

The Hunt Begins

The autumn winds that blew over the valley and across Alaric's bare arms seemed to be little more than a tease. It wasn't so chilled as to be the onset of winter, the season that, though devoid of change, was his favorite. He thought it to be a powerful thing how, for a few months, the world decided that it should remain stagnant. Despite the lean times it brought, he much preferred the consistent world of winter, one which allowed for deep, intimate introspection. He felt a smile split his auburn stubble as he let himself shiver, pulling the rut-sack slung over his bare shoulder tighter with his gauntleted hand.

I'll get warm soon enough at Dale's, he reminded himself as he recalled the specially brewed pumpkin ale the kindly old man made this time of year. *How long since last, three years? Aye, that's the last time I had to leave...* For a moment he let his thoughts quiet, only letting the continued crunching of his feet across the leaf covered dirt path populate both the outer world as well as his inner. Leave from the war had hurt more than the numerous bones he had broken beneath the hammer of an orc; to be reminded of all that he had left behind and now existed separately from him, trapped behind a foggy pane of glass. Though he felt his smile begin to somewhat droop, he quickly rebounded with, *At the very least it still does. Not many places on this continent can say the war barely affected them.* This sentiment was only compounded when he spotted it: a rusting, rotting heap of metal spikes and crudely carved wooden wheels. It had collapsed in the middle of the grassy field before him, beneath a towering banner of deep blue fluttering freely in the mountain wind.

The Allies' Banner, Alaric felt a swelling of pride as he spied the unmistakable sigil of the white, five point star made of interlocked swords. *Probably the one Horst keeps pinned above his forge. I almost*

feel sorry for the greenskins; if a squad of Axis made it all the way up here, then they surely would've met the business end of that old man's hammer. With that, both Alaric's mind as well as his hand drifted down to the one of the sheathed shortswords that bounced upon his belt with every step he took. *Going to put these right across the mantle. With the Treaty of Mount Obscurum, I doubt they'll be much need for them now. Unless, of course, Highlord Lightforge calls a crusade out of nowhere, but I think even he wants a rest,* Alaric thought, hoping he'd not be called to fulfill his oathly duties anytime soon.

The grass fields soon gave way to a gurgling river and the dirt road to the, almost rotted through, Hickman's bridge. Aside from the typical groans of protest from the wooden planks, Alaric made it to the other side in one piece, taking his first steps in spanning fields of golden wheat before him. Squinting his eyes up at the midday sun, he thought, *Old man Lars is either napping off a bad hangover or somewhere out here in his fields. Crazy old man'll never learn.* Despite this, he fondly remembered his last night in Springshire, assisting the blacked out famer with his journey to the rooms above Dale's with one of his arms slung over Alaric's shoulders while it's twin was over Penny's.

Penny, a brief image of her fiery orange hair flashed before his eyes before it faded like embers into the night sky. Nevertheless the thought warmed him more fiercely than any fire, even amongst the mountain air. That being said, he thought back on their last talk, their last serious one anyhow, before he had left.

"I can't believe you're leaving again..." she had said in a voice barely louder than a whisper. Alaric had turned from packing his rucksack to see her, standing at the foot of the stairs in their cabin, wrapping her arms about her form as though to hug herself. Almost immediately did he abandon whatever he was attempting to cram into his pack, instead crossing the short distance and drawing her into himself. He pressed his face into the side of her head, trying in vain to bring a part of her hickory scent with him.

"I'll be back soon," was all he could manage to muster.

"When?"

"I don't know," he had drawn away from her to gaze into her sea-green eyes, holding her face as gently as his calloused hands would allow. "I can't promise anything. But..." he let a hand slip away and down to a pocket, where his fingers wrapped around the cold object that rested there. Retrieving it, he let his hand act as the platform for the simple, pure silver hair pin that now rested there.

Penny's face morphed from one of preemptive longing to exasperation, "I told you nothing expensive!"

Alaric had grinned, "And I tell you no drinking contests at the pub, but who walks away several coins richer every weekend? Besides, it's worth it... it's something you can hold and remember that I'm coming back to you."

In the present, Alaric smiled to himself as he continued down the road, an expression that only widened as he neared a massive, barrier-like hill which he knew extraordinarily well. Indeed, even from the foot of it could he see the billows of smoke from the hearths of Springshire. *Just one more leg of the journey!* Alaric's mind buzzed as he burst into a bounding sprint up the steep slope. *And then I'll see everyone!* The crest of the hill neared ever closer. *Penny and I won't have to be apart again!* Alaric thrust himself forward, cresting over the summit and...

