

Thoughts Concerning the Delegates...

I became obsessed with these individuals soon after I came to this land. One unsubstantiated notion hidden deep within my clouded and damaged memories propelled me to pursue them, study them, and know them. In time I gave in completely to this desire, discarding all semblance of a life in the pursuit of this coveted knowledge.

They called themselves delegates and many pivotal events within the past century could be linked to them, with some important historical figures possibly being counted among their number. In spite of my amassed discoveries, their numbers remained hidden as did their true intentions and origins. Though they all were perfectly unique, they held one important aspect in common: their every action mirrored the duality of their nature, a subconscious schism between obedience and rebellion which divided one path into two, yet with the conscious illusion of being one. They believed that this was of their own free will; it was however a fact of their existence which ran deeper than they each could fathom, an aspect of themselves which they were all unable to escape.

Within that context they seemed to operate under two principal rules: achieve great power, and make no contact with one another. Though they excelled at the first rule, it seemed at the second they were less successful.

Five months prior to this day a delegate arrived in The City. I did not notice it at the time, for the daily comings and goings of people through the sprawling, nameless metropolis were countless. There was, however, something specific which drew my attention to him, and possibly the attention of all other delegates.

It was both arrogance and naiveté that allowed this man to do what no reasonable practitioner of bizarre arts would dare to do in all but the greatest of privacies. He conducted a ceremony which caused a structure, in all likelihood a shard of the delegate's own land, to spring forth from the mountainside to the north of The City. While it was possible that in some lands a deed such as this could be considered commonplace, in the world of The City it indicated powerful and dangerous sorcery.

I soon discovered his name, Daelus Thresh, and that somehow I *remembered* him. I *knew* him, though I could not understand how. What relic of my shattered past did he represent? Could I weld the memory back together through sheer will alone? That recollection, that spark of self awareness was what propelled me to focus all of my energy on mending the torn, burnt edges of my psyche. My obsession grew tenfold. My resolve became absolute. I would *know*.

Regardless of my own personal investment, what this departure from discretion meant for the plans of all delegates remained to be seen. It was an important sign: secrecy was becoming a lower priority to them in comparison to other goals.

Chapter 1

A Brief Intrusion

— Jyre: The Ascent —

Day 1: 11:00 pm

Now the tower stretched up into the sky before me, its shape hard to discern against the black starless sky, but its presence harsh and unyielding. I could feel its solidity pushing against the moist nighttime air. I had only a few more boulders to climb up before I would be able to hunt for a way in. Most would have simply wandered the path up the stairs which gently wove through the rocks and foliage, but there were men at the front gate. The men, guards with swords, would look upon a small young girl like myself and think awful thoughts. They would not say them, but their eyes would betray them. No matter their words, I would not be able to stand the look in their eyes, not now, not when I so needed to see the look in the eyes of the Lord of this tower again. His eyes were always different. Besides, someone dressed like me could not present themselves at the front gate of a nobleman's mansion.

My clothes were little more than sewn rags, with an old black curtain torn up and reassembled into a hooded cloak. The cloak, I thought, helped me blend in with the shadows. But tonight I might as well have left the cloak behind. The underbrush which grew in the lush soil between the rocks concealed me well enough, but the moisture made the cloak damp, making it heavy and harder for me to climb up the rock face. The climb was already difficult enough. I was able to find a gap between two rocks that I could get my hands and feet into to pull myself up the nearly vertical surface. When I came, much to my relief, to a horizontal shelf, I fell to my back, panting.

The challenge of the climb kept me focused, and stopped me from thinking too hard about what I was doing. I picked myself back up and looked down from the ledge I had just climbed over. My eyes happened to fall upon a package, a small painting wrapped in scrap parchment, which I had left behind at the base of the steep cliff-like hillside. It was for him, or it was supposed to be anyway. Really, it was for me. It was just a tool; an excuse to see him.

Tonight was different though, just seeing him wasn't enough; I had to ask him for help, and warn him. I felt like he was the only one I could trust, and that I had put him in danger. I had tried going where I usually met him, at his museum in Hightowne, the place they called The Circle of Stone and Shadow, but I was late. My cold-feet caused me to miss him. I knew that if I didn't go through with this tonight, I never would, so I came here. But when I got to the bottom of the rock wall, I saw that I couldn't have very well climbed it with a painting in hand. I had to choose, either return to The City or drop the act. So I made my choice; to do what I had really come here to do, and nothing more.

Now nearing the mansion, I closed my eyes, gathered up my strength, and turned towards the rocks once more. I reached up to the ledge, my small fingers barely reaching over the lip. I pulled myself up, and wedged one skinny, shaking arm between two rocks, to stop myself from slipping. At last I found myself against bricks rather than bare stone, but the ledge protruding

out from under the mansion's foundation wall was barely large enough to find footing on. I looked up the wall and around me, seeing many stained glass windows and relief carvings, each one different from the one that came before. The building was strange; with boxy and round bits nestled together amidst the rocky foothills almost randomly, with pointy roofs to accompany the sharp mountain peaks in the distance. It seemed to me that it wasn't here at all not long ago. I wondered if he had created it himself. That was how the rumors went. He seemed capable of doing anything.

Finally, my arm stretching up as far as I could reach, my fingers came to the lower edge of one of the relief carvings and found something I could actually get my fingers around. I pulled myself up, working hand over hand until I was able to get my feet into the spaces between the sculpted figures, keeping my eyes fixed firmly on my destination, and never letting myself look down. As I got within feet of the overhang my arms again were shaking with fatigue. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths, willing myself to go on.

With my determination gathered once more, I opened my eyes. The conviction was shattered the instant I saw a pair of dark eyes staring right back at me. I almost dropped to my death, or certainly a great deal of pain, but quickly realized that it was just one of the sculptures, and felt rather silly. In fact, had I not moments ago used its gaping mouth to grab onto and hoist myself up? I gave a little smirk at the stern, aggressive face in the stone, and continued up, my fatigue having been washed away by the shot of adrenaline.

A roof's overhang was a common problem while worming my way around The City's rooftops, so I was used to getting around them. Once safely onto the shingles, the base of the tower itself was finally in sight. I scampered up the incline, gazing up to the small balcony at the very top. Within was the faintest of lights, which I was sure had not been there a moment ago. I felt that the room at the top had to be his private chambers. He was inside.

I stared into the darkness, searching the top of the tower for any sign of something wooden. I could see gargoyles perched around a narrow rim, leaning forward with their arms pushing upwards, as if they were holding up the cone roof of the tower. The lighted opening was between two of these gargoyles. The tower roof looked similar to the one I was standing on, which was made from wood, so I hoped it had a wooden overhang too. I was going to have to risk it.

Having made my decision, I pulled my bow from my belt. It was a special bow, like nothing I had seen here in The City. It was a gift from a friend, Tanya, whom I had known back in my home, The Village. That was not even a year ago, but somehow, it seemed so far away. At rest, the bow was just a small shaft of wood which could easily be put under my belt. I held it between my palms, and whispered the short chant Tanya had taught me. The bit of wood trembled as it grew into a short-bow as tall as my shoulder.

The arrow I would shoot was just as amazing, but was an artifact native to The City and would have been considered just as magical back home as my

bow was here. These arrows were expensive, and very useful for getting where you're not meant to be. I took a moment to examine the large barbed arrowhead and the mysterious device wrapped around the shaft directly behind it. I was always afraid to touch it, certain that I would damage it somehow. I nocked the heavy arrow in place, raised my bow and took aim at where I felt there must be wood. I wanted to close my eyes and *will* the wood to be there and just let the arrow fly and hope for the best. My arm began to ache from holding the string taut while I searched for my target.

A chilly wind passed over me, causing a tremble deep inside my gut. At that instant I felt as if my feet were sliding down the slick shingles of the roof and that another gust of wind like that could send me tumbling head over heels. The wind was gone, but the trembling persisted, a deep dreadful shiver that went straight through to my core.

I lowered the bow, held my breath to calm my shakes, waited another instant, and then aimed once more. This time I didn't fret: I felt my aim was true. I let the arrow fly. I couldn't help but clench my eyes shut, waiting with dread for the sound of my valuable rope arrow shattering against stone, ruining my chances of seeing Lord Thresh tonight. Instead, the thud of the arrow sinking into timber came down from above, followed by the groan of the rope uncoiling as it fell. It was a delightful, deeply satisfying sound. I let my breath out and opened my eyes to see the end of the rope hanging level with my chest. It didn't seem possible that such a long, sturdy rope could be contained within the arrow, but I had learned recently that little was as it seemed to be in The City. I held the bow on my palms once again, said a different chant, and it shrunk back to its original size. I slipped it back under my belt and began to climb up.

I always felt silly while climbing rope arrows. I had seen grown men twice my weight climb up without the rope budging an inch, yet still every time I used one I felt as if it would pull free at any moment. Another chilly wind passed around me, causing the rope to sway to and fro, and the trembling in my gut again twisted and churned. I gripped the rope tighter with sweaty palms, and wrapped my legs tightly around it as well. The wind was stronger this time, and longer, and if I gave in to it, the fall would be more deadly.

As quickly as it began, the gust was gone. I relaxed my arms and legs, but not my grip, and continued up. When I reached the top and could climb no farther, I reached out carefully to wrap my fingers around the sculpted muscles of a gargoyle's shoulder to steady myself, and then just as carefully found a place for my feet on the narrow ledge by the gargoyle's feet. Once my footing was secure I let go of the rope with my other hand, quickly wrapping my arm around the damp and slippery stone of the gargoyle's chest. Counting to ten, and promising myself that I would not look down, I slowly let go of the gargoyle and inched my way to the small barrier which surrounded the balcony. With a burst of confidence I took a hold of the marble railing and quickly vaulted over it to safety. Now there was nothing between me and my destination except an open doorway.

As I passed through the threshold the wind and the dampness vanished, replaced by a warm calm. The massive bedroom was illuminated by a single candle on the table. The furniture cast long black shadows that stretched up to the ceiling. The room was empty; he was not here. My first instinct was to scan the room for valuables, but even if I had, I wouldn't have taken them. I could not steal from this man.

Then I turned and looked over my shoulder, and beheld the view. The city, with all of its beauty and ugliness, stretched out before me and beyond it the glistening sea. The glow of the city lights turned the sky a sickly pink. As much as I hated this place, it was my home now, and there was little I could do about it. Maybe after Lord Thresh helped me tonight, he would help me return home as well. He was not from The City, so he would not deny that there was a world outside of it. I smiled at the thought of returning to my village, a place that would not cause the night sky to glow like that.

