

Rafael in Sorrow...

The fires were still being put out. None of mine brethren didst speak as we collected the bodies of the fallen, especially that of Brother Adam.

At first, none knew where Father Rafael had gone. When the clock didst strike two, he emerged, stepping out into the ruins of the nave, standing silent over the reassembled body of Brother Adam, which had been laid out on the floor. There was a silence as we didst work, but all grew more silent as our Father stood before his slain friend, arms loose about his sides, hands open in a display of helplessness. Most present didst look away, resuming our work to clear the debris now that the bodies had been recovered. But I remained watchful, searching for some guidance from our Father, wishing to know how it was that the greatest among us would endure this hardship.

Suddenly, he dropped to his knees. I could not see his face. For many minutes he knelt there, before his slain friend, silent, head bowed slightly. I knew that he didst pray silently to himself.

Finally, a moment before I had decided to resume mine work; I didst hear him cry out in a wail of sorrow. All within froze, our blood turned to ice at the sound of it. He had crumbled before the body, his head nearly against the blood on the stone floor beneath him. After his initial cry of sorrow, I heard only a quiet weeping come from him.

None dared move; nor couldst they tear their eyes from this display.

Els in collapse...

I caught myself as I fell, my arms taking the pain rather than my face. I quickly forced myself upright and onto my feet, rushing to the bars just as they closed in my face. I shook them, but found them solid. "How can you do this? I trusted you!" I shouted with rage, but found the shutting of the dungeon door as my only reply. Then, silence.

"Moody, are you there?" I called out, praying that the old man was still conscious, and if failing that, still alive.

"Moody?" I called again. "Moody! Damn you, talk to me!"

Nothing. I had seen them throw him into a cell before me, kicking and beating him with the hilts of their swords. They cursed him and his kind, promising to kill all of them. I had been a fool to trust them. Maybe if I had come alone, but Moody...I'd kill all the devils for that they did to him.

Ranson in charge...

"Good, well done Mister Guildous," he said, slowly tugging one of his gloves off one finger at a time. I could barely see his face under that hood, except for those eyes; big, yellow, barely human eyes. "I am very lucky that Els came to you first and not Fieldings, or that bastard Soore. You are certain

that Crowley has not heard a word of this?"

"Quite certain," I said to the most remarkable boy. "I mark my word on it."

"Don't do that," he said, tossing the glove aside and rubbing his hand between his thumb and pointer finger. His skin had an uncanny texture to it which I could not place, and his fingernails had grown long and pointed. I did not know if this was natural, his own doing, or *her* doing. I took a nervous breath, expecting him to go on, catching the faintest hint of an odor; rotten eggs? "Don't swear to things. It just means I'll have to punish you if you're wrong."

Punish me? Hah, as if he could. Still, the threat made my skin crawl. "Yes... of course, but I'm not wrong," I said, watching as he got up and moved to the door.

"I'll keep them both alive in case I need them. Actually no...keep Els alive. We'll see how long that pagan scum can live without water."

Crowley in doubt...

"Guildous did *what*?" Lord Crowley shouted, his bearded face blowing up like a puffer fish. "He's siding with Ranson and going over my head yet *again*?"

"Well you didn't hear it from me," I said, while trying to clean a particularly itchy gnat out of my ear.

"Odd choice of words, Mister McWorth. Why *didn't* I hear it from you? Are you afraid of retribution from someone? Shouldn't my retribution be the only one you'd worry about, hmm?" He was turning red, and I realized I had said a very, very stupid thing.

"Alright," I said, trying to cover up my sudden panic with guile. "Let's be honest here; If it were just Guildous it wouldn't be a big deal, but most of the men like Ranson a lot more than they like you. He's one of the boys, a taffer, just like most of us Bloods. You're an upper; you've got your nose clean better 'en us. It ain't too hard to be clear and see that most of 'em'll get his back before they get yours. Dunn't matter if you're the founder or not, nor if you've got the big gold purse. You know none of them are in it for the gold, crazy as that seems. Hate's one thing that gold's got no contest on!"

He didn't call for my head to be lopped off, so it looked like my show of cunning had worked. "I want you to keep your mouth shut to Ranson, but keep your ears open. Keep bringing me news like this; but I need details, detail's for Builder's sake, I need bloody details! I can't sway my own society away from him without details!"

"Right boss," I said, finally getting the thing out of my ear. Huh, smelled like...wax? Just like the last time. "I'll swear to that!"

Chapter 10

Revelations

— Jyre: Shelter from the Storm —

Day 6: 2:00 am

Lines in the mud. That's all it was. It wasn't Els's face; just lines in the mud. My hand worked without really knowing what I was doing, fingers dipping into the soggy soil and moving about as my mind moved about. It looked nothing like him, anyway; just stupid lines in the mud. There seemed to be no end to the rain.

I began walking to Daelus's tower as soon as the sun came down, but then the rain started and I ran to find shelter. I had been sitting in a small cave opening now for hours. I may have even fallen asleep a few times. Daelus probably was. He was in his tower, resting gracefully in that big soft bed of his. The sound of the rain would echo through that chamber from his open window. I could see the drapes flowing in the wind. Slowly he would shift, the dim light of the candles mixing with moonlight to cast shadows across his face. How calm he looked, so peaceful. I sighed. How could I imagine so well something I had never seen?

I kicked at the lines in the mud. The remains of Els's face splattered across the cave opening. Why had I done that? Why was I so angry, and why did I take it out on Els? Was I angry at him for being gone, or angry that he ever existed at all?

The rain had slowed to an even pace some time ago, but made no indication of letting up since. Why did I care, anyway? I had been out in the rain hundreds of times. When I was home, my real home, I would run out and play in the rain. I never caught cold like they told me I would. Maybe everyone else did, but not me.

Once I was out in it, I found it was not so bad. Maybe it would rinse some of the filth off me. I could see the tower now; pressing up against the sky; pressing down against me. There were lights on inside, even at this hour, but the tower itself was dark. Don't go; don't disturb him; wait until morning. But I had already waited until night, and then waited for the storm to stop.

My legs moved in spite of my mental toe-digging. I would see him tonight.

— Sheam: End of the Siege —

Day 6: 2:00 am

Books in the rain. I could have spat pure anger.

Two hours ago a knock on my door invited me outside. The Hammerites were gone. A perimeter had been set up to keep watch, and it had been confirmed that they all had left and were making no signs of coming back. A short time later I was given a Hammerite Decree claiming to have found Lord Thresh innocent of all suspicions and declaring solidarity with him against the pagan menace. It was a huge victory for us, but all I cared about now were books in the rain.

And no one else did, which is why I worked alone to pull the sopping wet volumes off the pooling floor and out of the splashes as the rainwater was funneled in through the holes in the roof. Some of the books were hundreds

of years old. They had survived this long; it would have been horrible if they didn't survive this.

I could feel someone else in the hall with me now; a Gryphon. He was just watching. He came closer. It was Foster.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I snapped. Another rare volume was pulled from the puddle; streams of water poured out along with some pages. I set the book down and checked each page, trying to find if it had been numbered before putting them back into place.

"I'm just surprised," he said. "I thought that..."

"You thought what; that I'd be doing something more important?"

"Well no but...the rest of us are celebrating. The Hammerite siege is over. I thought you would be the happiest one here."

I closed the book and put it with the others. I began fishing out several smaller ones and tucking them under my arm. I was as wet as they were. I told him nothing. If he couldn't figure out why I wasn't going to celebrate with them, then he was dumber than he looked.

"I'm sorry, I'll let you work," he said, turning to go.

Not even an offer to help? No, why should he. I was being a wretched crow. I didn't apologize to him though; I just let him go. After I was alone again I stopped, and looked up at the doorway where he had been. It was raining in that room too. All of the illegal articles were safe. Everything we couldn't let them find was fine, but everything else was in ruins. Punish the innocent and protect the guilty; that was our way.

Four more books were stacked neatly in a pile; still soaked, but at least not submerged. Doing this made me nearly forget about the tiny, tightly folded letter I still had tucked into the top of my bustier. Nearly forget, but not completely forget. I did promise myself this much: if I ever was going to send it, I couldn't do it before I had rescued all of these books.

I *did* have something else I could have been doing. I had a choker to recover. Ghost was either dead, or he was right in his assumption. If he was right, then he would have to come back to me and beg forgiveness. If he was dead, then I just hoped a zombie wouldn't eat the choker.

— Lytha: Conscious —

Day 6: 2:00 am

I trembled with energy. I clenched my eyes shut and tried to relax, but I was almost shaking from it. Every muscle in my body had a will of its own, and was trying to break free of my skin. I clutched my arms around myself tightly, willing it to pass. Every instant I sensed that this was it, it would be over soon, but it went on, and on, and on...

I opened my eyes and sat up. I was panting—out of breath. The heart in my chest pounded so violently that my whole body swelled with every beat. My eyes went to my wrist, and soon I was clutching it before my face to examine it. No vines. Nothing was coming out of me. Not again. I pressed my

bloodied wrist against my body and hugged it there, rocking back and forth while trying to bite back my sobs of confusion.

My eyes darted to the side. I was not alone. He was snoring. I couldn't wake him; it wouldn't be fair. I wanted so badly to just sleep. I couldn't rob him of his. I pressed myself back to the ground. I forced my breathing to slow, hoping that my heart would follow, but it would not.

"What's inside of me?"

I could feel it clawing to take hold. My body was no longer my own.

"This was not meant for you!"

"Leave me alone," I whispered. "Leave me alone." Once again I found myself rocking back and forth where I lay. "I don't belong to you."

"You should have let him kill you when you had a chance! Then it would be gone!"

"No!"

"Leave me alone!" I hissed through clenched teeth.

"You'd be better off dead! Something as horrible as you shouldn't be allowed to exist!"

"But it's not me! It's something inside of me!"

"It is you and you are it!"

"NO!"

I sat up again. My face was in my hands. Still I shook and my heart thundered and I twitched and trembled. Once again I grasped my wrist and peered at it. Nothing. Only dirt and blood and torn skin. I rubbed some of the dirt away. Some of the blood had dried. I rubbed and picked it off. I could still feel it in me. I could still feel the growth pushing out of my skin. I squeezed my wrist as hard as I could; trying to force it out. It began to bleed again; a thin drop of blood flowed out and into my lap. I squeezed harder. More blood.

It hadn't been me. I hadn't done those things. The novice, the Inquisitor, clawing out his eyes, the vines, everything; none of it had been me. My mind, my body was doing it all, but it was not me.

"Get out of me! You don't belong here!"

"Don't you remember what he said? If it's taken out of you, you'll die!"

"Let me die then!"

"He said he could not tell the difference anymore! There is no difference!"

But it *had* been me. It was not like those mornings where I woke up to find blood everywhere in my apartment, and then those severed hands. I had been spared the memory of doing those things, instead foolishly assuming it had been pagans trying to intimidate me. This time, I remembered *all of it*. Every second of the time I spent as the *Thing* was vividly etched into my memory.

I began picking at my torn flesh, and finally pulling and tearing, just like I had in prison. I had to get it out. I had to get it out of me. I sunk my nails into my wound and tore. It was somewhere inside. I had to get it out.

"Lytha?"

I froze. I felt I could not turn my neck; I was shaking too much. My eyes

darted to Ghost. He was looking at me.

"Lytha, are you okay?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I didn't need to. Unless he was blind, he could see I was very much not okay. I halted my self-mutilation, and once again hugged my damaged hand to my chest.

He pushed himself up from where he had been lying. After we escaped from the church, we went right back to the ruins. We had been safe there before, so it was the only place we could reason to go. Ghost had started a fire before he passed out. He looked exhausted, and barely able to move. Sleeping in his armor didn't help, I was sure. He looked much better in it than he had in his prison rags. It made him look strong; like he could face anything. But he wasn't acting very strong now. He dragged himself, almost crawled over to me. His eyes blinked in the dim firelight; his wakefulness was losing the battle against his exhaustion.

I did not find myself growing panicked or shying away. There were no screams inside my head to flee or distrust him. In fact as I watched him, I seemed to forget about my twitching muscles and gasping lungs.

He put his arm to my back, and slid his open palm against me until it rested on my shoulder. His hand was heavy and warm. His arm was firm. Slowly he guided me so I was lying down again, and pulled me gently so that my face was pressed against his chest. The metal in my arm pushed against his leather cuirass, but he did not seem to notice, and I found that I did not seem to care. Gently, I began to relax. My breathing was slow now, almost as slow as his own breath against my neck. I kept my ruined wrist pressed against my chest, but my mind was now in focus; no more voices; no more *It*; only Ghost. I shifted closer, so that my hips too were resting against his. A sigh escaped me. I dared expect I would be able to sleep after all. Only one thing hadn't changed—my heart was still racing.