He barely heard his rucksack hit the dirt, let alone feel it slip from his fingers, as he saw what lay beyond.

Where once was a bustling town of log houses and well kept shops, now barely an intact structure was left amongst the ash. Indeed, now only half burnt timber echoes seemed to haunt what had once been Springshire. A hand rose to Alaric's gaping mouth to muzzle it, silencing the breathy gasps that were escaping and leaving the paladin alone in a silent world. "It can't..." was the only thing he muttered before his legs launched him forward.

It took but a few seconds for him to reach the bottom and race

between the ashen ruins, all the while calling out to the various people he had called friends, “Horst!” The pile of black burnt stones, what had once been a forge, amid a pile of ash was the only answer he received. “Dale!” Alaric’s path crossed with a half consumed sign, bearing the same name, that had hung above the tavern’s door; now it did little more than lay in the rubble. “Lars!” The nearly shattered wagon left on its side in the road was the only evidence left of the old man’s existence. Alaric skidded to a halt next to it, if only to catch his wheezing breath amidst the firetinged air.

“What the hell happened here?” he whispered between gasping breaths. “The war’s over. Even if it wasn’t, we’re so far out of the way that-” it was at that precise moment that a singular thought, a singular person crossed in and out of his mind like she always did. “PENNY!” His sobbing cry echoed across the valley as, faster than he ever had, Alaric pushed himself onward. There might have been next to nothing left in distinguishable landmarks, but Alaric had long since memorized his way through the winding streets of the formally messily planned town. *It’ll be fine. It’ll be fine. I’m going to round the corner in a few, and the house will be standing, just like always!*

Indeed he rounded the corner, but he was wrong. Where once the two story cabin he and his wife had built by their lonesome, now only a smoldering shell remained. A few supporting logs, the staircase, the stormcellar entrance outside, that was all that remained.

In the blink of an eye, Alaric found himself teleported from standing on his feet to laying on his knees in the smoking dirt, barely conscious of the fact his once polished legplates were now tainted. Of their own accord, his hands sifted down into the ash, coating them as his face had suddenly become coated by a stinging sensation.

“They can’t be gone...” Alaric muttered to a silent, uncaring world, “It can’t have... It can’t have all been for nothing... I-” And yet that sentiment went unfinished as the world, specifically from somewhere in the stormcellar before him, answered him with a *THUNK*.

Alaric drew first his gaze up, then his shield in the form of his face

morphing into a sneer as he placed a foot under himself, and rose. Finally, both his hands grasped the worn, leather wrapped handles of his twin swords, and pulled the blades into the sunlight, which ignited them like gleaming beacons. Though he'd thought he wouldn't have to for some time, Alaric reached deep into his core, drawing upon the wellspring of warmth that resided there, and prayed in barely a whisper, "*May my blades be as bright as Lord Sanctus'.*" In a flash, his blades truly ignited, now wreathed in cascades of the golden Holy Light of his god.

Raising a blade to point at the shut wooden doors of the cellar, Alaric bellowed, "On my honor as a paladin of Lord Sanctus, the God of Light, show yourself and I may yet grant mercy." Nothing but the still, ashen air dominating the town answered him. For a moment did Alaric think his ears were playing the part of a trickster, until they prickled with the slightest sound of a shuffling step within.

Tightening his grip, the paladin growled, "Fine then, prepare to face judge—"

"Wait!" a high pitched, slightly familiar voice cried back, "I-I'm coming out!" Alaric felt his sneer drop to a slackjaw, dumbfounded expression as he speculated, *Is that... Is that who I think it is? Then again, if it was her surely she would have recognized my voice...* In the moment, the only answer he received was the sound of three slow steps, which after a breath was followed by the drawn out opening of the squealing cellar door. Yet, Alaric was only met with bitter disappointment as he spied a head full of unkempt, brown hair begin to ascend from the void; a disappointment that only lasted a moment before the face of the hair's owner crossed the threshold and he locked into the wide, familiar eyes of the young girl there. Despite the years, and if her own further widening of her hazel eyes were anything to go off of, she had recognized him too.

In an instant were Alaric's swords cast aside as he crossed the remaining distance between the two, nigh toppling the girl down the short stairs with a crushing hug, a gesture she returned albeit with less force.