As quietly as I could, I crossed the room and quickly tucked myself into a shadow cast by a large wardrobe. I tried over and over to wipe the sweat off my shaky hands onto my damp cloak, but I could never seem to get it all. As time ticked by, I began to wonder if he was really here at all. He had to turn in for the night, I told myself; unless of course...he did his other business during the night. I had not thought of that.

I could just leave my note on the table and be off. He'd find it eventually. But...I also wanted to see him. As my heart flooded with anxiety, I pulled the folded letter from my tunic pocket, written with charcoal on some paper I had 'borrowed'. Of course, I wouldn't be able to actually talk to him. I had never managed more than a squeak. But writing was one of many 'gifts' from The Lady, and so I let the paper talk for me. My eyes skimmed over it, just to make sure I had written the right things.

Lord Thresh,

You are good to me. I must tell you of myself. You take my goods and give me pay. I must tell you of where it comes from but it fears me to. I am an orphan. I never knew my dad. My mum is dead for years. I was a thief in the street of my village, steal, rob, sneak, take. Understand please. I had to survive!

I was twelve when taken. A young man called Ranson took me. He was a guard for The Lady. He saw me starving and filthy. He took pity and took me home and fed me. The warmth at his hearth was so good. His hair was black. His eyes green. I was sure any lass would love him. Any. I was sleeping by the fire when he touched me! He says quiet! Do as I say or I will kill you! You think they will miss one of your kind? I gave in willingly. Please understand. I was lonely.

Morning came, and he took me to The Ladys House. I was to serve her with him. I was a guard that very day. Do not hate me for this! I was to serve or I die! I trained and worked hard. I

learned much. I was tawt the letters and to read and write. I had food and became strong. Ranson took care of me. It was good. In the house I see many times that things were no good. I went to captain Els to explain. But never never never did he listen! Tell the lady he told me. I tried but she would never see me. I was not important. One night I saw lights in the darkness. It filled me with fear. I went to Els and told him of this. Tell the lady. I hit him. Hard. We fawt. Everyone saw. She saw! We were arrested. Captain Els was whipped. I was put in a cage and left to rot. I was hungry and had a fever. I feared death. I have no other memory.

Then I was saved. It was captain Els who freed me. I asked why. Obligated was all he would say. Time passed. I healed. I practice my skill to sneak and climb. This is how I am who I am. I am a thief but not evil! Please understand.

We seek revenge! The lady is evil! I steal her goods and sell to you. That is why I must warn you! If she found you had them she will hunt you! I fear the danger I caused you! Please forgive me!

Now you know the truth.

Your servant, Jyre

That was my story, more or less. I could still remember waking up in the small boat, with everything that led up to that moment a blank space in my mind. However, the memory of that boat was vivid, as if it happened yesterday. I remember looking up at the moon in the sky and seeing black shapes moving across it. As my vision focused I realized I was staring up at dead tree branches against the sky. I jerked up with a start, and found that I was no longer bound, and the ground beneath me swayed with my motion. It took a moment for me to reason it out and realize what had happened.

Els was facing away from me, oars gripped tightly in his hands as he pushed and pushed against the water. At first, I didn't know it was him. I thought it could have been Ranson, and that he actually had loved me, in spite of how he seemed, and that he had chosen to save me. I felt slightly disappointed when I realized I was looking at the squared, grizzled jaw and creased face of my former captain. When I asked him where we were going, he just told me that it was to a city where he used to live. "It won't be the same as your village," he warned me, his dark eyes growing stern. "There are hundreds, thousands of people there, and if you fell in the streets, you would be trampled underfoot."

It was a very long trip. We spent most of it on the small river, only venturing into the woods on either side when we needed food. I remembered Els sitting by the fire crafting arrows from sticks and stones and bits of leaf. Then he would vanish into the woods for hours, sometimes overnight, until he was able to kill a wild beast. Then we would eat well; better than I had back in my village.

When we finally got there, my wide eyes taking in strange sights I had never imagined before, I wondered if he would cut me loose and leave me on my own, but he did not. He never asked me to stay by his side, nor did he ask me to leave. I don't know what made me stay with him. I perhaps felt bound to him, that his rescuing me was a debt that I needed to pay. It was a good place to be, though. Els always treated me fairly, and never struck me, and never, ever touched me as Ranson had done.

Els tried to get a job as a guard, but it never stuck. He was always sacked no more than a week after being hired. "It's the markings," he said to me. "I try to hide it but they always see it during the physical inspections. The other guards talk, they think they recognize what they mean, and they are afraid." He was talking about the tattoo on the back of his hand. All of the lady's guard had them. I had one, but on the sole of my foot. It showed us to be one of hers. The other guards thought it meant that he was a pagan, and that the Hammerites would come for him, and that they would be next. We were forced to live in the streets, like dirt.

Els was a big sturdy man, but I was small and agile. He taught me what he knew of how guards thought, and how to use my nimble frame to my advantage. "They may be twitchy," he would tell me, "and jump at the creak of a board, but they're also lazy and don't like moving around too much under that heavy armor. If you think someone is onto you, just make sure you've broken their line of sight, find a nice deep shadow to hide in, and stay quiet. Few will search more than five minutes." He always told me to be patient, and never afraid—always patient.

So, we survived, and kept far from the eyes of the district watch and the Hammerites. I stole from petty merchants and picked pockets. I emptied the coffers of shops and swiped gold from under the mattresses of foolish commoners. I was even able to teach Els a thing or two about the sneak, and so we became partners in crime. Els was the brain and muscle, and I could reach many small and narrow and high places he could not. Between the two of us, we were able to end our siege of the slums, and turned our eyes to those more deserving of theft.

During those years Els's anger grew slowly. He seemed to know things; things he would not tell me, about The Lady and the things she had done. He never spoke of it openly, but sometimes when he thought I was not listening I could hear him cursing her quietly. I feared that she had put spells on him in the years of his service, dark things he would not dare mention. I could see the pain and hate in his eyes whenever I spoke of her, for I did so often and openly.

I, on the other hand, was haunted by something else. I remember one night lying on my cot in our hideaway, staring through the cracks of the floorboards above us into the upstairs room, when I thought aloud, "I wonder if anyone back in my village misses me."

Els's reply shocked me, and struck me as the most beautiful thing he had ever said. "Would you like to find your way back home?"

"Yes," I squeaked after a moment, as my eyes filled with tears at the

thought of finally going home. I had been so scared to ask him for all of that time, afraid he would say no. As soon as we could afford supplies, we set out. I did not know the way, nor did he. I only had bits of memories from when Ranson took me away from there, combined with Els' knowledge of the area around The Lady's mansion and the small serf-like town around it, which they called Barlosk.

"There were hills like these," I would say, "and trees like this," I told him. "And I remember a stream, that's what sticks out most." After searching for what seemed like weeks, always careful to never get too close to Barlosk, Els found what he said was a trail through the woods. I did not see anything there, just a bit of space where the grass had been flattened, probably by a deer, but he was insistent. We followed it, and he was right.

We found a settlement in the woods, just a couple of huts, but it was not my village. The people there made friendly faces, but for the most part kept away from us. I knew why; we smelled like The City, and worse, there was the marking on Els's hand. "You are welcome here if you need food or a place to rest," one of them told us, "but we beg you to not stay."

It was by chance that a familiar, youthful face happened to be peering out of a window as Els and I passed. I stared for a moment in disbelief at the child-like eyes set in a surprisingly manly and handsome face. It was Tanya, my childhood friend. Tanya was a bit of a loner just like me but mostly because the other children picked on him for having a girl's name, and I on the other hand had an overly boyish name. His preference for long hair which he always kept very nicely combed didn't help things. We ran to one another and embraced. "I am so glad we found you," I said to Tanya, "you can take us to our village!"

But Tanya's eyes filled with sadness at the mention. "I cannot find our home, Jyre, it is lost."

Lost? How could it be lost? The thought was insane to me, but Tanya explained. "Once I had left, to be educated by the old masters, I was never able to find my way back, even with all of my skills. It is as if it was gone, wiped away, just a memory—my entire family, gone." I did not speak of it then, but in my heart I promised myself that this had to be The Lady's doing. I could tell from Els's knowing glances that he felt the same way. How, what, or why I did not know. All I could think of were the faces of everyone I used to know, imprisoned and destitute, slave to her whims.

Having given in to despair, I asked him to come back with us to The City. I begged, but he could not. When he left my village as a child it was to become a student of the arcane arts, as his parents had before him. If he came to The City, he would have to abandon his heritage. Wizards were not welcome there; the church wouldn't allow it. With his family now gone, that was all he had left. Then he begged me to stay with him in his new home, but the village elders forbade it. In seeking protection from The Lady, they had accepted a danger almost as grave; allegiance to a god, the lord of the wood. Els and I stank of The City, and so his beasts would be inevitably drawn to us, and we would be killed. They urged us to leave at once.

I was furious. Why had Els taken me to the horrible City, when I could have come to live with Tanya and escaped its curse? Even though I knew it was impossible for him to have known of this place, I still held a grudge. With my heart heavy from loss, we left, but not before Tanya had gifted me with the magical bow, which he had made himself. Els and I returned safely to The City, and I never again mentioned my village, nor my conviction that it was The Lady who had destroyed it.

Then one day not long ago, while Els and I were sitting in the Red Dragon Inn enjoying a rare treat of brandy after a successful heist, we chanced to hear a rumor; a single word sent chills straight through me: "Barlosk." It could only mean one thing; The Lady was coming to The City, a place Els swore she would never venture. We did not speak of it that night, but I felt my blood boil, and I knew that he felt the same. When the dawn came, Els spoke of her openly for the first time since our escape, and we vowed not to rest until we saw to her downfall. We had learned much since we had escaped from her, and felt that our skills were enough.

"She will regret coming here!" Els said. "We will find her weaknesses, and exploit them! We will find her contacts and spread foul and dark rumors to them, forcing them to shatter! Bit by bit she will be broken and eventually she will have no choice but to stay away! To do this, we need knowledge! Patience, Jyre! You must have patience!"

I remembered those words well. They became my creed. From that first lead, we began to find more and more news of her activities in The City. She had crept in, her presence far deeper than either of us feared. Still, we worked, finding out whatever we could about places we believed were her secret strongholds and breaking into them. For a time, I actually believed that we were doing what Els said we would do, but we never seemed to achieve anything. We would sneak through the halls of her allies and contacts, breaking into studies and store rooms, looking for anything useful. We always left empty handed. I stole things sometimes, gold, jewels; trinkets I did not think would be missed.

Upon returning from a pub, Els told me of a big shipment which had come in from Barlosk. Els had made friends with a man who worked at that warehouse, and he mentioned it to us. It was a lucky break for us, but also a horrible sign; why would she have so much delivered to The City unless she was intending to move here? The warehouse worker turned a blind eye as I went in and looked through the shipment. I neatly opened crate after crate of her things, only to find junk; furniture, plates, tapestries, all of it to be sent to her new home, a place simply described as The Villa.

