

Orchestrated Ignorance...

"The only question I have is, why did they wait this long?"

Captain Wendle was standing before Lord Canard discussing the recent "problem" in the dungeon. That morning when I had gone downstairs to begin my shift, I found that the night watchmen was missing, and that there was a pool of blood spilling into the hall from one of the cells, the only cell in that wing who had anyone in it in fact. It was a gruesome sight, like a bomb had gone off right in the man's face. The night watchmen was then quickly tracked down; merely drugged.

"The right question," Lord Canard answered slowly, "but still one we do not have an answer to. To be quite honest, I too expected an assassination attempt on our prisoner days ago."

"Maybe they just wanted to give it a few days to allow us to relax."

"An eternity, in which we could have gotten out of him who he was working for."

"But we had done nothing of the sort. No interrogations have been done." Captain Wendle seemed upset, and I didn't blame him. I was just glad he wasn't taking it out on me.

"Yes, well, the prison-master has been busy."

"Yes," the captain trailed off, probably not impressed by that. "Very well, if there is nothing to discuss..."

"Only breakfast," was Canard's reply. Captain Wendle left, and dragged me along with him.

"What the devil is going on?" I demanded impudently. "It's like Canard wanted to lose the prisoner!"

"He did, and without him telling us anything. Damn this political maneuvering and everything it entails!" Wendle seethed. "All Canard wanted to do is to make sure Raputo didn't have the prisoner, and then conveniently kept him in an outer-wall cell, un-interrogated, until he was silenced. Now Canard can wash his hands of the whole thing. Blast and taff this, I am getting too old for this kind of burrick-shit."

"But now we'll never know if that assassin was working for Ramirez or not!" I insisted, as if that would help.

"Of course he was working for Ramirez! The point is that as long as Canard can *claim* that there is no proof, he doesn't have to do anything. I wouldn't be surprised if someone on the inside had even drugged your co-worker!"

"I'll never understand this stuff," I just remarked.

"No, pray that you don't."

Orchestrated Neglect...

"About Blasted Time!" I yelled, but then felt myself go red with regret over mine outburst. I had been sitting for hours at Saint Benadictia's Hospital along with my wounded comrades from the expedition, expecting some news, some orders, some report from my superiors over what to do next. Brother Oberon seemed to be ignoring me, and even Father Rafael was impossible to communicate with. I understood that some devastating calamity had taken place elsewhere, but at the Hospital we were being told nothing.

But now a unit of twenty-four men stood before me, along with orders. I unrolled the scroll, sealed by Rafael himself, and read.

RETURN TO THE VILLA WITH THESE
MEN AND CONTINUE THY MISSION.

"That is it?" I demanded, glaring at the unit's commander who stood before me. "These are mine entire orders?"

"I believe so, Brother Ivan," he replied coolly.

It was an insult, not only to myself, but to Chispin as well as the entire mission. After all I had reported, I was granted a paltry handful! "This simply will not do!"

"It is all that couldst be afforded given the circumstances. All churches and other installations have gone on triple security following the disaster at the Temple of the Inquisitor and the subsequent attacks on a dozen other locations. We are all that canst be afforded."

"So we are to go completely on the defensive. Very well, I shalt do as have been asked. Come, we march at once!"

Orchestrated Inevitability...

The branch I stood on barely shifted as my nest-mate touched down beside me, its body quickly constricting into a hunch with translucent wings folded away to match my own posture, as I observed the activity below.

"The mongbats and the mansie-kin both failed," I clicked and chirped to my fellow fae. "The hammer-fools work to bring their metal beast to bear on Scina's monument."

My nest-mate was silent in observation of what I had just described. The metal monster of billowing steam and roaring fire was approaching the monument; the great stump around which Queen had built her embassy to the city-heads.

"We must halt them," my nest-mate chirped, "does Queen know of this?"

"Yes," I replied quickly, "and feels as I do. The time for action has past. For now will wait, and see."