— **Nightfall: The Ranger** —

Day 6: 3:00 am

Our group returned to the site of the battle where the machines rested in solitude, as did my derelict carriage. The smell of death permeated this place now, but after the villa, it was barely noticeable. I felt drops of rain on my shoulders once more; the rain was returning, but this time as a light sprinkle. The runners made no sign of pause. They wove through the scene of destruction deftly; just as deftly as they had moved through the thicket we had just departed from. The other Hammerites and I were having difficulty keeping up.

My eyes passed from one machine to the next as we went. I had been dwelling on the previous conversation with Thurm. Could Thurm and his men complete this work? He still had four engineers with him. Maybe with the help of the runners one of the wrecking machines may still yet reach the site of the villa. I did not know if it would be powerful enough to wrest that stump from its roots, but it was our only bet. "Stop," I commanded, halting

just as suddenly as I had spoken. "A word," I went on, when I saw that the runners and the engineers were all gathered back together, confused looks crossing them as to why I, of all people, had commanded a pause. All except Thurm that is; he was gazing listlessly at his machines.

"I am afraid that Brother Chispin may have been partially correct." Before I was confronted by queries of mystification I continued, "Not that we must push on to hunt down these enemies, but that we must continue with the original objectives at all costs. Thurm, tell me the bare minimum that is possible in the least amount of time. I can see already that your mind is hard at work."

Thurm seemed conflicted; not between the choice of returning to base or continuing, but between the extreme enthusiasm he always held when his machines were involved and the grim severity of the situation. "I have already devised a plan, in fact, it is quite simple. The four machines are fundamentally the same; it is merely the tools affixed to them that are dissimilar. It is the two deforestation machines that are destroyed; the demolition machines are still good. If the wrecking attachments were switched, we would have one deforestation machine to clear a path and still a demolition machine to perform the work required to discover what secrets that felled grand tree doth hold."

I heard hushed words of agreement from his four engineers, though also an air of concern about them. "Brother Thurm," one said, "switching attachments is far heavier work than we are equipped for. It is ordinarily done in our factory house where we have the assistance of conveyors and pulleys to transport the large, heavy devices as we attach them. How shall this be done?"

Another nudged him. "Brother, the wrecking arm of one demolition machine canst be converted as a crane for this purpose—we have only to exchange the pulverizing ball for a hook. If we are clever then we have no need for conveyors. The problem I see is how to navigate around the two ruined deforesters. It would take too long to cut a path through the woods around them."

"Simple," a third said. "The wheels and axels on one are still functional. We have merely to tow it backwards and out of the way, and the way will be clear." This resulted in even more talk, all very fast, with slowly gathering enthusiasm.

Once they were satisfied with their plan, Thurm turned to the runners, saying, "I wouldst humbly request to ye, who are unlike ourselves clearly of able body and bursting with energy, render us aid in this work."

I glanced back at the runners to gauge their reaction, and saw that all held their gaze firmly on me, waiting to see what my next move would be. I continued, "Can you and your men aid the engineers in this?"

As expected, there were no protests of duty to Rafael or even looks of confusion or doubt amongst them. They began to glance amongst one another, as if taking a silent poll. Finally one spoke up. "I can stay to aid mine brethren," he volunteered. "Aye, can I as well," another said with a nod, and

then several more followed, leaving only one, the original spokesperson, by my side.

Thurm's confliction seemed to fade, replaced with an overflowing display of joy at these unexpected turn of events. "Heavens and Builder bless thee Brother Daelus!" he stammered, but then quickly reeled it back in as recollection hit him. "But Father Rafael wilt be quite angry..."

"I shall bear the brunt of Rafael's wrath," I told Thurm firmly. "His most trusted servant Chispin has defied him, and now his most distrusted servant will have as well. He will not punish one and not the other."

Thurm's doubt evaporated quickly, and soon it was as if the thought had never crossed his mind at all. He wasted no time, not even bothering to ask the names of his new assistants, explaining procedures and issuing orders. There was no point in trying to bid Thurm farewell at this point; he was so deeply wrapped up with his plans that it would have taken a gong crew to wrest his attention away.

"Come," I said quietly to my new companion, and left the scene and the smell of death, behind.

We would not have to walk far to be out of earshot from Thurm or his engineers. Finally, the runner spoke up. "Nothing about that went quite like I expected."

I smiled, though the feeling felt alien to my face. "Then you expect too much. Good work with the inquisitor's memorial. Had I not been so clumsy with the contents of my pockets, Chispin may have decided you were an enemy."

"I wasn't sure if you had intentionally left it in the carriage or if you had simply forgotten it. Here, I must give you this; one of my men saw your carrier pigeon waiting patiently in its place on your abandoned carriage. That's when he found the token."

He handed me the small note just as he pulled the red hood of a Hammerite away to reveal a mass of wet brown hair. It was Sarievo, head of the Riverbed Company, a group of rangers who sometimes did contract work for James.

I am afraid we must risk extracting you from your company of Hammerites. We can deal with the damage, if any, later. I bear grave news about the situation with Delphine. We must speak at once.

— J

"Grave news," I whispered impassionedly, "as if things could get any worse." Finally I addressed Sarievo, "Any idea?"

"No, as I said, it was only by chance that my man even saw this note. We convened and decided that it was up to us to get you out of there. Aside from that, our contract was strictly for reconnaissance, both to keep an eye on you and the enemy."

I nodded, and doubled my pace. "I will see to it that your compensation is

increased."

"No need; the first one's on the house," he came back with a crack of a grin.

"What do you have to report?" I began; unsure if I should ask specific questions or simply see what he felt was the most important.

"We were in two groups; one shadowed the Hammerites and the other kept watch at the villa. I was among those who watched the villa. As you may have deduced, the painting of the building in blood happened after the rain had run itself out."

"Hrm," I grunted. I honestly hadn't realized that, and felt terribly slow for missing such an elementary point. I quickened my pace once more.

"They did not seem to have a sorcerer or shaman with them, or any leader of sorts, though they worked quickly and systematically, like they were following a plan that had been laid out in detail."

"Men? Beast-men?"

"I cannot say for certain. There was a beastness to them, though they appeared in shape and flesh as human. All pagans I have witnessed have a certain feral taint about them, but these men moved about as if there was something else lurking within their bones."

"How close were you able to get?"

"Not at all. My kin and I pressed nearer than we thought safe, as visibility was low and they used no torchlight to guide their work, but it was still too far to offer any specific details as to any individual amongst them."

"How many?"

"I counted fifteen, but my cohort was sure there were at least twenty. They were so similar in appearance and movement that it was difficult to count."

"Please excuse my interruptions. Please, go on." Here we quickened our pace, as Sariovo seemed to have no difficulty walking and talking.

"They approached from that path; the same one Chispin vanished down. They seemed to be all about it at once, dressing it with bodies fetched from some internal store. As I said before they worked quickly, but also silently. Though it was possible they exchanged whispers, there seemed to be no orders traded or conversation amongst them. After what seemed like an hour and a half, at which point it seemed that the flow of meat and blood they were generating and adorning the building with would never end, it ceased as suddenly as it began. They vanished down that path as silently as they came. Forgive me for this decision, but we opted not to trail them, thinking it too dangerous."

I nodded, understanding his caution. "Chispin may soon discover where they vanished to after all...but go on."

"What happened next defies explanation, and if you had not seen it with your own eyes I would be certain that you would not believe me. The building did not change all at once, but seemed to manifest itself into the illusion you beheld with every blink of an eye. All of my comrades felt the same way. When studied, we could see no change, no movement; but as soon

as one of us looked away and looked back, it seemed to worsen; but only to that person's eyes. For some of us it seemed to grow in horror by the second, though for others the transformation was much slower.

"One of us, Heppet who had once been a pagan himself, seemed the most resistant to the illusion. He petitioned me for permission to investigate further, and at first I refused, but eventually his pleas and insistence wore me down. I felt as if I did not utter a breath the whole time he was gone. At regular intervals my comrades scolded me for letting him go, but I reminded them that we are not a military unit; he had made his choice. After what seemed an eternity we saw him reappear from the structure—now a mass of writhing flesh to our eyes. He approached quickly, and I saw that his face was twisted into an expression of doom.

"Inside, he told us, was the same as the outside. The bodies must have been stored in the basement, as the floor had been torn open in many places, and a shallow space underneath was blood-slick and utterly crawling with maggots. He could not take a step without crushing dozens under each footfall. The center of the building was also in ruins; wallboards had been hastily ripped apart to reveal an enormous and ancient stump within. The stump glowed with ether; hundreds of pagan glyphs wound around the surface, each one twinkling with an eldritch green light. This, he reasoned, was the source of power behind the illusion; and it then became clear, the state the building now held was its intended design from its inception.

"He conducted an experiment, attempting to see how fragile the witchcraft was. He drove a tent-spike into the stump to pierce several glyphs which, while the true meaning was unknown to even him, he recalled as important. He did this over and over, though the illusion itself never seemed to falter. To his surprise however, the spike itself was growing quite hot, a fact that had escaped him in his enthusiasm thanks to some very well made gloves, until steam began to rise from his grasp. Try as he might then he could not remove the spike from the wood, and soon enough it became not red, but white hot, and began to bend, melting in its place, until it was no more than a smoldering stream of iron running down the surface of the stump.

"There was nothing he could do at that point but watch. The glyphs faded from view, to the point of becoming invisible even to one who knew exactly what to look for. He had lost track of time, he said, and when he realized how long he had been in there, he came running back to us. To be quite honest, I am not certain how he withstood the smell for so long. Most of my company had retreated to the trees to observe from afar, believing the heavy odor would stay closer to the ground. I alone was there to greet him, and not ten minutes later were we greeted by a comrade from the party observing the Hammerites. They reported the grave news about the mongbat attack, and that you along with a party of survivors were on their way.

"It was not surprising to Heppet then when the Hammerite's fire collapsed the illusion. He took credit for that with the work he had done to the stump. Otherwise, he insisted, there would have been no way that

Hammerite's magic would have been more powerful than what had been put into that stump. At that point we had to go. Heppet was nearing a state of nausea and I admit that I was not doing very well either. That is when I ran into my man who had found your pigeon, note, and memorial. A plan was hatched. As much as it horrified us to pilfer cadavers for their belongings, we needed to appear as Hammerites. We tried to assemble outfits in such a way as to make it not appear as if we were walking corpses, and at the same time not leave any obviously naked Hammerites lying about. I admit it took far longer than I expected, but some of us are very astute when it comes to detail and all were dreadfully worried of not appearing convincing.

"I consoled my men with the knowledge that if we were found out and forced to confrontation, it would be trivial to lose the Hammerites in the woods. We'd be in the trees and invisible within moments as they ran in circles; so we took the risk. I am sorry if we were out of turn or somehow put you in an impossible situation with the Hammerites, but I am fairly certain that James meant for you to see that note as soon as possible."

"No, thank you; what you did was wise. In fact, you supplied me with exactly what I needed in more ways than one. I hope your men do not mind working alongside Hammerites."

"After what we had seen and what Heppet had told us, we're as anxious as they are to turn those machines against that stump and pull it from the ground. The wood does not need vessels of evil haunting it. If there's something my men are better at than being rangers, it's play-acting. The thespian society of Newmarket wouldn't be the same without them."

I was slightly boggled at the prospect of several stage-acting rangers posing as Hammerites to repair heavy steam-powered machinery to pull an enormous evil stump from a blood soaked pit, but I chose not to dwell on it. "Did your men have any trouble with the mongbats?"

"Thankfully no, though there were several close calls. As far as I know there were no actual engagements."

He stopped abruptly, as if something alerted him. He was trying to focus on something down the road ahead of us; I saw it too, a lone horseman. I could tell Sarievo wanted to get off the road, but I held my hand up to him to halt him.

I did not have to have telescopic night vision to tell that it was Richen. I felt a small pang of joy at the sight; he had escaped the attack unharmed, of course. He had to turn his horse to the side to get it to slow down; he only knew two speeds, fast and too fast. "Whoa girl!" he shouted, tugging on his reins.

"Richen, thank providence..."

He didn't dismount, but walked his horse closer to close the gap. "Co'n't just leave ye' out here mate," he said as he absently patted the horse. "Got back ta' th' city walls and felt like a right coward I did."

"Your return is serendipitous. Is there room enough on that horse for two?"

"Ah...on the get out? Gave the Hammers the slip?"

"Not quite...I will explain on the way there."

"Fraid Suzy ain't long enough for the both of ye'," he said as I tried to get onto the horse. "Ye' be a'right out here mate?"

"Yes sir, I will be fine! The name's Sarievo—and I am quite at home in the woods, rain or shine."

"Ah, top o' the morning to ye' then mate."

"I would wish you Godspeed, but I do not think that will be an issue. One of my men tried to trail you as you made an escape, but it was useless. He said your horse would make the fastest jockey at the tracks of Wayside blush."

"Right..." he said slowly after a moment's pause. I suppose Richen didn't know how to take that. I had managed to get onto the horse's back, behind Richen as the two men chattered, and was now anxious to be off.