But then I saw it, hidden amidst the furniture; a painting. The Lady kept many treasures, most of which I would dare not touch, but there was a work I knew she cherished beyond all others. It was a painting, done by one whom they all said was very dear to her.

As I laid eyes on it I remembered vividly being back in Barlosk, peeking cautiously around the corner to see her standing in the center of the stair hall, gazing up at it. The Lady was tall and graceful, and carried about her a certain

air of warmth. It was not a caring or inviting warmth, but more a warmth that crept under your skin and made you wish that you could pull it from your bones.

She would touch the frame of the painting as she looked at it. It was wooden, not cut and nailed together but made of natural branches bound by reeds. The painting was abstract, just splashes of red, brown, and green; the paints seemingly thrown about at random across the canvas. The painting made me think of a forest, drenched in blood. I did not know why she looked at it, what she saw in it, but I felt that it had to be evil; as evil as she was. Maybe, I thought, if I stole it from her, it would take away some of her power. More than that, I held a tight hope that losing it would wound her personally.

As I stood in the warehouse gazing upon the painting I was filled with the chilling memory of her presence. Memories of being in her service, watching her look up at it with affection, filled me with a rash impulse. I took it, and left the rest of the crates unsearched.

"You must not keep it! It was *hers!*" Els scolded me. "She *will* find out," he insisted. "The warehouse workers will be punished, and it will be *our* fault. They will *never* help us again, even if they survive her wrath! Do you only think of yourself?" I hid from him for a week after that. I knew he was right, that I had been foolish, but that didn't mean he needed to scream at me.

Reluctantly I did as I was told, and found a way to get rid of the painting. I sold it to *him*; the lord of the tower. That was how I met Lord Thresh. I had heard that his museum gallery would buy any artwork, no matter the nature, and so I went to him. At first I found him to be a man the same as any other. I thought nothing of him or our meeting. I had just wanted to get the painting off of my hands, but the gold he gave me for it made me greedy. I began to steal, not coin which was vital for survival, but property which could be sold. Fear turned to the thrill of the heist. I became an art thief. I rejoiced at the sight of gold paid to me by the giving hands of Lord Thresh, rather than stolen. Els never admitted to approving of it, but he also never complained.

Then something changed. When visiting Thresh's museum, while staring, eyes wide, at the rows of books there, I overheard some men talking about him. They were talking about the rumors: that Thresh was from another place, his tower appeared from thin air, how everything about him was still a mystery, and how some called him *Master Nightfall*. Those rumors ignited something deep inside of me: a curiosity and a *need* to know more. In a way, I thought it made him a little like me. We were both from somewhere else, and no one here knew anything about where we both came from. I perished the thought that he could have come from a village like mine. No, a man like him had to have come from a place *far* more amazing than The City: somewhere majestic and *strange*.

Soon I started caring less and less about what I was paid and more and more about just getting another chance to see Lord Thresh again. The best moments were when he examined what I had brought to sell him, which allowed me time to study him in return. My eyes would move over him, taking in his features. His short brown hair was beginning to curl, waving

back and forth on the top of his head and around his ears. There was a thin mustache framing his lips, trailing down the sides to meet with the trimmed beard that covered his chin. His face was always calm and steady, never showing more than a hint of emotion. I was never sure how old he was, only that he was at the same time far older than Ranson but far younger than Els. The thing that struck me most though, was that look in his deep brown eyes after he had examined the goods and looked directly into mine. I didn't understand the look he was giving me; only that no one else had ever looked at me like that before.

I could no longer wait for my carefully planned capers into rich mansions. I just started grabbing junk on canvas propped up on the walls of common homes, worthless to him, but they were my passport. Even if he turned me away, at least I had gotten a chance to see him.

Then things changed again. News came to us, and just as Els had predicted, the warehouse workers on duty when her painting was stolen had all gone missing. It was *my fault*. I had brought doom upon the warehouse workers, and now Thresh faced the same fate. I had to warn him. At the same time I felt like Els's plan was going nowhere and I wanted to end this. I felt like Lord Thresh could help us. I hoped dearly that he would be thankful for my warning, and then swayed to compassion, and join in my cause to bring about The Lady's downfall.

I heard the jingle of keys. I drew back against the wall tightly in anticipation, and held my breath. I knew that at any second, the door would open, and he would be there. The sound subsided, there was a moment of silence, and then I heard the lock in the door open with a dull clunk. I couldn't breathe.

Several Hours Prior

— **Nightfall: The Return Home** —

Day 1: 9:00 pm

"Mad scientists and dreamers talk nonsense about changing the past. Well, they're looking in the wrong direction. In my business, changing the past is all in a day's work. I should expect to be well paid for my fantastic services, yes?"

I regarded him with a slight nod, "If you consider the standard fee to be 'well paid', then yes. You will have to do better than spout amusing anecdotes if you wish to see a coin of it, though." I was speaking with Sage Walden, a member of the guild of lawyers and judges. Seconds ago the portly gentleman pushed his way into my office without knocking or declaring himself, and began his soliloquy without so much as a 'good evening.'

He laughed "Of course, of course."

"And?—"

His swollen, reddened face seemed to bubble with inner excitement. "I don't think you should expect any more trouble from the city council," he

went on, being frank for the time being. "As far as The City's records are concerned, your land was bought and paid for nearly two years ago, and since then you have acquired a legitimate building permit, all paid for, construction began and completed in roughly under a year, all taxes paid, all permits filed, everything in order. We've invented a whole history of the building, Lord Thresh."

I smiled faintly as I wrote in the payment sum on the bank note, authorizing the transfer of gold from my account to his, and said, "You've done such a fine job thus far, I think I will be able to expect more and more from you, and if that occurs, you from me."

He eyed the digits I penned onto the document carefully and then looked up at me with a look surely designed to fill me with confidence, "At your service, sir."

We stood and shook hands. Sage Walden actually struck me as one of the more genuine of his guild, which must be why he was the personal lawyer of Lord Canard, Warden of Hightowne and my landlord. I just had to wonder how much this arrangement was meant to give Canard leverage over me. We may have been allies, but I was still very much an independent business man.

As I opened the door to let him out, we were met by Sheam, my assistant, whose office was a portal to my own. "No more meetings, Sheam," I told her as Walden passed through silently. "I'm turning in for the night."

Sheam gave a quick nod, absently pushed a strand of her dark yellow hair from her face, and glanced quickly to Walden, who was gathering up his coat and hat from their place on the wall. "Shall I escort Mister Walden back to his carriage, Milord?" She looked so small next to him, as if she was actually twenty feet away and I was viewing through a forced perspective.

"Indeed, thank you Sheam..." I said, as he interrupted me.

"Oh no, my fine young lady, that won't be necessary. I can find my own way. Goodnight, Lord Thresh, Lady Sheam."

"Just Sheam, sire," she said with a slight bow of her head, "and goodnight."

"Yes, goodnight, Mister Walden," I said with a similar gesture. He mirrored it and departed from the office.

Once the door was closed Sheam crossed her arms and asked in a much more natural tone, "How did that go?"

"I don't know yet, I have to talk with Rembrandt. He'll tell me what was between the lines."

She frowned a little and crossed her arms tighter together across her narrow frame. "But surely you must have some sense one way or another?"

I found myself rubbing my eyes from fatigue, and replied, "I think I have a good sense of him, and I trust Canard, so I think things will turn out alright." I opened my eyes in time to see her uncross her arms and start packing some papers away from her desk into her drawers. Honestly, I didn't really trust Canard, but it wouldn't benefit me to have Sheam stressing about it.

"I don't know why you decided to get help from Canard with this, instead of going through James like usual."

I opened the wardrobe which sat by the office door, and took out my cloak, walking staff, and my hat. "James is the one who suggested I should go through Canard, and I agreed with him. It's important to have a healthy relationship with my landlord; especially when we both have Warden Ramirez to deal with. It's good for the lords of Hightowne to show solidarity. We don't appreciate his kind in our part of The City. He needs to feel like we could all potentially join forces against him, should he try something against any of us."

She nodded, looking back up at me as the lines of concern vanished from her usually cheerful face. "That makes sense. Good luck, Daelus. Have a safe trip home."

"And you have a good sleep. I'll see you in the morning, bright and early."

"Yes. Remember, you have an appointment with that burglar trio at three, I guess they have more gems they want to sell you. Mister Knowles sent word that the replica of the chalice is ready for you to inspect; I scheduled that in for you at around eleven. Oh, and you're supposed to have lunch with Lady Dimewell at one o'clock, and you had decided that we needed to get the M stacks reorganized no later than tomorrow as well. Ever since that crazy taffer decided to re-arrange that shelf alphabetically according to book title, it's been a complete mess. Oh, and don't forget..."

"Sheam," I said, looking a bit baffled. "Just write it all down, I'll worry about it tomorrow. I can't sleep with all of that business jumping around in my head. Except the part about the burglars, don't write that down."

She gave a sheepish grin. "Right, written down. No burglars. Check."

I nodded with a wink, and turned for the door, but something stopped me. "Didn't I cancel that lunch with Lady Dimewell?"

She blinked. "Did you? She sent a messenger over today to make sure you two were still on...I thought..."

"Oh, blast. Schedule some disaster for around that time tomorrow, could you? I don't think I could sit through another moment of that woman droning on about her winery."

Her eyes went up, and then to the side, and then she scrunched up her nose. I smiled warmly to her. Now out the door and looking back at her I said, "Goodnight, Sheam."

She smiled back, for once revealing how exhausted she really was. "Goodnight Daelus." She wasn't the only one who was exhausted.

With my walking staff in hand I slowly walked through the dimly lit halls of The Circle, found my way to one of the many exits, and departed. I glanced back and forth at the now familiar cityscape around me, the streets of Hightowne, before taking the road north on my way home.

As I passed through the narrow streets flanked by crooked houses and old castles packed tightly together as if for warmth, I happened to run into a pair of guardsmen, Gryphons. These were Lord Canard's men entrusted with the protection of his assets which included most of Hightowne.

"Good evening, Milord," one of them called out. I recognized him to be someone who I had met before, an officer, though his name escaped me. He

looked like the type of man it would take two horses to push over. The man, or boy, next to him was clearly a junior, perhaps even on training tonight. He seemed puzzled at the way the officer addressed me.

"Good evening, sir," I replied. "How goes the watch?" I asked as I approached them.

"Not as quiet as I'd like. To be honest there's a bit of a stink. I insist on escorting you to the northern gate, if that is your destination, master."

I was taken aback, but did not argue. "An escort would be appreciated, but you must tell me of this 'stink'."

