rich, maybe eventually as rich as some of those arseholes down there screaming their fool heads off. What do you say?”

The offer wasn’t without its temptations. They *did* seem to have some notion of what precautions to take. And the wealth... Khulechtan was never going to become rich as a Corpseman. He could barely afford to keep what little he already possessed.

But these people, they didn’t understand what they *toyed* with, not truly. Nor did they understand Khulechtan himself.

He was Surinzan. He carried on his shoulders the great sin of his people, the betrayal that had left the gentle Meliae, as a race, to fall beneath the hands and teeth of the Dead. He would not forget, even if so many of his own brethren chose to; it had driven him to become a Taker, to serve this city that nobody loved, though it kept them all alive.

He would not be party to another betrayal. Not for anything.

“We’re leaving,” he informed Little Goat, the finality of his

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answer evident in his frosty tone. “You’re going to tell all of this to the Watch, and in return I’ll make it clear you cooperated. Make any attempt to flee, or allow any of your guard to stop us, you die. And I assure you, I know how to make certain you die slow, in agony.”

“I believe you do.” Little Goat, his hands half-raised, took a single step toward the door and the spear-wielding Corpseman...

A step that landed with a sandy *crunch* as the ceramic bauble disintegrated beneath his sandal.

In the half a heartbeat it took Khulechtan’s gaze to flicker down to the floor and back, Little Goat had produced a long-bladed dagger, now clenched tightly, expertly, in one fist. The *sleaghar* still gave the Taker every advantage — heavier, far longer, yet very nearly as swift — but armed as he now was, Little Goat could at least hold him off several moments. Quite possibly long enough for...

Yes. Already Khulechtan could hear the echo of sprinting steps pounding up the stairs. The bead *had* been enchanted, then. A minor magic, certainly, if all it did was alert the guards to come running, but that was all it *needed* to do.

“Should’ve taken the offer,” the diminutive criminal taunted. “Now you really *are* about to be a corpse man.”

“Oh, I’ve never heard *that* before,” Khulechtan mocked, thoughts racing.

Little Goat scowled. “You won’t hear it again. There’s no way out.”

“Of course there is.” *God, this was going to hurt...*

Even as the door burst open beneath the fists of the first guard, Khulechtan dove through the observation window.

Chamber walls flashed past, and he landed, hard and painfully, before he had time even to register the motion. Had he struck the floor, his injuries might have been far worse, but as he’d hoped and prayed, he landed instead on several onlookers. Caught utterly by surprise — and, in one instance, by the tip of his naked spear —

those unsuspecting souls suffered far worse, crying out in pain at the bruising, gashing, possible breaking beneath his weight.

He staggered to his feet, dazed, whipping his blade about to clear himself some space. All around him were screams, shouts, angered faces. People shoved at him, tore at his sleeves, furious at being “attacked,” at having their fun and games interrupted. Other shouts, from beyond, commanding, the soldiers of Little Goat’s gang — and whoever funded them — closing in, pushing through the crowd.

He tried to move, to run or at least to walk, to force his way through the flood of flesh and bone, only to be pushed back. Blows fell wherever he turned his back, naked fists as of yet but with cudgels and blades sure to come. Again he staggered, stumbled, took a few steps in the only direction the packed throng would allow, stumbled once more...

And fell as the ground beneath his feet simply ended.

This second plummet ended on softer earth, Khulechtan lying flat, the wind knocked out of him. For a bare instant the crowd above went silent, and then erupted into a new chorus of roars and cheers. Through swimming vision he saw them all staring down at him over the edge, audience and guards and Little Goat himself.

The fetor of rot and rancid blood washed over him, and the sudden surge of terror washed away the worst of his bewilderment. For he now knew where he was, and what horrid fate likely awaited.

Khulechtan scrambled to his feet, pressed tight to the wall of soil, and raised his spear to meet the Dead.

The struggle down here in the pit had continued, of course, while he and Little Goat had conversed above. Only two of the four Restless still stood, the other pair having been torn and wrenched and chewed into harmless, quivering chunks.

As before, one of them held back. A gaunt, leathery creature of

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near skeletal features beneath the coating of blood, it moved around the edges of the pit in quick, jerking motions near impossible to follow, almost insectile in its way. From there it watched Khulechtan with a burning, predatory intensity that disturbed the Corpseman far more than its grotesque appearance. It passed, as it circled, over a heavy wooden trapdoor built into the pit's floor.

