

Not Forgotten...

"Hey!" I heard someone whispering down from the tiny window at the top of my cell. It was just a hole, too small to even fit a head through.

Ever since I had been transferred from Raputo to Canard's dungeon things had been pretty much the same. Actually they had been the same since I had been captured, five, maybe six days ago. There were chains on my wrists and barely any food; and so far, no word from base on negotiations for my freedom or a breakout until now. "Yeah?" I called back up.

"You one of the guys sent to kill Nightfall last week?"

Had it been that long already? "Yeah," I whispered back. Even with my back pressed to the cell bars I couldn't get far enough away to see who was outside the window. It was too high up and too deep. It was a man's voice, but I couldn't recognize it.

"They get anything out of you?"

"Not Raputo's men, nor Canard. This crazy guy snuck into my cell once, asked me some questions, but he didn't get out of me who I work for. Don't worry!"

"Good." He replied, and then, nothing.

"Hey, are you going to bust me out of this?" I called up, trying to be quiet.

"Yes. You'll be out of that cell in no time. Here." A small black ball dropped down from the window. I moved over quickly and caught it with both hands.

"What's this?" I said, noting that one side had a slight indentation, and some fumes were rising out of it.

"A bomb."

"Yeah, I can see that!" I said, starting to feel really bad about this. "Shouldn't you be using this to blow out the window?"

"It's not strong enough for that. It's only good on soft targets in close quarters."

"Soft targets?" I nearly yelled. "How long's the fuse on this?"

Nothing. Silence.

I had to throw it away. I could only make it go so far out of the bars of my cell with my arms chained together, but I had to try. I pulled both of my arms back, and swung. It hit one of the bars right in the middle (what were the chances?), and bounced to my feet. "No!" I hissed, and bent down to pick it up.

That's when—

Well Remembered...

Brother Oberon closed the door behind him. The air inside was still and smelled of old books. He lit the wick of an old lamp on the table, and set the glass bulb over it before sitting down across from me. "Private Stattensworth, dost thou know why I didst call thee here?" he asked.

"I do not," I replied. I had been summoned by him many hours ago, and it had taken that long to be excused from my regular duties, travel across The City to Soulforge, and then gain an audience with him. The speed at which he saw me told me it was urgent; I had heard that it would take days, sometimes, to gain a moment with Brother Oberon.

"There was a topic to which thou wast sworn to secrecy by Father Markander."

"Aye, Brother, 'tis true," I simply replied.

"I too am knowledgeable on this topic, but I need to know more. I can release thee from thy oath of secrecy, provided that it is only me with whom it is breached."

I did not believe that this was how the oath of secrecy worked, and I let him know. "I do not believe that I canst make an exception for three, Brother Oberon."

"Thou must, for it is an issue of the utmost urgency. Father Rafael 'tis not himself. It is as if a fire hath gone out from within him. I fear that Brother Daelus is somehow involved...somehow responsible."

"I do see," was my only reply.

"'Tis true that thou wast one of three eye-witnesses who didst see him summon his ghastly tower from the nether realm?"

I hesitated, uncertain of how to proceed. Father Markander was long dead. I had believed that only he, I, and my two fellows were aware of these secrets, but now it seemed that Oberon too knew, but he did not know all. Reluctantly, I answered. "Aye, 'tis true."

"Please, recount for me these events, and be of the utmost detail and truthfulness."

His gaze was steady and even, and cold like ice. I wanted to tell him no, this was not what Father Markander didst wish, but I found myself speaking before I knew what to do. "That day, six months ago, mine unit's patrol of the northern wilderness had only just begun. We noticed some activity on one of the foothills several miles east of the Arvitable residence. Our task was to observe and report and only engage if absolutely necessary, so we took a level of caution as we approached what seemed to be a man in black working amongst the rocks. I was accompanied by privates Burch and Gwire. We observed from a safe distance through our spyglasses.

"It seemed to be a City Townsman, and was occupied most diligently. He appeared to be tracing something into the rocks. The light of the sun caught fantastically against the marks he seems to be making. At the time, our only guess was that he was laying claim to the land."

I paused, waiting for some reaction from Oberon. He was still glaring at me, his eyes unblinking, seeming to be an apparition in the dim light from the lamp. I went on.

"We soon decided that he was creating the outline of a foundation. At this we began to laugh and joke, thinking him a great fool to be working this way. As my fellows did observe, he would not have been able to breach the rock face to begin construction at such a location. The stone was simply too hard,

unless he planned to use explosives, and then many tons would be required. Not fearing a confrontation, but rather seeking to amuse ourselves with his story, we began to approach that we might interview him and learn the truth."

"Yes, yes, then what happened," Oberon hissed most unexpectedly. His hands were crossed before his face, so that I could see only his eyes beneath his stitched together fingers.

"After we had shortened the distance to him by half, mine fellow, Burch, did bid us all to stop. Looking up, I saw the reason; it didst seem as if this man was now casting a spell."

"How, casting?" Oberon said urgently. "What was he doing exactly?"

I strained to remember, my thoughts feeling clouded. "In one hand he held a small object, which glinted as silver in the light. With his other, he made a series of gestures, his palm flat and facing away from him, different fingers raised with each motion. I am also certain I saw his lips move, though we were too far to hear."

"And then?"

"Then, without warning, what had been sunny rocks covered with dirt and sparse grass was now a field of blackness. The three of us almost fell backwards before we pulled the spyglasses from our faces to behold the horror which was occurring before us. Blackness was shooting up from the rock face from where he had marked, towering up into the sky like an upside-down curtain. I could not believe mine eyes. I was shaking in shock and fear, taking steps backwards. Gwire had drawn his hammer and Burch was frozen. Soon the darkness had climbed so high that it blotted out the sun's rays. All of us fell into shadow. I looked over my shoulder and saw the dark column's shadow spreading out over the foothills.

"Then the shadow was gone. I spun around in place to look where it had been, and was even more astonished than before. Before us was a mansion, crowned by a single tower which stretched a dozen stories into the sky. There had been no shaking, no tremble of the earth, no rumble, no sound at all...just the darkness, and now this...this structure of...of amazing design. It had a certain awful beauty to it that both inspired me and chilled me to the very core."

"And then?"

"Then we didst flee. We reported what we hadst found to our superior, and he did bid us to speak with Father Markander at once."

"Who wert thy superior?"

"Brother Lee of Rodian."

"And where are brothers Burch and Gwire now?"

"Brother Burch didst die several months ago. Brother Gwire still serves under the command of Brother Lee."

"And dost thou know nothing else? Dost thou know any of the details of what went on between Father Markander and this man?"

"Naught. I have told all."

"And the others?"

"They know no more than I."

"Good. Thank thee," he said, dropping some dust into the lantern with his left hand. "That is most interesting."

"Canst I know why thou asked me these things?"

He was getting up, and pulling a key from his belt. He did not answer me as he opened the door, and without any indication that he was dismissing me, closed it behind him. I heard the door lock.

I was baffled, but I elected to stay and wait, in case he would return. In moments I noticed gray fumes rising up from the oil lamp. Curious, I got up from where I sat, to inspect it, remembering that odd dust Brother Oberon had put inside. Immediately the fumes stung my eyes and caused me to grow dizzy. I backed away from the lamp, going back to the bench where I had sat. The feeling did not fade, but instead worsened. Soon I saw my vision go dark, and no longer could tell up from down. The sounds of my own breath grew strange and distant, and then—

Chapter 11

Reunions

— Jyre: Tremor —

Day 6: 6:15 am

I ran back and forth, growing blind with rage. I felt trapped, unable to find a way out, and soon all I could think of was being trapped in the halls of The Lady's fortress.

I turned, flew through an opening, and saw him. A tremor went through me from the depths of my gut and seemed to stop my heart dead in my chest. Daelus was before me. Those eyes, how I had longed to see them. But it was for nothing. Had I imagined it? Had anything ever been there at all? I remembered standing in his chambers, dropping my letter at his feet and running away. Then too I longed to see that look in his eyes, but found nothing. I remembered that reply he wrote to me and how horrible it was, how betrayed I felt. I remembered Els's words of mistrust, how he insisted that I was wrong to seek out this man. He was right. Els was right and now Els was gone, maybe dead, maybe dead at Ranson's hands. Ranson should be the one to be dead.

The tremor within me grew into an explosion. Again I was in motion, as if I had never stopped. Screaming with hot tears on my cheeks, I was upon him. Els had been right; he was one of hers, just like Ranson. I knew now why I had been drawn to him in the first place; he had been a trap laid by her. He was just another Ranson.

Now I felt a searing heat all over my hands and face. Blood. In my rage I had taken the small knife into my fist, and in rushing upon him had stabbed over and over again. I was now flying backwards, struck with a mighty blow to my face. I saw the knife fly from my hand; Daelus, his chest in bloody ruins, falling back from me. And then as the back of my head stung sharply, everything went—

— Nightfall: Tremor —

Day 6: 6:15 am

My back hit hard against the wall. Instantly my closed fist struck her; where, I could not be sure. Her head hit the opposite wall with a crack. The sound echoed. She fell onto the floor unconscious; Jyre. I had not felt the dagger, but knew what had been done. Over and over her clenched hand had struck me with flashes of silver before I managed to retaliate. I felt the hot blood flowing down my body before I felt the pain. Now I was on the floor. My back was to the wall. I tried to call out, but only felt the same heat flowing from my mouth and down my chin.

I had to get below. I had to get down. I had to—

— James: Tremor —

Day 6: 6:15 am

“You may meet me back at my apartment in six hours. Hopefully by then you will have gleaned all there is to glean from our friend who—”

I stopped. Othello's head suddenly jerked to the side, looking to the closed door of the chamber. I had heard it too. What, I wasn't sure, but I knew immediately that it was not a proper sound. I got up, nearly spilling an entire stack of field reports onto the floor in the process. Othello was already on his feet and opening the door. Down we raced. I could hear the sounds of a woman screaming below; Mrs. Simon undoubtedly. It could have been what we had heard in the first place. I caught a flash of Jossimer before us as we got to the ground floor. Mercy, that man could move.

My hand caught the stone wall before me to halt my sprint. Daelus was on the floor. Mrs. Simon was upon him, shouting. It was panic mixed with determination. Jossimer responded to her cries in an instant, pulling a small blood red knife from the ground and placing it into her outstretched hand. She began cutting at Daelus's clothes which had already been punctured many times.

My eyes then darted to the small figure lying limp in a corner. Othello was running to her. He took her head in his hand and felt her neck for a pulse. I saw with grim certainty that her hands were as red as the knife had been.

I was to Daelus's side. Jossimer was shouting something else to someone. Mrs. Simon was shouting too, and pressing her folded hands onto his chest over and over. Jossimer pushed her out of the way, and began shouting at me. I had to shake myself into a focus to understand what I was being told, but quickly I understood. Mrs. Simon was resisting Jossimer, but soon the gauntleted hands of her husband were restraining her, pulling her from the scene. Jossimer's arms were under Daelus's shoulders and I was at his legs, lifting. Other guards were now there, attempting to help us, but Jossimer shouted them away.

"This way, this way!" Jossimer was shouting at me, his back to his course of travel. We were carrying him down another flight of stairs.

The guards were pulling us off of him and taking him in their arms. "You can barely lift him old man!" one of them shouted as he tried to take Daelus from Jossimer. "Just tell us where to take him!"

Jossimer gave up the fight and soon I too yielded to our much stronger friends. "This way!" Jossimer continued to shout.

We came to a blank wall; no, a door. I could see the joint down the center and the receptacle for the key. Jossimer was searching Daelus's pockets frantically but systematically. I joined him, nudging one of the guards out of the way to give me access to the coat pockets.

I found something, a simple metal rod. I ran to the door but Jossimer again shouted. "No! Put it in his hand! Only he can open it!"

The guards brought him closer. I pushed the rod into his palm and closed his fingers around it. His hand was guided to the opening. Light spilled out from behind the door, but flowed like liquid across its crevices to the hole in the center. The rod itself then turned white with light, which seemed to be absorbed by Daelus's hands. We watched silently with breath held as a faint glow penetrated the fabric of his sleeve, until finally the punctures in his chest themselves began to radiate with the light. I could hear Mrs. Simon, once

again behind us crying out, but this time in simple horror.

"Come on, come on," Jossimer was chanting to himself as the door began to slowly part. The guards had him through as soon as they felt they could squeeze their shoulders through the slowly parting doors.

"Here!" Jossimer was again shouting after he briefly glanced about. He knew much that I did not know, but I felt that now he was reaching the limits of what he knew. He ran ahead, going to a simple room with a dipping ceiling and a chair placed in the center. He pushed the chair out of the way and demanded that Daelus be placed on the floor.

"Out, out!" he then shouted with fury at the guards, who could only obey. They scrambled off, leaving Jossimer on his hands and knees attempting to adjust Daelus's position, looking up at the ceiling and back down at him.

"What are you doing?" I begged. "What is this place?"

"Our only hope," he hissed, and then turned quickly to look in the direction we came and the slowly closing doors. He paused only for a moment, as if something had occurred to him in a flash. "We cannot remain in here. If the doors close," he said as he launched forward, "with us still within, all three of us will surely be doomed."

I was after him. "Hold the door!" I pleaded, but knew it was futile. As I ran, I almost stopped in my tracks. The five statues that lined the corridor gave me a sickening pause. They were entirely blank; no face, completely abstract in form, and yet carried with them a dreadful reminder of something buried in the back of my mind.

"James you fool!" Jossimer shouted, betraying the fact that I had indeed stopped at the sight of the statues. I ran once more, and nearly collided with Jossimer as I careened through the opening and not an instant too soon.

Everyone was shouting as the doors came to a thunderous close. "What did you do! Why did you put him in there!" "What's going on, who attacked the master?" "Is he dead? Is he dead?" No one was shouting any answers or even shouting for everyone to be quiet. I sank to the floor, my back pressed against the stone door with an exasperated sigh of repressed panic escaping me.

"Missus Simon!" Jossimer finally shouted, his voice eclipsing all of their simultaneous cries. "Has it not occurred to you that should the master ever sustain an injury, no matter how severe or inconsequential, by the very next day it is never seen nor spoken of again?"

Silence resounded. No one needed to add anything else. I looked up at Jossimer from where I sat; my mind blank for all of the suppressed panic I now fought to contain, even though the moment of panic had now passed.

"Resume your duties," Jossimer said, though the order seemed impossible in spite of what happened. "This instant. Now! Move!" he continued, his voice coming to an apogee.

One by one they came unglued from their stances of shocked gloom. Mrs. Simon was once again escorted away by her husband. Within moments we were alone. Jossimer joined me where I sat, letting out a distressed groan and what sounded like many hushed curses. Without another word he withdrew

his pipe and began to prepare it.

I felt entirely too dizzy to think. Finally I managed, "Where did we just leave him?"

"It heals him; beyond that I do not know, though I suspect something sinister. Why else would those *five* allow him to have such a thing? I recall Phaeros had a similar chamber, though his was not nearly so elaborate, nor effective." His pipe was lit and clasped between his jaws with a pop of his teeth.

My handkerchief was on my forehead and virtually soaked. I continued to dab, though it seemed fruitless. "And now we have no way of knowing what is taking place behind these closed doors."