Pulling himself away, yet still grasping her shoulders, Alaric forced his throat to not choke as he gasped, “Gabi, what happened? Where is everyone? Where is Pe- Where is Penny?”

The young girl’s mouse-like face scrunched up as if in the preamble of bawling, yet despite her eyes growing more watery, she mumbled, “Gone. Mr. Alaric they... they’re all... I saw a stranger come into town at night. He- he was pale, white like paper and... then the fires started. Mama tried to get us but he grabbed her... people were all over the place but no one wanted to help us. Mama told me to run as he... bit her neck.” Alaric might’ve reeled back had anyone else told him that, yet he kept his composure steadfast, if only for the child’s sake.

Gabi continued in her monotone voice, “I ran down Baker’s street when I ran into... Mrs. Penny. She... she grabbed onto me and ran all the way here. I was crying, I- she set me inside the cellar and told me not to be afraid. She said she’d be right back... she was going to find the other kids... I didn’t want her to leave so she gave me this.” It was only upon her small fingers unwrapping that Alaric even registered she was clutching anything, and when did, his heart dropped when he found a familiar, pure silver hair pin resting there. “She gave it to me... said it was a promise that she was coming back...” Gingerly, as though plucking a flower, Alaric retrieved the gift he had once given. As the horrifying confirmation of what had occurred fully dawned upon him, Alaric felt his hand almost automatically constrict around the simple thing, clutching it so hard he felt one of the points pierce both his doeskin glove and the flesh beneath. Yet, he drew in a shaky breath, telling himself, *I can’t lose it now... I must stay together, if only for the kid’s sake.*

Slipping the pin onto his belt, Alaric brought his hand up to the girl’s cheek in a vain attempt of a comforting caress. In a voice as airy as his typically gravelly tone would allow, the paladin began, “Alright sweetie, here’s what we’re going to do. Go back into the cellar, grab a sack, and fill it with as much dried meat and waterskins as you can

carry without being slowed. Then, come back up here and help me find as many sturdy timbers that are left.”

“What are you going to do?” The question gave Alaric pause for a moment, a time in which he swirled his head over his shoulder and fixed it upon one of his extinguished short swords laying next to the shattered leg of a mahogany table. And yet, his attention was drawn not to the blade but the leg.

“Gabi,” he said, turning back to the child, “Can you remember what color his eyes were?”

A fresh wave of terror swallowed her expression as she mumbled, “Red. They were blood red.” Alaric swallowed hard. *Vampire*, he surmised though dare not say aloud for Gabi’s sake. *Dammit it all, with the Church of the Light being preoccupied with the war, of course those fiends have had the opportunity to run rampant. But I never thought...*

Alaric shook his head, and finally answered, “I’m going to kill it. But to do that, we’re going to have to draw it out. Gabi, after you gather up the supplies, I need you to get as much unburnt wood as possible. Once night falls, I’ll light the bonfire, and when we see him coming, you’re going to run the other way, then circle around to the main road and keep going. Don’t stop until you find help, okay?”

“But... Mr. Alaric, no one will help... it’ll be like before,” within Gabi’s eyes as she said this was a growing numbness, a void Alaric had seen time and time before, yet always in the eyes of soldiers who had seen the worst of the world.

“Oh Gabi,” with as much might as he could muster, the paladin forced a reassuring smile, despite nothing backing it, “The world might seem bleak at times, but somewhere out there, there’s going to be someone willing to help. It might take some time to find them, but just keep moving forward; you’ll find them eventually. Don’t ever give up hope, okay?” For but a moment did Alaric see a flash briefly illuminate the girl’s eyes, or so he thought anyway. Nevertheless, Gabi bobbed her head and dipped down into the earth once more. And

with that, the paladin recollected his familiar weapons, as well as the leg which would become his newest.

Seating himself amidst the ashes of his former home upon the first step of the stairs, Alaric went to work. With his blade in one hand and the leg in another, he first cut it down to size, turning the leg into jaggedly even pieces that now resembled the size of a dagger more so than a shard of a furnishing. Grasping one at a time, he began to carve one side down, evenly shearing off peels of the once rich red-brown wood. With every rotation, Alaric repeat a name in his mind, *Horst. Dale. Lars. Jessica. Mrs. Baker. Jonathan. Penny.* The names of people he had known his whole life, those he loved, now all gone as was the table the leg had once belonged to, with the slowly forming point being the only evidence any of them had ever existed at all.