It was the other, however, that demanded his immediate attention. A more foul, bloated thing, like a drowned man, it staggered toward him with alarming speed and arms outstretched. Khulechtan felt an unnatural chill as it approached, shedding flakes and slivers of frozen blood. He felt himself slow, weighted down by a creeping langor.

He barely dodged the thing's first swipe, dropping and rolling to the right. A shower of earth from the wall followed, made icy cold by the dead man's touch. He lashed back with the *sleaghar* as he came to his feet, but his aim was off; the tip passed a full hands'-breadth from decaying flesh.

Khulechtan retreated, trying hard to keep from moving nearer to the other, lurking thing, and the frigid corpse pursued. He heard numbers in the shouting from above as the bastards laid wagers on how long he might last, or which of the Dead would end him.

He wondered if his own lifeless body would rise again to fight in this hellish arena, and nearly vomited where he stood.

And with that, he recognized the error in his tactics. He was already battered, fatigued, not at his best. His enemy? Would never tire, never slow. Fearsome as his opponent was, Khulechtan couldn't afford retreat, couldn't wait for the perfect opening.

The dead thing charged, and the Taker moved to meet it.

Above, the crowd roared its approval.

Again Khulechtan rolled, bobbing beneath the outstretched hand, but this time he drew himself up short, jutting out a leg to

halt his momentum. Still in a crouch directly behind the revnant, which was already turning, he lashed out with the edge of his spear.

Flesh and tendon parted, bone chipped, and the thing staggered as its left leg suddenly threatened to give way.

Khulechtan dove, landing on his side, and lashed out again, making the same strike against the other ankle, then forced himself to rise.

The revnant swayed, nearly toppling, unable to take a step. It wasn't pain — these things, so far as anyone knew, didn't feel pain — but simply the refusal of its feet to obey, to support it.

The *sleaghar* punched through a knee, back to front, slicing muscle, severing tendon, popping the kneecap out of joint, and the creature finally fell.

No cheers, now. The crowd had gone silent.

Khulechtan stabbed downward, over and over — at the other knee, at the spine, the neck, the head, the shoulders, anything and everything to keep the thing down, to render its undead body useless.

More cries from above, now of anger, save for a fortunate few who had bet against the odds.

And still the other corpse waited, watching but never approaching. Khulechtan should have felt relief at this respite, but all he could do was wonder and worry as to why.

A shouted command, Little Goat's voice. "More!" Chains clanked, mechanisms ground together beneath the earth, and the trapdoor slowly rose. Decomposing hands flopped about in the gap as more of the Dead struggled to emerge.

That was it, then. Against two, and only one at a time, Khulechtan might have had a chance. Now?

From across the pit, a repulsive, hissing rasp, the fearsome breath from a thing that *had* no breath. Khulechtan met its gaze, and he swore, though it was impossible on a face already locked in a skull's rictus grin, that it smiled.

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And, before its compatriots had begun to emerge fully from beneath the trapdoor, it lunged.

Fast, *so* fast, its short, sharp movements near impossible for the eye to follow. It slashed left, right, left again, and every time Khulechtan's spear only scarcely managed to parry. He had no opportunity to escape from between the thing's bony claws, to roll aside, and in a matter of seconds he would prove a hair too slow.

Desperately, knowing it would do him little good against a foe who no longer used any of its vital organs, he thrust.

Had he been carrying his boar-spear, it might have proved more effective. The crossbar would, at least, have shoved the revnant back, held it at bay. The *sleaghar*, however, merely punched through the thing's chest without any overt effect.

And yet, the rain of blows stopped.

A dead, emotionless gaze met a live, terrified one for what seemed like an eternity. The trapdoor finally burst open and the Restless scrambled out, another four of them, but Khulechtan could only see the rotted face directly before him.

It spun aside, that dead thing, the strength of its turn yanking the spear from Khulechtan's hand. Skeletal fingers gripped the haft, drawing the weapon free with a terrible squelching sound. Again moving almost too fast to follow, it flipped the *sleaghar* around, aimed, and threw.

Propelled by inhuman strength, the spear sank well past its tip into the soft earth of the pit wall, leaving just a foot of haft remaining.

Even had the guards above understood what was about to happen, they'd have been far too slow to stop it.

The Dead thing ran, leapt up, grasping, used the deeply embedded spear to hurl itself up higher still...

The roars, the cries, the cheers melted into liquid screams of terror as the first of the Dead landed amidst an audience who had dared believe themselves safe from its wrath.