"None," he said with almost a snarl. "And the master had forbidden me time and again to even broach the subject of these lower chambers. It is only by observation and inference that I was able to take command tonight. I pray my actions save his life as only these actions could."

"Is he protecting us from them; or them from us?" I said, my mind treading on dangerous ground.

"Hrm?" he replied as if it were the growl of a beast.

"Those five statues," I said, my voice lowering, though I found I had nothing else to say. He did not reply, only silently offered his pipe to me. "No, no old friend," I said with a faint laugh. "I gave that up years ago."

He shrugged, and reclaimed it with a similar pop of his jaw and a deep breath.

"Bugger it," I finally said, and opened my palm to him expectantly.

— Jyre: Fault —

Day 6: 6:20 am

I saw myself from his eyes. I lunged. All I felt was a sharp cold pain in my chest. I lunged again. He staggered backwards. I begged him to stop me, to counterattack, to push me away, but he didn't. I didn't know why he just stood there. He just stood there as I killed him.

I let the dagger drop. My whole body shuddered. His blood was everywhere! It covered my hands like gloves. I looked up at him, at his torn and tattered clothes and bloody wounds. I saw the pain that filled his eyes. My heart sank as my mind finally accepted what I had done. His eyes followed my own to the blood covered stones and he shrugged. It was almost as if he had expected it. I swallowed back the lump of fear in my throat and tried to say something. Words wouldn't come. The sigh that escaped his lips then was filled with weariness. Tears slipped down my cheeks. I had killed him...

Seven, maybe eight stabs across his ribs and stomach. He was no longer able to stand. He had lost too much blood. He fell to the floor, and just rested. He was alive. He had not died.

I started to cry.

He pushed his body upwards. He was fighting against it. Tears streamed down my face as I cried with all my heart.

Blood trickled through his fingers, pooling in his lap. My blood turned to ice as I watched. Why wasn't he dead? When he looked up at me his face was calm and peaceful. There was no fear there, just acceptance. I tried to back away.

"You're right." I could barely hear his words. Blood trickled out the side of his mouth and down his chin. "It is my fault..."

My legs buckled and I collapsed into the floor. My whole body was going numb. He would die because of me! I had acted without thought, without giving him a chance to explain! And now he sat confessing to me even as his life trickled away between his fingers. I didn't want this!

He tried to stand. Slowly, he was on his feet again, towering over me. His desire to live astounded me. I wanted to help him but knew not how. If only I had listened more to him! If only...

He spoke. "There is still time...I know what she's doing...Little else matters anymore...I m-must go..." Then his eyes closed, and he fell.

He wasn't moving, just kneeling in front of me, eyes closed and features frozen. I forced myself to my feet, fighting the growing weariness. I gave his shoulder a shove, praying for a reaction but knowing there would be none. His body rocked slightly and then he was still. I watched him but saw no sign of life. He no longer even breathed.

Panic gripped me. I couldn't let him die! Not like this. Not at my hands! He wasn't allowed to die! I grabbed him with both hands, shaking him.

White lances of agony drove through my body. The room spun around me, shimmering. My vision began to dim. Blackness took me.

— James: The Hammerite Report —

Day 6: 6:30 am

"No, no, no, untie her!" The guards had gotten the still unconscious Jyre bound around the shoulders and hands. They looked up at me blinking and stammering from where they crouched as Jossimer strode in, puffing on his pipe like he was a steam locomotive.

"But she killed the sire!" one of them finally managed to get out over the stammering of the others.

"He's not dead," Jossimer reported through clenched teeth. "And until he returns you shall obey Master Sterrett as if he were Master Thresh."

"Just James will do, and I believe you already have your instructions," I said as the two men began pulling off the bonds from a girl a quarter their size.

"Her foot!" Jossimer exclaimed in a tone quite unlike himself. "This mark, do you see it James?"

I crouched down next to Jossimer and took her ankle gently away from Jossimer's grasp. "The mark of Barlosk," I said, brooding. "A permanent branding, done in ink below the skin—Jossimer, no," I said suddenly, causing the man who had backed away to suddenly rejoin me. "This is not the same mark. It is distinct in several ways. Note the cross-bar here and the way there two edges are connected; also, general proportional differences." As I

spoke I pulled the only thing from my person which could stand to be written on, the handkerchief I had been using to dry myself, and drew out the symbol with the small writing stick I always kept handy.

"Sir, someone's here to see you."

I looked up from my work to see the expressionless mask of Othello peering at me from the stair. "Rembrandt?" I asked, still trying to finish the copy.

"Yes sir," he replied with a short nod. "He's waiting in the foyer."

I quickly finished and tucked the drawing away properly. "Take her to the master's best guest room. Jossimer, see to it that all provisions are met to create the most pleasant environment possible for the interview." I began to climb the stair, still giving orders. "I will need some light food, for example fruit cut into small pieces, and water. Have anything soothing or relaxing we have brought to the room; incense, wind chimes even. I will be with you as soon as I have dealt with Mister Rembrandt. Someone stand watch in the lower chambers and inform me the instant there is anything to inform me of." I turned back to look at them. "Just in case," I added quietly and then left them behind.

They were not happy with the orders. Although with confusion and protest, I knew they would be carried out. Jossimer would see to that.

"I promise you, I am alright," I heard Othello say to Rembrandt in a hushed voice as I arrived. Rembrandt seemed to rearrange himself as he saw me, as if he had been caught for an instant not appearing as a scoundrel. His arm was bandaged and in a sling, but otherwise he seemed to be in good shape after his run-in with the zombies.

"Boss gone and gotten himself killed?" Rembrandt said with unremarkable gall.

"Not yet," I said, forcing a grin to defuse what could have been a confrontation. "What do you have to report?" I asked, checking my pocket-watch none too nervously. Six thirty-four, AM.

He shrugged. "See for yourself," he said, retreating to the large windows at the south end of the foyer and pulling the drapes open.

I had to blink back the sunlight for an instant, but I soon saw well enough what he was speaking of. "Remarkable," I commented before fetching my glasses from within my coat. Once in place atop my nose I looked again, stepping closer to the window with a frown. "Oh dear," I said again, observing the plumes of black smoke rising to join the clouds.

"Seven, eight?" Othello said, who was also taking in the scene. "Nine?"

"Twelve," Rembrandt finally said, exacting our long glazes to shift to him. "All Hammerite institutions, either directly or by proxy: three temples, a seminary, an academy, a boarding house, a foundry, two factories, one sawmill which is a bit far off and you can't see, and a cemetery which didn't really burn. These aren't the same attacks we've been seeing slowly take place over the past weeks." He began cleaning his thumbnail with a small pocketknife. "This was hit and run work. Bombs, most apparently made from flammable liquids, tossed over walls or otherwise snuck into place,

apparently resulted in most of the damage. Few little hand-to-hand conflicts reported, and no reports of enemies claimed, though there's of course blather to the otherwise; there's no actual proof that the Hammers or anyone else actually got anyone who's responsible."

"You said twelve," Othello said, "and listed eleven."

"That's because there's an exception," he said, pointing with the knife in a direction nearly tangent to the window; along the edge of the mountains. "You already know about this, but I bet I've got details you haven't got. The Temple of the Inquisitor, near Cragscleft was the worst hit. The Inquisitor is dead. The High Priest was present, but he's gone into hiding as far as I can tell. There's dozens of others dead, and the whole building is in ruins. Much of the damage looks self-inflicted, as if they themselves tried to destroy their own building in the fight against the *things* attacking them."

"What do you mean *things*?" Othello pressed, undoubtedly impatient with an outsider breaking the rule of cryptic dramatizations while giving a report. If you were going to use them, they had to be good!

"Claw-marks this long," he said as he held his extended fingers on both hands about eight inches apart, "we found all over the stonework on and around the building. Doesn't mean the claws were that long, only that the things attached to them were big, heavy, and really interested in getting where they intended to go."

"Sounds like jacknalls, or if we're lucky simply wolfmen. I'd consult my bestiaries at once if I felt such idle perusals were prudent at the moment."

"Now this next part may be entirely hearsay—propaganda, bollocks, you know, utter arse shite. Word has it that Lytha came back to the temple to get her revenge, got it, and then left."

"Lytha; yes, as I expected. These are not isolated events. She may have felt as if she was acting alone but clearly this is not the case. Is it the nobles who owe a debt to Delphine who have been ordered to pay up and the dues seem to be Hammerite blood, without us knowing or anticipating? Or is it a second possibility; a new manifestation of The Lady's power within The City, the activation of an undercover pagan group who employ guerrilla tactics? I for one hope it is the later. I'd feel much safer knowing it was an unknown group we had not been observing than for a known group operating under our own noses."

Rembrandt frowned, possibly confused over my grin. "Doesn't matter either way to you, does it? So long as bloody Hammers are dead," he remarked with a bored tone.

"Not at all; I value the sanctity of all life. But I also value clues, and we have been granted more in a dizzying array. I feel nearly befuddled at the growing complexity, and that in itself is why I cannot help but smile. Othello," I said in the same breath a moment before jerking my head to the side to look at my masked associate, "I believe our plans regarding the sole surviving debtor to Tempia have not changed. I will speak with you again in my apartment around noon as agreed."

He nodded crisply, and was off; I fear without breakfast. It seems we had

all lost our appetites.

The room was silent for a time as we watched the almost serene display of many tiny plumes of black smoke rising into the sky. I broke the silence. "Rembrandt, do you feel energetic enough to increase your efforts?"

He shrugged. "I've got other jobs today; but as I like to say, my word's only as good as your gold. If you can outbid my other contracts I am sure they could withstand some postponement."

I quickly considered enlisting someone from within the organization to take his place, but promptly reminded myself what I had explained earlier about being spread too thin. "Othello will discover if the debited nobles are linked to this series of attacks. I need you to discover if it is the other possibility, or even a third option I have not considered."

"More general snooping; it's my bread and butter. Very well.—twice the normal rate, then plus some more get-well-quick brew for my arm, in advance. I hate this damn sling, and I hate a fractured bone even more."

"Done."

"Cheers," he remarked with his usual bored tone before putting his dirty, ragged hat back on his head. He was off before another word.

I heard a familiar pop of a jaw on a pipe, and quickly glanced over my shoulder to see Jossimer had joined us. Several rings of smoke lifted from the pipe before they were torn apart by a subsequent stronger puff. He silently offered me a sheet of paper which seemed to have been soiled by dirty hands. I took it, reading it at once.

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

Wide eyes quickly went to Jossimer, abandoning declarations that our previous session of conjecture has been spot on, and instead cut to the chase. "I take it the scroll is not on her person?"

"It is not. I, of course, have ordered the manor and grounds to be searched for it, but I very much doubt it is to be found simply laying about."

"Quite doubtful," I said with a nod, after re-reading the letter. "Either she hid it in a place she knew Daelus would find, or she gave it to him before attacking him. We, naturally, did not search his pockets before leaving him!"

"Naturally. I must add that there is no movement downstairs. The master is still within. That is, assuming there is no second entrance."

I took a long breath, now doubly anxious to retrieve Daelus. "When he vanishes below, how long does he usually stay?" I checked my pocket-watch once more. It had been maybe thirty, maybe twenty five minutes.

"Sometimes it is very brief; ten minutes at most. But, he has been known to vanish below for many, many hours. I recall him once returning home and then mysteriously vanishing for two days; none of the guards or the servants could find any trace of him. He reappeared just as mysteriously, with not a word of where he had been, and the similar attitude of animosity towards any inquiries."

It was a grim and depressing thought, but I knew that as long as Delus did not come out, at least the scroll would be safe within. That, of course, was assuming that Jyre had actually given it to Daelus like she had planned. "If that is the case we cannot stand around checking our watches waiting for him. How is the girl, Jyre?" I said as I tucked my watch neatly away.

"The girl still sleeps," he said finally, "and investigation as to her mischief has led to several interesting notes. For one, several articles are missing from the lines outside, which she now seems to be wearing. I do not imagine she was particularly critical of the garments she stole, and thus it was merely a coincidence that it was my clothes that she saw fit to don."

I stifled an uproarious laugh, and instead produced only a hearty one. "Such is your luck for being such a rail. With my portly physique, she'd have been tripping and stumbling on the loose fabric before she got six feet!"

Jossimer did not seem amused, which of course only made me want to laugh more. "Missus Simon has found her some more suitable clothing, and shall be boiling the garments she stole to rid them of any infestations, in spite of my insistence that they be simply burned."

"Yes, I am sure she keeps colonies of rats in her pockets. But come, this is hardly pressing; what else was discovered?"

Jossimer's attitude went from irate to simply dreadful. "The knife she used to assault the master was a letter opener from the master's desk in his bed chambers. That is where she left the note you just read. Nothing else seemed to be out of place, though I cannot be certain if several documents on the desk had been disturbed. I would assume they had been, and she has read several communiqués intended for the master's eyes alone, including the one from the Hammerites. I am fairly certain that she did not enjoy it."

"Quite right, quite right," I uttered with a bit lip. "Not at all what she wanted to see."

"Also, it appears I was negligent myself. Phaeros's archive had been gone through. I did not place it back into hiding after I had done my research. I do

not know how much of it she read, but several documents I know I left within the chest were loose on the table. I am fairly certain she did not enjoy those either."

"Curious," I observed quietly. "Did these clues she uncovered turn her to rage? Not what I would have expected, but certainly within the bounds of reason; cause and effect being what they are when the churning of the addled pubescent mind are considered."

"And Mistress Henrett, who is beside herself at the moment I might add, demands that someone eat the food she has prepared. I suggest we succumb to her demands before the master is not the only one repeatedly *perforated*."

I grinned, saying "Quite right, quite right," always amused by the old man's grim sense of humor. "But quickly then, we've no time to lose. Oh, bless my senile mind, I nearly forgot." I fetched the missive stashed away in the folds of my wardrobe. "Ensure that Sheam gets this at once!"

— Jyre: Forgiveness —

Day 6: 7:00 am

"Jyre?" the sound of his voice brought me back. I opened my eyes to find myself staring into his face. He looked worried. He—he was alive! "Jyre, I'm sorry. Please forgive my blindness."

His voice was soft and gentle, so unlike the way he spoke before. And he looked so real. I lifted my hand to brush his cheek. It brushed against cool flesh. He smiled at me. I sank away again, too ashamed to fight the weariness that gripped me any longer. I felt something tug at me, pulling me from the depths that I had sunk to. I didn't want to rise. For that would mean facing what I had done. I would rather die than live knowing I had killed him.

He quickly unfastened his cloak from his neck and wrapped me in it. It was soft and warm. His hand pushed a few bits of hair away from my closed eyes.

"Jyre?"

"Jyre..."

"Jyre!"

Whatever it was that called me was persistent. It granted me no peace. Slowly, against my will I rose again from those quiet depths and returned to my mind. Opening my eyes I saw him waiting for me. I almost did not recognize him with his hat off. I was so used to his face being in shadow. "Daelus...?"

"How do you feel, Jyre?"

"Tired; but..." I examined him closer. Was it his voice or another's? "Better." As I answered his question he seemed to become more real, more himself, more alive! He seemed so concerned. It made no sense. I had killed him! "You—were dead..."