"Wait? Why? They are so few now...the two of us could fell them ourselves!"

"She said it is inevitable, and that all things must change. She said the time of the divide has come to an end. She said that Scina's monument's time is over; we are to guard it no longer. She said that what lies beneath...is to be released."

"So she believes then...the myths to be true. It had long been the duty of the fae to safeguard the monument, but now Queen turns her back on this? I can accept it, but if this it to be so, why this way? Released by the hammer-fools? Is that wise? Should we ourselves not be the ones?"

"We can consider it an offering to those that lie waiting below, those that dwell within the underworld."

"The underworld..." my nest-mate shuddered horribly at the word, synonymous with hell and damnation. "Does Queen's plans make room for such things?"

"Queen's plans make room for all things."

Chapter 12

Higher Stations

— Sheam: A Rock is What He Asked For —

Day 6: 8:00 am

The sight of sculpted plaster ceiling tiles was profane to my eyes. I twisted out of bed, responding to a sound which I might have heard but also could have dreamed. I was unaccustomed to the idea of having there be just a doorway between myself and someone *else* while I slept. I slid to the door and found a sealed envelope had been tucked under it. There was no marking on the seal, but curiously written on the back was,

*A curious day,
my Lady Sheam,
to see us dance and frolic,
sight unseen?*

Three, three, six, two: James's mark of authenticity. His little rhymes were always lovely too, when he found time to invent one. I took pause to sit while smiling to myself, delighted to have James's company even so indirectly, and knowing that my happiness would surely fade as soon as I read whatever dreadful news he had adorned so cheery a poem with. I opened the letter and read it. It was short, and to the point. Most importantly it did not contain grave news, but a request. In no time I was dressed for travel and bidding Eisenhower a good morning.

I had managed to recover my wardrobe, and so I was buttoned, buckled, and clipped in my own tight dark blue attire, with laced boots up to my knees and a collar buttoned to under my chin, making straight for The Circle. An icy fist seemed to catch me in the throat as I happened to see a pair of Gryphons chasing off some roughs from the premises. Looters. I could not overly concern myself with it; I had to leave the protection of this place to the guards now. I could not conceivably, myself, defend all of this *stuff* from the prying hands of opportunists. Besides, all of the items of true value were still below. But then again, James seemed to think that the particular item I had been sent after was of value, and it had most certainly been left among the collection that was 'safe' for Hammerites to inspect. It would be simply a rock under a glass dome. I knew exactly where it was kept.

The museum wing was just as ruined as most areas. Some areas in the brickwork were smashed through causing rifts to form all the way up into the vaulted roof. I could just see the entire chamber coming crashing down on my head, trapping my still breathing body under just enough rubble to break every bone south of my ribcage. Somehow, that seemed a far worse fate than simply getting my skull cracked open. The display with the rock would be at the far side of the ground level. I saw the pedestal at once; it was laying on its side.

I knelt down to it. A plaque etched into bronze at the top edge of the display read,

A curious stone, fallen to
earth from the heavens
—donated by B. Brockyl—

Shattered bits of curved glass were all over the floor surrounding it. I sifted through it gingerly; the circle had already seen enough red for one lifetime, I didn't need to add my blood to the sum. I told myself that I would be able to recognize the odd bit instantly; it could never be mistaken for any bit of rubble broken free from the stone walls. And, there it was, plain as day; if it were a spider I would have been dead.

I lifted up the rock, remembering at once how unusually heavy it seemed. It was more metal than stone, I reasoned, marveling at the wrinkled, craggy surface that was nevertheless as smooth as glass. I was back on my feet, shaking bits of stray glass from the hem of my coat and where they had stuck into my boots, and was on my way. I had no doubt whom James implied I take the stone, ingot, rather, to be worked. A man named Gordon kept shop several miles south-west of The Circle, and so there I walked.