Men and women died, trampled in the panic, asphyxiated as they were crushed between competing waves of the crowd. The guards, who might have been able to contain the thing, found themselves unable to press through the sudden current of panicked flesh. Skin tore and bones shattered beneath the fearsome strikes of the Restless, and bodies both living and dead plunged over the edge of the pit to land in dreadful heaps below.

Two more of the Dead followed the first, leaping from spear to the pit's edge — perhaps clever enough to seek freedom, perhaps merely mimicking what they'd seen. The other pair began tearing into the men and women now trapped in the hole, a collection of victims that only grew larger as those above knocked additional onlookers over the precipice.

Khulechtan crouched — some might have said cowered — against the wall, arms raised to shield himself from the rain of blood, of bodies and parts of bodies. He had no sympathy for the wealthy fools dying before him, but still he turned away from the horror, flinched at every terrible sound. And he knew that every onlooker between him and the Dead bought him only a few more moments of breath, that he would never leave this pit alive.

Except...

The sounds from above had changed yet again. Screaming and dying had been replaced by — no, not quite replaced, but now accompanied — a more martial symphony of angry shouts and battle. The clash not merely of flesh and bone, but metal.

Nor were these the voices of street thugs, however experienced, but disciplined, trained warriors. The Corpseman felt the first faint stirrings of hope — a hope that ignited into a warming fire when

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a knotted rope snaked its way down the side of the pit only a few feet from where he crouched.

“Hurry!”

Whoever had shouted needn't have bothered; Khulechtan had a grip on the rope before it even finished its descent. One of the Dead glanced up from its mouthful of flesh and howled at the sight of potential prey escaping, but it didn't bother even to rise, not when there were so many other still-moving bodies in the pit to choose from.

The woman who reached out a hand to haul him up and over the edge bore the noble features and skin to suggest she shared his Surinzan heritage. More important in that moment, she held a heavy hatchet in her other fist and wore the tabard of the Watch. Indeed, the chamber now contained over a dozen similarly garbed soldiers, as well as several in leather armor that Khulechtan recognized as fellow Takers. He felt tears of relief brimming in his eyes and angrily dashed them away.

“The officers are going to want to talk to you,” she warned him. “Nobody knows what the hell's been going on down here.”

“I'll tell them what I can, of course. But they might do better to interrogate the man running this. He's—”

“Little Goat?”

“That's the one.”

“Sure, they'll do that. As soon as we find enough of the rest of him to reassemble.”

“Ah.”

“Listen,” she continued with a sideways glance at a trio of soldiers lowering another rope into the pit, “I need to go. We still have two revnants to—”

“Yes, but how did you know to come here? How—?”

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, then moved to join her

companions, the first of whom had already started his climb down into the hole.

Khulechtan followed her gesture, stared, and then wandered over, carefully stepping around corpses and clusters of Watchmen questioning the few onlookers who had neither died nor managed to flee.

“You followed me?” he asked.

“*Tracked,*” Hudai growled. “*Know your scent.*”

“After getting help.”

“*Yes.*”

“You disobeyed me.”

“*Yes.*”

“You could be severely punished for that.”

“*Yes.*”

Khulechtan placed a hand on the ghûl’s shoulder, gently squeezing. “Thank you.”

“*Yes.*”

Was that a hint of a smile on Hudai’s snout? Did the ghûl even smile at all, as humans did? As long as he’d worked with them, Khulechtan realized he had no idea, and felt vaguely ashamed.

When all was said and done, the Watch had arrested nearly a dozen members of Little Goat’s gang, almost as many onlookers (though most of those likely had the wealth and power to escape any severe sentencing). Further, they and the Takers had accounted for five of the Dead, in addition to those still held in pens beneath the trapdoor.

Five. Not six. Of a gaunt, skeletal thing with frighteningly abrupt motions and a gaping wound in its chest, there were no reports at all.

And for a very long time, Khulechtan wondered.

It *couldn’t* have planned for this. Its patience, its hesitancy to

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engage the other Dead in battle... it couldn't have been waiting, watching for an opportunity such as the *sleaghar* had provided. Some of the Dead were cunning, yes, but they weren't *intelligent*. They didn't understand, didn't plan. Those that thought at all thought like animals, at most. Everyone knew that. Everyone.

Except...

His own words to Little Goat came back to him, time and again, as he walked the streets or late at night, whenever he tried and failed to sleep.

You can't know.

And on occasion, when the bells rang out their cacophonous song and the people gathered to deliver the corpses of their loved ones, he would turn his gaze toward the outer walls of Redoubt, or down the city's winding streets, and worry over what other secrets the endless Dead kept still.