"I almost died."

I grabbed a hold of his arm weakly. "Sorry..."

He took my hand off his arm and held it in his. "Please, forgive me Jyre."

Forgive him? The question brought tears to my eyes. I was the one who had tried to kill him without first hearing his words. "I..." I shook my head. How could I blame him for anything? "Nothing...to forgive..."

He smiled at me and lifted his head. "Thank you." I barely heard the soft whisper.

Suddenly remembering why I had come, I reached into my pocket and took out the scroll. "Found it...in forbidden district," I explained. "Monster came."

He took it from me and began to read.

— James: Interview —

Day 6: 7:00 am

It was a small room, with one side taken entirely by windows. With them open such as they were, it was almost like we were in a small enclosed nook out within the garden itself. The sun had risen in the sky such that the golden morning light had brightened into more of a pure white, though it filtered through the small trees and vines of the garden outside before it fell onto the carpet within. The intense green outside the window made the room a stark gray in contrast, even though I knew of the blue hues. Wind chimes had been procured, and so the ambience of plants and insects in the wind was augmented with the occasional faint musical hit.

I pulled up a chair beside the bed where Jyre rested. To aid my own relaxation, I pulled off my boots and treated my toes to the expensive carpet so infrequently trodden upon in the guest room. I observed her quietly for a time, realizing that her youth, though known, had not quite sunken in to my mind until I sat here observing the child. It is one thing to know that a person is pubescent, but now I found it is quite another to see that person before you and understand the implications of the life they have lived combined with their age. I felt sad for her.

I took a candle which had nearly burned itself out and lit the cone of the incense I had asked for. Within a moment the fumes would drive her to a state of being not quite awake, but not quite asleep. I wound the round mechanical device, the hypnodisc, in the palm of my hand until it clicked. It then hummed to life with the whirring of many tiny internal gears. I held it before her as the painted plates on its surface spun around to form a mesmerizing pattern of moving shapes.

"Jyre?" I said quietly, watching her eyelids twitch.

"Jyre..." I said again after a moment as her lips parted with a sigh. Her eyelids grew still.

"Jyre!" I said finally, with a little more volume.

Her eyes opened slowly, though the rest of her remained still. They were large and pale, with just a hint of blue. She was aware of what she could see, but the incense maintained her unconscious state. The moving patterns on the disc would do the rest. "Daelus?" she said quietly.

I grinned. "No Jyre; my name is James. I am a friend of Daelus's."

No reply came for some time.

"How do you feel, Jyre?"

"Tired but...better. You—were dead..."

"No Jyre, Daelus isn't dead. He is safe. You will see him again soon."

She moved, reaching out before her, trying to grab a hold of something. "Sorry," she said weakly.

I reached out to take her hand gently. She took mine tightly.

"I..." she said, and stopped. Her eyes were distant, seeing things invisible to me within her own mind. "Nothing...to forgive."

I was quiet. I would let the conversation in her head play out; see what she had to say.

She stirred more, and her grip on my hand grew tighter. "Found it...in forbidden district. Monster came."

"Found it?" I said, stirred to intense interest, but cautious not to jump to conclusions. "Jyre, what did you find?"

Her eyes changed; they grew instantly troubled, frightened. "No," she said with her voice trembling. "No, do not read it. Do not look at it...do not..." The fear in her eyes grew more and more as did her grip on my hand. "No," she continued to chant as her entire body shifted uncomfortably, each time growing louder and louder. Soon her face was twisted into horrific panic and instead of "no" came chokes and gasps, until finally she began convulsing violently and finally again found her voice, breaking through with a soul-shaking scream.

At first she seemed to fight to get away from me, though her grip only grew tighter and tighter. She screamed louder and louder, her eyes wild, her head jerking this way and that. Finally she piled into me, nearly leaping into my lap to cling onto my torso as if her life depended on it. The device was thrown from my free hand. She clung to me, sobbing and choking, still shaking violently.

I looked up to see a series of faces in the doorway all shoved into the opening as if it were a many-headed beast; guards' with swords drawn, Jossimer's, and the other servants', all with breaths held and looking nearly as terrified as the girl was.

I raised my hand to them. "It's fine. It's fine. A nightmare, though I fear not the result of simple imagination. Please, leave us. It is fine."

One by one they departed, until it was only Jossimer with his eyes fixed upon me. Slowly he closed the door, until once again we were alone with the sounds of the outdoors, the wind chimes, and Jyre panting for breath. I took her up and lay her back onto the bed, crossing her hands over her stomach. Her eyes were still open, blinking rapidly. By all accounts she was still asleep. I nursed my hand briefly; her grip in her moment of panic had been quite strong. Finally, I took my hypnodisc back, and once again put it before her face. I waited, and in time her blinking slowed, as did her breathing, and her trembling.

"Jyre, what happened?" I asked when I felt she had grown calm enough.

"He read the scroll. I begged him not to."

"Who read it, Jyre?"

"Daelus. He read it and the monster came again, worse than before...it was worse!"

"How was it worse?"

"It was him...it was Daelus. He was the monster."

I frowned deeply...simply the results of a nightmare, or some deeper meaning? Were dreams simply the results of our minds reassembling knowledge in such a way that it was not limited by the confines of reason, or was there some other connection, a deeper understanding of times and events not limited by our ties to the physical reality, but more open to the possibilities of the greater, unlimited meta-reality? Or was it Jyre herself, possibly gifted with some sense of foresight, hindsight, far-sight, or true-sight: a sixth sense not bound by the constraints of the fourth dimension or the material continuum?"

"I found it where I was not supposed to go; in the place with the wall. It is forbidden."

The hypnodisc had run itself out. Possibly, it had been enough. I set it quietly aside and flipped open my journal and began to write. "Tell me what the scroll looked like," I said slowly.

"Like cloth, dark on the outside, but inside, white as snow. Rough, but soft, almost like a feather. The writing, burned in stroke by stroke. But, you must not, under any circumstances, read the text within aloud." Her breathing increased as she said this, and she began to tremble once more with that same frightened look in her eyes. I had the disc wound and placed before her gaze in an instant. I didn't think the guards outside would be able to stand a second outburst.

The words were familiar, a faithful description of The Scroll of Phaeros as if from his own account. "Jyre, who told you about the scroll?"

"Ranson," she said, quiet as a whisper. "It wasn't Ramirez at all. It was Ranson the entire time."

Curious that she would mention Ramirez. Was he truly involved, or had Ranson merely employed his name in a plot to trick her? "How did Ranson know of the scroll?"

"The Lady told him, I think."

"Where is the scroll now, Jyre?"

"Gave it to Daelus."

"When did you give it to him, Jyre?"

"Just...now."

I feared I would have to wake her to get to the bottom of that; her dream was being confused with reality. I would continue and come back to that later.

"You mentioned Ramirez. What does he have to do with all of this?"

"Nothing. It wasn't him. A fake."

That was a relief. As long as one was to fight a war on two fronts, if the two sides do not join forces, one may yet have a chance. "Why did you agree

to help them, Jyre?"

"I wanted to do something. I thought I could make a difference. I didn't know it was Ranson. I thought it was Ramirez."

"Why would it being Ramirez encourage you?"

"He's evil. The Lady is evil. I thought...evil is best to fight evil. I thought something would finally happen. But..."

It would be difficult for her to be dishonest, even with herself in this state. I tapped the quill to the page expectantly as the real answer came out.

"I was angry with Daelus for not helping me. Ramirez is his enemy. I thought that if I went to his enemy, it would make him jealous and want to help me."

Projecting one's own irrational feelings onto another can take many forms. I had to remind myself that I was conducting an interview for a factual account, not offering therapeutic services. "Can we return to the beginning, Jyre?"

"Which beginning?" she replied.

Amazing...The remarkably insightful answer was yet another sign that the child-like mind held great wisdom which would ultimately be beat out of us all by the irreparable damage of education. "Where you came from, Jyre... Tell me of your home."

She was quiet for a time, but showed signs of considerably relaxation as the thoughts progressed through her mind. Finally, she spoke again. "My father caught me a fish once in an old wooden bowl, and when we got home he had this *real* glass bowl all ready and waiting for my little fishy. I would come to the river every day to catch worms for it to eat. But when I watched it swimming around in circles looking so sad and lonely I knew I couldn't keep it any more. I took it back to the stream and let it go. Then when my dad came home I lied and said it was dead."

I lifted the quill from the page considering what was written briefly. Curious, in her letter to Daelus she mentioned never knowing her father. Was it a simple random story, spurred forth from the recesses of her consciousness at an opportune moment, or was the obvious metaphorical significance intentional on her part? Was the hypnosis allowing her to access memories of her early life she had repressed? I wrote it down. Everything would be important in some way or another.

"I'd always thought my dad just left us that day mum died. When he never came home I assumed...I never realized that he..."

I waited, and nothing else came. If she had been honest about remembering her mother but not her father, it was clearly the result of emotional trauma, as they evidentially were torn from her life at roughly the same time. Unfortunately, and as interesting as it was, it was not the information I needed. I had to sculpt a more pertinent question. "What do you know about this painting of The Lady's that you sold to Daelus?"

"She loved it. It was made by someone dear to her. She would always look at it."

"Why did you decide to come to Daelus with it?"

"Daelus had an art gallery. I wanted to sell The Lady's painting to get rid of it, so I went."

Logical, and reasonable. But how could things be so simple? "What made you keep coming back?"

"There was something different about him that I liked. He wasn't from here. No one knew where he came from. It could have been anywhere. I am the same way. I am not from here. I liked that. When he talked to me he treated me like a person. But it wasn't just a show. I could see it in his eyes. I knew it was real. But there was something else—" She stopped. I rolled the quill between my fingers waiting, wondering if I should ask if she would resume.

"—something else in his eyes and not just how he treated me. I couldn't understand it. But I wanted to see it again and understand it. But then it was gone."

"Gone? At what point was it gone?"

"I do not know. I looked, and it wasn't there. Every time I looked for it, it wasn't there."

I felt I understood. In retrospect, she identified a certain memory associated with the look in his eyes. However, when actively pursued, the object of interest is elusive. Possibly, it was not there simply because she was looking for it. Some things can only be experienced when they are unexpected. But what this thing was she saw was not something she was even unconsciously aware of. I would have to allow it to remain a mystery for now. "Why did you try to kill Daelus?"

She shook. Her body seemed to shrink into itself as she began to cry quietly. This went on for a moment before she said, "I don't know."

"Did you feel compelled to by some outside force?"

"I...don't think so."

"You were not, as far as you are aware, commanded to kill him either directly or through ambiguous means?"

"No...It's all my fault. No one made me do it. I was angry. I wanted to kill Ramirez, but I didn't. I wanted to kill Ranson. I just wanted...when I saw Daelus there...all I could think of was Ranson."

It could have been a difficult thing to admit, were it not for the trance. I suspected that she may have attempted to lay blame on the scroll itself, or maybe The Lady, or possibly even upon Daelus, but here I had an answer I could accept as the only one. "Why did you come here tonight?"

"For help. Els is gone; I fear dead. I found our hideaway empty. No Els. I had nowhere else to go. I had to give Daelus the scroll. I had to keep it away from Ranson, from *her*."

It was difficult to formulate questions without leading the answers. I felt the evidence present was sufficient to understand her motives, and any ideas I put into her head from the questioning would dilute things. However; "Do you know who Tempia is?"

"I...do not." she stopped.

"Have you heard the name before?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"On letters in Daelus's box. Also, long ago. While working for The Lady. I...I remember now. The name makes me think of her. But it is not her name."

I suspected she meant Jossimer's box. Finding it Daelus's tower would implicate him as the owner, of course. I felt no need to clarify, opting instead to pursue farther. "Do you know who Tempia is?"

"No."

Curious; "And the name Phaeros?"

"No."

It would not be so easy.

She spoke, out of turn. "Is...Phaeros Daelus?"

A question of her own?—I was taken aback. I observed her closely to see if she had woken up. Her eyes were open, but still, looking up at the ceiling. Her breathing was normal. I passed my hand over her eyes several times. Nothing. Seeing no reason why not, I answered. "No, he is not. They have much in common, but the two have never met." What had she read in those letters upstairs to make her draw that conclusion? Or was it yet another sign of the girl's tendency for premonitions? Had her instinct to come to Daelus with a link to The Lady been happenstance? Had her juxtaposition of Phaeros with Daelus also been an accident? In my work disbelief in the truly baffling coincidence was as foolish as a strict adherence to the theories of parapsychology.

Silence. The question must have been truly eating at her mind in order to emerge as an inquiry during her trance. "Why did you suppose that Phaeros was Daelus?"

"They loved him," she said simply.

Ah, a woman's intuition; disbelief in that was as foolish as disbelief in gravity. Claiming to understand it was as rash as claiming to understand gravity. But what form of answer was this? Perhaps, the most simple and honest of all: in the stirring of feelings for Daelus, possibly the first time she has truly experienced these; it would be simple to project these feelings unto whatever surface seemed ready to accept them. The display of similar feelings for Phaeros by the writers of those letters stirred within her an irrational concept which could not be shaken. The fact that these letters appeared to be a possession of Daelus did not help things, but only solidified the irrational concepts. In the end the most horrible of all possibilities took shape; the object of her own love, Daelus, belonged instead to one she could not possibly hate any more strongly. Indeed, says the researcher; gravity has no discernable reason to exist, save to prevent us from all flying into the sky!

"What was the name of the place where you served The Lady?"

"Barlosk. A place far from here, many days travel upstream. Not a city like this; but not a village like mine. A small town surrounded by a high wall with a castle. She ruled over it. I served in her castle. It was so big. Many floors. Many rooms. A palace."

I hesitated before asking such a vague question, but I wasn't sure how

else to proceed. "What can you tell me about her?"

"She was beautiful. I was in awe of her at once. She took me from Ranson. She punished him, and said I wouldn't have to see him anymore. She was so young, but so powerful. When she spoke, it was soft, but everyone would listen. She only said things once, and everyone obeyed. When she was happy, she was distant, and mysterious. When she was angry, I felt like the walls were going to split open around her. Usually though, she was sad, though I never knew why."

The way she spoke of her, it didn't sound like she actually hated her. "Can you describe her appearance?"

"Tall, skinny, with white skin. Her hair always changed colors and lengths—sometimes black, sometimes white, sometimes red, sometimes long, sometimes short, sometimes bound, sometimes loose. Blue eyes. Beautiful. I envied her."

"What sort of unusual things did you witness while in her service?"

"People changing. Some fast. Some slow. Longer arms and faces. Backwards knees. Different skin. Hair, scales, worse things."

Yes, as expected; the pagan beastmen. Neither men nor beast, but men transformed into beasts. They were usually clumsy, awkward creatures possessing neither the intellect of the man nor the animal instinct of the beast, though far more loyal to the master than either. They were bound to their creator out of some vain hope of either being returned some day to human form or being evolved further into full beast. The beastman state was a hideous purgatory of half-transformed parts, none of which worked quite right. Always angry and restless, always longing to be something other than what they were. However, they were the foot soldiers of The Trickster's army. That Delphine employed them only further confirmed what was already suspected.

"And this was taking place in secret, correct?"