But then I noticed the smell of burning. I craned my neck to look over the line of rooftops, expecting to see plumes of smoke. It was almost directly ahead, and from the amount in the sky, it seemed to have been burning for many hours. As I drew nearer, knowing this street well, I realized that it had to be coming from the local Hammerite church. A crowd had gathered, though were being held back by erected barriers, to watch the progress of the fire. Relief mixed with disappointment as I realized there was truly nothing to be seen. The stone building had of course not burned down, and from my vantage point in the street I could not see the damaged area where the smoke was coming from.

I did not wish to, though this may have been vanity and paranoia, be recognized by the Hammerites and taken captive, so I kept my distance and tried as best I could to blend neatly in with the gathered crowd. I could catch bits of conversation as I passed. "See what happened?" "No, you?" "I heard that pagans are to blame—they set off a bomb." "Well I heard that it's a religious protest, done by ordinary folks!" "My neighbor told me this had to be an inside job. He reasoned, a disgruntled novice." "Do you think the fire will spread?" "My chickens are doing just lovely this year!" "I caught a glimpse of something earlier, some Hammerites moving around inside. I wonder why they won't come out?" "Do you think any of them died? Oh I sure hope so!" "How dare you! My nephew is a Hammerite!"

I thought about the Hammerite funerals, the blood trail; links and clues. This was another piece to the puzzle that much I knew, but I also knew that I was not to be the one to solve it.

A mile or so passed before I reached Gordon's shop, with that typical wooden anvil of a hanging sign knocking rhythmically against a metal pole in the breeze. As I pushed the door open, slack was given on a pulley, causing a small metal weight to drop onto a miniature gong. "Enter!" he called.

My eyes skimmed across the array of unglamorous items hanging from

the wall; cooking pots and pans, barrel hoops, farming tools, and horseshoes of every shape and size. At the far side of the interior was a man in a leather apron, putting down a pair of tongs as he approached. "Welcome, welcome," he said.

"I have a job for you. I am told that it will be difficult and time consuming, but the pay will be generous. Are you interested?"

"Sheam, isn't it?" he said, moving to behind the counter and taking up a ledger to jot down my order. "What is it you need?"

From the looks of things in progress I could tell he was very busy right now. He seemed to be making a spade, with several other dozen objects in various stages of completion strewn about the back half of the shop. I hated to tell people how to run their business, but I needed to be frank with him. "Yes, Sheam," I gifted him with a smile for remembering. "This request comes from James, actually, and I must beg you to complete this order at once."

He peered at me from over his whiskers, the look on his face reading as 'well this had better be good' rather than 'no way in hell, I am too busy.'

I showed him the material in question. "James needs for you to cold-forge this ingot into an arrowhead." I hoped he would not need any more directions than that; it's all James told me, and I knew nothing about blacksmithing. I didn't even know what cold-forge meant.

His brow twitched a little as he took it from me with big stubby fingers. "First of all, this isn't an ingot. If I melted it down and formed it into a bar, then it would be an ingot."

Self-doubt brought a slight flush of embarrassment to my cheeks. "I thought a hunk of raw metal was..." It was true that James had never called it an ingot. I added that myself in an attempt to look clever. "Never mind. How soon can you have it done?"

"I am not used to working with a chunk of ore," he said, tapping it and turning it over in his hands like it was an egg. "And I've never seen one quite like this before. Cold forge he wants? And he wants it quickly? Those two demands do not go well together."

I glanced down at the counter. I had to be firm about this. I gathered myself up and resumed my businesslike composure. "You can name your price. James always pays, as you know."

"That he does, that he does," he said, a cautionary glance taken to his work in progress before resuming. "I'll need compensation for all of the late work. It'll have to be on the house if it's another day late. That and," he grinned and began to laugh "after I am done pounding away at this rock, I'm going to need a massage."

I was sure he would, but it wasn't going to come from me. "We can arrange for a visit to the massage...place, for you."

"I'm thinking Madam Blough's," he said quickly, obviously having thought this out already. "She does good work."

"Very well, it will be arranged," I told him with a twist of the brow and an ever so slight frown.