The junior guard whispered loudly to his officer with a puzzled look on his face, "Why him?"

With a scolding look, the officer replied, "Show a little more respect. This is Lord Thresh, friend and ally to Lord Canard."

The look of puzzlement grew on the lad's face as he said, "Lord...who?"

"You're going to have to learn the who's who of this place if you expect to be able to do your job, son. Now quit your slack-jawing and be on with your patrol "On with you!" The boy seemed to jump a little, and then hurried off. "Ah, kids," the officer said. "They don't know nothing these days."

"They tend to be more interested in each other than anything else."

I eased up my pace a little to match that of the guard, whose saunter befitted one who often spent the entire night doing nothing but walking, watching, and waiting. But we did not walk in silence. "Warden Ramirez has been awfully quiet these days; too quiet, if you ask me, and that's the reason for the stink."

I nodded. "Coincidentally, I was just speaking with my aid about him. He seems to be on everyone's mind tonight. Go on."

"It's complicated. I can't say much without sounding daft I'm afraid. He knows there's a plot to push him out of his district for good. Everyone knows that. Everyone knows he's real sore about it too. But what no one knows is what he's doing about it. See, that's the thing. It seems like he's doing nothing, but he's got to be doing something. The fact that it look like he's doing nothing makes me positive that he's up to something really good. That make sense?"

"No news is bad news, is that it? You can't expect that he'd be out in the open about his plots and schemes. I'd say it sounds like life as normal."

He made a funny face and seemed to rearrange his shoulders. "Yeah, that's the thing isn't it?"

"What thing would that be?" I inquired, though I didn't know why. I was sure that he really wasn't sure what he was trying to tell me.

"Just got a feeling is all. You walk these streets long enough; they start to tell you things. They don't have to make sense, but you just know. It's like that smell you can't figure out; that stink."

"I imagine all will be made clear when it's far too late to do anything about it," I said to him with the slightest crack of a smile.

In time we came to the gate which separated Hightowne from Shalebridge. The guards at the gate were familiar with my trek home, so they

always expected me at this hour. I was greeted with a nod and a smile, and the officer with a salute and a brief exchange, which I didn't really listen to. Once the gate was open and I was on the other side, I bid my escort and the gatekeepers good evening and tried to be on my way.

Moving from Hightowne to Shalebridge felt like going back in time. The buildings here were more weathered, more cumbersome and more tumbled upon one another in ramshackle randomness. The terrain grew hilly to the north—Hightowne gained its name from the sudden upward slope the ground took—and by this point, should I have cared to glance over my shoulder, I would have seen quite a bit of the city laid out before me, a field of lights with distant towers puncturing the sky.

I did not look over my shoulder, however, for I was in a hurry. I continued briskly, as was my way, and tapped my walking staff on the ground in time with a flapping shutter. I found that I would often do such a thing without thinking, and as soon as I realized I was doing this, I stopped.

And in the void of the next shutter flap minus my tap, I thought I heard something. I resumed the rhythm of the tapping as I walked, this time listening for that same noise. I could hear it again, faintly, up above me. Every time the shutter or my staff tapped the ground, they moved, using the noise to try to mask their faint footfalls.

"What now?" I whispered under my breath. I imagined they were stalking me from the rooftops. Who 'they' were at this point was unclear, but 'they' were not just some random goons looking to mug a nobleman, that much was clear. So, fight or flight. I was never one for those types of quandaries. I wanted to try to get on top of the building from behind them and gauge what I was up against.

I veered closer to the side of the road until I was beneath the shelter of an overhang, and then quietly went into a narrow alleyway. Once deep within the shadows, I took off my cloak and hat, and carefully placed them somewhere that didn't look too dirty. The alley was narrow enough that I could use the windowsills on either side to shimmy my way up, staff still in hand. Now I played their game, timing my movements to match theirs, so the shuffling of their feet masked the sound of my ascent. After climbing above the fourth story, I was able to peer over the parapet to see three men in black cloaks ducked down, gazing into the streets. The hard part would be getting within striking distance without altering them.

I felt around for a loose pebble and, with great care, tossed it over their heads. It struck the building on the opposite side of the street, and tumbled down to the road, where it bounced a few times before settling down. They seemed to grow excited at this, and were looking back and forth more intensely than ever, still trying to find me.

Seeing them distracted, I moved quickly, getting beside the first one. I swung my walking staff sharply up against his throat. He fell aside with a muffled gag. I immediately jabbed the second in the temple before he noticed that his pal was down. The third, spinning to face me, elected to give the moment over to confusion rather than action, so he was unable to react in any

lucid manner before my staff struck his body in various tender parts, leaving him in a state similar to his fallen comrades.

The second one recovered quickly and was now upon me, dagger drawn. He was fast, getting in close to cut me in the ribs, but he missed. He thought he was safe, too close for me to get a strike at him with my staff, but I caught his arm under mine and rammed the base of my palm into his ear.

The first one came at me with his knife, but I had his friend as a shield. After Numbers One and Two collided I jumped back, and made a jab at Number One's face with my staff. He slid to the side and tried to counterattack, but he was too far away. My next blow landed in his stomach.

Number One was down, but now Number Three was coming at me again. I knew that at this rate they would come at me one at a time until they wore me down, assuming I could incapacitate each one in turn; otherwise I'd be finished with a knife in the back. I slid to the side, so that I was in-between Number Three and the ledge, just as he came at me. I dropped my staff, grabbed onto his thrusting arm, and used his momentum to send him careening over the ledge.

Number Two was at me again. He came in close, nearly stabbing me where my shoulder met my chest, but instead his blade bit only fabric. I ducked and lunged, catching him in the chest with my shoulder, toppling him over. His head smashed into the rooftop with a jarring crack. Number Two was now down, but Number One was angry and coming for me.

I plucked the dagger from Two's stunned hand. Number One paused for an instant when he saw this and changed direction. He slid left and then right before tossing his dagger into his other hand to come at me from the side, probably hoping to disarm me. It would have worked if I hadn't pulled my right arm quickly out of the way and nailed him in the jaw with my fist.

I darted away, jumped and slid over to my staff and scooped it up. I expected him to be right on top of me, but instead he had chosen to grab a second dagger and growled menacingly. I was between him and the ledge.

He came at me daggers swinging, eyes ablaze with rage. I jabbed his kneecap with the tip of my staff. He spun around to one side in a stumble. I dropped my staff and caught him, one arm around his throat and the other around his chest. He threw his head back and hit mine, bloodying my lip. He had dropped one of his daggers, but still held tightly onto the other. He squirmed, trying to reach around to grab me or kick me in some way. I just held, and waited, and prayed that Number Two wouldn't wake up.

It didn't look like it was working. As he struggled, still totally conscious, he flipped his dagger around in his hand and jabbed it into my thigh. Stung by the unexpected blow, I twisted him around quickly to face the parapet and thrust him down upon it so that the stone edge caught him in the groin. He yelped in pain and, for a brief moment, stopped squirming. I brought my arms down on his back to pin him there forcefully. All he could do now was take in the view of the street from four stories up and contemplate the body of his fallen comrade below.

"Now what's this all about?" I said, hoping that I sounded calm, still

wincing from the pain.

He didn't say a word; just growled menacingly and fought against my hold on him.

Then I heard the sound of boots thudding against cobbles, and when I craned my neck, I saw two fully armored soldiers with their swords drawn charging down the street in our direction. It was the Shalebridge guard. They had heard the cries and saw the dead body, and apparently had justice on their minds. One of them pointed to me, catching me at a rather unflattering moment, "You there! Don't move!" they called out almost in unison.

"Tell him to let me go!" the goon shouted.

They had bows and were pulling them off their backs. "Unhand him and come down at once!" the soldier shouted. The Shalebridge guards were anxious warriors and tended to kill first and ask questions never.

Quietly, I hissed to Number One, "Drop your weapon and I'll let you live."

"I'm not the one who should be worried about dying, Nightfall; you're the one who'll be dead soon."

Feeling my guard down, he thrust back against me, breaking free and causing me to stumble backwards. The thug loomed over me with his dagger brandished point down as he pulled his arm over his head for a powerful downwards jab. Thanks to his flair for the dramatic, I was able to treat him to some makeshift dental work, courtesy of my trusty wooden traveling companion which I lifted from the ground at the last moment. Several of his teeth fell to the rooftop, but he himself followed his late comrade to the gravelly grave below.

It would have been nice if the Shalebridge guard had broken the thug's fall, but I would have no such luck. They easily evaded the falling body and once it struck ground, they regarded it as little more than falling debris. Then two arrows sailed over the building. I really wasn't expecting that, so it was a close call. I managed to move out of the way, but one of the arrows brushed my shoulder. I got down low and crawled away quickly, hoping to not become a pincushion.

I fretted, wishing that I could have had some time with Number Two in order to question him, but I wasn't being given the chance. "Who's up there? Declare yourself at once!" I wanted to peek over the ledge to see what they were doing, but I was afraid that they'd take the opportunity to try to put an arrow between my eyes.

I surveyed the rooftop scene to see if I had left any evidence which would implicate Lord Daelus Thresh, a respectable businessman, in murder. No, the only thing I would be leaving behind was my own blood. The sight of it reminded me of my fresh leg wound and the pain shooting through my muscles. I had to get off the roof before the adrenaline faded and the pain truly took hold.

I scrambled over to where I climbed up and as quietly as possible, started to descend. I heard the guards talking quietly to each other in the street. It sounded like they were inspecting the bodies. Once my feet were on solid ground, I quickly located my cloak and hat and held them as a bundle under

my arm.

"Come down here this instant and submit yourself for questioning!" They thought that I was still on the roof; good. I wasn't going to answer, it would have given my location away, and I certainly wasn't going to comply. I was too busy trying to work out an alternate way home. I crept around in back alleys for some time, and when I had left the scene far behind I found a place I thought safe enough to sit for a bit.

Tearing off a strip of my cloak was almost as painful as the wound. But I knew that I had to slow the bleeding; otherwise I'd leave a trail from my unconscious body right back here to the building. I tied off my leg, and then once more donned my cloak and hat to resume my trip home. By the time I reached the northern gate of Shalebridge the pain in my leg was quickly growing hard to bear. I patted myself on the back for the usually superfluous but currently lifesaving habit of carrying a walking staff, as it was the only thing now that made the journey possible.

The Shalebridge guards at this gate were familiar with my trek home, though tonight I was rather late. I could tell they were looking me up and down, inspecting me, trying to discern the reason for my hobble; and hopefully not noticing the trail of blood I had left behind linking me to the building where the battle had taken place. Even after tying off the wound, it still bled, but hopefully so little that any blood I left on the streets would become invisible mixed in with the sludge. They didn't ask any questions, and simply let me through into the northern wilderness beyond The City limits.