"To my tower as fast as we can go without me falling off."

— Lytha: Imprinted —

Day 6: 3:00 am

In time even my heart slowed, and I found peace and comfort. Sleep eluded me. Ghost's mind was very *active* as he slept, though I found myself able to respect his mental privacy, as close as he was.

Or are you simply afraid of what you will find there?

I wasn't afraid. I had no reason to be afraid. I felt *safe* here.

Then look. Look!

Before I had a chance to realize what was happening; I was doing just that. *I felt as if I was falling now—falling faster and faster, but everything around me was falling even faster than I was.*

I opened my eyes and looked at him, a shudder of shock running through me as I broke the connection. He did not stir.

He was not just dreaming; he was having a nightmare. His mind was focused, trapped in this vision. It was so focused that I could *see* what he was dreaming as clearly as if it were before my own eyes. It all came in an instant, a flash, as I felt myself falling.

He was surrounded by the undead, clawing at his body, but he didn't seem to care. Before him was a woman, youthful and fair. He was trying to offer her something over and over again. Each time he held his hand out offering a strand of jewelry sitting on his open palm, she would push his hand away, and then the string of large beads would change into an ornate, gem encrusted star. Then he'd shove the star into his pouch and pull out the beads again, some type of necklace maybe, or a choker, and offer it to her, and she'd pushed it away just like she always did. Her face grew more and more angry with each offer, but now it seemed that she was barely alive herself. Her eyes were white and her skin no longer fair, but ghostly white. Her cheeks caved in and eyes pulled back into her head. Still Ghost offered it to her again and again, and again and again she refused and it was replaced with this star. He sank deeper and deeper into the swarms of dead bodies, until he could no

longer reach his pockets. He begged her for help, but she had become part of the swarm.

Then I realized that my hand had gone to the pouch he was using in the dream. I lifted myself from him slightly to peer at what I had found and discovered that same string of large beads. I set it aside and delved once more, and just as I knew I would, I felt the distinct shape of the star. I felt a chill run through me as my fingertips brushed against its rough surface. It had tooth-marks in it. Shuddering, I put the star away, breath held.

Still, he did not stir. I slipped gently from his grasp, taking care to lie his arm down slowly as to not disturb him. He seemed to roll over a bit, grunting softly with his eyes twitching under closed lids. I sat down several feet away and examined what I had found.

It wasn't a gift, I felt. It was hers. He took it from her, and now he wanted to give it back. But what *was* it? I fingered the large beads one by one. They turned easily in place. It was heavy, far heavier than its materials should allow, but not heavy in a physical sense. It had changed hands countless times. It had many owners. Some loved it, some had hated it. I could feel imprints on it. Such fierce, powerful emotions had been directed towards it and they had also been stirred up because of it. Why did Ghost have it, and why had he taken it from her?

Somehow, I knew what it was for. The imprints on it were so strong; I could almost hear the minds through the ages calling out for this *thing*. I found myself lifting it to my neck and clasping it shut. I felt no different, but that shouldn't have surprised me. Ghost said he had found a stream nearby. Maybe I could find a still pool. The clouds were parting. The moon was in the sky. There would be enough light to see. I lifted myself up and left the ruins behind. I surprised myself with my energy—how easily I moved. I knew that whatever was in me could also be responsible for this. I couldn't complain. I tracked nimbly over rock and patch. I could smell water. I could feel it in the air. I kept moving, knowing what I had to do.

— Jyre: Appropriate Attire —

Day 6: 3:00 am

It just didn't match; how could Daelus employ such awful people to stand watch over his home? And that doorman! I hated him almost as much as I hated...

Why were there so many of them? There seemed to be twice as many as before, and they weren't just standing watch, they were patrolling. I noticed different uniforms too; they were the men who normally patrolled around The Circle. Was Daelus anticipating a break-in, or an attack? Was it possible; had he incurred the wrath of The Lady? I sat mesmerized, watching them go to and fro for I do not know how long.

I shook myself out of it. I had snuck in before; I could sneak in again. I was among dense bushes with long thorns, pushing my way through with little concern for how the thorns pulled at my clothes or pierced me. I found

iron before me, heavy iron bars surrounded by the dense, thorny bushes. I had learned long ago that if my head could fit through, the rest of me could follow. I pulled my hood down over my head to protect my eyes from the thorns and pushed. My ears scraped against the wrought iron metal, but I was through. My shoulders wriggled past and everything that followed was trivial. I was on the other side, and the bushes behind me.

I checked my pockets. Had the scroll always been this small? I seemed to recall it being enormous, so large I'd need to drag it with both hands; and yet it sat neatly at the bottom of my pocket, so light I could easily forget it was there. I dared not take it out and examine its authenticity.

Daelus would have to lash his guards, for I was through their perimeter already and sulking about behind the manor portion of his tower. No matter who employed them, guards were guards, lazy and stupid. I stumbled upon a sight which startled me and seemed dreadfully out of place, clothes lines. Somehow it managed to suck all of the epic otherworldliness out of where I was and what I was doing. Daelus too needed to hang his clothes out to dry. I fancied myself trying on some of his things, even though I knew none would fit me and it was entirely ridiculous to do so, but before I knew it I was appraising various articles for possibilities.

I had swum through canals, walked through haunted, dusty chambers, and rested in the mud of a cave. It was amazing that my rags still held together at all; but I felt that if I were to be discovered, it would be due to how much I smelled rather than being seen or heard.

Before pulling free of my rags and enveloping myself in my carefully selected articles, I paused for a moment to make sure that this narrow corner of the yard was unwatched. I tied knots wherever the oversized outfit would impede movement and quickly dressed in a perfectly black and unreasonably comfortable shirt and matching trousers. I had never seen him wear either of these; they must have been relaxation clothes he only wore at home. The pockets were deep and roomy, so my special compacting bow did not have to be left behind. I hated going anywhere without it, even though I hardly ever used it. I didn't even have any arrows.

I began to rummage through my old rags trying to find the scroll, when panic hit me. Where was it? I hunted for its familiar shape among the folds, but it simply was not there. In a moment of revelation, and slightly before my panic turned into pandemonium, I found that it was already in the pocket of my new clothes.

I did not ask questions; I was just thankful I had not lost it. I shoved my old clothes into the bushes and turned my eyes to the tall stone walls which framed this narrow courtyard. I peeked around the bend and could see a back area to the manor grounds which I didn't even know existed, but then why would I? It was guarded as well, though much less so. A narrow road wound up through the hills towards the steep, sheer wall of the mountains. There was no gate in this direction though one could have been farther up the road. It took a twist at several hundred yards, beyond which I could not see. Where did it lead?

It was no matter; there was a back door, and though the guards were close by, they did not expect to be watching for anyone to come from where I was. They did not expect anyone to make it past that iron fence or thorny bushes.

I spotted a key hanging from the guard's belt. He was whistling loudly, which would make him nearly deaf to my passage. I inched my way over, feeling much more confident in my fine black clothes, and plucked it from where it hung. I wondered why guards didn't try harder to secure their keys to their belts. Maybe they got tired of tying and untying them whenever they wanted to open a door. The key turned in the lock. I placed the key back on his belt like it had never been gone, and slowly pushed the door open. It was dark inside, but empty. I slid within and closed the door behind me, bolting the latch after it closed. It was like I was never even here.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I saw that I was in a sort of workroom for the servants. For the first time I felt confronted with the prospect of navigating these halls unseen all the way up to the top of the tower. If one of the guards found me, would I be killed? Would they take me prisoner or expel me? They had every right to strike me dead; I was an intruder and they were guards. I had to be sure to not find out the answer.

— Lytha: Reflected —

Day 6: 3:30 am

The water before me trembled with motion. I had found the stream, and was now following it downhill in hopes for a pond. I no longer felt tired in the least. I felt the same boiling energy, but without the restlessness that had previously driven me mad. I went from stone to stone down the path of the narrow creak, ever downward, waiting for the land to flatten out as I knew it would, with hope that I could come to a pond with water still enough to act as a mirror.

My instincts were true. Up ahead I could see reflected stars on a plane between the branches of the trees. I scaled a shallow ledge and found myself on the edge of a small pool. The water from the stream poured into it and exited on the far side, but I could see places around the edges where the surface was still and clear.

I looked down at my face in disbelief. The bruises and cuts were barely visible. I just stood there for a moment looking, turning my face this way and that, and remembering. Slowly my hand went to the choker, guided by the memories and knowledge imprinted onto it, and began turning beads. I worked slowly, each time turning a bead just the slightest amount, so that moment by moment, a hair at a time, I changed.

My cheeks grew rounder; my eyebrows less severe. My jaw and chin became more pronounced. With each small alteration I looked, watched, and thought. I adjusted, critiqued, and modified. The longer I dug into my memories, the clearer the visions became. Thalia. To anyone else's eyes we looked so alike, but to our own we couldn't have been more different.

Just when I thought I had it right, I paused, remembered, and tried something different. I forced my hand to steady and make finer and finer adjustments. The nose had to be a little smaller, the brow just a little higher. The color of the eyes...the shape of the lips...just a little thinner, just a little farther apart, a little closer together, a little darker, a little...

I saw myself lying on the floor of Thalia's cottage, curled into a ball with tears of blood running down my face. My skin was awash with movement; the vines, they were in me. It was in me. Slowly I recovered, trembling, reaching out to Thalia fruitlessly.

I watched myself act out the scene from days ago. "What did they do to you?" I heard myself whisper to Thalia's body. I watched as I got up, put Thalia back in her chair, and then busied myself fixing up the room.

"Don't you know!" I found myself screaming to her; to myself. "Don't you know the killer is still here?!" I demanded, though my words were silent.

*She heard me. She looked **right** at me. Suddenly I was no longer a disembodied observer, but standing there in the room with her—with me. I became frightened. "No...no," I began to say. "It's not how you think..." and I fled. I spun away from the cottage, trying to escape. She bolted out the door, and came for me, knife in hand.*

She chased with ferocity, like an unchained animal. She could feel my presence. I ran, moving backwards from her, watching her weave between trees with ever growing speed. I tried to hide: behind a tree and she came; behind a rock and she came; up on a branch and she came. With each attempt she grew closer, and closer. I knew I could not escape her—escape me—for long. She struck. Her blade bit bark. I scaled the tree and leapt from it.

I scaled a boulder, but she was on top of me. Her strike missed my throat by less than an inch. I could feel her breath against me as she let out a gasp of frustration. She came at me again and again. I was unable to flee and could only avoid each strike as it came, less and less narrowly each time.

I swung, my hand a claw, reaching out to scatter her innards across the forest floor. I missed. She caught my hand. Her knife went into my shoulder. The metal of the knife struck the metal splint lodged there, sending a shock through every bone in my body. I was on the ground. She was on top of me. I felt a veil fall from my face. She looked at me.

I looked back. The vision that I had blocked from my mind came suddenly flooding back. I remembered what I saw. I remembered that mask of death; eyes great and black and deep, and masses of teeth lining unfolding jaws. I remembered falling into those great and horrible eyes like a pit had opened up below me.

I fought against the vision. I tried desperately to return to my body by the pool, but I could not. I was trapped. Something else had taken my place. I couldn't get back...couldn't get back...

— Thalia: Reflected —

I gasped for air and caught myself falling, stopping just before my face hit the water. I pulled myself back to rest on my ankles, with my arms clinging to myself, a rash of raised bumps under my sleeves. "Lytha..." I whispered faintly. "Where did you go?" I glanced around the wood, expecting to see her sitting next to me, but of course this was impossible. I felt myself shivering from the cold but at the same time flushed with heat.

My hand went to the choker around my neck, but I stopped myself. No. I could help her. She had done so much for me, now was my chance to pay her back.

I never wanted this. I warned her of what would happen if she looked into my eyes. I knew what was trapped within me, and how easily it would be for it to escape into her. I just didn't expect it to drag me along with it. I thought I had died, I thought, finally, I could defeat *It*. Lytha's memory of my dead body haunted me. I could see myself, my ruined body, aged well beyond its years, sitting there cold and limp: dead. Sadly, even my death could not hold sway against *Its* power. First, I had thought, the Hammerites could wrest it from me, but Lytha had "rescued" me from them before my exorcism had been completed. Still, I thought my body had been too crippled to be of any use to *It*, but still *It* haunted me. The damage the Hammerites had done had weakened me, making me unable to resist *Its* domination. It would tear me from my cottage nightly to go on its murderous quests in The City. Then, once the Hammerite faces had been shredded and their eyes put out, I would go under *Its* power to see Lytha. It wanted her; how desperately *It* wanted her. She had no idea how much stronger she was than I, how powerful, but *It* knew.

I remembered vividly standing over her as she slept, after having adorned her apartment with the flesh and blood I still held in my claws. When that ran out, I'd cut my own body open to add more, using my own precious fluid to paint symbols of power to prepare her subconsciously for *Its* inevitable domination of her. I wouldn't allow *It* to touch her though. As helpless as I was in those days against it, what little control I had left prevented *It* from ever touching her.