"And the cold forging bit...working without heat is an awful drag. And I

woke up with this nasty cramp in my arm this morning. Normally I charge double for it, but I think this time I will have to ask for triple."

My open hands went down on his counter hard. "Shall I bring you a steady supply of port while you're at it? And how about a cabaret line? Some dancing girls in your shop for you to watch while you work? Better be careful, or you may miss the metal and hit something *else*."

He laughed, but I think he got the point. "Oh we wouldn't want that," he said, still chuckling. "Fine, tell you what, we can stick with double. Double pay for my time, plus all of the work that will be late because of this, and a visit to The Blough's when I am done."

I hated the sound of the deal, but I was realizing that cold-forged probably meant that he was going to have to work on the metal without the benefit of heat, which seemed like an awful lot of work. He probably was in the right for giving me a hard time over it. "Yes," was all I said.

"And just to show you how much I appreciate it," he said, again peering at the rock from over his whiskers, "I'll make the whole arrow for you. The best arrowhead in the world isn't any good if it's not fitted to a shaft by an expert. That's on the house!"

If it was on the house then it had to be a trivial fee anyway. I let it be. "Thank you," I said. "James will want to be contacted directly when it's finished." At least he hadn't asked for any payment up front. I was accustomed to him only accepting payment when the job was done, so I hadn't brought any money.

I could have just gone back to my hotel room, but now that I was out and about I couldn't stand the thought of just shelving myself away like that. I set out to James' home. I would tell him personally what I had done, and then hopefully he could tell me a little more about what was going on. I wanted to know where Daelus was, and when I could move back into my home.

As I walked, nearly an hour later, I smelled smoke again. I looked up to see an almost identical scene, billows of dark ash drifting up from a Hammerite building. This one wasn't a church; it was a boarding house for young novices. I felt a flash of anger when I realized that the same people who had attacked the church had also sought to kill a bunch of children. The words I had overheard from the previous crowd leapt back into my mind. "My nephew is a Hammerite!" an old woman had said. I quietly prayed for her that the boy had not been in this school when the fire hit. It was foolish. For all I knew he was a soldier working the alleys of the slums.

I made a wide berth to avoid the scene, and continued on my way. The streets around James's apartment building were quiet this time of day. It was pleasant to get out of the sun and into the shady confines of the narrow stair leading upwards into the heart of the building. The smell of the huddled, filthy bodies lining the stair however was not. I stepped around them carefully, dreading that at any moment one of them could make a grab for my leg. They would appreciate my boots as much as I did were that to happen. Once to the right door, I knocked. I heard a bit of a commotion inside. There was a small glass set into the center of the door, a peephole; so I stood where

I thought it best for someone to see me through it. "Just a moment Sheam!" came the familiar, warm voice of James's wife, Corinne, followed by a long series of thuds and knocks as she undid the locks.

"Come in, come in!" she pleaded, cracking the door open just wide enough to let me fit through. "So, none the worse for wear and tear? You certainly look ready to take on the world! Are you visiting Daelus's tailor now?" She laughed easily as she said this.

I blushed slightly as I regarded her. She was a lovely woman nearing fifty, both taller and more slender than I, with short dusty brown hair which curved down around her cheeks. A delicate pair of wire rimmed spectacles sat on her nose. "Oh no, not quite anyway. But yes, I am fine."

— Jyre: Unjust Rewards —

Day 6: 12:00 pm

I barely knew what was going on. I had been taken from the place below ground, told repeatedly that I was not to worry, and set into an oversized chair at an oversized table in an oversized room, while men and women who I didn't know stood around and talked about things that made no sense to me. One thing did make sense to me though; the oversized plate of steaming food which had been set down before me. The smell of the roasted beef invaded my senses and almost made me drunk with anticipation. It sat in a pool of brown juices with a little bit of green something sprinkled on top. My hand quickly went for the knife to dig in, but then I stopped.