As he finished one stake, slipping it into his plated boot until it was needed, Gabi emerged with the bustling burlap sack he had ordered her to retrieve. Starting upon the next weapon, Alaric kept his eyes fixated on the child. *These aren't the only evidence of them.* He realized. *She and I. We're all that's left. I'm all that's left to protect her... Penny, I'm so sorry. I won't fail you, not ever again. She has to live, because if she doesn't... Penny's spirit dies with her...* Alaric felt his hands stop their work, involuntarily clenching around their possessions as a pressure mounted behind his eyes. Matching his hands, Alaric squeezed his eyes shut, beating back the desire to break. With a shaky breath, he opened them and once more continued his work as he concluded, *That's why I'll do whatever it takes to win, whatever it takes for her to live.*

With the passage of time, his work ceased, and the paladin moved on to assist Gabi with her task. As the long hours bled into a moonless, icy night, Alaric stood beside the small child, both before a roaring pile of shattered homes. Despite the heat cascading over his back, it did little to warm the frigid steel that encased his soul now.

It took perhaps a few hours since the blazing ignition of the pyre, but Alaric finally saw it: a lone, thin figure, wreathed in a darkness

more abyssal than the night around them with the smallest patches pure white betraying their form, slowly approaching them from some ways away.

Keeping his eyes fixated on the bestial creature in the form of a man, Alaric muttered, "Run now, Gabi. I'll be right behind you." He didn't need to turn to see her look at him with a breath of hesitation, knowing as he did that he was lying, just as his wife before had. Nevertheless, the child's scattering footsteps heralded her departure, a noise that swiftly faded and left the paladin alone with the crackling of the flames.

With one last kiss of his fingers to the pin securely fastened to his belt, Alaric himself started forward, pulling his twin shortswords free as he did.

Perhaps a second, perhaps an eternity passed, but eventually the world passed beneath Alaric's feet and drew him closer to the facade of humanity. Seemingly, as though one being, he and the pale shadow stopped simultaneously, leaving a little more than the length of a person between them. As the paladin regarded the figure, he found a chilled shock electrifying his veins due to one sole reason: the normalcy at which he stared at. He had expected to come face to face with some horrific, twisted being, yet what gazed back at him was the face of a simple, albeit handsome, man nearing his third decade. The shadow's cheeks were gaunt while his lips were thin and decorated with what looked to have been a neatly groomed goatee, though was now beset by the stubble of a few days of missed maintenance. His clothes were nothing more than a simple brown tunic over leather pants, with an obsidian black cloak wrapped around his thin form. These aspects might've fooled Alaric into believing him to be nothing more than another survivor, were it not for the crimson red eyes that glared at him from beyond a veil of shaggy black hair, in addition to his stark white, almost alabaster, skin.

As a chilled, hissing wind blew over them, the paper thin lips of the shadow opened, revealing a pair of pointed fangs. "Well," the

vampire began slowly, “it seems the wolf missed one of the sheep. Or, perhaps you were separated from your little flock?”

Alaric tightened his fists around the hilts of his blades, “The latter.”

“I see... no being should have to stumble upon such carnage, a quick death is more... humane...”

Alaric could feel his face contort in tandem with his bristling skin, “No being should wrought such carnage.”

A dry chuckle chortled from the shadow’s pale throat, “It is simple nature. Sheep feed upon grass, humans feed upon sheep, and I, at the top of the food chain, feed upon humans. Would you deny a higher being their place in the world?”

Alaric drew both his blades up, leveling one upon the beast before him, “This human is about to bring you crashing down, then we’ll see how much of a ‘higher being’ you are then.”

Despite the rage the paladin channeled into his voice, he was only met with the thin lips contorting into a too wide, toothy smile, “You want to kill me?” When Alaric only answered him by deepening his snarl, the vampire continued, “Very well then. I’d surely like to test my new powers on something that can actually fight back. Go on, give it you-” Yet, Alaric failed to wait until the end of the sentence, opting instead to let a bellowing war cry split his lips as he lunged forward, both blades poised in preparation for a deadly slash. Despite his sudden outburst, the paladin’s mind was anything but reckless as it grasped onto the shadow’s words, *‘New powers’! He’s only just gotten them, therefore he’s arrogant, which is exactly what I’ll use against him!*

In a flash, the distance had closed to almost nothing, and the paladin let his shortsword snap forward in a razor sharp arc. Yet, when the edges were just a hair length away from their target, in a burst of movement to shame a lightning strike, the vampire turned into a pale blur as it lunged back. Before he could even process what had occurred, the blur rebounded, slamming into Alaric with all the force

of a sledgehammer. The power of the blow torn the air from the paladin's chest as his feet freed themselves of the grassy earth, sending him flying back some feet. Just before he suffered another blow from his impact, Alaric twisted his body forward and shot his plated feet back just as they began to chur up the moist dirt. The sudden, dragging stop caused him to lurch forward, yet he just barely managed to shoot his arm out to save himself from such a stop.