I hobbled to the meeting place making a horrible racket as my legs shuffled weakly across the gravel strewn with dry grass and twigs. Adding to this racket was my staff as it occasionally punctured the gravel surface when I thrust it down to gain another hold before pulling myself forward. Rembrandt would have been able to hear me coming from a mile away.

"Heard you had some excitement," said the familiar voice of Rembrandt from his hiding place between a boulder and a tree.

"Hello Rembrandt," I said, peering into the darkness to make out the slight shape of my agent. It could be said that Rembrandt's first, best employment opportunity is being a scarecrow. He had the look of one who was simply sticks and clothes wrapping straw, and a floppy, filthy gray hat meant to disguise the fact that his head was simply an old melon rind. "How did you hear about that?"

"I haven't been waiting here all this time. I keep my ear to the ground."

"Do you know what happened after I left?" I asked him as I joined him in the shadows.

I couldn't see his face under his hat, though I knew it to resemble a bit of gnarled wood which had washed up to shore after years of being worked upon by the salty ocean currents. His voice was shallow and hoarse. "Nothing witnessed, just what I heard. They arrested the survivor, got him on vagrancy for the time being, other things will happen through the night. I'll make sure you find out what they were all about. Good thing you hadn't killed him too."

"An officer I spoke to back in Hightowne said that he felt something bad was going down tonight; seems he was right."

"I see you're not in very good shape. Shoulder, leg, and unless I am very mistaken a swollen lip."

"I'd be impressed with your skills of observation if it wasn't the obvious you were uttering. Yes, I got a knife in the leg. Don't ask me if I feel bad about killing two of them. I don't think I'd like my answer."

"And I suppose the wound to your shoulder was self inflicted?" he remarked dryly.

At first I was confused, sure that the cloak covered where the arrow had torn the fabric of my sleeve, but then I saw that it was a much closer call than I had imagined. Blood had soaked through to my cloak. "Ah," I said, after discovering it. "Shalebridge's finest." I had hoped to get past my employees at home without them noticing the injuries and making a fuss, but at this point it looked like that was going to be impossible. Changing the subject, I looked back to Rembrandt. "What did you find out about Sage Walden, the lawyer?"

"It all checks out, actually," he said as he rubbed his shoulders up against the rock. "Seems like he's really doing what he says he is, and no one can figure out why he wouldn't be. I think you can rest easy about that. I know you don't trust lawyers, and trust wardens even less, and I couldn't agree more, but I trust my nose, and my nose can't smell a rat this time. I think things are finally going to smooth over with this whole tower issue."

"Well, that's good to hear."

"Well, if there's nothing else?" he questioned, lifting his shoulders from the boulder.

"I suppose not. I was expecting bad news, so I expected this meeting to take longer. I look forward to actually getting some sleep tonight."

"Before you go, I do have one question, if you don't mind me being a nosey git."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What is it, Rembrandt?"

"So you had this lawyer make up a fictional history for your tower in the city's official books. What did they have on it before?"

I frowned slightly, and looked in its direction, quickly picking out the tower's faint silhouette against the mountains, "Something that needed to be changed."

"Rumor has it you conjured it up from thin air."

I fixed my eyes into the dark shadow under his hat, where his eyes should be, and replied in a hushed tone. "Is *that* how the rumors have it." I made it clear from my tone that I was not asking a question.

There was a pause before his reply, but it wasn't what I expected. "If you want my help with the Hammerites, I can do it, not tonight, but soon, and it's going to cost you."

"It costs me every day, Rembrandt. But tonight I am more interested in those assassins. Find out what you can, will you?"

He nodded. "Count on it. As you know, James is going on holiday this

week, but I don't think this is anything I can't take care of without him."

"Yes, I know, and I believe you shall do fine. Still, do me a favor and keep him in the loop. I know he'd want to be, even while on vacation, especially about something like this."

"I'll do that," he said with a nod.

"Thank you, and goodnight Rembrandt."

He nodded once more, turned around and vanished into the shadows. I could faintly hear the cracking of the gravel as he went.

Something about that meeting troubled me. How had he known about the assault on me? Had news of it spread that quickly? Was it that obvious? I had seen no one else in the streets. Still, there could have been people in the buildings that witnessed it, but again, how did news of it get to Rembrandt before I did? I wasn't exactly moving quickly; a good jogger could have easily gotten to him in half the time it took me.

From the meeting place it was just a brisk walk to my tower in the hills, but it was an occasionally steep walk and of course I was in no condition for a brisk anything, steep or level. In fact, tonight even the rocks beside the road were starting to look like comfortable bedding. At last the path turned into a stair as the slope ascended to my front gate, now the mansion and the tower itself was well within reach.

Two of my personal guard, Gispa and Medan, were standing watch at the front gate. "Evening Master," they chimed in unison. They had watched me slowly navigate the stairs, so I knew that they had to know that all wasn't well.

"Evening Gispa, Medan," I said in reply. Gispa silently opened the gate for me, and stood aside. I could see them trading concerned glances back and forth, probably wondering if I was going to explain what was going on. I just asked them, "All quiet?"

"All quiet," replied Medan.

"Jarah's up top; thinks he heard something a little earlier," Gispa reported.

I nodded. "But he didn't find anything?"

They both shook their heads. "I see. During my walk home tonight I encountered an assassination attempt."

Gispa asked, grinning like a monkey, "Oh? Who was trying to assassinate who?"

I almost laughed. "Me! Gispa, they were trying to assassinate me."

"Poor devils," Medan laughed. "You didn't kill all of them I hope, boss. Someone needed to cry home to daddy to tell him they been licked! Ha!"

I did laugh at that point. "Yes, one of them was left alive and he is now in the gentle hands of the Shalebridge guard."

"Whoa, one of them...? How many were there in all?" Gispa asked, seemingly astonished.

"Three in all," I stated calmly.

"Three! The fools! They should have known to send at least five!" was

Medan's reaction.

I laughed a bit more, and then put my hand on Medan's shoulder. "Keep a close eye out for more trouble, would you? I don't want to have to wake up in the middle of the night to fight off five more villains. Be sure to catch them before they get inside."

They both nodded, and then Gispa said, "Don't you worry, boss, if we catch 'em, we'll send Jossimer after them. He'd make them shit themselves!"

Medan laughed quite a bit at this, but I just smiled and nodded. "Have a good night, Gentlemen."

I walked up another flight of stairs inside the fenced courtyard to my front door. With each passing step, I felt as if I was ready to tumble back down. I could have asked the guards for help, but pride prevented it. I fumbled around for my keys with my injured arm, but before I could find them the door swung open. Jossimer stood before me, looking as though he had eyes up his nose considering the way his nostrils were aimed at me. I wanted to offer him a pair of tweezers. He took a deep breath, as if he was about to say something profound, but only said, "Sir," rather forcefully.

Maybe he actually would make the assassins defecate. "Jossimer," I said in reply, trying not to stare up his nose.

"Dinner is being served, if you do not tarry it will not be cold, and," he tilted his head a little so that he might see my shoulder over his nose. "I take it you will want Mrs. Simon to be tending to your shredded outfit."

I nodded grimly, and replied, "Yes, and if you don't mind, I'll be keeping my staff for the time being." I then offered him my hat.

"Sir," was his only response as he took my hat from me.

Though I hated the idea, starving as I was, dinner would have to wait. "Please tell Marith that I must visit Mrs. Simon before dinner; I have a task for her that cannot wait. I shouldn't need more than a few minutes, fifteen at most. Keep it heated for me until then."

"I shall, but I do not know what good it will do, *sir*." He ended his statement with a rather forceful period.

"What the devil is that supposed to mean?" I replied, ending with my own forceful punctuation mark.

"Mrs. Marith Henrett seems incapable of listening to a thing that *I* say, so *I* do not see what good it would do to have me say *anything* to her, *sir*."

"Alright, now what the devil is *that* supposed to mean?"

"As head butler, I was under the impression that I would be in charge; however, it seems that the only entities I have sovereignty over are the feather duster and the potted plants, and even they are insubordinate."

"Jossimer, I don't have time for this."

"Of course not *sir*, you are a very busy man. I'll just go over here and stand in the corner and perhaps in time you will hire someone to dust *me*."

"I'm not in the mood for one of your tantrums, Jossimer. You have a great deal of responsibilities and duties. Don't make me list them now; you should know them well enough."

"And furthermore, why is it that I, your head butler, am forbidden to enter

certain chambers of the abode? How am I to do my job if half of your mansion is restricted?"

The pain in my leg and arm shot right into my brain at that moment. It took a great deal of restraint to overcome the urge to explode. I just took a deep breath, and stated evenly, "I am perfectly capable of firing you this instant, Jossimer, and will do so if you ever protest upon that particular subject again."

There was a long pause, until finally he said, "I will inform Mrs. Marith Henrett. I hope that Mrs. Simon will be able to tend to your despoiled wardrobe to your satisfaction." At that, he turned around and left.

As irate as I had been at the night's misadventures, Jossimer had just made me furious. If I was still angry with Jossimer in the morning, I'd look into having him replaced. I couldn't believe he came so highly recommended from James. Maybe all butlers were just like that.

I slowly headed through the halls of my mansion, while praying that I wouldn't drip any blood onto the carpet, over to what I had nicknamed Mrs. Simon's "laboratory". She had transformed several rooms in the upper basement into a makeshift tailor's shop, where she not only tended to my clothing, but to the entire staff's, including the guards'. The guards were all her brothers-in-law, except the one who was her husband.

I poked my head into her lab, and glanced around to see if she was around. Of course, there she was, poring over one of the guard uniforms, fixing a tear. She was a handsome woman close to my age, a trifle older most likely, with long tightly curled red hair. "Mrs. Simon?" I said softly, as to not startle her.

It didn't work. She jumped a little and put her hand on her chest to steady herself. "Oh my," she muttered as she looked over at me, the light catching her freckled face. "Yes, Milord?" she said, trying to stand without dropping her work on the floor.

"Yes, I do have some work for you, I tore my cloak here..." I said, indicating where I had ripped it to tie off my leg.

"Hmm," she said, pausing to look at it. "That's a nasty tear...*Daelus*...what on earth? You're bleeding terribly!"

Keeping the topic on my clothes, and not my wounds, I said, "I fear much of my outfit has been ruined, either cut or bloodied, mostly both...cloak, pants, tunic, undershirt..."

She grimaced. "Master, what on earth are you doing here? You should be at a doctor!"

I grimaced as well. "It's fine, don't worry about it. Can you fix the clothes?"