In a flash in my mind, I saw myself leaping onto Daelus, plunging the knife into him over and over. I dropped the knife onto the table, where it bounced and fell to the floor with a clatter. My feet went up to the chair as I pulled my knees to my chin, hugging onto myself as I shook with grief and regret.

The conversation nearby stopped. The first thing I saw when I looked up was an elderly woman with an apron looking very troubled as her eyes went from me, to my food, and to the others over my shoulder. She came over quietly and took the knife off the floor, setting it down on the table again with a, "Not hungry dear?" spoken ignorantly at me. It made me angry; of course I was hungry! Can't you see that!

Then a chair nearby was pulled away from the table, and a man who's face I felt that I knew very well, though I had no idea why, sat down. His round creased face with inviting light brown eyes set me at ease at once. He pulled the plate of meat away from me as well as a knife and fork, and began to cut. I watched him jealously, expecting at any moment for him to begin devouring my food, though I would have done nothing to try to stop him. I began to wish that he would, simply so that I would have another reason to feel angry.

Finally, he placed it back before me, fork still in place inside one of the small squares. I flicked my eyes back up to his smile briefly before I took the fork up and stuffed the food into my mouth. I nearly forgot to breathe, almost choked several times, and was certainly making a mess of my face as I devoured the offering like a starving animal. It was more food than I was

used to eating in a single day, and finer food than I had maybe ever had, ever. I felt it was wasted on me though. I would have just as greedily devoured a lump of stale bread and hard, salted meat.

"Do you know who I am, Jyre?" he said.

I was about to shake my head but suddenly found myself saying, "James," instead. Then I remembered; lying in bed, the strange disc, and all of those questions...all those questions. How had I answered them all so easily? It didn't matter. I just nodded, my mouth hanging open slightly as I sat there befuddled before this strange grinning person.

"Good. You have petitioned the master for his aid, and thus in doing so have petitioned me. I am in a position to begin a very serious phase of the work you have set us out to do, but to do so I will need your cooperation. I invite you to join our company officially; understand, this is an offer you must seriously consider before you accept or decline. Accept it and you must be willing to help me in any way you can in order to see the ends you desire; this crusade against The Lady which you have set us upon. Decline and we shall still continue in this crusade, but I am afraid I will be able to ask no more of you, and you must be excluded from the remainder of the campaign."

"I accept," I said without really listening to him. His offer didn't make much difference to me, but I knew that I didn't want to be cut out from what was going on. "Are you...are you really going to help me?" I found I didn't want to believe it. I hadn't come to this man for help; I had come to Daelus. Why should I finally be offered the help I need, but not from the man I needed it from? I felt my lips trembling as the truth of the matter crept back up on me. "How can I do anything else now...after what I did..." My cheeks were wet with tears again.

He picked up a towel from the table to my face to dry my cheeks, but I pulled it away from him and did it myself. I didn't understand why they were treating me like this. I should be in chains in a dungeon. They insisted that Daelus was alright; he wasn't dead, I didn't kill him; but then where was he? Even they didn't know. No one knew, so why should I believe them?

"Yes Jyre, we're really going to help you," he said as he produced a scroll, a bag which jingled like it was full of money, and a quill pen. "Do you know what an oath is, Jyre?"

"Yes," I said meekly, staring at the still half full plate before me.

"Very good," he said, unrolling the scroll before me. It didn't have many words on it. He wrote my name in at the top in big letters with the quill. "Now, say the words on the scroll as I do. I pledge honesty."

I looked down at the page. It had only four lines. That was it? I say these four lines and suddenly I was part of this group? It seemed stupid to me. But it was important to him, so I went along with it. "I pledge honesty."

"Diligence, attentiveness, and faculty shall be granted without restraint." I repeated him as he said it. "Do you know what all of those words mean, Jyre?"

"Yes," I told him crossly. I didn't really, but I hated that he asked me; like he thought I was stupid.

"I will hold to the network's interests with fiduciary duty." Again, I repeated him, though if he had asked me again if I knew what the word meant, I would have admitted to not having a clue.