Despite his movement halting, Alaric's mind whirled, *By Sanctus he's fast! And the hells did he hit me with? I didn't notice any weapon!* The paladin snapped his eyes up, only to find the cloaked, thin figure casually striding towards him, his hands empty at his side. And yet, it was then that Alaric's eyes truly beheld the curled, spindly things that were his hands which, with the pointed, black nails that topped them, more resembled some beast's claws.

"*Tsk. Tsk. Tsk,*" the clicking of the vampire's tongue, as though he were some adult chastising a child, drew Alaric's gaze back up to the crimson orbs embedded in the gaunt thing's head, "A surprise attack, seriously? And I was being cordial with you! I expected more from—well guessing by your armor, an Allied soldier." *He doesn't know I'm a paladin, Alaric thought, which is good. I need to catch him by surprise; I have to wait to use Divine Smite until after I've already hit him!*

Standing back up to his full height and leveling his swords once more, the paladin screamed, "I'm going to make you choke on your own teeth!"

Yet, frustratingly, that threat seemed to have as much effect as the last, as the pale beast shrugged, "I'll regenerate."

At that, Alaric released another scream as he charged once more, and once more his blades seemed poised to meet their mark until the last second. This time, the pale shadow simply blurred to the side, yet something akin to a tree branch tangled Alaric's legs, ripping him down and slamming his face harshly into the earth.

With a pained groan, Alaric rolled onto his back as the silky voice spoke once more, "Oops! You should really watch your step."

Funneling the dull ache that now consumed his face, Alaric thrust himself back to his feet, and found himself face to face with a smug, pale face. *Nowhere to run now!* He roared to himself as he roared aloud, “I’m going to kill you!” With that, he surged both blades forward into what was to be a hurricane of slices.

Yet, before the first blow of the storm, a horizontal slash of his left sword, the vampire sighed, “Please, try to be a little original in your threats,” before he dodged towards Alaric’s right. *Got you!* The paladin bellowed internally as he thrust his right blade into a vicious stab. And yet, that too failed to pierce dead flesh. Retracting both blades, Alaric stepped forward for a parallel slash, but as its predecessors, it cut nothing but the wind. Soon enough this became a pattern, an aggravating dance of blades reaching out to rip into nothing but where their quarry had once been. As the storm raged on, the weight of his weapons and the fury of his movements began to bear upon his arms. With sweat drenching his form and with his once clam breaths having degraded to gasping pants, the paladin thought, *He has to slow down at some point... right? The texts... they said they were fast but... still... mortal...* Yet, his eyes failed to match his knowledge as the pale blur dodged blow after blow as swiftly as ever.

Sucking in a draught of the cutting night air, Alaric released a final, screeching cry as he tore his left blade up before whipping it downwards. Yet, instead of meeting naught but air, his arm violently came to a stop as a vice tighter than any manacle wound itself about the paladin’s wrist. Glancing up, he found that a clawed hand had clamped about him, gripping him so hard, Alaric could feel his bones begin to scream out from the pressure with white hot licks of torment. Yet, Alaric refused to allow any agony, no matter how great, stop him and he thrust the right side of his body forward to plant his steel into the pale shadow’s gut. And yet, that too was violently halted, yet this time, no pain clawed at the weary paladin. Flicking his eyes down, Alaric couldn’t help but feel a wave of relief, more refreshing than

water on a summer's day, wash over him as he found the beast's other alabaster claw wrapped not around him, but the blade itself.

Got you! Alaric wanted to bellow as the all too familiar voice gloated, "Well, I've grown bored, so it seems our little game must come to a- wait, why are you smiling?" Having not even realized his face held such an expression, Alaric turned his gaze up to fixate upon the narrowed, blood red eyes.