"In basements, behind closed doors. I could hear them; see flashes sometimes, and worse, glowing lights peeking through loose floorboards below. It frightened me."

I pondered; one could not arbitrarily transform men into beastmen without first considering their physique in regards to their final form. It was not simply a matter of matching sizes, some ratmen were more massive than bears and more terrible too; but more a matter of what would be the intended duty of the final result. What transformation had been in store for Jyre? The thought of seeing her with hair all over her body and protruding lower canines sent shivers through me.

I shook it off, and asked my next question. "Do you know of The Lady's plans for The City?"

"No," she said quickly.

"Does Captain Els know?"

"I think so, but he doesn't say anything."

"Do you know anything about a small cottage several miles from The City where The Lady might have gone to from time to time?"

"No."

"But The Lady did leave Barlosk often for extended periods?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where she went?"

"No, never."

I paused before asking the next question, wondering if it might upset her. "Did The Lady ever exhibit any signs that she was not completely human?"

She did not answer at once, which always meant something interesting. "Only that her hair always changed."

I grinned, amused that a person's fascination with wigs could be seen as an inhuman quality. Fearing that Jyre knew very little indeed about Delphine, and that it was Els I actually needed to be interviewing, I moved on to a more personal topic. "How did you grow to hate The Lady and seek revenge upon her?"

"It was Els's fault," she began. "He was always mean to me, always trying to get me kicked out. I got angry. I hit him over and over. That made The Lady angry. She put me in a cage hung by a chain from a wooden beam. She made me watch Els's whipping, and then watch him patrol. I had to stay in that cage for a long time. Then, I was out. Els rescued me. He took me to The City. Then, we tried to find my old home, my village. It was gone. The Lady had destroyed it."

"Do you know for certain that The Lady destroyed your village?"

"No," she said simply.

"But you believe it is gone because of her doing."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Els told me how evil she was. She could do something like that. It had to have been her. Only she could have."

Fair enough; it was difficult dealing with someone who did not know the difference between facts and their own ideas. No amount of honesty could dissuade them.

I felt I had done all I could, but the most pressing question had to be answered very shortly. Do I leave her here under the watch of Jossimer and Daelus's guard, content that at least one innocent will potentially be safe from further evil from The Lady; or do I involve her further, and allow her usefulness in our investigation risk bringing her life and livelihood to an unnatural end? It would have to be her choice. I was, after all, an employer, not a lord. "When I count to three, you will wake up, and remember this conversation with perfect clarity. One, two, three."

She blinked and gasped a little, but otherwise remained still. "Where's Daelus?" she said after just a moment, and before I could answer she had leapt from the bed and was pushing her way through the door.

"Oh bother," I cursed, picking myself up to chase after her. The guards who had grown idle outside the room seemed to careen into each-other as the unexpected child propelled herself like a missile between them towards the stair leading below. The score of us gave chase, only to find her stopped cold

on the floor before the great stone door, the impassable figure of Jossimer barring her progress.

She had collapsed into a fit of despair. The guards were once again moving to apprehend her, but I quickly bade them pause. Jossimer averted his gaze from the squalling mass, as he undoubtedly saw her, up to me with a look on his face which could only be described as 'why must I go on living with you people?' but instead he said, "Continuous watch of the chamber doors reveals nothing. I was about to attempt a deeper intervention when I was interrupted."

"Jyre, there's nothing you can do now," I said, crouching near her as she sobbed. "He will either come forth from his healing chamber or he will not. We have no way of knowing what is happening within."

"Perhaps we do," Jossimer said. I saw that he had been busy while I had been away. A large apparatus of tubes and water tanks sat on a wheeled cart beside him. How he managed to produce such a device in this short interim was beyond me. Two tubes came out of the apparatus, one split into smaller branches which were pressed into his ears. The other was connected to a small disc which he was pressing to the stone wall. I understood what it was all about; any vibration within the chamber would be transferred to the stone wall, and through the tubes and water tanks of various pressures, be transferred to the tubes leading to both of his ears. He would be able to hear even a heartbeat within, if there was a heartbeat to be heard.

Jyre had stopped crying, and was instead watching Jossimer intensely. I gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze as I waited for Jossimer's report.

"I hear nothing," he said finally with his face tightened into a scowl of intense concentration. "Everyone move at least a dozen feet away, now."

"Come along Jyre," I said. Everyone backed off, as he said. I saw that even Mrs. Simon and Mrs. Henrett had joined us, clearly attracted by the scene Jyre had been making just a moment ago. We waited, and watched.

He moved the small metal dish several times. His frown intensified. He seemed to be holding his breath. "Nothing," he finally said once more.

Many Minutes Prior

— Nightfall: The Five and the Two —

Day 6: 6:30 am

It was all quiet. Sound, I knew, could not be here. My eyes opened.

I felt that I was sitting, but found that I was not. I felt myself listening, harder and harder, for some type of sound, my own breath, my heartbeat, but I found neither. It was not right. Yet I could hear...something. But hear was not right, for that would require the use of my ears. I knew there was a sound, and yet felt that sound was not even the proper word.

I was standing. I took a step forward. The sound of my own footstep echoed in my ears, and yet, did not. My leg had not moved. There had been no sound. Yet, I had traveled forward. I was being drawn forward, towards

the open space before me. I took another step, and yet did not. My footfall sounded like a hammer falling on marble, and yet I heard nothing.

Forward I went. The pounding as I moved became something else. The rhythm quickened. With each loud bang it sounded less and less like an impact, and more loose, more *organic*. It was spreading out, as if it had been some compressed solid reverting back to its natural form. Forward, ever forward.

It wasn't right. I had opened my eyes, but I could not *see*. I opened my eyes *again*.

I was not alone. Five figures stood in a crescent around me, such that I would form the sixth part and complete the circle. I felt them there, around me. No, I had seen it, but I *could not see*. I forced my eyes to open a third time. I was centered now, with the five surrounding me as if they had moved to close the gap.

In an instant I felt that I knew where I was. I was home, beneath my tower. Something had happened. Jyre was there, and I fell...

"Why have you returned here, delegate?" It was not a voice. No spoken words had been heard. The thunderous sound had unraveled itself, and the end result now resonated and echoed through me. *"What happened to you?" "What is the meaning of this?" "Why did you bring us here?" "What tore your spirit from your body so? The chamber was not meant to work this way... unless?"* All of these expressions bore themselves equally within that one moment of clarified reverberation.

"I died," I said immediately, the words flowing from my lips and yet; I had none. My voice could not be heard for I had no ears. I could not open eyes I did not have. In an instant, I knew my body was somewhere behind, sitting, sitting *in its place*. But then I remembered what I had always known but had never experienced when my body was being repaired; my mind was separated from it. I was no poltergeist; I was alive. "No," I added quickly. "Not yet. I am not dead."

"Yes," one said, and then the others followed. *"You died. There can be no other explanation." "It was death that separated your spirit from the body, not the chamber. Yet, simple death should not have returned you to us. You are within your chamber." "How could you have died and yet found your way to the chamber? No, you must have died while **within** the chamber." "You died though your body yet lives. It has been restored, as is the chamber's power to do. The chamber can return your spirit to your flesh, and your life may resume, but **why** would we allow this after you have failed so miserably?"*

As they spoke, reasoning out what had taken place; I felt something tearing at my spectral self, some deep anxiety which was building to a state of panic, but unable to find hold of my mind without the use of a physical body to manifest itself in. I was among them, the five, those whom the statues represented.

*"The directive **will** continue,"* they boomed, with a unity of voice not present initially. *"However, **great** doubt has been cast upon you."*

"Much has happened since I came here. Much is yet to happen, and soon.

If I am permitted to resume, you will find that much progress will be made in a very short order."

"Clarify," they all said in unison.

I tried to look at the figures, the five statues, hoping to see something I would recognize and terrified that I would, and yet I again found that I could not see. They would only let me know what they wished me to understand. Gray, cold stones, each a poignant reminder of things I dared not forget. I searched my mind for what to tell them; what I could convey without letting them know something I would regret. There was so much I had to keep from them. They could not read my mind; I knew this. There would be forces that could, but not them.

"A great evil power," I finally said, "threatens the directive. It is within *my* directive under the first rule to see to it that this evil is stopped. To fail to do so would put an end to the work of *all* delegates. I have been drawn to this task, by chance and by choice, and now I will complete it."

*"If it is what you say then one who has failed, as you have, cannot be trusted with this task." "Why would we entrust this to one who allows himself to simply die?" "A successor can be named. There are **other** delegates who may replace you." "We require more convincing." "You have displeased us."*

"No, I must continue what I have begun. No successor may resume if my progress is aborted. You have no way to prepare another for this task. There is no time."

There was no reply at first. I sensed they were convening amongst themselves, or possibly petitioning the **sixth**, hidden from me, for instructions. Finally, each of the five spoke in turn. *"Evil is a word of great meaning to **you**; to **us** it is of transparent distinction. You are yet human, delegate, in spite of our gifts to you. Evil is your domain; it is of no relevance to the directive." "You are mistaken in your beliefs. None can threaten the directive before the time of implementation. **Now**, all are opportunities for conquest." "The directive requires infiltration and succession into control. To you we delegate this task." "Find this which you call evil and take control of it, supplant it, or abolish it, so that all is right for the time of implementation." "Obey the two rules, **delegate**."*

It sounded like they were going to let me have my way. "I shall do this work that has been delegated to me," I said simply.

"The time of the implementation draws near." "Continue to return to your chamber, often, delegate." "Few delegates are granted this additional directive, as we have done with you. It is a simple one, and we expect you to obey it." "Take great care. Your death is a direct contradiction to the directive. It is a failure we do not take lightly." "We can yet choose to replace you. Your potential successor has already been chosen."

As the five each said their final piece, I felt myself being pulled away from them, or possibly them from me. With each passing instant their presence grew fainter and I felt my own self awareness growing more distinct, congealing. I assumed that it was the sensation of my spirit being reunited with my restored body.

It was then, when I felt myself totally alone but still adrift in my non-corporeal state, when I felt the intrusion of another presence. It was totally different from the five, fainter, and yet more potent. Could it be the sixth, the Intendant itself, who I was sensing? No, that wasn't right. This was another mind I was sensing, a warm mind, vibrant with personality and identity. These were not things that could be associated with the Intendant. "Hello?" I felt this presence call out in a gentle, feminine tone. "Is someone there?"

I tried to reply, but all I felt was gasping for air as lungs, breath, and mouth suddenly reentered my reality without warning. I found myself in my lowest chamber, sprawled out on the floor, the dipping ceiling just above from where my eyes now opened. I was not in my chair but next to it. With an amount of effort I haphazardly draped myself on it, and then sat still and breathed deeply.

I remembered all of it. I did not know if it simply was because they chose to allow me to remember this time, or if there was simply nothing to remember from any of my previous visits to this room. No, their reactions to me during the first moments of the meeting told me that this was highly irregular for them as well. I had died. That was why I could remember...it has not been merely my *mind* separated from my body, but my spirit as well. It was likely that I convened with them every time I entered the chamber, but upon waking the memories didn't exist. What had I told them, all those times?

I pulled my body from the chair, forcing my stiff joints to remember their functions. A deep seated weariness had taken hold of me; it was not just the lack of sleep. It would have been so easy to just go back up my tower to my bed and sleep—but all those stairs.

No, I had been healed completely. The fatigue should not matter. I took several steps away from the chair and the dipping ceiling, so I could finally stand up straight. My resolve was returning, a moment at a time. What *had* happened? I saw my tattered outfit where the knife had stabbed me repeatedly. Had Jyre done this? What would possess her to want to *kill* me?

Remembering my usual routine, I departed from the healing chamber to confront the five statues, which stood in two rows flanking the central path through the room, three on the left and two on the right. I went to each in turn, inspecting their faces. It was the only assurance I had that the contents of my mind were still correct following its separation with my body.

The hundreds of times I had passed through here, each time noting my recollection of these statues, had I ever truly looked, or even known what it was I was seeing? As with a moment ago, when in their true presence, I felt that I could not truly *see* the faces beyond my impression of shape. I just knew what was in my mind when I cast my gaze upon them.

Yet, I felt that all was as it should be. They were the Rivata: the dispatchers of the delegation. I knew them all well: she The Planner, he The Arbiter, she The Inquirer, he The Advocate, and he The Contemplator. Their desire and eventual success to join themselves with the hidden sixth, their master, The Intendant, had not robbed them of the history of who they once

were; no matter how idealistic that seemed in their perfect equations.

And yet they lived, still persisting, some shred of their individuality still lingering. There had been five; there were still five; there will always be five. No matter how perfect they feel that their union may be, there will always be that husk of humanity they cannot discard. And I was to do their will; uphold the two rules. One was made to be broken. It had proved impossible to follow as it often conflicted directly with the other. The other could not be broken willingly, for we were never certain what actions were in servitude to the rule and which were against it.

I had to go. I had business with Delphine as I had promised the five. My mind was clearer now. I looked upon those statues with the cold apprehension of one who could gaze upon a past mistake from afar, and know how fruitless and futile a thing, regret was. I left them behind. These were not the only chambers in these lower reaches. The recovery room may have been the deepest chamber of the tower itself, but there were far deeper chambers to be reached from here.

I made my way to the vault. I needed to check Delphine's painting for clues, as well as better equip myself for whatever new dangers I would soon face alongside Thurm and the rangers.

A pair of monoliths marked the end of the long sloping corridor which snaked its way beneath the earth. Beyond it, lights appeared from an unseen source. Now more than ever I felt as if I was no longer in The City at all, but somewhere *else*. I was back home—I was thousands of years ago.

It was a long vaulted hall kept simple and functional, for it was a storage chamber, an archive, not a museum. Here I had collected a multitude of artifacts and memorabilia from my "previous" life, both in my old homeland and in the many distant lands I had traveled to. I was a collector long before I came to The City and opened The Circle, I simply kept it to myself before.

I stripped off my filthy, bloody, shredded outfit and discarded the pile, at least temporarily, by the door. I inspected where I knew the daggers must have hit, and strangely felt disappointed at the lack of scars. No proof of passage, no evidence of an event so important. Was it because I wanted Jyre to feel guilty for what she had done? If she saw me now she surely would believe that her attack had been no more than a dream, or at least she had failed completely. But, maybe this was for the best. There was no reason to forgive a crime which, as the evidence suggests, never took place.

The means to care for and clean my collection were a mysterious assortment of items themselves. A small enchanted basin, which was only large enough to submerge items and not a person, was always full and always clean and sat conveniently at one corner of the room. An assortment of solutions and chemicals (most hardly suited to be used on skin) accompanied it on a small shelf. With only a small rag I managed to clean myself and restore some of my dignity.

There wasn't exactly a stocked wardrobe, but some old clothing was still stored in this room. Once dressed appropriately, I surveyed a series of cases which held various armor sets before choosing the one most appropriate. I

opened the case which held the suit of heavy braided fabrics and closely stitched leather scales. Naturally, it was purported to be magical. I had worn it many times in my younger days, not long after I first realized that not being hit was probably better than withstanding a direct blow. It was light and flexible, and though it probably would do nothing to save me from a *coup de grâce*, it would certainly help me to never be in the position to receive one.