But in my last solution, swallowing those deadly mushrooms and taking my own life, I had let it win. Lytha came to me, and then *It* had her. *It* had been correct all along. Within her body, its powers increased tenfold. But as strong as she was, this strength also made her weaker. She was helpless against its draw, submitting totally to *Its* will whenever *It* truly desired.

But that would change, now. Now *It* was I, Thalia, in control, not *It*, and I would not allow it to have its way.

I stretched, filling my lungs with air. *It* had been so long since I had felt this young, this healthy. I wanted to jump into the pool and swim, but no. I had something I needed to do for both of us. I returned to the campsite. How would Ghost respond? Could I leave him behind?

"How would you feel if you woke up and he was gone?"

Yes. Lytha was still with me. I could feel her back there, somewhere...angry, frightened, but accepting. She was right, as well. I could not just leave him.

Would he be able to tell the difference? Lytha and I looked so unlike, and yet, many could not tell us apart. It was dark. He was asleep. I could persuade him to come.

I was back among the ruins. I slid over to Ghost, taking his face in my hands gently. "Ghost," I whispered to him. "Wake up."

He stirred with a murmur. He was still having that nightmare. His eyes opened and he coughed a little, but then smiled. "Lytha," he said quietly, with a hint of satisfaction in his voice.

He did not recognize the change. His vision was blurred from sleep. He would come with me. He had to—I had a promise to keep.

"You have to come with me, Ghost. You have to come now."

"But..." he mumbled, his mind scratching out a rudimentary reason like a tower constructed entirely of triangular blocks. "It's still dark...zombies, the curse..."

"I'll keep you safe," I told him, and then leaned close, pressing my lips to his.

He made a noise like the squeak of a mouse and the purr of a cat at the same time. He did not reciprocate, but he did not protest either.

"*That's not fair; he's not for you.*" I felt Lytha say, forcing me to smile into the kiss.

"*That's not my fault; you should have kissed him yourself,*" I reminded her.

I let it linger, drawing him closer a moment more before releasing him. A long contented sigh escaped his lips.

He made no indication that he had changed his mind, but also made no protest as I pulled him from his resting place and to his feet. "I already scouted around the area; the zombies are not near. We're going in the opposite direction, and will be moving too fast for them to catch up."

"But where are we going?" he muttered, scratching himself, but standing.

Still no words of agreement, but no protests either. His mind was like putty. His tower of reason was no longer under construction. I grasped his hand in mine and pulled him out the ruined arch which separated us from the wilderness. "Come, I said," the man in tow, "we're going to see my *other* sister."

—Jyre: Clues —

Day 6: 3:30 am

I had been pinned. I walked through silent halls only to hear someone coming from up ahead; so I went back where I came, only to find someone coming from that direction too. I skid down the carpeted hallway and grabbed hold of the first doorknob my fingers could find. I was through it and my back pressed to it in an instant. It was a small closet, thank goodness, with only the light from under the door to guide my eyes and only my panting

lungs making a sound. I clasped my hands over my mouth and held my breath. Someone was walking by outside. How horrible it would be if it were a servant, here merely to fetch a broom.

The door did not open, but I was right that it was a servant. Then I heard a familiar hated voice: that doorman. I peeked through the keyhole and found that I could see him, or at least his arm. He was talking with someone. The other was speaking now.

"If it's really been called off, solidarity and all that, why are we still on high alert?"

"Because our orders come from *The Master*, not from a *newspaper*. Continue the patrols. Do not falter. I know all of you are tired, but I will have Mistress Henrett provide coffee breaks for the guard as well as our extra help at thirty minute intervals. Make up a schedule to ensure that all receive their doses no more and no less than four to five hours apart, and no more than two men are off duty simultaneously." Strange, he did not sound as horrible as I remembered him. I heard concern in his voice. But then I remembered; The Lady often provided stimulants to the guards as well, only they were far worse than simple coffee.

"That is certainly something to look forward to. Alright, I'll spread the word. Thank you Jossimer."

I could hear them part. One sounded heavier than the other. I assumed he was a guard. The other must have been Jossimer. If I followed him, he could lead me to Daelus.

I peeked out the door. I could see coattails turn a corner up ahead. I slipped out and ran, bare feet against carpet. I hugged the corner and watched him go; up a stair he climbed.

It was beautiful. Walls and columns soared above me. It was all arches and vaults, streaming banners and richly sculpted reliefs. I almost cried out in awe before I caught myself. He was quickly walking up the spiral stair, his long bony fingers barely touching the thick, sculpted banister. I was after him. He did not seem the type to glance about idly, so I felt that as long as I was perfectly silent it should not be an issue to follow him in plain view. Up and up the stair wound passing chamber after chamber of column and tapestry; before the stair hall grew narrow and enclosed, views of other rooms were replaced by tall windows; and finally he went to a door. I held off, waiting to see what he would do.

He pulled a large iron key from his pocket, and slid it into the keyhole; a turn, and the door was open. Then at once he was inside, and I heard a loud click from within. No! I rushed to the door, but forbade myself haste. Frowning furiously, I carefully tested the handle. Locked. I collapsed at the doorjamb. Curses!

I quickly consoled myself, and pressed my ear to the door. I heard voices within. I waited, and listened, but the voices neither grew louder nor more distinct. However, I soon felt I could tell them apart, and after several moments of reasoning, figured that three men were present, and none of them Daelus.

I knew I was in the tower though; I had to be. His chambers would be just a few more floors up. I went, the soft carpet of the stair emboldening me to speeds I would dare not attempt otherwise. I passed several doors as I wound up, and paused to listen at each one, fearful that I should by chance pass a door right as Daelus, a servant, or a guard opened it. All was silent. Finally I came to the last door, the one I knew to be to his chambers. I recognized it, though before I had seen it from the other side.

Unlocked. I gave a sigh of relief as I turned the handle. The door ajar, I peeked inside. It was dark. The windows were shut and the drapes closed. All was silent and still, not even a candle to illuminate the room. I strained my ears for the sound of breathing, or of someone stirring under blankets, but again could only hear my own breath. I closed the door behind me, though as I did so I found myself trembling fiercely. I could now see the bed. It was crisply made. No one had slept here tonight.

Failure. I slid to my haunches and stared at the ground. Again I was in his chambers, uninvited, and alone. Finally I pulled myself up, and gazed longingly at the smooth dress of his bedding, marred by nary a wrinkle. His housemaid was an expert. Before I realized how exhausted I was, I felt myself longing to just lie my head down on the soft fabric and just rest, just for a spell, maybe until he came. No, that wouldn't be right; in fact, it would have been horrible.

The words of the guard and Jossimer seemed to finally find a place in my mind. They had increased security. They were to patrol through the night. They had all probably been on extra-long shifts for some time to need such provisions as were being provided. Jossimer had to be the chief servant and he too was taking part in this vigil, as were the two strange men behind that locked door, that secret meeting. What was going on? They were expecting someone to come—who? Had Daelus angered The Lady and now expected retribution at any moment?

I found that I had lit a candle and was gazing about the room, my curiosity for what was happening tonight quickly being filed away in favor of curiosity for this man. The room seemed smaller than I had remembered, but maybe that was just because I had been so frightened before. After the past days, I found little here now to frighten me. I could no more be frightened of this than a man as I could be frightened of a beaver after I had met a bear.

For an instant I felt as if the scroll had grown heavier, reminding me that it was in my pocket. I had only to drop it on Daelus's bed, and he would find it. Mission accomplished. I could write him a letter; let him know what I had found and how, and...

I was at his desk. I found a quill and paper easily enough. A moment's further search provided ink. I had never written with a quill before. I wondered if it was easier, or if it simply made the writer feel more important. It took me a few tries to get the hang of it, and even more tries to get the words down on my paper that I wanted.

Daelus,

I write now to say goodbye. I have been to where I must never have gone. I seen things I must never have seen. I can not stay any longer. To seek revenge, it was foolish. I see this now. I had only wished to see you once more before I went. Please, if you can right the wrongs of The Lady, please let this be. But no longer revenge I can seek. Hurt me it has. Hurt all I love.

I leave this for you. It is scroll of darkest evil. Found it in the forbidden district. I am told The Lady wishes it. She must not have it! She would destroy all! It is dreadful. My words cannot describe. I beg of you do not read this scroll. Destroy it. Anything. I feel you are wise and will know how best this is to be done.

I go to the docks on the morning. Stowaway on a ship. Where I will go, I do not know, but I cannot stay here.

Your servant,
Jyre

I did not know if it was true or not. Was that really my plan? Did I really believe the things I wrote? I could not be sure. I left the note on the desk. I was sure he would find it.

My eyes happened to cross a few errant leaflets on the other side of the desk, and I found myself compelled to read them. What harm would it do?

Milord,

The first batch will be ready shortly. It is superb quality, but you do not need to take my word for it. I encourage you to bring your deftest expert to attest my claim,

Happily yours in business,
Mister Cobbis

I sighed. So much business...and none of it was mine. My eyes began to wander about the room from where I sat at his desk. It was much like the stair hall; tall vaulted ceiling, exquisite stonework splitting off into bits and parts, which I did not know the names for but found nonetheless impressive, until it met the ground. There were many paintings on the walls, too. Strange how I had not noticed them before, but again, the last time I was here I was so timid that I could do little more than stare at the door in anticipation. Yes, he was an art lover—of this I already knew. It was something he and The Lady had in common, and the thing that carried me from her service, into his. Not that I was ever her servant; slave was more like it. But then, I was never really Daelus's servant either. More like, pathetic pawing child begging for favor.

The desk was just as extraordinary. The top seemed to be made from a single block of wood, but it was so smooth and hard to the touch that it seemed more like stone. Delicate carved inlays around the cabinetry on the top reminded me of what I had seen in the stair hall. A bit of gold and silver caught my eye inside one of the compartments, a very small dagger; no, a letter opener, which seemed to be as intricately made as the desk. I turned it over in my hands slowly, running my fingers down its smooth polished surface. I could see my face in it. My skin was dark with dirt, my eyes bloodshot, and a nasty bruise on my cheek. I saw myself cringe as a drop of red blood showed itself on the blade. It was sharp. I sucked on my cut finger for a moment, tasting the blood as well as my own filth. I put the knife away into my pocket.

I slid the next letter in the stack out and glanced over it.

D —

I have a new sales figure. It should go up tonight.
Some prices have almost doubled!

S

How boring. It made no sense. 'It wasn't for my eyes.' That's what Els would tell me, and then scold me for being so curious about things that were none of my business. Without thinking I found myself glancing over my shoulder, half expecting Els to be standing there with a disappointed look on his face. Of course, I was alone.

I turned my eyes once again to the letter, but was caught by the sight of something else instead. It was so large and monumental; it seemed to blend in with the shape of the desk itself, a bound scroll. The seal was broken, but still I understood what emblem it bore, Hammerite.

I stared at it. What could the Hammerites possibly want with him? I had been warned that he dealt with them, and here was my proof, or disproof. Could I stand not knowing? Could I hold firm to my faith when facts were sitting not even a foot from my clenched hand?

The answer never came. I unrolled the scroll and read.

OUR SCOUTS HAVE RETURNED FROM INVESTIGATING THE STRUCTURE, THE LOCATION AND NATURE OF WHICH YOU INDICATED TO US DURING THE EMERGENCY SESSION OF THE HIGH COUNCIL OF THE ORDER OF THE HAMMER. THE VILLA WAS ABANDONED, AND THE INTERIOR WAS IN SHAMBLES. AT FIRST GLANCE, THE BUILDING COULDST HAVE BEEN MISTAKEN FOR A WOODLAND RETREAT, BUT INSPECTION HAS REVEALED THE PRESENCE OF HUMAN REMAINS BENEATH THE FLOORBOARDS. THE BUILDING ITSELF IS AN ACCURSED WORK OF EVIL.

AS SAID, THE VILLA WAS ABANDONED, BUT WE DISCOVERED ONE WOMAN TRESPASSING ON THE RESIDENCE. THIS WOMAN

APPEARED TO BE A THIEF, WHOM WE CAUGHT DURING HER RAID. SHE WAS CONVICTED ON FIVE ACCOUNTS OF RESISTING ARREST, BREAKING AND ENTERING, TRESPASSING, THEFT, BEARING FALSE WITNESS, AND CONCEALMENT OF EVIDENCE. AFTER BEING BROUGHT TO THE TEMPLE OF THE INQUISITOR, SHE WAS POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS ONE, IF NOT THE ONE, RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RECENT BLOODY ATTACKS AGAINST OUR KIN, AND CAN BE DIRECTLY LINKED TO THE SLAUGHTER WHICH OCCURRED TWO NIGHTS AGO. THE SEVERED HANDS OF OUR BROTHERS WERE DISCOVERED HANGING FROM THE WALLS OF HER DWELLING IN THE CITY. IT HAS BEEN REVEALED THAT HER NAME IS LYTHA.