As he deepened his expression, and drew upon the, as of yet unused well-spring of power residing in his core, Alaric simply said, "*May my blade be as bright as Lord Sanctus!*" A flash of gold erupted, illuminating the night as a shrill scream electrified the air. Pulling his blade back, Alaric could feel it easily slice through the shadow's fingers as though they were sticks of butter being cut by a warm knife, before he resoundly jammed it into the gut of the former human. The already ear piercing screech climaxed to a wail of agony the likes of which creatures weren't meant to make, yet to Alaric, he had never heard anything sweeter.

However, his triumph lasted a split second before the screaming face of the vampire lunged, retching Alaric's blade out of his hand and pulling his still gripped wrist with him. For a moment, the paladin attempted to rip his still captive arm free, but the moment he pulled, his ears pricked with the distinct sound of crunching bone as pain enveloped him, consuming his vision in a flare of nothingness. Numbly, through the agony of a thousand knives running between the muscle and bone of his left shoulder, Alaric felt himself fall backward. After a moment, his vision blotted back into existence, though upon rolling his head towards his left, he wished it hadn't. Even slightly concealed by his top, he could see that his shoulder looked *wrong*. It was misshapen, as though someone had gone at it with a smithing hammer, and even through the dim haze of the roaring fire a ways away in town, he could see that some areas of his skin had split open like a ravine tearing through the earth.

As he grit his teeth to help bear the pain, his ears pricked with a

distinct sound: a foot crunching upon grass. Whipping his head up, Alaric found his foe still standing, and worse yet, still stumbling towards him. The vampire's face had finally revealed its monstrous nature, having contorted into a snarl to mirror Alaric's own. One clawed hand, however, clutched his gut, where it failed to fully conceal a festering, almost molten wound that slowly was consuming more and more of the pale flesh.

With panic whipping upon his heels, Alaric swiveled his gaze about, searching for where his blades were, though to his horror, he found both were cast aside a few feet too far for him to reach. Sucking in a determined breath, the paladin began to shift himself up, yet that only invited another white hot lashing of his shoulder, which brutally forced him back down. Drawing a quick succession of breaths, Alaric began to constitute himself, yet as he looked up, the pale shadow collapsed upon him.

"You!" the thing hissed as a claw clenched Alaric's throat, "Paladin filth! I'm going to greatly enjoy draining the life from you... maybe I'll even puppeteer your corpse around as my thrall!"

A total, all consuming fear gripped Alaric tighter than the hand around his throat, as he watched the vampire's thin lips split open. The world seemed to slow to a pace not unlike a snail's as the fanged maw inched ever closer. Brefet of even the smallest glint of hope, Alaric simply felt nothing, not even the agony of his twisted arm, as he knew death readied to claim his soul. *I'm sorry Penny...* Alaric's mind wandered as he let his eyes fall close, *I couldn't do it... when I see you, please... for-* And yet, the abyssal darkness of his mind was ignited by a brief flash of orange, as his fingers, seemingly of their own accord, traced something icy cold upon his belt. Though the flash, as always, lasted but a moment, it was enough to recognize who stared back at him from the abyss: a smiling, freckled face, topped by a hair the color of a warm hearth.

Penny... I'm so sorry... the paladin thought as his fingers gripped

the icy object, *I made a promise...* Alaric freed the pin and gripped it tighter than any blade, aiming its points up, *I'll never give up again...*

Channeling what little energy remained in his form, Alaric snapped his eyes open to look straight down the wide maw of his wife's killer. Soundlessly, though with still as much righteous fury as his war cries had held, the paladin thrust Penny's silver pin, now ignited gold with the Holy Light, up and straight into the vampire's jaw. Once more, an inhuman screech echoed over the valley Alaric had once called home, yet without hesitation, the paladin left the pin embedded in it's flesh, as he reached down, and tore a stake free of his boot. Smooth, seamlessly, and without a shred of hesitation, Alaric silenced the screech by plunging the wooden point straight into the pale shadow's chest. Building upon the momentum of his thrust, the paladin lifted the thin thing up and tossed it aside like the garbage it was.

The night fell silent, even the winds seemed to die with the sudden cessation of the screech. The only sound that seemed to populate the world, was the sound of Alaric's ragged, wheezing breaths, and what seemed to be a symphony of crunching, crinkling paper at his side; yet after a time, that too faded from the world.

Perhaps a second, perhaps an eternity passed, but eventually Alaric rotated his head to where he had deposited the pale shadow, finding a withered, almost dehydrated corpse that barely resembled a human resting there. *No...* the paladin dimly thought, *not human... vampire...* With that, and with his one good arm, Alaric slowly reached towards it, and emotionlessly tore the silver pin free.