After several moments of lifting, shifting, and buckling, I found that the armor still fit and was in as good repair as I remembered. I tested my range of movement, reacquainting myself with the idea of wearing armor at all. If there were magical properties; increased strength and speed as usually boasted by the maker, I could not detect them. Perhaps part of the magic was to disguise the effects to the wearer, so that they do not misinterpret their new abilities at an inopportune moment resulting in calamity. One must always be aware of exactly what one was capable of.

My cloak of choice seemed to be no more than a dark hole in the back of the compartment it was hanging in than an actual object. Even with a thin layer of dust covering it, it was far blacker than even the most artful and repeated attempts at dying could produce. I knew the secret; it hadn't been dyed at all. The material it had been woven from (purportedly the hair of mythical beast) was simply that black. I wrapped it around my shoulders, and at once the armor itself seemed more familiar. I had never worn this armor without this cloak to accompany it. It made me appear smaller; as if I wore no armor at all.

Weapons were held on the opposite wall. Swords of all shape and size adorned rack, shelf, and pedestal of honor. Most I had never used; I was very particular when it came to my weapon, and most of these artifacts were simply memorabilia or gifts, and have never seen combat. I ran my fingers over one of the racks just as my eyes glanced from one blade to another. Some that had been used were dreadfully in need of repair, but at the time they were archived it seemed more appropriate to preserve them in the state resulting from the battles fought, rather than in a timeless, memory-less form of metal. There were jewel encrusted hilts and blades decorated in rune and glyph, words of enchantment or simply encouragement. Each one was a deeply felt reminder of a different time, a different conflict.

I reached for one, but paused. This sword had a very specific intended use, which it had never seen. The five once again came to the forefront of my mind, with their dominion of the two rules. I retracted my hand slowly, feeling the inappropriateness of using such a weapon in their servitude.

There was another; this one I had purchased for myself, long ago. It was a long blade with a single edge, used once or twice but not memorably so. It was solid, comfortable to use, and familiar to my hand. It was similar to a saber, with its slightly curved thin blade, but without the guard that wrapped around the fingers. It lacked the ostentatious pommel typical of more showy weaponry, examples of which lined the walls. I lifted it from its place and tested it briefly before affixing the scabbard to my belt and placing the sword safely away. It was time this quality weapon had some memories associated

with it.

It was not to be my only weapon. There was one artifact in this vault that was entirely unique and for it I had a unique chamber. A polished, protruding stone in the wall opened the compartment with a distant click and the sound of grinding deep below. The compartment unfurled itself slowly, a simple shelf rotating out of the wall. Inside was a rod, short for a staff but long for a wand. It was over three feet long, richly crafted from wooden parts and ornate metal coverings. I ran my hand over its cool smooth surface before I took it from its resting place. It was sturdy enough to be used in hand to hand combat as a blunt weapon, but it was so much more than that.

At one end was a broadened tip which could sustain great impacts, useful for knocking the locks off doors or cracking a person's skull. On the other was a small transparent tip, not glass, but crystal, about two inches in length and coming to a sharp point. In a desperate situation, this too could be used to deal a deadly wound against a foe, but it was not meant for that purpose. When the rod is twisted correctly, a lever about seven inches long can be pulled out to protrude at a right angle to the length of the rod revealing a small compartment. It was empty now, but it would contain the fuel for the casting rod's power.

Also inside the wall compartment was a small wooden chest. Opening it revealed a series of shiny, transparent spheres, larger than a toy marble but smaller than a hen's egg. They were manufactured elemental orbs, similar to the naturally occurring elemental crystals, aside from their artificiality, size, shape, and potency. Also, I did not know of any naturally occurring locations on earth where lighting could form into crystal. There were only nine remaining, of various elemental qualities, and then there would be no more. I suspected that the elemental wizards of The City had the ability to make more, should they be given a few as examples, but feared I would need them all. It was a shame I had never gotten around to finding a replacement supply, but I had never expected I would need to use them again. I placed them in a velvet sack which had been neatly tucked away with them and secured it to my belt. Only the casting rod could activate the power within, so I needn't worry about any accidental explosions. The rod itself could be secured to my back with a simple harness, which fit under the cloak. I had nearly everything now.

Ordinarily my hat was the only headgear I required. Though I was not one for believing too heavily in supposed magical items which did not have an immediate practical value and were otherwise merely charms, I still found myself lifting the glass dome off a pedestal which was host to a thin circlet of silver and gold. Increased awareness, I was told, along with sensitivity to forces otherwise invisible to the human mind, were the virtues of this particular bit of jewelry. I had never been given reason to believe this to be true, but it would not encumber me and the forthcoming adventure was a good enough test of this claim as any.

As soon as I had dropped it onto my head, an instinct compelled me to spin about to face the exit of the chamber. My sword was in hand in a flash as

my entire body tensed with dread. I forced my breathing to calm as I willed my eyes to penetrate the darkness in search of what intruder I had immediately felt. No, it was not someone, but *something* which did not belong. I adjusted the circlet more properly about my head before I proceeded; it was still yet to be determined if the device made one truly more perceptive, or simply more driven by paranoia.

Something was amiss, and the epicenter was my discarded pile of clothing. I put my sword away, knelt down and began to search. A bit of fabric was tossed aside, revealing an unexpected item, a scroll. I lifted it from the place it had lodged itself amongst my clothing, staring at it with distrust. What was this? I knew the answer in an instant, but how could I be holding The Scroll of Phaeros in my hand?

I stood, regarding the scroll as if it were a snake I had caught by the tail. Could I be certain that this was it, without opening it? How had it come to me? Was it in the possession of the five all along, only to be materialized on my body when they felt I needed it? No, that was preposterous. Jyre. The moment of Jyre's attack leapt into my mind. She must have had it with her; somehow, it was transferred to me. I imagined it willfully leaping from her pocket to mine with some form of sentient *purpose*, as the scroll was professed to be able to do.

I had read Phaeros's account of it which James had shown to me some time ago; the words came back to me as if I was reading them anew.

Insidious this thing was: for once it was taken it seemed impossible to put back down. With deliberate willpower it could be done, but only when the mind is focused and no other objective is heeded. An instant's distraction, a flash of doubt, and the scroll will find itself once again clutched greedily and coveted. It was not in my design for this to occur. Something in the creature's power compels the owner to remain as such. However, even if given away, somehow it will find its way back to the owner it desires. Twice I attempted to hand it over, and twice I found it once again in my possession, though I am certain that I saw its recipient stash it away. I must build a suitable hiding place for it—somewhere angels will fear to tread. Only then can I be free of it. Oh, how I wish I had never created it to begin with.

There was no doubt in my mind any longer. This was the resting place; the cage, for the five's avatar: the form that Phaeros had chosen for the Rivata to take upon entering this world. Without their occupation the beast was a terrible monster, driven by an alien will and mind so distant from our own plane of reality as to render it unfathomable. Controlled by the Rivata, it could be bent into whatever form or forms they wished. But, by Phaeros's own account, at the last moment he knew that he could not go forward. In summoning the monster, rather than bind it to the five, he bound it to this scroll. He feared what would become of the creature should the scroll be

destroyed; would it be released without the possibility of further binding upon this world? It had already been released once, and somehow sought out the scroll again, returning to it. I on the other hand had no fear of what would occur were the *scroll* destroyed. I knew exactly what would happen, for such powerful magics held little regard for the mere *physicality of things*.

I stormed across the room, pulling an empty brazier from its place in the corner to the center of the chamber. I held the scroll before it. Deliberately, with clear mind and pure intent, I placed the scroll in the center of the brazier. How large it now seemed; impossible for Jyre to carry by herself, and even more impossible to slip from her and into some pocket of mine unnoticed. I willed myself to a state of boredom over its appearance. I could afford no trace of interest in it if I was to be successful. I lifted the casting rod from my back; it slid neatly out from under the cloak. I dipped my hand into the bag of orbs; instinctively I felt which one I wanted, even though they felt identical to the touch. No, this one was slightly warmer. The circlet seemed to be more useful than I could have imagined.

I refocused my mind, finding myself growing distracted, back to the scroll and what I was doing. I squeezed and twisted the rod; it shifted easily in my grasp causing the lever to open with a pop and reveal the small compartment. The orb was now in place. Another twist and the compartment closed, the lever returned to its firing position. I felt the entire rod grow warm with its fuel. Again, I had to refocus on what I was doing; feeling the scroll attempting to slide out of conscious thought, but it would not escape me. I gripped the rod tightly in my hands, one against the lever and the other guiding the direction of the crystalline tip to aim directly at the scroll. At this distance, I could not miss.

But what if I was caught in the blast? I was too close—no, the scroll was working on me again, attempting to dissuade me from the action I was seconds away from performing. My fingers wrapped around the now warm metal covering of the rod, holding firm, as I gently pushed forward against the lever.

The front half of the rod deformed slightly as the crystal tip instantly erupted in a near-blinding flash which propelled itself away just as quickly as the rod contracted. Everything in the room shook with the instantaneous tremor of the blast. The brazier still stood, though glowing red hot and several feet farther away than it had been, with gouges cut in the floor from where the broad base had scraped the stone beneath it. The rod quickly returned to its natural state. I kept my distance, watching the contents of the brazier burn.

There was no doubt about it; I had struck a killing blow. The fire was quickly dying, leaving behind a pile of ash not even remotely resembling a scroll. With the same care and determination I had used to burn the scroll, I set to work. Another pouch was taken from the collection, its few baubles emptied out onto a shelf, as well as a brush-like implement normally used to remove dust. Slowly and carefully, I swept the remains into the sack. Once I was content that I had it all, or at least enough, I tied the sack tightly and

placed it on my belt next to my cache of orbs. Not destroyed per say, but now certainly unable to be read by anyone.

Now I was ready to go. I found my original boots and gloves suitable for continued use, and so they too were removed from the heap of discarded clothes. I looked at my hat, clenched gently in my hands before me. I brushed the top off a bit. It seemed silly to don such an unreserved article while otherwise geared for combat, but somehow its power over me was stronger than the scroll's. Still damp with sweat, it was once again on my head, the circlet tucked neatly away under it.

Something else was nagging at me, something that I instinctively felt did not belong, though it did not fill me with the same shock and panic that the scroll had. I focused my mind on the feeling, trusting in the power of the circlet to do its work. I turned slowly, letting my eyes shift from place to place. Finally, they came to rest on the bound parcel of Delphine's painting.

Of course, I had nearly forgotten the reason why I decided to come down here to begin with. After removing the packaging with some frustration (Sheam had gotten much better at packing things since this painting had been stashed away.) I lifted it from the floor and studied it at arm's length. It was all splatters of paint on the canvas: an incomprehensible mess. There may have been some hidden message or meaning in it. I would have to bring it to James and Corinne for study. Ironically, with all of my gear and battle equipment I was without a simple pocket-knife. (One could have come in handy when I was fighting with the tied packing straps! Gods, Sheam could tie an aggravating knot!) Once procured from a drawer of less than glorious other items, I set about removing the painting from its rigid restraints. The frame was easy enough to detach from the canvas, and once that was done I carefully cut the fabric from the stretcher bars.

I looked at the painting again. Something about it tugged at the back of my mind. What had Jyre told me about this painting? I thought back; it had been months ago. She did not tell me who she had stolen it from; only that it was coveted highly by its previous owner—possibly with some proper analysis...

That's when I noticed that what first seemed to be part of the painting was actually a signature: Phaeros Kendrick. The strokes forming the name had been hidden by the twisting branches of the frame. "Well, that settles that," I muttered quietly to myself. I gave it a good roll, opting to allow James the opportunity to form any conclusions.

I left the vault behind. With quick strides I traveled back to the central corridor where the five statues stood. I hesitated at the doorway, not wishing to approach. Again, there was something; some new force to be felt which had previously been beyond my range of perception. I could feel myself quickly growing addicted to the use of the circlet; surely it would drive me mad. I told myself I had no reason to be alarmed. It was the five statues. And yet, I was alarmed. I could feel their presence here, in this room. They were watching me; studying me more closely than ever before. Was this how it was to be now, or had it been this way all along, and I had simply been blind

to it?

Then I remembered that *voice* that called out to me in the instant before I returned to my body. It was the only thing I had no explanation for. Could someone else have been using a chamber similar to my own at that very moment? Was it another Delegate, maybe? Or were they trapped in that plane, somewhere between the mortal realm and that ethereal prison the Rivata had been banished to? I found I did not want to leave and resume my quest just yet. I felt that if I went now, this would forever haunt me as a mystery.

I decided, and passed between the statues once again. I could feel their gazes, intent upon me, like the wretched clawing of imps clinging to my back. As if I were passing through a gauntlet, I made it to the other side and once again entered the small chamber, the place of recovery and reverie. I had entered this room many times and for many reasons, but never before for the express purpose of separating mind from body. I had no idea if what I was doing had any point to it, but felt that I soon would. I moved the chair back into position and sat. It was uncomfortable with all of my armor, but I did not need comfort. I only needed to will the powers of the room to take hold. I could stay here as long as I wished.

Just as before, I found that I was aware of the separation. Without the disorientation, without the shock of being in this state without realizing it, I was in command of my cognitive faculties; and so with ease I drifted away from my corporeal form. "*It was not meant for this,*" I felt in the back of my mind. Had it been the five, or my own thoughts? In either case, it was true, but I was going to ignore the warning. Dreading another meeting, I averted my thought from those in the central chamber before me; but soon found I had nothing to fear. I was alone.

I focused on the presence I had felt, the one that had called out to me in that feminine voice. It was no longer here, but I somehow felt aware of its passage. Perhaps it was the circlet, the power it granted me effective even during this state. I pushed my mind father from my body, as if trusting that I could sense things more clearly without the noise of my physical form intruding on my perceptions. Yes, I could clearly sense someone, not their presence, but a trail blazed by their presence as they had reached out to me just moments ago. Unafraid of not being able to find my way back, I followed the trail. I willed myself upwards, traveling up through the tower in all its heights, catching a glimpse of the study, then the library, until finally my own chamber was below me.

Now I could see the entire city lay out before me; possibly not the true city, but the imprint it made on this non-corporeal plane. It was a jumbled contrast of silhouettes and motion.

I did not dwell on it. There was somewhere else I had to be. I now knew with reasonable certainty where I needed to go. I propelled myself over the mountains, which grew higher and higher, to where the air would be thin and cool. Soon the city was far behind me, miles and miles away. I knew it would be a modest distance; a day's travel on horseback, at least.

There was a small cottage or even a hovel on the cliff-side, at the end of a long winding road. The spiritual trail ended there. Soon, I was within. I forced myself to focus on the moment, where I was, what I was doing, so that my mind and thoughts would congeal into a form cognitive enough to accomplish what I had dared to dream possible.

There was a table and chairs, aged wood painted white, with a lace tablecloth draped over it. Sunlight from the nearby window caused the cloth to glow white, along with the small vase and its host of flowers. All around I could see the contents of the one room home take shape; cabinets on the walls, an old worn bed which looked ready to break in half at the center, but at the same time deliciously comfortable. Paintings of every shape and size appeared on the walls. They were of a broad range of creation; some detailed landscape scenes, others violent episodes of paint thrust onto canvas haphazardly. Finally, my perception came back to rest on the chair at the table, and the woman who sat there.