SHE IS BEING INTERROGATED AT CRAGSCLEFT PRISON FOR INFORMATION ON THE FOLLOWING TOPICS: HER HISTORY, THE MOTIVE BEHIND HER ATTACKS AGAINST US, HER POSSIBLE INVOLVEMENT WITH THE PAGANS WHO MADE RESIDENCE AT THE VILLA IN THE WOODS, THE LOCATION OF THE EVIDENCE SHE UNDOUBTEDLY STOLE FROM THE RESIDENCE AND IS NOW CONCEALING, THE NUMBER OF, NAMES OF, AND LOCATION OF ALL HER CONSPIRATORS AND CO-CONSPIRATORS, AND ANY AND ALL OTHER INFORMATION WHICH MAY SERVE US IN DETERMINING HER PAST CRIMES, THUS INFLUENCING THE SEVERITY OF HER PUNISHMENT, AND THE METHOD OF HER EXECUTION.

AT THIS POINT IN TIME, THE SEVERITY OF HER PUNISHMENT WILL BE LIMITED, AS WE FEEL THERE IS STILL MUCH INFORMATION WE CAN EXTRACT FROM HER, AND FOR THAT WE NEED TO MAINTAIN THE CLARITY OF HER CONSCIOUS MIND. GUILT OVER HER GRIEVOUS SINS SHALL COMPEL HER TO GIVE US THE INFORMATION WE REQUIRE.

AT NOON TODAY A TASK FORCE BESEECHED TO DEMOLISH THIS STRUCTURE SHALT SET OUT ON ITS JOURNEY. I ASK THAT YOU BE THERE AND ACCOMPANY THE FORCE DURING THE ENTIRETY OF ITS MISSION. YOUR ABSENCE FROM THIS EVENT SHALL BE CONSIDERED A DIRECT INSULT TO THIS ORDER, AND WILL BE ANSWERED ACCORDINGLY.

Hammerites. The villa. He had gone to them. I felt betrayed. I pushed the scroll away and stumbled out of the chair. How could he have done this to me? I had trusted him, and this is what he does? He hands over everything I told him to the filthy Hammers! Would he hand me over to them next?

I snatched the scroll back up to read it again, hoping I had simply read it wrong. No, it was right there in black and white. It was worse than what they had said; he did not simply work with them, he was *one of them*. He had attended their meetings. He accompanied their forces. He was on their side.

My mind spun with all of the atrocities they had committed, and could not deal with the idea that Daelus could be part of all of this. I simply could not cope with that.

No, I had to stop it; he only did as I had asked. He hadn't betrayed me. I wanted revenge, and this was the fruits of it. It was my fault, not his. The blood was on my hands as well.

I left it all at the desk. I left his chambers behind. I didn't even bother closing the door. I rushed down the stairs—all I wanted to do now was get out of here.

Someone was coming up the stairs. I froze; eyes wide with fear. I could see his shadow around the bend; tall, skinny. It was Jossimer. He must be going to Daelus's room. Again my hand went to the nearest doorknob, and turned. It was open. I slipped inside.

It was pitch black within. No light peeked out from under the door and no windows could be seen, not even ones concealed by drapes. I heard the footfalls grow louder, and louder, until they stopped. He was coming inside!

Blindly I moved from the door to the first solid thing I could find; something long, low and made from wood, and ducked behind it. I held my breath as I heard the door opening, and the room around me illuminated with candle light. I had chosen my cover well, a low cabinet which was solid all the way to the ground. I listened closely as he moved about, thinking at any moment he'd come into view, and then I'd be done for.

He did come into view, but his back was to me. He was walking up to a wall lined from floor to ceiling with books. Slowly, he removed a row of books from their place on the shelf and methodically stacked them on a nearby table. Then, reaching around through the empty place on the bookcase, he began to move his arms like he was unfastening something. One by one, he placed small items, too small for me to see, on the table. From the sound they made as they hit the wooden surface, I guessed they were tiny metal screws. After setting his small tool down he carefully lifted away what at first looked like a row of bricks, but when he turned it I saw that it was just a piece of clay that had been designed to look like bricks. Finally he reached into the hidden compartment concealed behind the books and fake bricks and drew out a small chest. Once it was free he then sat down at a table, with his face to the doorway but with his back to me. I was trapped, but momentarily safe.

He began pulling out papers. In the dim light and at this distance, even I could see that these papers were ancient indeed. The pages were nearly translucent, and impossibly frail. He handled each one with gloved hands and very carefully articulated movements. He held a magnification glass, peering, poring, on and on. When I realize that this was going to be going on for some time, I allowed myself to breathe, but ever so carefully. One by one he pulled out sheets and examined them. He was completely silent; no thoughtful grunts or ponderous sighs escaped him.

This went on seemingly for ages. Every now and again I peeked at the doorway, but always came to the same conclusion. Unless he had tunnel

vision, there was no way I would be able to open the door without him seeing. I had to just wait, and hope that there was nothing in this cabinet that he wanted.

My eyes went to the bookcase directly across from me. Some of the books had titles printed on their spines. Many were words I did not understand, but some I could make out. A Dream Surrounds. Canon Tales. It Lives Beyond. Memoirs of Sir Solstice. I felt that if Jossimer had not been here, I surely would have pulled one of those volumes out of the shelf and read. The titles sounded like works of fiction. After I had been taught to read I had only twice managed to get my hands on such books, and both times I read them until the pages fell out. One was a book about legendary beasts called dragons, said to not exist, though many insist otherwise. For months I read that book time and again, and every night dreamed of meeting such creatures. It seemed so silly now. The second was about a man who left everything he knew in order to travel to a strange land for a chance at a new life. His was a dark tale however, and at the end of the book he died. Every time I read it, I hoped that the ending would be different; that he would live happily, and safe, but he always died. I hated that book.

There was a groan of the chair, and the source of the candle light began to move. Before I could shift my gaze from the books to Jossimer, he was up and out. I caught a glimpse of the back of his head before the door shut, leaving me again in darkness. Then I heard keys, and the click for of the door locking. I was trapped! No, no I was not trapped; the lock was on the inside. I would be able to escape.

The room was pitch-black, but, foolishly, my mind was no longer focused on escape, but on curiosity. I did not hear him place the chest back into its spot hidden behind the shelf. I was overflowing with a need to know what those pages held. Maybe, just maybe, it was the proof I needed to show that Daelus was not in league with the Hammerites. It would show that he was playing them, a trickster himself, and that he was exactly who I thought he was.

I thought I remembered seeing gas lamps on the walls, and so I hunted. To my delight, I found one, and even more luckily I was able to turn it on. A pale light flowed into the room now, enough to read by. It was true. The chest sat open and unattended at the desk. I knew that at any moment Jossimer would return and place it back where it belonged, so I had all the more reason to act now. The sounds of his keys would give me enough warning.

The letters inside were arranged in a row, so that the upper edge of all were visible. As carefully as I saw he had been, I lifted the first page out.

Dear Phaeros,

It breaks my heart to write this, but I understand the difficulties faced by one who leads a life such as yours, and wish to no longer compound them. You must understand why I must now

go.

We come from two very different stocks, you and I. For you everything is black and white, but I have a difficult time believing that those ideals even exist. For every black you see, I see things even blacker, and for every white you see, I see what is whiter, but in between, an infinity of shades, all of which you seem to be blind to. I cannot help but wonder how you can see me at all; to you I should not exist at all. I cannot live by your code. I cannot understand your rules. I know you set them for yourself and none other, but how can you expect me to stand by your side every day when my very existence is in a state which would drive you to suicide if you shared it with me? I do not understand you, and I do not understand why I love you. In time I know I would have either broken you, shattered the ideals you so clung to, or you would have broken me, and I cannot fathom the state I would be in were this the case.

There is, of course, another reason why I must leave. If this were the only reason, I would not be abandoning you like this, but together these two reasons have forced my departure. It is simply this. I cannot be truly free from our slave drivers while still clinging to you: one who remains true to the tasks set before a delegate; one who refuses the freedom which I worked so desperately to achieve. To stay with you would be to welcome the return of their yoke, and I would sooner die than wear it again.

As much as I feel like this is for the best, I do not know if I will be able to forgive myself for leaving you, my beloved. Please give my farewell to the others. I have valued their friendship.

But I beg you for forgiveness,

Ever yours in love,
Em

I stared at it. It made as much sense as the first two notes I read, but it seemed *far more important*. Who was Phaeros, and why was a letter to him from this Em sitting in a box in Daelus's tower? Why was his doorman leafing through this archive? I found myself staring at it for a long time, going over each word over and over again. What had happened to drive these two lovers apart like this? What did it mean?

I set it aside neatly. Whatever it was, it didn't involve Daelus. I fished out another page, this time from somewhere in the middle.

Phaeros,

Is it too soon to celebrate? I do not know how you did it, but it worked. We're moving in tonight. I do not expect resistance, but I am sending my best warriors anyway. You know how much they will enjoy a good reaping. By the time you read this, it may be

over already. I once again stress that this could not have been done without your aid. My cause, and your cause, have both been furthered this day. I know we shall find great success in collaborating in the future.

Sincerely,
Tempia

How horrible. As much as the first letter made me uncomfortable, this one I found disgusting. What wretched business was this, and what could it possibly have to do with Daelus? Why keep it in a vault? Was it a dark secret?

By chance I glanced at the wax seal; it was broken but still clung to the paper almost in its entirety. I dropped the letter and pushed away, hands going cold in an instant. I had seen the mark on the seal before. I had seen it many times before—Barlosk. Reluctantly but hurriedly, and with disbelief mixed with surety, I picked my foot up to look at what had been burned into my flesh years ago. Yes, they were the same; it was the mark of The Lady. There it was, as clear as the first day it had been etched into my skin. The letter was hers. That name had to be one of hers, if not her true name. Ranson's thug could have been lying to me about the name Delphine. Was, perhaps this name Phaeros a secret name of Daelus's?

My eyes went back to the archive. I pulled out page after page, not to read, but to check for signs of a seal. I found dozens. All the same. So many letters. So much. I knew this was not some archive that Daelus and his men had uncovered in their search for clues. It belonged to Daelus. The hiding place and the chest, the servant poking through them: it had to be his.

My mind spun. What could it mean? Was he in league with both the Hammers and The Lady? Was he playing both sides? I wanted to cry out from confusion and a sense of betrayal. He had been working with her all along—I knew it now. He had to be; why else would such a letter exist? This is why he acted the way he did before, why he refused to see what I was saying and refused to help. He was on *her* side.

But then, why would he send the Hammerites...Unless he was sending them into a trap? The Lady knew the secret of the villa had gotten out. She would let the Hammers come, and then close the trap shut. Daelus was helping her.

I didn't know who he was, or why I had trusted him. Tears dropped onto the letters one by one. I bit back my sobs and my anger. It was time to go.

I left it all behind. The door unlocked, just as I knew it would. I ran down the stairs, no longer caring who knew I was here. In no time I was at the base and kept running. Hall after hall I passed, going this way and that, trying to retrace my steps; but as soon as I thought I had come to the servant's exit, I found another chamber or corridor. Finally I wound back into the stair hall and saw that it continued down. Maybe I had not gotten to the ground floor after all. Carelessly, I ran down.

— Nightfall: James —

Day 6: 5:00 am

We arrived at the foot of the stair leading up to my tower, and none too soon, I was about to simply slide off the rump of the damned beast named Suzy. I would find myself with a dislocated jaw if I ever uttered such a thing to Richen.

“Shall I wait fer ye’?” he asked, turning the creature around after I had dismounted.

I looked up at the tower, and then back at him. “Yes, I think so. Is the horse up for another long ride?”

“Aye, but not with two on ‘er I dun’ think. I’ll let yea’ ‘ave ‘er if ya need, if yea’ promise ta’ take care o’ ‘er.”

I was hardly an equestrian; but I needed to get back to the site of the former villa, so I would ride the horse. “Thank you Richen. I will inform my staff to bring out whatever provisions you or the horse needs. If you feel she is situated and I am not ready to leave yet, feel free to come inside and make yourself at home.” I felt like I was wasting time, but after everything Richen had done I felt a need to show him a little hospitality, not just dismount and leave him waiting like I wanted to do.

“Don’ mind if I do!” he said happily, patting his horse.

Jarah and Filburt were stationed at the front gate, as expected, but I also saw many Gryphons. Apparently Jossimer had taken the opportunity to beef up security, though I was not sure how he had managed to convince Wendle or Canard to let him borrow some troops. “Anything?” I asked the elder of the two.

“Nay,” Filburt replied. “I haven’t seen a flash of red or silver all night. If the Hammerites are here, they’re...invisible!”

Jarah let out a goofy laugh, followed by a chuckle from Filburt. “Forgive him sire, he hasn’t slept more than two hours in three days. He’s what’s the word?—punchy, sire.”