She slid her frown from left to right before answering. "No way to get the blood stains out. I can cut off sleeves and the like, but I am afraid the cloak is ruined unless you want a patch on it. I won't abide you going around in blood-stained clothes. Now I warn you, I won't tolerate some misplaced show of bravado or modesty; you had the chance to go to a doctor, but you came to me instead. Out of those clothes this instant! I'm fixing you before I fix any

old pile of threads!"

I gave a weak laugh of astonishment. "I should have known you'd be that way, with all those guards in your family, lots of patching up to do no doubt."

"No doubt," she said, trying to get me out of my shirt. "Why were you attacked?"

"Just for being me, I suppose," was the only answer I'd give her. Thankfully she seemed too preoccupied to follow up.

Getting the shirt off, she grimaced again, this time baring her teeth in an exasperated expression. She rushed over to one of the sinks and fetched a cloth, wet it, and returned to try to clean the wound up a little. I protested. "Really, Mrs. Simon, I can take care of this. I just need you to fix the..."

"Nonsense, hold still," she commanded, scrubbing at it like she wanted it to reopen. I was afraid she was going to spit on it or something. And then, as I feared, she fetched a needle and thread from the pouch on her belt.

I spared myself the exact details of what was to follow by trying to imagine myself on a walk in the country with sunny skies and a light cool breeze. The worst part was knowing how needless it all was. I had my own methods of repairing myself, which certainly wouldn't involve the torment of a nurse and her needles. Alas, I had to endure, as failure to do so would raise too many questions I was not comfortable answering. I thought it best to allow Mrs. Simon the belief that what would be my miraculous recovery later on was the result of her *tender* care.

She was finished in due time, and soon I found myself wrapped in all sorts of bandages, far more than I thought appropriate. As a finishing touch she dabbed at my swollen lip, though to what end was a mystery to me. Once finished, she ordered me to keep blood off my clothes from now on, or else she'd have words for me. I wondered how her husband and the brothers managed put up with it. Somehow, though, I felt better. With the stitches in place I of course had far more holes in my body than I had before, but I was intent on not thinking about it. I was failing. On the other hand, I was in clean, intact clothing, so I felt like a human being again. As a bonus, it was time to eat.

I entered the dining hall and found my place set with a meal of ham and green beans. Somehow, my chef had managed to keep it just the right temperature until my arrival. It didn't look very fancy, but was quite tasty, especially with the gravy on the green beans as well. My chef, Mrs. Marith Henrett, a small elderly woman whose talent for cooking showed in everything she prepared and whose sharp wit showed in everything she said, came in at one point to see if I wanted a second helping of anything with nary a word of scolding for my being so late to the table. She did eye my staff, which would usually have been left with Jossimer, and I was obviously favoring one arm, but she did not mention any of it, nor did she try to make conversation. It was just as well; I wasn't in a talking sort of mood.

My full stomach did little to distract me from the pain of my injuries, nor did the knowledge that they would soon be relieved. I descended into the

earth, walking the stair which plummeted below my tower. At last I came upon the door, the deepest one, and placed the key into the lock. Light began to shimmer on the outer edges of the doorway and then it bled like liquid along the carved crevices of the slab until it came to the lock and key and finally to my hand and arm. The light flowed through my veins, seeking out my heart. The bit of metal which I placed in the keyhole was not the key to the door; it was but a metal rod that simply activated the true lock. I was the only key that could open this door. The seam down the center of the door parted and the two sides slid open. I entered and found all as I had left it.

I passed silently through the hall lined with statues, each a poignant reminder of things I dared not forget, to the chamber at the end of the hall. It was the least elaborate, least grand chamber in the entirety of my home; tower, mansion, and underground chambers. It was but a simple round room with a ceiling which dipped down in the very center, beneath which sat a simple wooden chair.

The chair itself was unimportant. In fact I had moved it here from an upstairs room. It was the device in the ceiling, a strange artifact which had been integrated into the foundation of the tower itself, which would be doing the work. When I sat in the chair and my head was positioned directly under the central point, I would immediately feel my senses slip from my grasp. It was not a sleep, but rather a detachment of mind from body. I was told once that, were this not the case, my mind would be 'repaired' just as my body was and to repair a mind in this way would be synonymous with ruining it permanently. That said, I was never sure if that was truly taking place and I simply did not know about it. To be certain, every time I exited this chamber I went to the statues one by one, recounting in my mind the meaning behind each one, ensuring that my mind was still intact.

I lightly ran my fingers over the coarse wood of the chair's arm, contemplating briefly the danger of immersing myself into a state I barely understood, knowing only that it was merely *necessary*. Once I had composed a suitable state of internal calm, I sat, grunting ever so slightly at the discomfort of the chair.

*... Instantly I was no longer within my body. For a time I was not even certain who I was, but then more pressing questions engaged my consciousness. What instruction buried within my nature demanded that I partake in this ritual? Why was I never allowed to question it while within my own body? Why was it that I **never** felt alone when I was brought here? ...*

I felt once again within myself, and the pain gone. This time, as with all of the countless times before, nothing noteworthy took place. Of course, I was never certain if this was true, or if the reunion of mind and body simply obliterated the new memories I acquired during the separation.

I had done this often. I had lost count of the actual number of visits, for sometimes I allowed myself this treatment every day, but for some periods I would only visit once a week, or fewer still. I had only twice used it to heal

grievous wounds, which in fact was *not* the primary purpose of the chamber; the separation of mind from body *was*.

I stood and breathed deep the ancient air within the chamber. The air within, like the tower itself, had been summoned here from that ancient, forgotten resting place. I pulled my shirt aside to inspect my shoulder, and found that the wound was healed. Tomorrow when Mrs. Simon examined me, if I couldn't avoid it, she would make a fuss about how quickly I had recovered, and I would then compliment her handiwork and Marith's cooking as the causes.

I passed once more through the hall of statues. All was as I remembered as I noted each one in turn. These were not memories I wished to dwell on, so my reminiscing was brief. The portal, passable only by myself, closed behind me as I departed the lower chambers. I was anxious to get some sleep.

— Jyre: Trespasser —

Day 2: 1:00 am

The knob turned, and the door opened. A man stepped inside quietly and shut the door behind him. All of this was silent to me; all I could hear was the pounding of my own heart.

I almost did not recognize him without his cloak and hat, especially in the dark, but after watching him move about the room I was sure it was him. As I watched him place some of his belongings from his pockets onto the dresser, it sunk in that I was an intruder in the bedroom of Lord Thresh and what a foolish thing this was to do. I glanced over at the balcony, and then back to him, thinking I should try to leave while he wasn't looking.

But then I looked at him again as he slowly undid his tunic. I pulled my eyes away in embarrassment, realizing how hideously I was invading his privacy. Still, as I looked away, I could see him in my mind. I pictured him as I had just seen; but rather than be startled away from the image, I savored it. He seemed so calm and thoughtful. His quiet tranquility put me at ease. I slowly forced myself to look back up at him, watching with breath held, now unable to tear my gaze away even if I'd wanted to. He would not call his guards or send me away. This was the same man who had always showed me such kindness when all others saw me as filth. And, I had come here for a good cause.

I suddenly realized that if I waited for him to undress any further, it would become impossible for me to continue. I picked myself up out of the shadows, and walked halfway across the room to him. I wanted to call out to him, to let him know I was ready to reveal myself, but I found no voice in my throat. Instead, I just stood there, waiting for him to turn around. Finally, he did.

And he just looked at me. At that moment, standing before him, he felt to me just as the tower had, his presence pushed against me like an invisible field making me short of breath.

After what seemed an eternity of just standing there, I finally willed my eyes to meet his. His dark brown eyes were steady and his gaze firm. These were not the eyes that I remembered. Where was the tranquil calm? Where was the gentle compassion? I saw only scrutiny from these eyes; scrutiny and at the same time, even more dreadful, apathy. In a way, he seemed to be staring right though me.

I averted my eyes and forgot everything I was going to say. Painfully and quickly, I understood what was wrong. I had displeased him. How could he look at me the same way now that I was an intruder; worse, a voyeur? I didn't want him to speak; I could not stand the thought of him chastising me for being here. Without explanation, I dropped the folded note to the floor at his feet as I spun around and dashed for the balcony. I did not turn to look over my shoulder as I crawled back around the ledge with none of the caution I had before, found my rope, and climbed down as fast as I could.

The wind had picked up during my wait, and I found myself being pushed back and forth violently as I climbed down. Several times I clutched my body tightly to the rope and held still for fear of being blown away. When the wind subsided, and I was able to open my eyes again, I looked up, hoping to see him looking down at me, watching over me in my decent, but he was never there. Fretting, I continued my climb down, interrupted several more times by gusts of wind which threatened to throw me to my death. I could feel the rope slipping through my slick palms inch by inch with every sway of the rope.

But I did not fall. Slowly, I worked my way down the rope, until I finally felt the solid, rough rooftop under my feet. From there I scrambled down the inclined shingles and tried my best to climb back down the way I had come without falling or hurting myself. As I carefully and quickly dropped from rock to rock, I finally looked back up at the tower. My rope arrow still hung from the wooden beams of the roof. There was no going back for it. Even if I had, I wouldn't be able to get it back down. It showed me how I felt about this entire night; hanging, halfway between my hopes and dreads.

I turned back towards The City, and secretly wished that he wouldn't read the letter. I privately made a deal with my heart, that if he didn't read the letter, that if he really had no idea who I was and didn't care, then I would just go on living like I had been, and it wouldn't be so bad. On the other hand, if he did read the letter, it may tear my world apart, for better or for worse. As I started my journey back to the small den I called home, I lied to myself that I was happy that I had accomplished this, and secretly admitted to myself that I had done a very foolish thing, and I would live to regret it. I had written in an address for him to send his reply. I would go there, and wait.

— **Nightfall: Intrusion** —

Day 2: 1:00 am

My first thought was that this was another assassin who had been lying in wait for me for some time, but after a moment passed with the two of us

observing one another in frozen silence I grew very skeptical of this initial assumption. The confrontation came to an abrupt end as the intruder dropped a folded parchment to the floor and then darted for the balcony. I watched, hands gripping the exterior marble rail, as the small person took hold of a rope and began to climb down.

I plucked the letter from the floor and exited my bedroom. Quickly, I walked down the stairs, through several halls, until I finally came to the front door. I let myself out and moved through the yard so that I could get a better look at the intruder as he climbed down. Two of the guards, Gipsa and Medan, came over to me to see what was going on, but I held my hand up to them and bid them to be silent. I had arrived just in time to see the small creature land on the rooftop, and then quickly vanish off the edge into the rocky terrain below.

"Jarah was right," I finally said to them. They stirred, quickly pulling their bows from their backs, grunting with enthusiasm. I threw my hands up once more to halt them. "Let this one go. He only wanted to deliver a message."