"This I vow."

"This I vow," I said quietly. Just stupid words; I felt no different. I had no more desire to do as I was told than I had before. I would have done as he asked without some stupid words to recite.

He handed me the quill, and I signed. Still, it made no sense. I looked over the words of the oath one more time with a frown.

He had produced another book and writing implement, and was putting something in diligently. "This is the payroll," he told me. "It confirms that I have given you your first salary of twelve copper pieces, as all receive weekly at your rank of incumbency." The sack was pushed towards me.

I looked inside. Just like he said, twelve coppers. I would have done as he wished without his money either, but I wasn't going to refuse it. I let out a sigh and closed the bag. "Do you know where Daelus is yet?" I pleaded.

"He will reveal himself when the time is right, I am sure of it. He is a resilient fellow; always bounces back somehow." His smile reassured me. I still didn't understand all those words, but somehow it made me feel like I could trust him more. Trust and duty were obviously very important to him. I should be able to expect it from him. "But now we must go. We have much to do, and little time to do it in."

— James: A Litany of Informants —

Day 6: 1:00 pm

Jyre seemed at once startled by the horse as well as intensely curious. It's one thing to admire a horse from afar, but once you're in contact with one and you realize how truly large an animal it is, there can easily be a moment of intimidation. Richen seemed to be rested and in good spirits, though I suspected that all he required for good spirits was to be brushing his horse, which is exactly what he was doing when we found him waiting outside. A new carriage had been procured for the journey, which Jyre seemed almost as intimidated by as she was by the horse.

"Keep up the watch old boy," I said to Jossimer as I patted his shoulder. "I'll raise the blue flag. Send a carrier pigeon if there's any sign of Daelus."

"Of course," he said, sounding a bit glum.

"Oie!" Richen shouted as he leapt up to his shiny new seat on his shiny new carriage. It was one of the modern varieties, called a Hansom Cab, where he sat at the top back of a small car on a sprung seat with the passengers up front and closer to the ground, flanked by very large wheels, with the doors closing in front of us before our laps. A trap door on the rooftop could be opened if I wished to speak with him, which I now had opened as he was doing just that. "She's a beaut! Gonnay have ta' 'old onta' thisun!"

"I'm delighted that you like it!" I replied proudly after deciphering what the devil he had actually said. "Now please, make haste to my apartment, but

drop us off several blocks in advance of it, if you please!"

"Sortenly ser!" he said before he cracked the whip with a, "ha!"

Jyre jumped a little at the sound of the whip, and then again when we began to quickly move forward.

"Have you ever ridden in a horse drawn carriage, Jyre?" I asked, giving her knee a reassuring pat.

She nodded her head quickly, eyes fixed on the back of the horse with a certain trepidation.

"Ah! I hope it does not spoil you though! Once you've been tempted with the speed and ease, it is very tempting to grow impatient and weary with walking!" I grinned at her, watching for any sort of reaction, but she just kept her eyes fixed on the horse.

After what seemed like no more than an hour with scenery flying past us, I realized it was time to stop. "Thank you, Richen!" I called up with a knock to the ceiling. "This is quite far enough!"

The cab came to a quick halt upon the side of the road. Richen had quickly learned the benefits of this new design; a lower center of gravity meant that he could take turns much faster without the fear of tipping, not to mention a much lighter and more agile framework in general. Combining that with his lofty vantage point and the absolute thrill he no doubt got when he did actually manage to make the cab tip, meant that he was able to experiment with untold acts of velocity. It had turned Jyre into a complete nervous wreck at first, but in time it seemed more like she was pretending to be afraid in fear of appearing to be enjoying something. "Here ye are!" he said, crossing his arms proudly from his throne above our heads.

"Here you are!" I called back, tossing him a gold coin as a tip, "And another one for you shortly. Meet us back here in two hours. Four o'clock!" I said, checking my pocket watch. He winked and nodded to me and cracked his whip. In no time he was circumnavigating the maze of larger, slower carriages, many of whom were shaking fists in protest as he went.