“I see,” I told him, smelling the coffee on his breath as Jarah continued to chortle. “Jossimer’s having you all burn the candle on both ends?”

“And in the middle and everywhere else he can set fire to it, sire.”

Jarah stopped laughing long enough to say, “James is inside, sir, er, sire, and another too...Othello.”

That perked me up. Othello back on his feet? Not all news was bad it seemed. “Thank you both. Get Richen here whatever he asks for.”

“Yes, sire!” they both replied, and then craned their necks to see who Richen was.

I was not greeted at the door by Jossimer, but rather a pair of Gryphons. I would have to finally consider giving him that raise I had been putting off since the day I met him. They echoed a “Lord Thresh,” as they opened the door for me. I didn’t bother taking off my cloak and hat; I didn’t expect to be here long enough to get comfortable.

I knew James would be upstairs in the third study; the map room. Protocol always held that the door was to remain locked when official

business was being tended to—just in case. I produced my own key and unlocked the door, pushing it open before me.

I saw Othello first; his visage gave me a start. I did not know what to expect after he had been mauled by the zombies; and now, even though I could not see his face at all, I knew it to be him, for he wore a mask. His comportment was the same however, so I could only assume that his physician did all he could, but nonetheless there was a, you could say, mutual dissatisfaction with the visual result. “Master Nightfall,” he said politely from behind the mask of simple design and not immediately recognizable construction in the current light. Though dripping candles had been stacked everywhere, the drapes had been opened wide to let in ambient light, and all of the gas sconces had been lit upon the walls, there was still a darkness about the chamber.

“Ah, Daelus,” came James’s familiar voice from behind a large stack of books. The short man came out of hiding, buckling a cuff as he approached. He peered at me from over his reading glasses and continued, “I did not expect you to come so quickly!” a grin quickly spreading over his worn face.

I closed and locked the door behind me. “I didn’t seem to have a choice. What do you have to report?”

— James: The Report —

Day 6: 5:10 am

Daelus looked terrible. He usually made a grand show of being the master of his faculties in everything he did, but not this night. Sadly, it was about to get worse for him, and I wasn’t going to mince words; we had an unwritten rule around here that the bottom line went on top. Unfortunately, telling him the news I had was akin to tossing a live grenade into an electrical station.

“Lady Delphine,” I told him, “has been connected with Phaeros Kendrick.”

He looked at me like he was waking from a dream. “What did you say?” he asked, though I knew it wasn’t because he hadn’t heard me; quite the opposite in fact.

“I have discovered evidence linking our fellow delegate, Phaeros Kendrick, to Lady Delphine, both directly and indirectly. I do not know if he was or is an associate of hers, but all signs point to a sharing of knowledge, either willingly or by force, between Phaeros and his company and Delphine and her company.”

He found a seat. He was filthy, covered in dirt, plant matter, mineral deposits from evaporated perspiration, and of course a great deal of blood, though from his apparent stamina in light of his exhaustion, I could only surmise that he was not currently losing any. His apparent disregard for the interaction between the mud on his person and the carpet and upholstery only furthered my certainty that his list of concerns was long indeed. I felt it had now tripled in length, which made him and me even. “Phaeros, by your own admission, vanished decades ago. You were just a young man when it happened. He would be ancient now. Are you suggesting that he is still alive

and you've discovered his whereabouts?"

I shook my head, disappointed that I had led him in the wrong direction. "No, there is no evidence that he is still at large, but there is evidence that his interaction with Delphine occurred after his disappearance. Allow me to explain—"

He cut me off. "Does she have the scroll," he said withdrawing his hand from his face.

"I do not know," I replied, understanding the urgency of the question. "But my instincts tell me no. If someone such as Delphine were to acquire The Scroll of Phaeros I sense that we would know about it in some way or another such as; for example, complete pandemonium."

"Yes," he said in a low voice, shifting his gaze to anywhere but me. "But the scroll has been opened. Someone has read from it."

I blinked, and then curiously, felt compelled to agree with him. The thought had not crossed my mind until he mentioned it, but now I could not help but feel that he was correct.

"You felt it too?" he asked, possibly seeing the conflicted yet somehow knowing look on my face.

"Now that you mention it, I have at around ten PM, yesterday; that is, two days ago." I had lost track of time now of course, it was nearly dawn. "But I expect it affected you far more severely. You have, after all, not been here as long."

"Yes," he said, his voice growing lower. Suddenly his eyes shifted to Othello.

"Be at ease, Daelus. I trust him as well as you trust Sheam. He is here for vital education. I need him on the same page."

Othello remained silent behind his mask. Cursed zombies...Blending in had been one of Othello's greatest talents, now that would be impossible. I was ineffably thankful that he was alive, and was sure that another factor would soon fall into place as his greatest talent. He was a man of strong character and resolve, and had not shed a single tear concerning his life-altering predicament. But I had enough to concern myself without feeling empathy for my man.

Daelus seemed to relax, and continued. "It felt like I had been pulled out of the world and then thrown back in within a split second. I had no idea what had happened at the time; I find it difficult to barely even remember it; like my mind is not built to work in such a way to even fathom..." he trailed off,—I felt that I understood exactly what he meant.—"but then why no pandemonium?"

"Please forgive me, but I am about to guess. In all likelihood, I believe Jyre has read the scroll."

Daelus's eyes flashed panic for a moment, but then he seemed to settle down, though his knuckles were clearly white. "Explain."

"Naturally. A rogue element within The Bloods under the command of the so-called Ranson esquire has been in search of that very scroll. Spy reports indicate that they had sent Jyre to The Forbidden District on a mission to

recover it. If Phaeros was to hide that scroll somewhere in The City, that place would be very tempting. I am certain that he could have somehow gotten inside and found a safe place to leave the scroll, possibly employing his own talents to protect it. Somehow, Ranson, a former employee of Delphine, knew not only about it, but where it was, and wanted it for himself, and for some reason felt Jyre best suited to get it."

"Remarkable," Daelus said, "It seems he was right. She got it. Also, if she read the scroll while still inside the wall, it could be why The City is still here. The barrier could potentially contain its effects."

"Potentially, but not certainly: we cannot know. It is also possible that the effects of the scroll are linked to the reader of the scroll; Jyre herself could have not been strong enough (in a metaphysical sense) to conjure up an effect that could overcome the barrier. That is mere speculation. All that is known is that Jyre did cross back over the wall and chose not to deliver the scroll to Ranson, opting instead to go into hiding. Her location is still unknown; as is, I regret, the location of Captain Els, who I am certain has a great deal of information that would fill in many gaps."

"That is as comforting as it is alarming," he said. "What could someone like Delphine do with that scroll? What would she *want* to do with it?"

"One of two things: to destroy it, if she is at all sane and values the existence of our mortal plane, or to use it, if she is completely insane and feels she is somehow not a member of our mortal plane. However the question is less relevant than the opposite; what would the scroll wish to do with her? It is fairly *sentient* after all."

His eyes narrowed, looking out into space. "One moment this is about Hammerite politics and dangerous pagan witches, and now you have to drag The Scroll of Phaeros into it. Tell me, is that the only reason why you think that Delphine is linked to Phaeros? *We* know about the scroll and certainly not because Phaeros *told* us. She could have found out about it from someone else."

"Yes, true, but: we did not know where it was!"

He nodded, but did not let go. "Someone else could. Phaeros could have shared his plans with someone else, possibly Em or another of our fellow delegates you and I don't know about."

"Quite right, quite right," I remarked with a grin. "No, I have much more evidence to support this idea, if I may continue."

"Please," he said.

"No more speculation for now. Let us focus on what we know about Lady Delphine."

He nodded. Othello stood up and brought a rolled map to the table, unrolling it atop stacks of other documents. It depicted The City in one corner with most of the map fairly blank, indicating the sad state of cartography concerning the area beyond the woods and mountains. I was certain that Daelus's eyes would be drawn to the big red circle I had taken the liberty of adding to an area in the corner opposite The City. "I may now fully confirm the suspicions I hinted at earlier which research has given shape.

The Lady is no simple pagan priestess. Casual questioning about the streets has produced no information other than knowledge of her existence, which is considerably unexpected since she is a foreigner and most within The City think as if the world simply ends if one steps outside the walls that surround it as this map suggests. There was an exception, one informant who was killed before making her rendezvous, which nonetheless confirmed everything we believed she would say. This much alone would indicate a currently strong coercive power; however, a curious glyph was left carved on our informant's back after she was killed and it has become a worrisome clue.

"The glyph itself was unique, not a component in any known alphabet nor pictographic writing. Naturally my wife Corinne insisted involvement at that point, as such things are one of her many specialties. After a day a number of references were discovered, but only referenced *en passant* and in tones of terror. The power behind the glyph is linked to the Trickster and the Wood, but as an equal, not as a servant; certainly a dark and chaotic force, in any event, and ill-disposed towards man. Is the use of the glyph in this age merely an accident? I think not. Is it a false lead set by a normal enemy to deceive; or, to wear the mantle of an ancient terror? Again, I suspect not. The terror is forgotten for long years in the records, only to crop up anew when it has slid from memory.

"As she continued her research, I continued my own. Investigations within the Order of the Vine (under the command of the Woodsie Queen), the foremost pagan cult within The City's walls, were leading to simple dead ends. It had the makings of not simply a forbidden topic within the group, but also a similar air of terror which had turned up amongst commoners. It was then that I changed the angle of investigation to not search for a secret within the O.V., but for a contending faction, and a reviled one at that. It was then that links in the chain began to show themselves, as did a list of names, including the most telling of all: Barlosk."

At this, I indicated to my circle. "Research on Barlosk was much more revealing. It could not properly be called a city, but rather a castle-manor with a large populace of indentured servants. It provided the link between several elements. For one thing, shipments of goods from Barlosk," at this point I traced with my finger a line from Barlosk, to a nearby river, out to sea, and then down the coast to The City, "were stored in several local dockside warehouses. One of these shipments was broken into, and a painting reportedly stolen."

"Jyre's painting," Daelus muttered to himself, not to interrupt.

"Those shipments were en route to the villa, which solidified the conjecture that Barlosk is the home of Delphine; in fact, she is likely to be the ruler of it. Still, I could not justify sending out an expedition which could take weeks to a distant city, the location of which is merely a conjecture, so I needed to locate some more local bases of operation. Thankfully many previously bored apprentices of mine were more than happy to launch their minds to the task. One of the lads had the acuity to follow the lead left by young Jyre concerning an abandoned factory. Within an hour he had listed all

candidate sites in The City, and agents were dispatched to investigate each one. Naturally the one with the least to discover was the one with the vital clue." I rolled over the map page to reveal a diagram of The City, and indicated to Daelus the location in question.

"Discovered in Downtowne, this abandoned facility had a sparseness associated only with places that had been very recently picked clean of evidence. In their haste to escape detection, the previous occupants neglected to unleash an army of spiders to re-adorn the facility with cobwebs, and likewise several sacks of dust should have been evenly spread throughout. We could only come to the conclusion that this location had recently been compromised, possibly by Jyre and her companion themselves, and so the enemy withdrew.

"But the damage was done. Though abandoned, the building did still have a landlord, and after serious persuasion, using methods I do not care to discuss, it was made clear that this landlord was in fact well aware of his squatting cultist tenants. His name is Lord Creeban, and he is now under a considerable amount of protection. He was our first link in the chain. Unsurprisingly, his business was to simply own land. It was quickly ascertained which pieces of properly hosted similar abandoned structures, and again field agents were issued to each one. All displayed similar characteristics of recent departure, though some appeared to have been unused for as long as months and others had not been cleaned up nearly as effectively."

"So she is withdrawing; but why? Why now?"

"It is likely that the cause is less sinister than you might expect. I suspect that it had everything to do with growing pressure from The Bloods, the Order of the Vine, and the Hammerites. Specifically, if Ranson betrayed his kin to side with The Bloods, it would have been trivial for them to lay waste to everything that Barlosk controlled within The City."

"I wonder if it would be terribly unwise to try to develop relations with the OV," Daelus mused quietly.

I did not entertain that dangerous thought. Instead, I changed the subject. "That is where a break came in Corinne's investigation. A single scrap of a note was discovered with what amounted to nonsensical scribbling to the agent, but caused Corinne's eyes to light up like police-yard search lamps. It, combined with dozens if not hundreds of cross references and clues, allowed her to crack the code of Barlosk's unique breed of glyphs, opening up droves of new leads. Blood oaths, some going back many generations, were uncovered and linked to powerful nobility within The City. Quiet investigations revealed that in all cases, contact had been made between these aristocrats and an unknown group, unknown at least to them; but now known to us, none other than Barlosk itself. Though descriptions varied greatly between the type of contact, and who or what was instigating this contact, the thread remained true.

