

The Black Hand

The Beginning

The Belacoth tower stood out against the dark of the night like a long stone needle, its spire of metal and stone penetrating up through the night sky and pointing towards the heavens as though casting a finger at the gods. Lightning crackled through a gap in the clouds and the tower lit up, the gargoyles lining its roof and parapets suddenly shining with a wet blue brilliance.

It was a heavy storm over the Belacoth tower. Not a particularly precipitous storm, or the one great storm that was said would come at the end of all days, but it was a storm, nevertheless, and it went on unheeding of those below it. And also, this storm was a beginning. Not THE beginning (In the same way that it wasn't the end), but it was a beginning of sorts. It was the beginning of a story in such a way that it was where you heard the story first.

And so, this beginning begins with a tall, lone figure walking hooded and heavily robed up the long steep path towards the tower. His name, is Pralschek, of the order of the long quill.

Pralschek wiped a trickle of water away from above his eyes, but it came on down heedless. With a huff of resignation he put his hand back towards the handle on the pack and carried on puffing up the hill. He usually would have been complaining about this walk, and about the hill, and about a large manner of things, except for the fact that he had been placated by some other

good news in the first place. He was about to record (In his first notable recording) the tale of the Master Black Hand himself. The man whom it was said was sired by Lucifer and raised by medusa, with a forked tongue and hooves cloven beneath the shoes that he wore. Millar, the unholy of all unholy's had finally consented to tell his tale after much ungentle persuasion by the residents of the bent and thin tower that pimpled up off the top of the hill.

Pralschek reached the door, the two guards beneath the brief shelter raised their long pikes, a signal for him to stop.

The captain, the taller of the two men, came forward and peered through the rain at Pralschek's pale countenance.

"Evening squire."

Pralschek nodded.

"Pass?" He reached out for the oiled piece of parchment that Pralschek held beneath the fold in his robe, and took it quickly. After a brief examination next to the torchlight flickering and hissing on the wall behind him, the captain lowered the parchment again.

His face split into an ugly grin, showing the dark gaps along his line of teeth.

"So," He handed the piece of paper back again.

"You're the one who's going to be recording the final words of Master Black Hand himself, hmm?" He lifted an eyebrow in enquiry.

Pralschek nodded again.

"Don't talk much then?"

Pralschek shook his head. It was his lot to record, not to provide material for such pursuits.

The guard turned to open the door, as he did so, looking to face the robed man who followed shortly behind.

"I tell you what though squire; it's a queer storm we're having tonight. Looks to me as if the dark lord himself is mourning for the fate of his son up there." He thumbed up towards the cell at the towers top.

Pralschek nodded dumbly, and walked forward, out of the rain.

The door to the tower was open now, and in front of Pralschek lay the stone stairs which led upwards, the torches on the inside casting ominous shadows across the path that lay ahead. As he entered in, Pralschek stopped suddenly, the guard captain stepping in front of him solidly, the odour of him, of sweat and drink and stale old meat reminding the monk, of the nearness of the man. The captain crouched forward, leaning in towards Pralschek and, grabbed him by the front of his robe, pulling the scribe closer in towards his face.

"Now you listen to me mister monk - We all here, had friends that died at Faros. No one around here likes the sort of him," He motioned with a flick of his head, " being here, and so the sooner you is done with him, the sooner we can put him to rest, and that would be better for all concerned, if you know what I mean."

He let the Pralschek go, and backed away, this time with a wide grin seperating the thick line of his jaw from his wide nose and thick set forehead. He motioned for Pralschek to enter.

"Have a safe walk upstairs, mind." He stopped for a small gruff laugh with his silent partner at the door, "and give the black hand my regards, ya hear?" He turned away, laughing again, the

slam of the shutting door drowning out his laughter and replacing it with the hollowness of an empty tomb.

Pralschek shivered, glad to be out of the rain, but now colder still, and he turned from facing the door, to walk up the stairs ahead of him.

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The heavy wooden door, lined with thick bands of oily blue steel, stood in front of the tall, lean, recorder of deeds done and actions misadventured. He raised a pale white hand, skeletal and lightly blue veined, knuckles red from the cold and fingernails chewed short over much deliberation, and rapped sharply on the door. Its report echoed past him and died down the heavy dark of the stairs below.

A slot just over halfway up the squat door slid open to reveal a bulbuous nose, behind of which sat a wide and heavily tanned forehead. Two shifty brown eyes peaked up over the edge of the slot and peered in Pralschek's direction.

"Yes?" The voice was muffled and very low.