"Come along Jyre," I said to the girl who seemed to once again be practicing her well crafted façade of complete hopelessness. She followed as I asked her to, sticking close by me through the sparsely occupied and dreary streets, though compared to her it was downright sunny!

I quickened my pace as I saw a familiar park upon the side of a building, and altered my course gradually to glide past a row of unkempt hedges. With a slight of my hand a folded letter was stolen away from Drop Box 19g. I knew at once who it was from; the g boxes were always used by my operative West, who had been sent to infiltrate The Bloods. I swept it open and read as the two of us walked.

There is great unrest among them. Friction between their founding leader, Crowley, and the charismatic newcomer, Ranson, is mounting. The group is nearing a breaking point, possibly splitting into two rival factions. Crowley and Ranson both seem to not want this however, as much as they hate each other. It's too

soon to tell what will happen; anything could at this point.

A very important note; Els and his pagan friend Moody were trying to infiltrate The Bloods. They didn't join up and try to snoop around; they cut straight to the snooping around. They were caught of course and now rot in a secret dungeon. He's part of the friction; Crowley thinks that Els should replace Ranson as their main insider in the campaign against Delphine, but Crowley needs Ranson because the man's such a damn good recruiter. People just flock to him and sign their name in blood and get brought into the fold in twos and threes. Crowley insists that he knows Ranson is conducting Blood business behind his back. More soon.

"I have news, Jyre," I said to her, noting her quickly mounting interest in what I was reading. "I know where your friend Els is."

Her eyes lit up and her gaping mouth let out a faint squeak. "He's alive?" she quickly begged.

"Apparently so; but sadly he is the unfortunate guest of your acquaintance Ranson and is being held prisoner."

Her look of relief and delight melted into a scowl. "We have to do something!" she demanded, and began to walk faster up ahead of me, even though she did not know where we were going!

"Oh yes, you can be quite certain of that!" I remarked with a grin. "I already have something in mind."

"Let's go! We have to go now!" she insisted, turning to look at me and walk backwards. "Ranson will kill him!"

"We cannot rush in like your friend did, Jyre. We must plan things. Please, trust me. I have one already being worked out. If my hunch is correct, it can be set in motion very soon. However I must warn you that you will be needed elsewhere."

"I have to help him!" she continued to insist.

"Be patient Jyre; you will indeed help him. Now, if you will bear with me for one moment..." We were coming up on Drop Box 19d, which also had a mark indicating that it was full. I took a detour to walk onto a shallow wooden porch which spilled out into the streets, and made a hasty grab at the edge of a page protruding from a narrow crack in a railing post. I was then back on the streets and expecting the second letter in a similar fashion; this one would be from none other than Othello himself. Baby Builder in a Blessed Buggy, the man filled up four pages!

According to Lord Metzé, formerly a clockmaker, the oath to Tempia has been both served and paid in full. I could write many pages on what he told me; but clearly I will not here. As we noticed all of the current holders of the oath are wealthy, aristocratic, and people of influence. This was the payment that was offered to them. The task was to create various items of

arcane design. The work, in his case (he has no knowledge of any others; in fact, my confrontation was the first he had ever known of others being given the same offer as he) was a series of components of enormous complexity and detail, not clockwork themselves, but miniature abstract sculptures requiring the type of precision and reiteration normally required in his craft.

It took him years to complete this task, during which time he was visited very often, by surprise, by Tempia to demand progress and to inspect his work. It was never good enough. By the time he finally produced a piece which met her approval; he was ready to take his own life out of hopelessness. More items of indiscernible purpose and seemingly having no relation with one another followed. Finally he finished, and he claimed that the rewards were worth the work. His only regret was that these things he created made him hate his profession, and by the time he was finished, he set down his tools never to pick them back up again. He had no need to, for Tempia saw that he was wealthy enough to last several generations.