Her figure was full and soft, wrapped lightly in various laced articles which crisscrossed her form. An arm rested gently on the table, finger following the pattern on the cloth. Her legs were crossed, bare below the knee. Her shoulders and neck were also bare. Her head was crowned in a wreath of cloth, with locks of deep brown hair spilling out from around it and onto her shoulders. Her small round face seemed to be mostly eyes, big dark pools which stared off into space, slowly blinking every few moments. Her pale pink lips drew themselves out as a look of concern entered into those eyes, and she turned to look at me. Her eyes grew even larger for an instant, with her lips parting very slightly with an unexpected breath. Her chest rose slightly as her back straightened, silently taking in the apparition which had become an addition to her own spectral state.

She could see me? As much as I thought this impossible, I quickly realized that she was no different from me. She too existed here in a non-corporeal form, and yet somehow appeared physically as if she were flesh and blood. She was the one who had called out to me, across all that distance. "Hello?" I asked. "You called to me, so I came," and then with a start, as my voice came into my ears as real sound, realized that I too was manifesting within this room in a sort of pseudo-physical form, just as she was. Was it a property of this place, or was she affecting me directly?

"Daelus of Thresh," she said as she drew another quick breath, her blinking growing suddenly quite rapid. She took her hand from its place on the table and joined it with the other in her lap. "Gods...they sent you?"

This was not at all the reaction I expected. "How do you know me?" I expressed with urgency.

"How could I *not* know you? The last line to fall in the war against the Rivata?" her melodic voice was full of excitement but with some darker edge to it, as if she felt both honored and terrified to be in my presence.

"Then you too are one of the delegates," I replied slowly. "You are from where I am from...and you knew me?"

"Of you. I was just a girl then. And now here I am, and here you are,

though how I do not know, and in what form...you are not dead, no I can feel that you aren't. You are being projected somehow. Yes, you are the one I felt and called out to a moment ago. I was not sure if you would hear me, of if it were even possible...You are..." She gasped, her hand going over her gaping mouth "The tower." She seemed to be withdrawing from me, like she wished to escape but had nowhere to go.

"Yes," I said, knowing I could only alleviate her fears with honesty; the act itself of being honest, not the truth I had to tell. "The tower; they modified it for this use. It is through their power that I come to you now."

She seemed to calm herself, as I expected she would. "Yes, I knew of you. I knew of all that you did, and how it all failed at the end, and how we were all punished along with them, even though we were the ones fighting them. But, how could they send you? They have never sent anyone like you before. They had always been like me; simple children, nobodies. They sent you?"

"I..." I felt myself grow dizzy. Her words were stirring up too many memories, too many emotions. I felt this place and time slipping from me; I was being dragged back thousands of years to a different time and place, a place I refused to go.

She had stood, and in an instant I found her by my side. I felt the scene returning to me again, focusing on her presence by me. "You're not very good at this," she said with a smile, ghostly lips just inches from my face. "Yes, you are still very much alive. I can bring you here. It will be easier for you. You will not have to go through their channels to speak with me. Trust me."

"That is within your power?" I managed.

Her smile turned into a laugh. It was not condescending; but rather it seemed to contain some shred of joy somehow finding itself through the veils of sorrow, like the first bit of green in a field of snow. "Yes," she told me. "Your mind is here. That would be the hardest part. Bringing your body is the simplest, most trivial thing in comparison."

"And along with my body, all of my clothing and gear?"

"Hmm," she said, suddenly taking a step away from me. Her smile changed quickly from one of joy to a much broader one, something else entirely, as she looked me up and down, "As much as it would please me not to...yes, all of that as well. I was wrong; bringing your body is not the most trivial. An inanimate object is child's play."

Before she was done speaking I once again began to feel the weight of my armor, the cool thin air against my face, my lungs expanding to take it in, and the bright sunlight above the clouds filling my eyes. Still, she remained there before me, even clearer now that I was looking at her with eyes of flesh. "Your powers are extraordinary, enchantress," I told her.

"Enchantress?" she said with a bemused look. "Why do you think that of me?"

Of course I felt a trifle silly for making such an assumption. "I admit that I am not certain, other than that, based on your knowledge, you seem to be a delegate. Are you, in fact, Em?"

She moved again to sit, reclining in her chair much as before, with only a

gentle shift to cross her legs. "I am. Come," she said, offering me the chair next to her, "sit with me."

I did as she asked, and found that the chair—which I was not certain was really there—was as solid as I imagined she herself would be to the touch.

"This cottage is real, then?" I said, continuing to test the firmness of the chair.

"As real as you are. Why would I choose to live in a place that exists only because I will it to? That would be horribly tedious. No, it was built, it physically exists."

"But you?" I ventured, uncertain if I needed to state the question bluntly. "You do not seem to quite physically exist. Are you a ghost?"

"I am in the state I need to be in order to be *truly* free of them. Though I admit I find my freedom intruded upon by the presence of another delegate. You are, please admit, not as free as I am."

"No, Em, I am not."

"In that case, you are breaking their rules by being in my presence," she said coyly.

"The rule you speak of has long been broken, Em. You yourself disregarded it. I have as well. It is impossible to follow."

The smile returned. She closed her eyes and took a breath. "Yes," she said, as if the thought held many good memories for her. "Do not under any circumstances make contact with other delegates. If somehow you become aware of the existence of another delegate, avoid them at all costs. Do not reveal your nature as a delegate to anyone, especially another delegate." She began to laugh quietly, short bursts of breath which caused her shoulders and chest to rise and fall. "First they send us into a strange place, alone and lost, without reference or anyone to relate to, and then they forbid us from seeking out others like us, and in doing so, betray the fact that there *are* others like us. In simply telling us the rule they doomed it to be broken."

"Especially in my case, considering that they arranged for me to summon my tower back into existence from the banishment. I imagine every delegate in The City took notice."

"I see. Yes, I certainly would have. Ah, if only they had sent you back then, so long ago..." her gaze averted from me back to the table. "You know why, or *supposedly* why, that rule exists?"

"To keep us from joining together and rebelling against them."

She nodded. "That is what we believed, back in the old days, when it was just Phaeros and me, and Jossimer."

"Wait, *Jossimer*?" I said in an outburst, quickly shattering the mystique of the moment.

She looked back at me; smile broad and eyes open wide in delight. "Yes of course. He was the first one to break the first rule. He's the one that brought the three of us together."

"Jossimer is a *delegate*," I repeated to myself quietly, the implications of this fact cascading through my mind. "All this time and I didn't know. I thought the old ass was just a friend of James's. Why would James keep that

from me?"

"Old ass!" she proclaimed, throwing her head back to laugh heartily. "I knew poor dear old Joss would grow into a grumpy old coot. He was always so serious and glum. But he was also so charming. He is still charming, isn't he?"

"As charming as waking up on a freezing winter's morning to discover that your toes had fallen off to frostbite in the night," I put bluntly, somehow feeling as if I knew this woman well and had no need for guarded formalities.

She bit her lip and shook her head. It was so difficult to believe that she was just a ghost, long dead. She seemed so alive, so here. I could reach out and touch her, and it would not surprise me to find her warm. There was an agelessness to her which I could not seem to grasp. She seemed at once a sagely old woman and a blossoming young girl. "That is perfect. It is so good to know that he is still hanging in there after all these years."

"James keeps him around," I revealed. "Though for some reason he saw fit to hide from me the fact that he was one of us."

"I am sure they had their reasons," she said, growing more serious. "James I barely knew, for he came much later, after Phaeros had vanished. He struck me as one of the brightest and most earnest people I had ever met. I could see why he was chosen as a delegate. His powers to influence people effortlessly are confounding. It both thrilled me and saddened me to see the Rivata so well empowered by such a great talent."

"But," I ventured "you know of The Cause? It was James's invention."

She tilted her head slightly, saying, "James managed to track me down years after I had left The City and all of that behind. I had already vowed to abandon the directive and to lead the simple life of a hermit. He explained his plan to me, and though it sounded noble, I decided it was too dangerous. For all he knew, his cause was merely the directive disguised in his mind."

"I see. He too contacted me, though as a result of my summoned tower, not through any great deduction on his part. When he explained the cause to me I too felt it possibly was just a veiled form of the directive, designed to seem more appealing to him. Still, I decided it was worth it to try. As you said, James is a man of remarkable persuasive charisma."

She smiled, shaking her head. "I was a poor choice for a delegate. I may be a talented enchantress, a good guess on your part, but I lack ambition to rule over others. The Rivata have been known to make mistakes in the past. I was one of them. How many delegates are there, now?"

"More than I had realized, it seems. There's Phaeros, you, Jossimer, James, and myself. I always suspected that there would be five."

"Why?" she said, turning her head the other way.

"The five make up the Rivata, one delegate for each of them."

Her eyes grew narrow as she smiled widely. "We both know that this is very unlikely. Things are seldom so pat."

I smiled back. "That's true. For all I know there's dozens of delegates, all working diligently at the directive, some in small groups, some loners, all quietly working to ready The City for the Rivata's return: the time if

implementation.”

“Or maybe it’s somewhere in between,” she replied, still smiling. “I wonder if all have already been sent. I wonder if you were the last—maybe that is why they chose someone so different from the rest of us.”

“No,” I said, a dark feeling creeping up on me. My successor had already been named. They made that clear to me.

“What’s wrong?” she said intuitively.

“I wish dreadfully to speak with you for hours upon end about our histories, but,” It was then that I chose to glance down at what I still grasped in my hand: the rolled canvas. I had completely forgotten I even had it; so enthralled as I was to be in Em’s presence. She noticed me noticing it, of course. “But I am afraid that this is a most unexpected detour, and I am on a mission of deadly importance.”

Without a word, she reached out and took the canvas from me, as if it were my own grasp on it that was spectral. I did not protest as she unrolled it slowly. Though she looked at it silently, her eyes gave everything away. Recognition, but with confusion mixed with disappointment, “Phaeros painted this. I have some of his others on my walls. How did it come to you? And who would be so dreadful as to mistreat it like this?”

I hoped my blush would not betray that I was the villain in this case, and focused on the first question, hoping the second would be forgotten. “It was sold to me by a young girl many months ago. She claimed to have stolen it from an important and dangerous person, called Lady Delphine.”

“Delphine,” she said slowly, feeling how the word sounded in her mouth. “Meaning dolphin, but also a small blue irregular flower, poisonous to the tongue and bearing many sharp thorns. A beautiful name; who is she?”

“I had hoped that you had known her. We believe that it is a false name born by someone whom I feel that you did know very well, Tempia.”

The look in her eyes was again a flood of conflicting emotions. It was difficult to separate into individual thoughts, but I knew that if I ever saw that look again, I would remember it as the one she reserved for Tempia. “I do know Tempia. But why do you think that Tempia is Delphine? Tempia is older than I am.” She rolled the canvas back up and placed it on the table, keeping her hand over it.

“Because there is a great deal of evidence linking Delphine to Phaeros and, as you know, Tempia and his disappearances coincided.”

I felt as if she now regarded me as someone who had appeared at her door cradling her dead cat in my arms. From what James had said to me, I knew that this was not an easy topic for her.

Her hand was now against her face; her body was still. It was quiet for a time before she finally lifted her face away and responded. “Is Phaeros still alive?”

“We do not know. If age is an issue, I can point out that he is older than both of you.”

“Not that much older. Were I still alive, I would be ninety-three. It is possible that he is still alive.”

So she was a ghost, after all. How, I wondered, was she able to remain here in spectral form, rather than returning to the Rivata as they promised I would, or merely passing on to our final resting place?

"Tempia still might yet live; quite old, but alive."

"Yes..."

Again, there was silence. I had brought her sorrow, and was none the wiser for it.

"If you find out," she said meekly. "Please let me know."

I nodded. "When this is over, I will tell you the complete story."

"As I will for you," she added, a smile crossing her face for the first time in what seemed like ages. It was impossible not to see why Phaeros had fallen so desperately for her, and bewildering that he had, in the end, chosen Tempia.

We sat in silence again. Somehow, I felt as if she did not want me to go.

"Are you sure," I began; though quite unsure if I wanted to bring this up again, "that you have no idea who Delphine could be?"

"I have never heard of that name other than in the etymological sense."

We still could rule nothing out, but I felt a very well reasoned line of deduction growing cold.

I stood. "Time is not standing still, as much as this meeting is in itself timeless. There is somewhere I need to be. I am not sure how to get there from here, however."

She stood, taking a step very near me. How real she seemed...

"Where is it you need to go? I brought you here; it is the least I could do to send you on your way."

I regarded her again. When I first saw her, I felt as if the absence of a body was shielding me from my proper reaction. Now as she stood before me, I could not help but feel that the distinction was meaningless. I had been afraid to admit it to myself, rationalizing. It had been as potent then as it was now; only now I did not feel so frightened by it, I felt drawn to her. "You said sending a body was easy, but to send a mind was difficult."

"How could I claim something to be difficult unless I was able to do it?" She stepped even closer. It was impossible to believe that she was not as real as I, of flesh and blood and beating heart. She lifted her hand to my cheek, touching it gently. Her skin was soft and warm. "You are so unlike Phaeros," she said suddenly, almost as a whisper.

"I am sorry I do not live up to his memory," was all I could think to reply.

She shook her head, drawing even more near as her hand trailed down my cheek. I felt a deep trembling within myself as she drew near, eyes wide, locked on mine. "That was not a complaint, just an observation." She was now against me, her head tucking under my chin to rest her cheek against the front of my armor, though I now regretted its presence. She did not have to explain herself; how long as it been since she had had the company of another human being? "But there is something I hope you and he have in common. It was something that he and I had in common, actually. I like to think that it was my gift to him. Maybe it can be my gift to you as well?"

"What is it?" I said quietly, lowering my head to feel her soft hair upon my face.

"We broke *both* rules. I think...I know that you will too."

"I hope you're right," I told her, and for once, actually believed it was possible.

"James's *cause* is not the breaking of the directive; it is the perverting of it selfishly. You must abandon The Cause as well, and flee all civilization. All delegates must. It is the only way to throw off their yoke of the slave driver and be free."

I didn't say anything. She knew that I couldn't promise something like that here, now.

She took a long, slow breath. "I never dreamed that they would send you, of all people. How could we be so lucky? How could they be so stupid...?"

Without thinking I found that my arm had gone around her to hold her in place. How could it be? This perfect stranger...No, fellow delegate; I never once expected I would actually meet her. And if what she said was true, that she was aware of me in my old life and knew of me and what I tried to do so long ago, what must this be like for her? I did not want her to send me away. She was like me. She was one of us. I did not have to keep anything from her...and yet, as real as her heartbeat seemed, as warm as her skin felt, I knew that she was not really here. She had died years ago. A restless spirit, imprisoned by her powers in life which had grown too strong for her own good, willing herself to this state in the avoidance of her spirit's return to the grasp of the five, fated to exist forever now in this impression of life, if only for the benefit of this impossible moment.

"Where is it that you must go?" she asked, only drawing herself tighter against me as the suggestion of my departure loomed.

I wanted desperately to not speak, but I was propelled forward. "Do you wish for me to focus on the location? I do not think I could describe it to you."