"Sorry boss!" Medan shouted, sounding very flustered. "Won't happen again; I swear!"

"Who's it from?" Gipsa said, peering at the note in my hands.

I frowned. "I don't know. I suggest next time you pay more attention to your younger brother Jarah. He could have saved the lot of you from a load of embarrassment."

"Won't happen again, sir!" Gipsa shouted, more forcefully than Medan had, as if I hadn't heard.

"I should hope not, or you will likely have to find new employment, either because I fired you, or because I was murdered. Goodnight, gentlemen."

As I returned to the mansion Jossimer was at the door to greet me, probably not very cordially. Before he could let out a comment I said simply, "There's a rope attached to my tower that shouldn't be there. Please take care of that tomorrow?" I took advantage of his stupefied expression to excuse myself from his presence. It was dark in the halls and on the stair, so I waited until I was in my study before reading the note.

Before reading a word of the letter I looked at the bottom to see who had signed it. "Jyre," I said aloud, trying to remember, and to fit the name to a person of the stature of the intruder. Soon I had a recollection of a young girl with a boyish appearance: short dirty brown hair, rough face, olive colored eyes. She often sold me a painting or some other bauble. I didn't get many guests like her, so slowly my recollection began to flesh itself out. I recalled mostly the way, when I tried to speak with her, she would stare into my eyes dumbstruck for a moment before shrinking away, her head down, and replying in barely a whisper. Yes, I was certain she and the intruder were one and the same.

The letter was badly written, scrawled in Jyre's own hand. It rambled on for some span about being an orphan, a thief, and then being molested at age twelve by a guardsman. Then she was apparently made a guard.

"A young girl girl was made into a guard? What manner of foolishness is

this?" She explained how, as part of her guard duty, she was taught to read and write, and eventually welcomed the company of the guardsman who had violated her.

She described an episode where, as a result of trying to do her guard duties, she was told to speak to the mistress when she reported strange goings on, but was never able to. Now it started to make sense. If she was a serving girl, she may have been taught to read so that she could be left instructions by her mistress; and naturally, a guard captain wouldn't want to be bothered with the paranoid clamoring of a serving girl, especially a child.

Then she wrote of more tragedy; she attacked the captain who had been ignoring her. She claimed that there was a fight and that they were both punished for this. I could imagine several things about what really happened, but I was growing tired of idle speculation. After this she was thrown into a jail cell and left there to starve, only to find herself rescued by the same guard captain whom she attacked. There was no explanation for this. The letter only described that time had passed since then, during which she healed and learned to be a thief.

Finally Jyre hit me with the kicker; she wanted revenge upon her mistress. Jyre described this lady as being evil, and the source of the stolen goods that Jyre had sold to me. She said that she was afraid for my well being, since I now possessed her mistress's stolen goods, and apologized for endangering me. For an unspecified reason she felt that this lady must be stopped from doing whatever wicked things she was doing.

I searched my memory for what I had done with those paintings. It had not been that long ago. A few of them had been put on display in The Circle. One I had sold. The first one I was unsure of. That had been months ago. All I remembered about it was that it was abstract, and I hadn't liked it at all. It was most likely at The Circle as well. I couldn't remember exactly where, but would discover that in due time.

When the paintings had first been sold to me I had some experts examine them, and they always reported that they were of unknown origins: worthless. The ones on display could be pulled easily enough, assuming that I had not already tipped off the wrong parties, and the buyer of the third would be warned.

Back to the matter at hand; she apparently wanted me to help her get revenge upon her mistress who had treated her cruelly and who must certainly be a wicked person. Well, most mistresses fitted that description rather well. I did not want to deal with this right now, nor did I want to have to think about it in the morning. Really, what dealing was there to be done? Should I humor her with a reply? Reluctantly, I gave in to the part of myself which decided that all things must be dealt with in some form or another and quickly crafted a response.

"A million servant girls," I muttered to myself as I wrote, "and a hundred cruel mistresses, yet in all of The City, only one Daelus Thresh for them all to turn to with their sob stories."

I finished the reply, and signed it 'Thresh'. Exhausted, not in the best of

moods, and probably not of sound judgment, I folded the letter, addressed it according to the information I found on the back of her parchment, and placed it in the 'out' chute on the wall. A messenger would come early in the morning and tote it off to its final destination.

— Jyre: On the Streets —

Day 2: 8:00 am

The morning mists rolled in with a golden glow. For a time, the light was my only companion as I sat huddled on the loose, damp earth with the dusty dry floorboards above my head. Streams of it pierced the crevices between the boards one by one as the sun lazily crept above the rooftops. Once or twice, the dancing motes of dust in these streams distracted me from my wait, watching the post box where, I hoped, the reply to my letter would be delivered. Would he reply? He would, I felt, though I did not know how long it would take.

And it was in one of these moments of idle distraction that I realized I was no longer alone with my thoughts. One by one shutters were opened and drapes were parted; there was a face in the window; clothes were hung out to dry; a door opened; several animals ran out into the streets ahead of their proud master; an old man emerged with a badly stained shirt and a long pipe, puffing away at it merrily as he watched the furry creatures he released from his domain search the crevices between the stones for food.

A woman finished hanging her laundry, and began to scold her small children. A fisherman returned to his hovel with a long line of catches slung over his shoulder. In no time he had them laid out on a table and then he kicked back with his hat low over his eyes waiting for the impending buyers. Right on cue the man with the pipe laid down some copper, and two fresh fish were his. A cart rolled by, pulled by a speckled gray horse with its head hung low. The driver yawned, throwing his hands high up into the air before scratching his eyebrow. The cart was full of barrels; their contents a mystery.

I had shrunk back further into the darkness at the sight of the busyness in the streets, but now I had come to the edge again, watching as I usually did, fascinated with the business and lives of those whom I'd never know; each one a life of their own, with joys and pains completely different from mine. I let out a gentle sigh, wondering if my life would be so very different had I been born in The City instead. I wondered if I would be daughter to any of those whom I saw before me. Would it be the fisherman or the man driving the cart?

What would my life have been like? Could I have belonged to him, the mysterious master of The Circle? How would it have been, were that true?

I rested the side of my head against a smooth board and watched lives continue unfolding before me. The furry creatures had been rounded up and the door closed behind them. The hanging clothes now shifted gently in the breeze; now no sign of the woman or the children she had been scolding. Dozens of carts rolled this way and that on the narrow road; sometimes

barely avoiding one another. People went on with their business; and soon it was not just the peasants and commoners.

A stagecoach rolled by. The dark, shiny wood of its surface glinted and shined in the morning sun. A crack of the whip set the horse, with a coat just as dark and shiny, upon a quicker pace. I smiled gently at seeing how they matched each other. The lives I saw unfolding before me were but a small patch; a footnote, in the vastness that was The City. I could have been sitting anywhere this morning. What different sights would I have seen? What sights would he see in his life, and his world? What greeted Lord Thresh as he awoke?

And then my eyes again went to the post box. Had a message been delivered, and I had missed it through my distractions and fascinations? No, I was sure I had not; I could see the box was still empty. I would have to wait a little longer. I closed my eyes, my head still resting against the smooth wood, and pictured to myself what it would be like to see the message delivered. Would he send his best servant to do the job? Would he hire someone like me? Would he deliver it himself? Again and again I visualized this, and again and again I opened my eyes to see the box still empty.

I closed my eyes once more and, this time, allowed them to remain closed. Soon the feeling of the wood against my head was gone. The dirt beneath my legs; gone. Soon, as my mind drifted free, as slumber and rest took me, my daydreams became dream....

...I watched the fat merchant enter the small shop from the corner of an alleyway, and smiled. Nobody noticed me. I was just another beggar to them, filthy and stinking. My face and hands were smeared with soot from the fire. My clothes stank after steeping in the dirty wash water over night. The disguise was perfect. In many people's eyes, I didn't even exist.

"The hunt" was one of my favorite pastimes. I would choose my prey early in the morning. It had to be someone reasonably rich, but not so rich as to attract an overly large amount of attention, and then I would stalk him.

I would follow him from house to market, through the streets and even, once, into a church. Sometimes, when I was well off, I would spend days doing this, just to prove I could. I was thoroughly enjoying myself as I trailed behind that fat merchant, having already picked three of his pockets, and found tasty trinkets in each. The marketplace was busy enough that day for me to stalk him quite closely without him ever noticing. He just bounced along, the folds of flesh beneath his layered garments jiggling with every footstep, which made it all the more easy to grab something without him ever giving it a second thought.

I was just reaching out for more when a small boy dressed in rags ran right into me. I had scarcely got a word out in protest when he whispered "Lord Thresh sends his regards!" as he winked and vanished into the crowd. I didn't even get a good look at him, though he appeared to be a boy of no more than six or seven years. Quickly looking back up, I was relieved to see the fat man still in view, flirting with a comely peddler woman. My next instinct was to check my pockets. I kicked at the dirt of the path as I discovered that the fruits of a

morning's work had been replaced by a neatly folded note. Cursing under my breath, I pulled it out and scanned it quickly. Then my face lit up.

Jyre,

Hello again, always a pleasure to correspondence with one of the patrons and contributors to The Circle.

Now, allow me to congratulate you. If your tale is true, and I have no doubt that it is, then you have survived much suffering and hardship, and have grown strong as a result. Also, I'd like to welcome you to the realm of the written word. I see you are quite new at this, and you managed to put forth a valiant effort. I know of many poor feeble minds who, in spite of proper schooling and a wide knowledge base in the field of language, cannot seem to tell a story half as decent as you have done.

So you and the captain wish to reap revenge upon this cruel lady? I am curious to hear of your plans.

Sincerely,

—Master of the Circle of Stone and Shadow

P.S. If the boy steals anything, steal it back from him.

Surging with excitement, I quickly dashed to a courier post, making a small detour to relieve the merchant of his gold pocket watch. Arriving, I rang the bell to summon a message carrier and quickly pulled out a narrow stick of coal to write a letter in reply, using the back of Lord Thresh's letter to write on. A tall gaunt fellow in his early twenties arrived shortly, and stood there, staring at me as I scratched out the letter. "You need me to carry a letter, lady?" the man said, through a mouth with as many teeth as I could count on one hand.

"Yes," I said plainly. "And if you make speed there'll be a gold piece waiting for your return."

Grinning from ear to ear, a sight I really wish I hadn't seen, he nodded vigorously and stretched out his hand to take it. "As soon as I'm done," I said, sensing his anxious nature. I reread the letter and wondered if there was anything I had forgotten. Hearing the courier's impatient shuffle of feet, I wrapped the letter in some cloth and handed it to him, along with a silver piece. "Now go, quickly," I told him. The man nodded once and ran off.