Pralschek pulled out the parchment, slightly damp from the previous guard, and held it up to the slot. After a short while of ferretlike eyes scamping to and fro across the paper, the slot slammed shut again, and the heavy machinations which kept the door locked began to slide open. With a slow and almost frog sounding croak, the door swung inwards, revealing a stocky man dressed in brown leathers with a sword belted at his side.

The room behind him was virtually bare except for another guard, standing in the shadows behind a blindfolded man shackled extensively to an iron chair, a table, chair and a door in the far right hand corner. The door to the dark one's cell, it seemed.

The guard moved out of the way, and motioned for Pralschek to enter, which he did.

"Right master recorder," The guard pointed at the man in the iron chair, " There he is for you, all trussed up and bound, ready to be telling you your stories."

He paused and gave Pralschek a look to let him know exactly what he thought of that.

"Now you can write what you will, just don't start opening any doors without us, or start believing anything he tells you. That is how his evil magic gets its hooks in you. We might all be simple country folk out here, but we know how things work."

Pralschek stood, his face impassive beneath his overlarge brown hood which he still hadn't taken down yet.

"Right, good, so long as you understand how things are."

The guard signalled for the prisoner to be brought closer to the table, at which his compatriote picked up the iron chair, no mean feat for it must have weighed over fifteen stone with man and all, and dropped it rather unceremoniously next to the table, the prisoners face now being seen out of the shadows and under the wan yellow torchlight.

"Right master scribe," The guard herded his friend out as he was about to shut the door. He smiled his brightest grin back at Pralschek, "Feel free to loosen his hands if you want to - it isn't us he'll be strangling! We're right outside if you need us." The door creaked to a slow close, its final and inevitable, resting shut against its metal frame in the wall, seemed to the tall lean scrivener, to close him out from the rest of the world. So here he was, alone in a dimly lit world of shadow and half shadow, with only this being of consummate evil as his only human companion in the dead, cold stone cell.

Shivering out of his cold reverie, he stepped forward and emptied the contents of his wet sack, one piece at a time onto the table. Only once that was finished, did he sit down, take his hood off and lean back into the splintered wooden-backed chair.

He opened the thick leather bound book in front of him, and on the first blank page, wrote the words:

The Chronicles of Millar of the Black Hand,

known to the Chelinites as darkblade, to the Dewargan as Deviller, and by many other names too numerous or vile to mention.

By monk Pralschek, recorder first class, the order of the long quill, Belacoth.

He turned the page, and then for the first time, turned his head up to look at the man that sat still in front of him.

He was blindfolded, the cloth covering both of his eyes, and most of his forehead and nose. He was unshaven on a sharp thin jawline, and his dully coloured lips were tightly drawn across his face. That of him which was not covered beneath his tattered black shirt and pants was covered in grime and blood, abrasions, contusions, burn marks and such, which all attested to the truth of his stay at the tower. His short stay had thus far, been very unpleasant.

"So, what does your examination show you master scribe?" His voice was cracked, and hard, and with an unfamiliar accent.

Pralschek sat up suddenly, not realising that he had been stooping forward in his examination of the man, shocked a bit at the sound of the voice, intruding on the silence that hung heavily about the tower.

Pralschek faltered for a brief moment, and then continued.

" Nothing which I had not expected, Black Hand."

"Oh," The shackled man smiled sardonically, a smile confined to his mouth only "so you did not expect me to have hooves then, did you? Or have you already looked?"

"No. No, I haven't" Pralschek's soft voice tightened a little firmer. He was not here to make fun of. He was here to record.

"Come Master Black Hand, let us record your story so that you may be put to a rest, which you no doubt richly deserve." He nodded to himself, as if reaching some decision.

" Yes, let us begin."

"Aye, I'll be put to a rest alright, but not the likes as which I deserve from these." His voice raised a little, as if in anger, and Pralschek found himself taken aback. Bound as he was, there was still an aura of danger about the man.

"Master scribe, seeing as we will be together for the duration of my story - a long one at that, couldn't you take my blindfold off so that we may see each other, and if not be friends, then at least we can communicate as men?"

Pralschek spent a moment considering the request.

"Alright." He leaned forward, and undid the blindfold.

Millar had two dark grey eyes, beaten black, with cuts around his forehead and gashes around his nose which had the looks of being beaten and broken many times recently. He nodded his head in thanks to the scribe, who nodded back.

The entire effect of his face, as beaten as it was, was one of strength. An otherworldly, and perhaps not entirely natural strength, but a strength nevertheless.

"There," Millar smiled at him, one of genuine gratitude, "Now you can tell your friends that you have been gazed upon by the son of satan, and survived to tell the tale!"

He laughed a bit at that. And after a not so brief contemplative silence, Millar, the Black Hand, began to tell his tale. The tale of Millar, the innkeepers son.