"Yes, she said," her hands now playing at the back of my neck. "Just think on it. I can do the rest from here."

And so she was gone. I felt for certain that I would return to the chamber beneath my tower, but instead, the tremendous buzzing of a mechanical saw-blade and the thunderous crack of a tree being torn asunder violated my senses. Before me was Thurm's mechanical beast, miraculously restored to life in an impossible time span, working diligently to clear the forest path ahead of it. Up ahead I could see through the trees, not two hundred yards away, the cleared sight of The Villa with that great stump standing solitary in the morning light. The scene was busy with Hammerite engineers and rangers in Hammerite clothing working like brothers towards their slowly approaching goal. In the midst of it all stood Brother Thurm, appearing hardly the man who had set out days ago on this mission. His face was hard with determination; his eyes darted back and forth from place to place, maintaining constant awareness of every detail, as if one moment of obliviousness would spell an end to the work he had poured himself into. And there stood I, still unnoticed and miraculously transported; yet all I could

think about was returning to that mountaintop.

— **Thalia: Oaths and Vendettas** —

Day 6: 6:30 am

“Yes, Delphine,” I replied. “It’s me.”

An instant passed, and the shouts and howls resumed. Flashes of beast and man raged at the edges of my vision, with their minds flailing out recklessly at me. I barely noticed it; she was before me.

“Be still!” again she commanded, thunderously, but somehow still not a shout. Her long slender arms shot out to either side to emphasize her command. All present seemed to wither and cower at her flash of rage, retreating back with shoulders hunched and tails curled in upon themselves.

“Who’s Thalia?” quietly came a familiar voice from behind.

“H’sh!” I hissed at him without turning, begging Ghost to show a little thoughtfulness and not get himself killed.

Slowly she approached, eyes fixed on me just as mine were on her. How barely human her eyes seemed, everything was in place as it should be; yet behind them held so very little which I could identify with. Her eyes, small dark discs in fields of pure white and lined with black lashes, were set in a long narrow face with graceful cheeks and a small thin mouth set low on her chin. A row of horizontal lines trailed down her cheeks from below her eyes to the sides of her mouth; either markings of some sort, or rifts of a deeper nature. Her skin was of the purest white, her neck long and slender just as her face. Her protruding collar bones sat between thin, raised shoulders, all framed by a delicate composition of thin black hair which seemed to float in the softest breeze. She looked as if she had not aged a day since I saw her last, years ago, and yet, so much of the humanity that had reassured me then, seemed absent from her now. She was so far gone; I barely knew what to make of her.

The beasts and pagans who surrounded us grew restless again, finding it difficult to accept that their mistress had forbid them from tearing these intruders asunder. But she had made her demands clear; I knew that they would not approach, no matter how much they lusted for blood. Her power over them would not be broken.

She reached out to me with those long thin arms. I looked down at her hands, slender and graceful, palms upwards to greet me. If I had extended my arm to her, it would be to cut her throat. But I held back. I had not come here to do that.

“Sister,” she uttered, seemingly taken back. “I thought I would never see you again.”

“For a long time I didn’t want to ever see you again, but I changed my mind.” I didn’t know how convincing it would be, but I felt she would believe what she wanted to. Most people did.

“This is simply astounding!” she cried, rushing to me, for an instant no longer appearing as the queen who commanded silence, but the girl I

remembered from my childhood. Rather than embrace me, she paused before me, reached down with both of her hands and took both of mine up. She looked at them, and then back up into my eyes, her own eyes dancing with joy. "You have ascended. I know this to be true."

I held myself back. If I gave myself in to anger, it would all be lost. "It is not true, Delphine. I have not."

She looked surprised but doubtful.

I continued. "Yes, I have tasted it. Yes, it burns within me, striving for release. This is not ascension. This is possession. Is this what you want? Is this what you want for me, to be the fleshy plaything of a demon?"

"Thalia..." she trailed off, her voice and expression growing softer, but she did not let go of my hands nor back away. "I can see we have so much to discuss. There is so much you do not understand, but first, please tell me. What of Lytha? These days much is said of her exploits. In truth I very much expected to see *her* presented before me as the Queen of Fangs, not you."

I wanted to change the subject, but knew that this had to be addressed now, and then never spoke of again. "Lytha is dead. She was killed when rescuing me from the Hammerites years ago. Since then I took on her identity, since my own was so thoroughly hunted. I considered it penance, for she died for my sake, I felt it better to be the one who died, and to live on as her."

She appeared haunted by this ghastly news, gazing at me with eyes ablaze for a moment, in silence. Finally when she spoke, her voice was shockingly mournful. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

She looked like she wanted to say more, but I was in no mood for tearful expressions of love for one whom she had treated so wretchedly since the day she was born. "The man behind me is my savior. Twice he has come to my rescue. He is to be treated as you would treat me."

An expression of vague disinterest crossed her features as she looked past me to Ghost. Then, slowly, her apathy melted into appreciation. "So you have chosen then? Is this another thing you have managed to accomplish before I could?"

"I have chosen nothing. I meant simply what I said; nothing more."

He continued to shuffle now that the attention was on him. Thankfully he was keeping his mouth shut. I wanted to peek into that brain of his, to see what he was making of all of this, how well he trusted me; but I feared getting swept away in the avalanche he called a thought process.

"Very well," she resumed, along with her look of apathy.

"Seriously," he began, but was again met with a sharp "h'sh!" from me. Ghost, so help me, if you do not keep your mouth shut...

"He is tired. He needs rest," I commanded, feeling it would be better if he was...somehow inactive during all of this, for his own sake.

"Very well. Asleep with him then." She waved her hand.

"No, wait!" I pleaded, but it was too late. A field of light green mist had engulfed Ghost, blown from various pipes produced by some of the pagans who had snuck the closest, and so Ghost collapsed into a heap on the floor. "I

didn't mean like that!" I scowled, furious with Delphine for this insult.

She frowned. "I am not sure what you meant, but I know what is best. While he is asleep, he will be tended to by my shamans. When he awakes, he will feel stronger than he ever has before."

I turned back to look at him. He was being lifted off the ground by three men in animal skins with painted faces. I watched, apparently helplessly, as he was taken away and into a tent. I vowed then silently that if he were mistreated, every one of those pagan shamans would find their head mysteriously about their ankles. But I could not protect him from the pagan magic; in fact, I had come here to help him by using the pagan magic.

Delphine too was retreating into her tent. She turned to look at me a moment before she disappeared, her black hair wisping softly behind her. I followed immediately; my own motions practically a march compared to the idle way she seemed to glide.

The fabric of the tent was translucent, with the full glory of the sky revealed above us. Wherever a shadow passed over the surface, from a tree branch or a passing person or creature, the red material became opaque. There was a small place for respite, simply adorned with a collection of cushions which still held the shape of her slight form. A wide work surface was erected along the opposite side, strangely looking as if a series of bushes had grown that way and shed all of their foliage, but not as if commanded to against their will. It was covered with an assortment of objects, many of which I could not fathom the purpose of, others which seemed to be the tools of an apothecary, and even more that resembled shamanistic idols.

I stood holding the tent's flap open casting a critical gaze about, while Delphine sat on what seemed to be nothing at all, but was a small twig-like growth which should have shattered under her weight. She leaned back, fingers caressing the branched form of the surface idly, with her body oriented towards me, though her gaze was cast sharply to the side, as if observing something outside the tent. "My friends returned from their mission to recover Lytha from the Hammerites. They reported failure, and their numbers were cut in two. Oh, how they howled with rage and anguish at what they had failed to do. But I consoled them. I pleaded with them to not mourn for their loss, and insisted that in the end, their act would be the one that finally brought her to us. But now I find that it was you all along, and this confuses me. Who was it that murdered Hammerite and jacknall alike, bringing destruction and fire to the Temple of the Inquisitor? I was certain it had been Lytha, but now I see you before me. Why would you kill your own children along with your enemies?"

"It was me," I said, oddly truthful and lying at the same time. "Aided by Ghost, though it was the Hammerites themselves who destroyed their own temple, and some of the jacknalls fell by *their* hands. I believe zombies were also involved, courtesy of Ghost. I went there seeking revenge for what The Inquisitor had done to Lytha. I got it. He's dead."

She frowned. She probably didn't like me being so cold about the dead beasts, but she did not speak of it further. If she was confused now, it could

get worse. I only hoped that she had no idea what it was I wore around my neck.

"I see. Yes, I was told that one fell to the Hammerites, and one by the man you call Ghost, but that one also died by your hands. Do you deny this?"

"I do not. I killed one to protect Ghost. His life means more to me than that of a jacknall, regardless that *you* feel they are my children."

She frowned. I would play along as best I could, but there were some lines still that I would not cross. I did not care how much the jacknalls loved their Queen of Fangs. I would not be their gods' damned *mother*.

"In that case they will understand, but we must tell them at once, and that you chose to come to me after all. Their joy at your return will chase away their remorse at once, and creatures such as they have no room for vengeance in their hearts. I sometimes envy that of them."

I did not know what to say to any of that. I wanted to simply state my business and be done, but it was clear that Delphine had completely misinterpreted the reason for my visit. Before I could find the words to speak, her entire demeanor changed.

"Thalia!" she cried, suddenly pushing up from her recline and rushing to me. "What is this? What have they done to you!" She was upon me, her slight hand with the firmest of grip upon my arm, her face twisted into disgust and terror. I did not fight against her, or move to get away; her reaction was appropriate. With dreadful fascination she regarded the metal splint in my upper arm. "The Hammerdevils did this to you!" Lips parted to reveal clenched teeth, somehow smaller and more numerous than I felt a human jaw should bear. She looked at it up and down, her grasp growing more gentle as she guided me towards a more well-lit part of the tent.

Finally, she moved her fingers to touch it. A scream of anguish escaped her. She threw herself away from me, crashing into the work surface behind her with her hand clutched at the wrist by the other, regarding it as if it had been scorched by flame. Her tools scattered in her wake, some crashing to the floor, but she did not seem to notice. I could see—the truth may not have been far off—the fingertips which had come in contact with it were blackening, which was spreading like an infestation from one knuckle to the next. She trembled furiously, nearly crying from the pain, the hand that grasped the other deforming as she squeezed harder and harder. I expected the blackened tips of her fingers to fall off at any moment.

There was a great activity at the door to the tent as her servants broke the barrier to rush to her aid, but all stayed back as they watched her; I could feel their grim fascination. Her jaw opened wide as she mouthed a silent roar. Her eyes were fixed on the decaying fingertips, trembling more than she was. I could feel how much she was fighting to restrain herself from the agony, and how desperately she was fighting against the Hammerite magic which had infected her. I saw my chance.

With her mind caught in the unexpected agony it would be a dreadful place, but she would not be expecting an invasion, nor would she be able to defend herself against it while fully occupied by the state of her injury. I was

in like a diver casting off over a cliff uncertain if there were jagged rocks just below the surface, and then sailing in freefall unable to half my acceleration even as fear of certain death was rushing me in the face. Once I broke the surface of the thrashing perimeter I found myself in an alien realm; barely recognizable; barely human.

I sorted through my new environment as if I were navigating the thickest jungle without a blade to cut my way through. The currents and eddies ripped at me, threatening to pull me deeper and deeper, wave after wave of incomprehensible thought crashing into me. There was nothing to be learned here. I was blind and deaf, seeing only in great strokes of something, some powerful potent something, but unable to decipher what any of it was. I pulled out just as I felt myself inching towards the threshold of no return.

She was breathing slowly again, her injured hand still grasped tightly with the other; but the black infection had subsided, and faded. The servants had departed, leaving only the sound of her panting to accompany the ringing in my ears. "I am sorry Delphine," I said, fighting to keep my sarcasm hidden. "I had no idea it would have that effect on you." It was true, I did not, but how it delighted me to see her suffer so.

"It was foolish of me," she hissed, but with a thread of vulnerability in her voice. "I was caught off guard." She let go of her wrist and began to massage her hand. "We must remove it. I do not know how you can stand to have it in you at all. You must be in tremendous pain."

I shrugged with a frown. "I've gotten used to it. But now you must believe me when I tell you that I have *not* ascended. Could such a thing be possible while I have this Hammerhead scourge affixed to me?"

She stopped nursing her hand, though she still leaned against the surface for support. How weak she now seemed; vulnerable. She looked away from me, all the majesty now gone from her face. She seemed so young in that moment; suddenly I was the goddess and she was the battered victim.

"The Queen of Fangs is not as vulnerable to Hammerite magic as I," she said plainly. "You of all people should know that. Their hammers may strike you, only be reflected harmlessly away. Only the Woodsie Lord himself was more fortified against their ways. You *have* ascended, Thalia. If you do not believe me, then shortly you shall meet someone whom you will have no choice but to believe."

"Oh?" I said, my tone tainted with mockery.

"The timing of your arrival could not be more fortunate. I had hoped for more time to prepare you, but it is possible that you need none. She is expecting us soon. I requested an audience with her as soon as I suspected that the Queen of Fangs had ascended. I am certain she would not have granted my request had I not promised I would be accompanied by you." She raised her hand to the top of her forehead, and slid her fingers into the edge of her hair. It parted from her scalp silently, revealing a pale but mottled surface beneath. She then took a sponge from her collection of things and began to work on her face, scrubbing off the white which now seemed no more than paint, revealing that same pale but mottled surface.

"What is happening?" I asked, unsure of what I had been so foolish to get myself into.

"We must be seen as we are." She turned to me, her face somehow not looking nearly as severe and haunting as it once had. The discolored patches which covered its surface gave a creature-like quality to her appearance that somehow made her seem more human. Those lines down her cheek however, remained. "I have something for you to change into. You cannot go to her as you are."

"Who?" I said, looking around the tent for what struck me as a set of clothes laid out. I saw nothing. "Why?" I continued, growing impatient. I was not going to let her play dress-up with me.

She rubbed at her ear, the white coming off in great streaks onto the cleaning surface. "Our *other* sister."

"Other sister," I voiced quietly, feeling as if I would not like this. "I told you already, Lytha is *dead*."

"No," she said, and then whispered, "No, no, not dear Lytha."

"I am not changing. If you are to go as you are, I must go as I am."

She looked listlessly over at a small parcel at the edge of the tent, and seemed to once again assume that vulnerable state. Was it simply an act to throw me off guard? I wished feverishly that her mind was more decipherable. For an instant I remembered the minds of the two great Hammerites; so distinct and potent, instantly identifiable, but the individual thoughts themselves impossible to decipher. "Very well," she told me as she stood. Even with her changed appearance, she once again seemed the goddess; tall, majestic, timeless. Slowly I regarded her; the dark translucent silken fabrics which wrapped around her seemed more like an extension of her own skin than some outfit, how tightly it clung to her regal form without any signs of support or fastening. For an instant I pondered what exactly she did intend for me to wear. "We should go now, then. I fear we will keep her waiting."

"Delphine, stop. I did not come here for this. I have a very specific purpose. The man I brought with me, Ghost, has a curse upon him. I swore to him that in return for saving my life, I would find a way to get the curse lifted. That is why I come to you now. I know it is within your power to break this curse." I did not want to say more than that. I watched her eyes slowly as she stood in silence, too long in silence, her expression unreadable.