That's when I saw him, Lord Thresh, wandering through the streets, a smile on his face and a bounce in his step. I forgot about the fat noble, and chose a new prey; but this time things would be different. This time, I would not take from my prey; I would give; now my prey was Lord Thresh.

For one terrifying second he seemed to stare straight at me, but then his gaze moved away and I decided it was my imagination. No one had ever seen me before. I waited until he had started on his way once more, then tagged along behind. His route was winding with many pauses before he finally turned

for home. I rounded a corner behind him when something tripped me. I was grabbed by the collar and hauled off my feet. Looking up, I saw him. "Lord Thresh!" I gasped.

My wits were scattered about as he slowly let go of my ragged shirt and gently dusted me off with a few quick strokes of his gloved hand. "So, Jyre," he said with a half smile, "the lynx stalks the tiger today?" His smile widened as he leaned against the side of the building. As soon as I regained my bearing, I noticed that we were in a narrow alleyway. I suddenly remembered why I had been following Lord Thresh and reached into my pocket to retrieve my letter to him. I really should not have been surprised when he started reading it out loud to me.

I did not recognize the words though; they were not my own...

"My dearest lord," he said aloud. "It is I, The Lady. Thank you for ignoring the wretched lies of the foolish girl who visited you last night. She is but a waste of skin, worthless. Now if you would but hand her over to me—"

With a start I came to my senses, awakened by the sound of my own shriek of despair. I opened my eyes with a jerk, knocking my head against the wood, only to give out another shriek. I quickly forgot the nightmare when I saw right there, standing by the post box, a perfectly ordinary looking fellow with a letter in one hand and the reins of a horse in the other. He was staring at the post box, back at the letter, and then back again to the post box. I watched in silent anticipation as he peered into the dusty window, probably trying to figure out why he was delivering a note to an abandoned shop.

I pried my eyes away from him for a second to notice how busy the street had gotten, how high the sun was, and how damp and hot I was huddled in the crevice under the abandoned porch. I had gone and slept through the morning. It had to be close to noon by now, but at least I woke up for the letter's delivery.

Finally, he dropped the letter into the box and closed it. He mounted his horse, and trotted off along the street, joining the other traffic. I let out my held breath and scrambled out of my hiding place, nearly scraping my knee off on the sharp rocks beneath me. Dodging around a passerby or two, I made my way to the box and, taking a deep breath, pulled the letter out. It had my name written beautifully on the front, Jyre, and bore the seal of The Circle.

I carefully broke the seal with my breath still held, and read it right there in the street.

Jyre, considering that you are a business associate, I suggest that you use the front door of my mansion from now on. The guards have been made aware of your avenue of entry, and will be keeping an eye on it, bow in hand.

My deepest condolences concerning your orphanage, abduction, violation, and forced servitude. It is a hard life you have led, and to be able to continue on in light of your suffering shows a resilience of spirit which I must respect.

Also, I appreciate your concern, but I am very well acquainted with the proper way to handle stolen goods. You need not fear for me.

If I may be of some service to you and your former captain, I shall be waiting to hear from you. However, I suggest you consult with this captain about what is and is not a reasonable request of a business associate, and what is and is not average behavior for the token cruel mistress, and if or if not such potential unusual behavior should be alarming for one such as myself.

—Thresh

My heart sank into my toes as I read the letter. He hated me. His letter was so cold. It was nothing like how he had treated me before. He must be angry with me for intruding in his tower. This couldn't be what it looked like; this had to be some mistake.

No, he didn't understand, that had to be it. He thought that The Lady was just some mistress who beat her servants. No, she was a vile murdering witch! My first letter had failed, but at least it opened the door; he was willing to listen, but I needed to write something more persuasive to make him realize that this Lady was dangerous to the entire city; and to him as well. I *knew* she was, Els had *said so*. He had seen the things she'd done to people!

Els could help me convince him, but Els didn't know I had gone to Lord Thresh. In fact, he'd forbade it. He didn't trust him, just like he didn't trust anyone, except me. But, if he didn't believe me when I said we should get Lord Thresh's help, did he even trust me? I couldn't talk to Els about this, even though Lord Thresh said I should. I had to try to convince the Lord to help me on my own.

I raced back to the shelter Els had found for us. It wasn't far; I got there quickly. Thankfully Els was nowhere to be seen within, so I wouldn't have to explain to him. I again broke into his cabinet, and got some paper and a stick of charcoal to write with. I wrote quickly, maybe too quickly, but the sooner it was in his hands, the sooner he would think better of me.

I signed my name and jumped up, heading for the door, but before I could grab the handle I heard a key being turned in the lock. It opened, and Els stood before me. He was dressed in black leather and had a bow on his back. He had been out that night thieving. I shrunk away, backing from the door and him. I knew I was covered with guilt.

He looked down at me, which was no small tip of the head, considering the way he towered over me. "Leaving?" he asked, though his gravely voice seemed to be devoid of any surprise or disappointment.

"No I..." I said, trailing off. "I just was going to get the door for you." I slowly put my hand with the letter behind my back as I continued to back away, hoping he hadn't noticed.

"I have a key, Jyre, why would you open the door for anyone?" As he asked he moved past me into the room. He dropped a sack onto the table,

which jingled with the sound of gold. "It's not as much as I wanted, but it will do. It will take more than that to buy us as many rope arrows and flash bombs as we need when we break into The Lady's Villa."

I just watched and listened to him, keeping my back, and the letter, out of his view. "Oh," was all I said. I wasn't even really listening to him, just waiting for a chance to put my letter away.

"What about you?" he asked. "Did you manage to get anything?"

"I uh..." I began immediately without thinking, for I did not anticipate being asked a question. I stammered for a moment while I searched for words. "No, I couldn't get anything."

"I'm not surprised." He frowned, and then turned his back to me as he went to the cupboard. That was my chance. Quickly I folded the letter up a few more times and put it into my pocket. "Damn, this is all we have left, isn't it," he said as he lifted up a nearly empty tin. "I'm going to have to spend half of my haul on food alone." Then he laughed. "Sometimes I wish I was as small as you; takes way too much grub to keep this old body of mine going."

"I'm sorry," I whispered to him meekly.

"I could have used you last night, Jyre."

I lifted my eyes slightly. He said this calmly, but there was an edge to his voice, as if he was trying to hide away some other feeling. I didn't have to guess what this feeling was. He was mad at me.

"I wasn't able to get where I needed to go, not without someone seeing me. I waited here for you for a while, but you never came. I had to go on without you." He pulled out a jar of preserves from the cupboard, and stared at it.

"But you're okay, right?" I asked him, worried that he was hinting at something. "You didn't get caught?"

He frowned and shook his head, "Nah." He continued to examine the jar in his hands, but I knew he wasn't contemplating if he should have some or not. There was something else on his mind. "You went to go see him again tonight, didn't you?"

"I..." I blurted, shocked. I said nothing else. I just braced myself for another scolding.

"He didn't buy the painting, did he? I told you it was worthless. He can't keep up the charity work." As he spoke he finally opened up the jar of preserves. He grimaced. They were mine; a waste of money really, but I liked to spread it over bread. It made it taste better. He just dipped two of his big fingers into the jar and took out a gob of raspberry jam.

"How did you know I was selling to him?" I asked, carefully.

"I didn't, it was a guess. You just wouldn't shut up about him for days, and it was right after you sold the painting. Plus, you never really did tell me who was buying them, so I got suspicious, and started reasoning it out."

"Oh," was all I could think to say. I felt smothered by his explanation. Had I been so predictable? "No, he didn't buy this one," I finally added.

"Why don't you believe those rumors about him?" he asked me, right before sticking his raspberry laden fingers into his mouth.

Those rumors flashed through my mind. He wasn't talking about the ones I had heard, about his mysterious past and his magical tower. He was talking about the bad rumors. "You don't need to believe in rumors when you're faced with the truth," I said in reply, at last finding my tongue. I thought it was a remarkably clever thing to say.

"And what is the truth, Jyre?"

I had to think for a moment, but it was only a brief moment, before responding. "There's no way he could be in league with the *pagans*," I began. "He's not like those sorts at all."

"Now how do you know? How do you know that, Jyre? You've heard the stories as well as I. You remember them; the stories about the man they called Constantine. You remember what happened, don't you? He wasn't a man at all, was he? And how much damage was done? How many people did he kill? And do you know what my favorite part of that story is, Jyre? Constantine was a most civil gentleman. Yes, most civil."

Maybe what I said wasn't so clever at all. Els was just toying with me. He wasn't going to let me have it my way no matter what I said. "Look!" I said, firmly, "I know he's not one of *hers*, okay?" I thought I was digging to the heart of it. Els didn't really believe that Thresh could be one of the animalistic pagans. He was afraid *The Lady* had gotten to him already.

"And what about the Hammerites?" he asked, after licking his fingers clean and closing the jar. "He's in league with them too," he finally added.

"It's not true," I said, in a much more hushed tone. That, I was not so sure of, but I believed strongly that he'd never turn an innocent person over to them. He had to deal with them, just like everyone in The City who dared stick his neck out did, but that didn't mean he was their servant. "That's stupid, anyway. Noone can be working for the pagans *and* the Hammerites. They hate eachother."

He didn't react. He never listened to me. He just talked, and talked, and what I had to say in reply was never important enough for him to answer. When he finally spoke up a minute later it was just to say, "I'm going to go get some food, Jyre. Stay here while I am gone." He placed the jar back into the cupboard, and then turned to me, as if he expected me to reply.

I frowned sharply and glared at him, unable to take it any longer. "Haven't you been listening to a thing I've said?" I said, pleading. "He's not anyone's pawn! He doesn't work for anyone! He can help us, Els! I know he can!"

"Why? Because he bought a few paintings from you? Don't be an idiot, Jyre. Do us both a favor and stop thinking about him. We have more important things to worry about now. Jyre, are you listening to me?"

I wasn't really. I was thinking about my letter, but I said, "Yes," anyway.

"I think *The Lady* has some prowlers in the slums. I don't know how long they've been here, but I think that if they'd spotted us already we would know it. I want you to be careful, Jyre, and don't leave the apartment. While I am out there I'm going to check around at a few places where I have friends, so they can let me know if they hear anything. I don't want you milling about

out there and I don't want you going to Lord Thresh, clear?"

I was frowning at the wall until I heard the word Thresh, and then I frowned at him instead. I knew I was right, and Els was wrong, and that was final. He had no argument that could dissuade me from my choice. I was going to see this through. I had a false start, that was all, but I would do better next time. I was nervous about facing Lord Thresh again, but I could go to The Circle, where I could give the letter to him.

"Well?" he said bluntly.

"Fine," I replied, with no intention of following his command. He couldn't tell me what to do.

"Alright, Jyre," Els said, opening the door to leave. "I'll see you soon."