"There are some clues to money exchanged, but it was all from secret, private accounts which left no paper trail. As far as I can infer, there is no

connection between any of these individuals; not a one knows the identity of any of the others; so no meetings between them have taken place for us to investigate. However, it seems that in uncovering this fact we have also stumbled upon the function of the villa, as a meeting place between Delphine and these aristocrats.

"There seemed to be no pattern to the men and women in this ever growing list, until it was pointed out that the pattern would be in the original oath givers of course, not their progeny. Sure enough, a pattern emerged. All fifteen confirmed cases were artisans of some type; in fact, all types and not a single duplicate amongst them. Each was renowned in their time for their skills, as well as their vocal and radical views against The Church. A further pattern emerged; the most recent of these oath takers committed themselves fifty years ago. After this point, there is a gap. No activity from this group seemed to take place within The City for this period, but if you recall how this conversation began, you will see the third key to this pattern.

"Phaeros," Daelus said simply, his chin now cupped against the backs of his woven fingers.

"Yes. Phaeros's disappearance fifty years ago and this gap in activity seem to coincide. Since I am finished for now with the facts, I again postulated a conjecture and at this moment I still see no reason to alter it; Phaeros's departure from The City fundamentally altered Barlosk's plans; and they had no choice but to shrink away from The City as well. Now, I believe, by the way Jossimer is standing there at the door, he may have some new information for us...Jossimer?"

I had been so wrapped up in my chain of thought that I hadn't noticed my old friend had let himself in, holding several documents gently between his gloved fingers. "Master," he said politely with a nod to Daelus, before approaching the table as if he were a professor approaching his lectern. "I believe I have found something useful," he began in his usual drab tone. "But first, I must explain how we came to this point. I am sure James already discussed the unique glyphs and the discovery of their translation. Several hours ago James was discussing with me what major events correlated with the withdrawal of this cult from The City. That is when I realized where I had seen the glyphs before, though at the time I had no fathoming that they were even glyphs at all, on several correspondences between Phaeros and a female companion of his whom I believe was very close to him."

"Jossimer," Daelus said, suddenly sitting up at attention and apparently quite alarmed. "You know of Phaeros?"

"I do indeed, Master," he said with a slight bow, "Quite well in fact."

"It was Jossimer's memory which provided the final link between Delphine to Phaeros," I said, smiling to my old friend. I unfolded a bit of paper, Corrine's excellent draftsmanship, and placed the sketched glyph on the table. "Barlosk," I said simply. Jossimer then set down one of the letters he had recovered, so that the broken wax seal would appear whole. The two matched.

"You could have just begun with that," Daelus said, eyes wide at the clear

similarity between the two.

"True, but you insisted that we first discuss the scroll!" I replied with a grin. "So the connection is clear—from Delphine, to Barlosk, to Tempia, to Phaeros, to, well, us. How did Jyre decide to visit this upon us in the first place?"

"A painting," Daelus said quietly, still staring at the sketch and the seal. There was astonishment in his voice, not a sense of determined reasoning. "She stole it from Delphine. I run an art gallery. She decided to sell it to me."

"Yes, interesting," I said, giving my chin a slight scratch. "Where is this painting now?"

Jossimer then cleared his throat and picked the folded letter back up. "There was more," he said impatiently as he opened up the letter, "If I may?"

"By all means; I am sorry for cutting you off!"

He frowned slightly, and continued. "Two letters from Tempia in particular stand out to me." He cleared his throat with an extended series of coughs, and then began to read, adopting a slightly different tone. "'I implore you,' she writes, 'to set aside our current disagreements. I know there are things you are holding back from me, knowledge and powers you do not trust me with. I know I can do nothing to change your mind in these cases, but I ask you to consider this. The fate of The City now rests in our hands. You see fit to trust me with this shared responsibility. Now I ask you to look into your own heart, and see if this trust is genuine. I do not see how you can trust me with this grand design, and yet not trust me with the full implications of it.' She knows of some power he holds, but possibly does not know what form it takes. It was fortunate for us and for him as well, that she did not."

Daelus was growing visibly irate, and was possibly not even listening. "Jossimer, where did you get these letters, and how the *devil* do you know anything about Phaeros? James, what's this all about? How much have you two been hiding from me?"

"Oh, I promise you, I've hidden no more from you than Jossimer has from me!" I said with a grin, but knowing it wouldn't help. "But please, let us remain focused, and we shall explain Jossimer's own connection in due time. You see, the woman Phaeros had been corresponding with was Tempia, an enchantress not associated with any pagan cult. She was a loner, an outsider of the strictest sense. Phaeros sought to use her for his work as a delegate, attempted to coerce her, and ended up becoming coerced himself. Combine that with the love-triangle between the two of them and our fellow ill-fated delegate Em, and it is quite an amusing story. However, all that was fifty years ago. She would be a very old woman now; much can change in that time. I do not think we can say for certain that Tempia is The Lady, but it is where evidence currently points."

He nodded reluctantly.

Jossimer continued with the faintest hint of a snort. "If I may be so rash as to suggest that the power that Tempia desires an equal part in, could be none other than the scroll? During the time this letter was written, the scroll occupied the entirety of the man's faculties."

“Good thinking man,” I called out. “More and more proof for what we suspect. I see you have a second letter?”

“I do. The second document is from many years later. It is of a much different sort and seems to have nothing to do at all with our current concerns; but if you will bear with me, I will read it in its entirety. ‘Dear Phaeros. You are quite certain that not a living soul but you know if this place? The way you described it fills my heart with a surge of such warmth that this paper is unworthy to convey. I understand your desire to get away from The City, and allow me to admit that I have begun to feel similar thoughts about my village. If at all possible, I think we should make a habit out of taking advantage of your cottage. Bring enough to spend the night. I shall do the same. Love, Tempia.’”

He looked up from the letter with a look on his face resembling a judge who had just heard the last bit of evidence he needed to convict a maiden of prostitution.

“Interesting,” I said, after observing Daelus’s expressionless state of silence.

“Indeed,” Jossimer replied. “Its unique nature is not in the...flirtatious tone or the innuendo of intercourse. It is a lead to a new site.”

Daelus seemed to perk up at that. I was having a harder time placing his current mental state. He was exhausted, yes, but also deeply troubled. He had to take in a great deal very quickly right now, and undoubtedly had more information for us he had not yet shared. “You think that this new site is important? Couldn’t it just be the villa?”

“No,” I said with surety. “We’ve uncovered proof that the villa is a very recent construction.”

“No,” Jossimer also said. “But we are running out of leads to follow. This is a new trail. It must be followed.”

“Any idea how this site could be found?” Daelus asked, looking to me.

“It will take some research. I will have to return to my apartment to say for certain. I believe that if it is sufficiently far from The City I do have a method which should work, provided it is also close enough to travel to by foot.” I said simply, not wishing to bore anyone with the technical details. I quickly jotted down a few research requests for my apprentices in order to get the ball rolling.

Daelus took a deep breath. “So we know a bit more about Delphine, but do you know what she actually wants? Why is this house of Barlosk suddenly interested in The City again?”

I had finished my note, and was signaling Jossimer. “One moment, Daelus...Jossimer, please see to it that a courier gets this at once,” I told him. He nodded quickly with the most furious frown I had ever seen him wear, at least that evening, and was out the door in an instant. It was bolted behind him.

Daelus was rubbing his temples, his eyes squeezed shut. He wasn’t going to last much longer!

I opened up an old volume and spread its pages across the map. “It is

difficult to say for certain, as Barlosk's location is well beyond our reach and we have yet to discover a working local base of theirs, but I have some theories. Though there are many cults of pagans, one always dominates." I pointed to a diagram on the open page, which indicated a type of convoluted hierarchy. "Up until last year, it was the Order of the Vine under the rule of Constantine in the form of The Trickster. But he was killed, and thus the great beast went headless. Normally succession occurs through occult practices, rituals and so forth, possibly a sacrifice of the elder avatar or possibly through challenged single combat; but in this case such a passing of the torch was impossible due to the nature of this avatar's death. Pagans, prizing chaos as they do, obviously have no rules or laws to govern what takes place when such an event occurs," I said, my finger circling the page to indicate the absolute obscurity of the diagram. "They are not much for forethought, though I suppose they enjoy this fact. Thus a new cult must now vie for power, and will do so in a bloody feud.

"Corinne believes, and I agree with her, that Delphine chose now to return to The City because it is her only chance to assert dominance over the rival pagan cults and become the new leader. This is not a continuation of her old plan. The old blood oaths, while still valid, no longer link to individuals of use. Her hand has been forced by the death of the god, and so now she must act. But a simple priestess cannot lead. A goddess can, or more specifically, the avatar of a goddess. It is all laid plain in the Tome of the Fae: in it their avatar is described; the Faery Queen; the drinker of nectar; sower of seeds of nightshade and spores of *Amanita virosa*; the destroying angel. The language in this ancient text could not escape Cor's sharp analysis—it is the original form of the tongue The House of Barlosk now uses."

The chamber was now surprisingly well lit by the first rays of morning sun. Curse it—lost track of time again. "Some fighting has already broken out in pagan villages surrounding The City. Is it an attempt by House Barlosk to test the dominant faction? Will the followers of the slain god protect their own, or leave them to the savagery? Do these villages even have a true affiliation, or are they cult-less, worshiping naught but the sun and the rain as elements of life itself, free from any anthropomorphism? Whatever the reason, new attacks have taken place at an alarming rate, and all of them carry with them a threatening promise."

I found the note I wanted, and read it verbatim.

Forsake this slain God and embrace victory. Soon The City will flow red with the blood of the city heads, as will your village be painted. On one chance only will man-souls be spare: forsake, as well, man-flesh. Embrace the Queen of the Fae; your lives will be spared, reborn anew.

I put the note down after folding it neatly, and continued. "It grows worse. It is said that The Faery Queen's greatest ally is the Vile Slasher, also known as The Queen of Fangs, and sometimes referred to as the assassin of

The Trickster. One of the oldest and most fearsome of the pagan gods, this being's first references date back to the time of The Lord of Charr; it represents a primal, unquenchable hunger for blood and death. I could see the great apprehension in Corinne's eyes as she relayed this information to me, and the more she told the more I knew my own eyes reflected it. It was the Vile Slasher's way to remove the face and hands from its victims; these parts of the body are what made a person more than a simple beast; thus the victim had been reduced to mere meat."

"The Hammerite Temples," Daelus said, who now held the same fear in his eyes that I had seen in Corinne.

"Yes, and more, it is our connection to Lytha."

"Lytha; of course. Othello was certain that you would not believe Lytha to be responsible for these attacks."

Othello did not stir with the mention of his name. Good grief, I had nearly forgotten he was here! "Not at first, but now I am convinced otherwise. You see," I said, holding up a neat pamphlet, "I was able to get a copy of Brother Adam's notes concerning his inquisition of Lytha. I am afraid that your extremely successful gamble to free her was exactly what Delphine would have wanted." It was harsh, but I couldn't mince words. "Brother Adam felt strongly that Lytha was possessed by none other than the Vile Slasher herself. This is an extremely well-studied and intelligent Hammerite. He would not have claimed this unless he was completely certain."

The idea that he played right into Delphine's hands with the release of Lytha did not seem to faze him. "I remember, he said something..." Daelus said, trailing off, "about her being possessed."

"Indeed. And she is at large once more, probably responsible for the recent murder of Brother Adam, and the Hammerites are too badly wounded to mount any sort of recovery mission right now."

"Damn it!" he nearly shouted, finally showing some emotion! "I knew I should not have let Somno use Ramirez's thugs in that plot. If he hadn't done that, he and The Pit Crew would have Lytha in custody."

"Doubtful; she in all likelihood would have killed them all in order to escape. This is not one to be caged. I hate to be remarkably heartless and morbid as I say this, but it is very likely that you still did the right thing. Word has it that not only has Father Rafael decided that the prisoners you gave him, due to the chaos they caused and the fact that Lytha was rescued, were exactly the guilty party he had desired, and for the time being has decided that you are completely on his side."

"Wonderful," he said in a very dry tone. It sounded sarcastic, but I knew that he simply could not take pleasure in something like that, even if it was technically good news.

"But, back to the topic of Lytha's interrogation. It seems that she had a sister, which is news to us, but apparently a well-known fact to Brother Adam. This sister, Thalia, exhibited symptoms which led Brother Adam into a long period of research into The Vile Slasher, so that when he discovered Lytha, he was able to make his judgments. He believed that Thalia was also

possessed by this creature, and when she died sometime after being broken free by Lytha herself, the demon transferred itself somehow.

"Thalia, by Lytha's own admission, was an associate of Delphine; thus, it all fits together. Apparently Lytha knew very little about her sister's dealings with Delphine, only that they had dealings, and Brother Adam's own logs concerning Thalia are locked up in a vault deep below The Temple of the Inquisitor. We're still working on getting a copy, but as you know, things are a little crazy there right now."

"What else did Brother Adam discover?" Daelus said from behind his glove.