"Come with me now, and we will speak on how to repay your debt." Her hand went to the work surface, pulling a single article from amidst the jumble, a mask. She placed it on her face and tied the long black ribbon behind her ears. The mask resembled her face, but with a grotesque difference, the horizontal lines flowing down the cheeks were open revealing dilated pupils within. A black robe was pulled from its place and wrapped around her, hood going up over her smooth bare head, covering all but the mask. She tied the robe at her waist, and then turned to face me. For an instant, I was uncertain which set of eyes were hers and which had been painted onto the mask. Silently she walked past me to the edge of the tent,

pushing the flap aside to leave without looking to see if I would follow. She knew I would.

The pagan camp looked different now that the sun had risen above the trees. Many of those present snapped to attention as Delphine approached the clearing in the center, while still others went about their business. What struck me the most was a pair of large, hairy beasts which came into her attendance; and now their gaze was fixed upon me as I approached. I knew they had to be the same creatures that attacked me in the temple, if not others of their race.

"You look upon them with hatred, Thalia. Please, understand that they too can feel the sting of rejection. They are yours."

I watched them move, like wolves crossed somehow with great apes, and yet bearing none of the strange deformities of a typical forced combination. Their eyes were large and seemed to hold some level of awareness behind them, not simply the empty eyes of animals. They were silent now, ears up and forward, sniffing in my direction with a certain level of anticipation.

"They wish to accompany us," Delphine said, gently winding her finger around one of their ears. It leaned its head into her touch. "What is it you wish?"

"No," I said without hesitation. "I won't be anywhere near those things. They tried to kill me."

"No!" Delphine replied harshly. "They did not try to kill you; only to bring you to us."

They looked from me back to her, and then back to me.

"Well I've already killed one of them; and I would again without hesitation."

"I can see that this will take...time. Very well," she said and began to whisper to them. "They will stay behind. But trust in time, you will come to love your children as they do you."

I didn't even know what to say to that, so I said nothing.

"My own Cicada will also be unable to join us, for he is on a...special mission of the utmost importance. So, we go alone. My steed is ready to carry us there."

There was a stirring at the edge of the encampment, though at first I could not see the origins of it. Finally, long spindly legs were revealed coming out of the thicket along with a long narrow body to which they were attached. A triangular head swung smoothly from side to side, the bottom of which was a maze of motion as dozens of tiny parts twitched and gestured. It was some type of enormous mantis. It walked towards us bowing its head to its mistress so she could place her long hand gently between its big green eyes, the same shade as the rest of its body.

I wanted to say that I was not going to ride on her bug, but somehow I had already agreed to the terms she had provided, so for now I would play along. "Let me see Ghost first," I insisted. "Where is he?"

She sighed, and pointed to a tent at the opposite side of the camp. "Do return quickly."

The tent was empty except for him lying on a fir mat in the center, hands folded over his chest. His snoring set me at ease. I quickly checked him over, worried that they had injected him with something or performed some other witchcraft, but had no idea if I would even be able to tell. I pressed my hand over his for a moment as I looked at him. He was also drooling. I knew that if it were only the debt, I would not be doing this. I had no illusions about that.

I left him behind and saw that Delphine was seated on some type of strange saddle close to where the creature's legs met its body. Both of her legs were to one side with her hands folded in her lap. "Is everything satisfactory?" she said from behind her mask.

"Yes," I told her, moving near the creature to where the second saddle was. With its legs flexed it was actually lower to the ground than a horse, but I was sure that it would become much taller. I mimicked her position as I mounted the creature finding its stance to be impossibly firm, as if I were mounting a solid rock. As soon as I was in place it rose, so smooth and deliberate I almost suspected that the creature were mechanical.

"The journey will not take long," she told me, facing away towards the head of the insect. "The apostle mantis is quite swift."

I could see why she preferred it. It was indeed quite swift, but it kept its body so smoothly level that I felt little need to hang on if not for the rush of air constantly blowing in my face. We did not speak as it traveled; she was facing away from me and I did not think she would have heard me through the rush of air and the thrashing of the forest as the creature's legs danced briskly against it. I looked up at the sky after a time seeing that the sun was quite high now.

With a shock I recoiled as all went dark. I threw my head back to look where we had come from and saw the mouth of a cave vanishing into the distance behind us. We turned abruptly and the exit was out of sight. I looked forward, expecting nothing but inky darkness, but instead saw that some illumination was guiding our way. Bits of light, twinkling and giving off dusty glowing trails, were racing before us at the same pace as the insect. I could hear what sounded like chimes coming from them as they spun and looped along in their path.

Deeper and deeper we went; until somehow I felt we were no longer in a cave at all, but back in the woods, only at the dead of night with a starless sky. I knew we could not have traveled all night and exited the cave at the other side, so I could only assume that we had entered into some underground forest. The mantis's speed diminished as the great trees grew closer and closer and the bits of light drifted away before us. Then it stopped completely.

"We must continue on foot," Delphine said as she slid off. I followed her.

The bits of light were no longer before us, but I could still see them dancing in the distance. But there was more light. A red and greenish glow emitted from above and all around, casting leafless branches above our heads into dark silhouette. She walked before me slowly, her footfalls against the hard cave floor echoing into the distance along with the distant sound of the

chimes. I looked from tree to tree, somehow expecting some form of movement, but only saw twisted ancient bark. We were in a clearing now. The lights spun and bounced beyond the tree line on the other side. Delphine stopped. I did as well, by her side.

There was a sound in the distance, what sounded like rope rubbing against the trees. Abruptly came a voice in the darkness, but of no language I understood. It chanted and echoed, barely words at all, but some inhuman whining and chattering, a mockery of human tongue. The source of the first noise shot into view before us; long slender shapes, vines or tendrils of some sort, twisted and writhed before us. I instinctively took a step backwards, though Delphine did not move. The indecipherable non-words grew louder as something began to take shape before us, the stems binding together into a pillar before us.

As quickly as it began, it stopped. The dark shape before us silently untangled itself, legs, arms, and a head crowned in thick hair. It was a woman, though if she was of flesh or plant I could not be certain due to the darkness; she was naked, generous of hips and endowment, slender in the waist and neck. If she was truly formed from vines then they had no need for roots, as her bare feet tread easily from her place of origin to carry her towards us slowly. A pulse of green light came from her eyes suddenly, illuminating a face of smooth green bark.

"Woodsie Queen," Delphine said, head lowered and arms to either side of her, palms forward. I made no such gestures. I kept my eyes fixed on this being that had manifest itself before us feeling a stirring deep within myself.

"Witch," the woman said, her eyes flashing orange for an instant. She then turned to me, her eyes flashing similarly, "Assassin."

"Viktoria, sister, we, the Faery and the Queen of Fangs, have come here to petition for your allegiance. The time is now at hand for the three of us to stand as one."

The woman was silent, head shifting ever so slowly between us. Her hair began to move, like vines with the lives of snakes, brushing against her shoulders and neck. I could see two tendrils at either side of her forehead rise up slowly, a shocking visage resembling horns. Her once green skin was slowly turning gray, the smooth texture growing rough, the orange in her eyes no longer simply a flash, but an ever increasing glow. The voices in the darkness resumed, the changing non-language twisting and writhing about not unlike the vines that had formed this woman's body.

"Then I pity you," she echoed as she spoke, her own words matching the tone of the distant chanting. "I made my allegiances clear long ago; do not think they will change so easily." The whining chatter intensified, no longer distant, now much louder than before; somehow, I knew that it was coming from *her*.

"The time of the old Gods has ended. It is now the time of the Goddesses. We can win where the others have failed, because of our unity!"

"I chose my allegiance, and it was not with you. You call yourself Queen of the Fae, but you are no more than a witch. You do not even wish to be a

goddess; you wish to be a monarch and so a monarch is all you shall ever be.”

Delphine resumed her bargaining, but I could not hear it—those red eyes were fixed upon me, and her voice flooded my mind like water into my lungs. “*And you; you are not who she thinks you are.*”

I shook myself, recoiling from the intrusion, but as soon as it had happened it was gone. “*Imposter! Imposter!*” cried something from deep within.

“*Why did you bring us here? Why did you let her bring us here?*”

“*And now they have you, and you will become one of theirs, and always will you be one of theirs!*”

Delphine’s voice cut through the chaos in my mind. “Viktoria, look at me!” She said, pushing the hood from her head and pulling the mask free. “I am Delphine; not Tempia. Your quarrel was with her, not me!”

The woman smiled. “Do you wish for me to flatter your...appearance? I know who you are, witch. Do not doubt that. Do not think that by evoking the name of my old adversary and insisting that you, her pupil, are in any way different from her does anything for me.”

“Why do you cling to the past? You, of all beings, always insisting yourself, the past is the past.”

“If you expect me to be a creature of habit and protocol, then you are truly as foolish as you appear. I do as I wish when I feel it is correct. I have no use for codes of conduct.”

“Then you must understand that all I have done is in that same faith: as I wished, when I felt it was correct. You must see that.”

“And you must see that the correlation holds little meaning. What you choose for yourself has nothing to do with what I choose. You cannot sway my mind with such petty arguments. I am aware of what you have chosen as your *right ways*, and see no reason to consider them any more lightly...” she paused, her face growing in ferocity, “just because *you* felt that it was best for *yourself*.”

“Then for the sake of the Queen of Fangs!” Delphine commanded. “With her you have no quarrel!”

Viktoria turned her eyes to me once again, but did not dwell. She quickly cast her gaze back to Delphine. “Do suggest that any form of alliance with the Queen of Fangs is even *possible* shows only your ignorance. To believe that she is in any way an ally of *yours* shows only your naivety.”

Delphine paused, those inhuman eyes of hers seeming all too human with their look of denial. “You are quite the opposite of what I had come to expect.”

“And you are exactly what I knew to expect.” The woman began to twist and deform, just as she had when she arrived, but in reverse. Soon all that remained was her face, but in an instant even that was gone, and the vocalizations with it. We were left alone, and in silence.

“Let’s go,” she said, turning quickly and putting her mask back in place. “There is nothing else here to do.” I looked back in the direction where the woman had been, sensing a distant rumble. One by one the wisps of light

blinked out, but not because they were vanishing. I could see the subterranean trees shifting in place, moving to fill the gaps that had previously led deeper into this domain. They were sealing the way; we were not welcome. By the time I heard her call for me again we were in complete darkness. I had only the sound of her feet to guide my regress. How strange it felt to consider her the safest and most familiar thing I could reach.

I could hear her before me mounting the creature. I broke the silence. "I did as you asked. I came with you, little good it seemed to do. I don't know what you had hoped to accomplish." I was in place, and we began moving again. The mantis did not seem to need light to know where it was going.

"Yes, you did. I had hoped that things could be quite differently for the three of us, but I see that I was wrong. My plans must change yet again." I could not see her, but I felt that she had turned to look at me. "I was wrong about *her*, but I am pleased to see that I was not wrong about *you*."

I promised myself that very soon she would see just how wrong about me she actually was, as soon as I had what I needed from her. "What about Ghost?" I ventured.

"I will see what there is to be done for him, once we return, but we have to act quickly. Many things will be happening now. Now that I know we cannot count on Viktoria's help...now I know, it will be up to us. I know I can trust you Thalia. In the end, she will see that she was wrong. But, by then, it may be too late for her."

I didn't care about any of that. She would help me remove the curse from Ghost and the demon from Lytha, or she would feel the full brunt of both unleashed upon her. The first, I felt, would not be difficult to achieve. I only hoped that through those same means I could accomplish the second goal. It was definitely not something I could expect Delphine's help with. I would take it by force.

With the sky above us once more, we were soon to approach the encampment. What bargaining lay ahead of me to ensure that I got what I wanted was yet to be seen, but somehow I knew Delphine would do all she could to get as much out of me as she could in the process. Then she seemed to come to attention and did something which made the insect move even faster. There was a commotion up ahead in the encampment. As we drew closer I could see that there was a great deal of action taking place.

We came to a halt; she slid down even before the insect stopped moving. I followed as quickly as I could get my bearing. As we passed the first line of tents I could see that the number of pagans and beasts present had doubled. There was even a new addition; many small chattering monkeys with swords and great leathery wings hopped from tent to tent and circled in the sky. The other newcomers, mostly men with animalistic features were chanting and cheering, with the ones I recognized from before taking great interest in the packages which were being delivered.

Bodies, coated in blood, bound and gagged, were being dragged in; some were tied to sticks, others dragged, and others even in sacks. They were Hammerites.

"Cicada! Tell me of your conquest!" Delphine shouted. The weight of her earlier defeat was completely gone and replaced with the regal command of the queen as she addressed her servants.

One stepped forward. He hunched with bulging, unnatural shoulders which came up to the back of his elongated skull. As he spoke, I could see sharpened teeth inside a pointed jaw. "Fell into our trap, just as I promised. A great prize; one of them is very important!" he hissed with a hint of a growl. He pointed with a long, claw-like finger at the parcel to the rear. A rack of branches had been tied together; a figure was stretched out across it, his body oozing with blood and tied to the frame in every possible location. He was blindfolded and his bearded chin was wrapped closed just as the rest of him was bound.

"Do I believe what I see before me? Cicada, you are truly a beautiful creature," she said as she moved to caress his neck and shoulder. "The high priest of the Hammerheads sends his very own, his most prized pupil, and you deliver him to me alive. This is a glorious day indeed." The prisoner stirred, suddenly coming to life, straining against the bonds which held his mouth shut, hands balled into fists as he fought against the thorny vines which held them firm.

"A feast? Possibly," she said, toying at the side of Cicada's head where his ear should have been. "A ransom, I think. Yes, I think that would do well and then a feast. Oh, but Hammerites always taste so horrid." Cries of disagreement erupted from the assembled mob, which seemed to be growing larger every moment. "No? You disagree?" she said playfully. "Very well, but you will pardon me if I do not partake; I prefer the ones with less muscle and more fat." she added with a laugh, which was accompanied by cheers and roars of laughter.

"Cicada, make ready to deliver my terms of ransom. The rest of you!" she shouted, and then waited for the outburst to die down. "It is time we were on our way. There is no longer reason to keep watch over the envoy to our embassy. The Hammer-warriors have been bested, and though their workers still toil diligently to topple Scina's Monument, we must move on. Leave no trace of this encampment. Go to your places and await the messengers for your next commands. The prisoners shall accompany me." She then lowered her voice, and looked to me, "and what is it that you desire, Thalia?"

I looked to the Hammerites with an empty feeling inside. No matter how cruel their fate was, I could not muster the least sympathy for them. "I have already told you what I want."

"Yes, the male," she said without waiting to see if I had more to say. "Then you and he shall be traveling with me. Once we have reached my laboratory I will focus all my energy on your request. I take it he has rested long enough. You may wake him now if you wish."

I nodded, glancing back to the tent where he still slept. I felt I knew how he would take all of this, but I could never be sure. He would not be happy, but the curse would persuade him. He, like I, would be willing to do almost anything to be free from it.

But then, amidst all of the commotion, something felt out of place. For an instant I felt I was back in the cave again, with the great trees in the darkness and the drifting lights in the distance, and then it was gone. I looked back the way we came, and saw only sunlit woodlands.