"That Lytha is no friend to Delphine; in fact, she considers the woman responsible for everything ill that ever happened to Thalia. I do not suspect that they are in league, but I suspect that if Delphine knows of Lytha's possession she will certainly attempt to either win her over, or dominate her; if such a thing could be possible of The Slasher."

His eyes narrowed, looking out into space. This entire situation was like reading in the evening post that a ship had capsized and all hands lost, and then a week later, learning that your entire family had been on that ship. "I see. So, what do we do now?"

Jossimer was letting himself in, but not with his usual simplicity of movement; he carried with him a tray adorned with four steaming mugs. I felt my mouth instantly water with anticipation, the beautiful aroma of coffee tantalizing my senses. "Compliments of the chef, Missus Henrett," he said in his usual offended tone, which I had learned long ago actually meant that he was pleased. I accepted my coffee greedily, though could not help but pause with a crippling sensation of empathy as I saw Othello gently lift his mask away from his face, cupping one hand over his ruined cheek as he sipped the beverage. We sipped from our mugs quietly for a moment or two, as we all could undoubtedly use the stimulation, and could even more undoubtedly use a small pleasure at this very dark time.

Finally I spoke up. "Now you can tell us what became of the Hammerite's expedition. I had expected this report to come from the Riverbed Company, but somehow you are here and they are not!" I added with a grin.

Daelus quickly recounted the events of the expedition, briefly refreshing us as to the events which led up to the mongbat attack, as well as the aftermath. He described what he saw at the villa, or rather what became of it, and the tale relayed to him about the great stump and the melting of the iron spike, though it was now a story that was three times removed from its source. I would quickly trade my entire anthology on the Battle of Ruun Valley for a chance to inspect that stump in close detail. Corinne would probably happily trade me!

"Fascinating," I murmured, listening to the result of the spike in the stump. "The interaction of iron and Woodsie magics is not fully understood; does forged metal gain a magic of its own from the work of its creation, in the same way that building a structure in the earth can enforce on some creatures its floor plan of walls, doors, and windows long after the structure has

crumbled into dust? Or is it more simply a matter of direct counteraction, the logical physical reality of iron dismissing the arcane psychological glamour of the ancients of the Wood?" I paused, my mind quickly at work, feeling suddenly like I was once more in my office at the old college. "Daelus, at The Circle you have in your archive a curious iron stone that fell from the stars. I have previously mentioned to you the potential power of this item. It is time to use that potential. There is a smith whose discretion and skill I have the greatest regard for. We must have him use this stone to cold-forged a weapon we may need in opposing The Lady. Have no doubts, it will be time consuming, but I think it will prove worthwhile."

"Do it," Daelus said. "If it can be found among what's left of The Circle," he added with a snort. "Blood—I nearly forgot; any news on The Circle or Sheam?"

I shook my head and set to work on another missive. "None, other than that Sheam is now safe, but I feel I have assaulted my research on The Lady with far too much abandon to stay abreast on all that is currently unfolding. Rembrandt will be returning soon with a full report on the activities of the Hammerites. For an independent, he's showing a surprising affinity to working with my field agents. He has leadership potential."

Daelus nodded, and then leaned back in his chair, running his hands through his hair against his scalp. "I think it's fairly clear that recovering Jyre and that scroll needs to be our number one priority. Who could lead us to her? Els? Ranson?"

This made me frown, for in all of our successes, this remained a failure. "Yes, but they too are missing! I sent some agents to aid Els and his companion Moody in their search for the girl, but by the time they reached Eisenhower's Hotel Sheam had already sent them off, with only a list of Blood strongholds as our clue. I haven't heard a thing about it since then. We have been investigating The Bloods and found them to be little more than an amateurish disorganized mob of bigots, thus our thinly spread resources have not given them the thorough examination that they need. As you know we have located their latest meetinghouse, and have more recently infiltrated it, but this has not given us Els or Ranson. Aside from writing speeches this is not a wordy bunch—no written records of any of their activities could be found anywhere in the compound. I have not yet heard the report of the agent who is attempting to extract information through charming coercion. If that fails, muscle shall be the next resort."

"So no word on Ranson at all?"

I shook my head, "Location unknown. He is either too unimportant or too cautious. I feel it is a measure of both, for nothing conceals so well as perceived irrelevance. The Newmarket base was abandoned. It was likely only a temporary one, anyway. The members of The Bloods continue to speak about their inside contact, but few seem to have met the man and only know someone who knows someone who's met him. It is in an instance like this where the target's complete lack of organization simply confounds intelligence operations far more effectively than the most expertly devised

concealment protocols!"

Daelus managed a small smile at this, which was good. I had intended it to be humorous, as my own grin now betrayed.

"Again, I would have devoted more manpower to this area of the investigation, but other sections were seeing far more success, and I did not feel that it would be wise to begin pulling agents off of the Ramirez front. I did not know about the Phaeros scroll connection until several hours ago, and so had no idea that this scroll that Ranson sent Jyre after was our harbinger of the apocalypse."

His smile ended, "Wouldn't do to have a conflict with Ramirez in the middle of a war against goddesses and the end of the world."

I couldn't help it; my grin resurfaced. I then saw his return, and realized that it was his turn to make light of the situation—grim though it may have been.

I got back on topic. "We will do all we can to recover Jyre, but someone like her moves invisibly and silently wherever she pleases; she could be anywhere, inside or outside of The City by now."

"Strange how things work out," he whispered to himself.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," I said suddenly, my second letter finished and handed to Jossimer. "One of the original oath givers is still alive."

Daelus was still nursing his coffee. I wished I had done the same with mine; the cup was dry before its base found its way back onto a flat surface. "That must be useful," he said with a raised brow.

Indeed, and it is why Othello has joined us tonight. He will be meeting with this truly ancient man..." at that Jossimer gave a rather pronounced snort, "Sorry old boy! As I was saying, he will be meeting with you shortly. It was very difficult to arrange this meeting under the pretense of Othello here being an agent of The Lady, which is why it is only now taking place."

"Ah," Daelus said, looking reluctantly over to Othello. "No talent, no matter how unfortunate, left un—exploited," he said.

Othello finally spoke up. "I felt that I could use my current deformity to add a level of intimidation to the proceedings. I doubt the man will assume for an instant that I am not an agent of the darkest devil."

Sad but true, we do what we can with what we have. "That is phase one. Phase two is to investigate this new property of The Lady's, that is, as soon as we can pinpoint its location. Phase three which you have so informatively provided yourself Daelus, is the forging of this weapon, which I have described to our expert craftsman as no more than a simple broad head of an arrow. Alas, I fear the age of charging into battle, magic sword gripped readily in hand, is long gone."

"Phase four, which will hopefully be happening very soon," Daelus asserted, "is the removal of that stump from the earth, as it is clearly a source of considerably occultist power which I would happily have Delphine do without. Brother Thurm's machines will, I hope, make short work of it."

"Yes, yes," I said, excited by the prospect of an entirely different reason. "Have them preserve that stump, please Daelus. We would very much like to

get a look at it.”

“I will do my best, but you know Hammerites. If they’re not using their hammers to build something, they’re using them to smash something.”

I checked my pocket watch. Six fifteen. “Now that you are free from The Hammerites, I take it you shall be returning to The Circle to survey the damage?”

— Nightfall: Adjournment —

Day 6: 6:15 am

“Not so fast,” I said, having patiently waited all this time to return to a topic which had been eating at me since it had first come up, only to be brushed aside in a most uncomfortable fashion. “I believe I am still owed an explanation as to why my *butler* has in his possession a cache of letters belonging to a fellow *delegate*.”

Neither man replied as quickly as I would have liked, and when they did it was not in a way I cared for; James with a nervous laugh and Jossimer with a disgruntled sigh. “It is because,” James began,

“You are not the first Delegate whom I have served, Master Thresh,” Jossimer suddenly said quickly and firmly. The way James quickly nodded only convinced me more that there was a great deal here being kept from me. I knew it wasn’t unfair, for there was a great deal I had never conveyed to James; I had to accept that the privacy of certain matters went both ways.

“You were major domo of Phaeros’s estate as well?” I said with some measured skepticism.

“No sir,” Jossimer quickly attested. “During those days I was a commanding officer within The City’s military, and he a powerful politician. I discovered this vault of documents while securing his belongings after his disappearance. Apparently he saw no need to keep or destroy them. It is possible that he foresaw the day when they would be of use to another.”

I sighed. I wanted to get the whole story, but it was starting to sound like it would be more a tale for a long rainy afternoon rather than something we could spend time on during a crisis. “We’re going to have to arrange for some rather lengthy talks to get all of this out in the open. I suppose this was a long time in coming.” I added, remembering my thought about fairness from a moment ago, “As I certainly have some stories as well.”

“It shall be our first order of business once this is all settled, then!” James said with a grin. How quaint; he knew as well as I that rarely, if ever, was any situation so nearly labeled as “settled” that one could schedule an event by that standard. It was like promising that this sharing of stories would never come to pass.

“No, not to The Circle,” I said, abruptly changing the subject back to James’s previous question. “I’d like to rejoin Brother Thurm and the rangers. But first I think I can allow myself a change of clothes and a bath. Maybe by then Rembrandt will have arrived.” What I really wanted was to sleep. Sitting in this chair for so long had trained my body to expect rest now, but I

would have to disappoint it. I had not slept this night, which was beyond my control, and that fact was not about to change. Everything James had told me was making me feel drunk. My mind was crowded; confused. Everything about this situation had changed so quickly. It was no longer a matter of bickering Hammerites, but of warring goddesses and ghosts from the past.

If James had sensed my state, it certainly was not rubbing off on him. He seemed animated as ever. "I will continue to brief Othello. Jossimer, would you please inform the good Mistress Henrett that we will be ready for breakfast shortly?"

James also never skipped meals. A roar of dissatisfaction from my own stomach reminded me that I had. "I must eat as well, but it must be something quick. Just toast for me, thank you," I told Jossimer, who nodded with his usual sour expression. "Oh, and make sure she knows to prepare something for Richen as well." He grunted an affirmative and left the room behind me.

"Thank you, gentlemen," I finally said before standing. "I will see you both very shortly, downstairs."

There was something I had to do downstairs before I busied myself with issues of cleanliness and attire. During the discussion James had asked how Jyre came to me in the first place, and the answer was that painting. He asked what I had done with it, but then the topic changed and we never returned to it. I did have an answer for him, for of course I had placed the painting in my vault just the other day. Discussion of that, however, I would save it for breakfast after I had fetched the artwork so we could all have a look at it. Additionally, there were other artifacts within my vault which I felt would be of use should there be additional dangers in the woodlands to face.

I rounded the bend into the small cellar, the passage to the lower chambers just ahead of me. I caught in the corner of my eye a flash of movement; something small and somehow familiar lunging for me. Instinctively I spun around.

— **Thalia: Delphine** —

Day 6: 6:15 am

There were lights up ahead, in the wood. I could see them still even as dawn broke. I was always careful to not let Ghost get too far behind for fear of losing him, but also to not let him get too close for fear of him seeing the choker. I didn't know how he'd react to that. I didn't know how he would react to any of this. Thankfully Lytha had not attempted to change her hair length while using the device, if such a thing was within its power, so for the moment my secret was safe. It would not be for long.

Lights up ahead; I felt myself slowing, and a panting, gasping Ghost catching up. He would be wondering how I was so spry. I would not give him the chance to ask, not yet. I began to move again, focusing on the lights up ahead.

I knew where to go; I could feel her. When I first set out I had only to lift

my head high and witness the brilliance with which she shone. She was so strong now I could barely believe it was truly her, but the feeling of her mind was unmistakable. Lytha would have felt her too if she had known what to listen for, how to pick out her voice from amongst the chorus. The chorus was loud now. So many minds were in these woods, minds that belonged to her. Many were frightened, many were devoted; all were trapped. I could feel them in the woods around us now; stalking us. They would not approach; they dared not. I put into their minds that they could not.

I could feel Ghost growing restless behind me; apprehensive. I did what little I could to sooth him. We were almost there.

We were in a clearing now. The woods gave way to an encampment, a gathering of tents with a few simple hovels all bathed in the golden morning light. Dozens of torches and campfires still flickered with their last remaining life. Within an instant the scene was a flood of activity. Creatures and men flooded out from the tents, confronting us with tooth, spear and sword. Shouts of "intruder" and "man-flesh" abounded, echoed by growls and inhuman chants. But none would approach. Ghost had his daggers drawn, shouting something himself, but wisely made no move to attack. He was not the focus of my attention however.

"Be still!" a woman's voice cried out from across the clearing. It was as she commanded, and all eyes turned towards her. She stepped out of the greatest tent, drapes of black and ivory trailing behind her lissome body. She looked at me, and quickly her face of white scorn melted into surprise and joy. Her jaw dropped slowly, open lips uttering a silent whisper, "Thalia."
"Yes, Delphine," I replied. "It's me."