It is a sad coincidence that he is the only surviving person of the original fifteen oath givers; he is also the only one who did not have heirs to make the true expanse of his wealth worthwhile.

With great reluctance he finally revealed to me the key aspect of his tale which I knew he was saving away the entire time. Tempia never collected the work he had done for her. However, some time ago last year he was invited out to a villa in the woods by a Lady Delphine, and he was instructed to bring the artifacts that he created for Tempia. He did so; and found her a kind and pleasant hostess; and definitely not the same person as Tempia. She took the artifacts from him and even promised him that he would produce an heir to make his surplus wealth worthwhile, though she did not elaborate on how a man of his lofty age would manage this. He's admitted that no developments along those lines have taken place, though the idea of it did make him very amicable towards Delphine at the time.

He has admitted that were she to call upon him again, he would gladly assist her.

"Remarkable!" I said aloud after finishing the report.

"What is it?" Jyre said, with the same curiosity she had displayed towards the first letter.

"I have news of the contacts within The City that you reported your Lady to possess. It seems that their debt is to another and complete, but The Lady, whom I shall henceforth refer to as Lady Delphine in order to avoid confusion, has claimed this debt is open once more and owed to her, though I am not certain if the victims in this case realize this is even happening."

"Oh," she said, sounding mystified. "I remember someone coming to see

her once.”

“Oh?” I said, echoing her previous monosyllabic expression.

“It was said they were from a big city. When I got here I realized it was probably this one. They were wealthy; they looked wealthier than The Lady, and were her guests. But I do not know anything about that; just that they stayed for a little while and then left.”

“Was this at Barlosk?”

She nodded. I did not want her to feel like the information was of no use in case she stumbled upon another memory later that actually was of use, but held it back in fear of seeming foolish.

“So, Delphine has been in contact with these lords and ladies for some time prior to her return to The City. Very interesting. Come along Jyre, we’re almost there.”

I had one last stop to make as I approached home, sweet home. A set of tube wind chimes hung low from a second floor balcony of a nearby building; just low enough for a man of my height to reach up and pull the bit of paper out of the lowest tube. Once again a mark, this time a pair of shutters opened at exactly forty-five degrees (but only on days with no wind!) informed me that I would find something there. Having retrieved the message, I flipped it open as I began to climb the stairs to my unit reading.

Activity along the Ramirez front continues to be quiet. The usual channels are still active; no change. The usual Ramirez outposts show no signs of increased or decreased activity. Ramirez has not reacted, as far as can be seen, to the Hammerite activity in The Circle, nor to Nightfall’s disappearance from The City. The operation to massacre the night-crew was likely paperless, and no one is talking about it. Ramirez’s nephew Balastar sadly seemed to survive the event; I can only guess that he was involved considering how battered he now appears. The official explanation—An accident while hunting bandersnatch.

“What’s that one say?” Jyre asked, now having learned that these notes usually had something to do with her.

I peeked over the top of it and grinned at her. “Ramirez is a sneaky bastard,” I said simply before pocketing it. As per usual, the vagrants were circumvented and in no time I was unlocking my door.

“Cor! I’m home!” I called out, holding the door open for Jyre. “And I have a guest.” Hearing her delightful voice coming from the other room I then exclaimed with pleasure “Ah, Sheam!” The hunch I had previously mentioned to Jyre was indeed correct. Things would be proceeding as planned, which I had now fairly well worked out.

— Jyre: Adrift in a Sea of...People —

Day 6: 2:30 pm

I kept just wanting to run. It would have been so easy to, this part of The City was full of places to hide, and I could tell that I was much faster than James. But every time I built up the urge to dash away the weight of the coins in my pocket reminded me of that oath, and that he was trusting me. I had to trust him now; he was the only way I'd get Els back...Or maybe Daelus.

I still didn't know what to think. James didn't seem to even be thinking about Daelus anymore, which both annoyed and reassured me. Why wasn't he doing everything he could to find out if Daelus was alive or dead? He didn't seem to care now, or was it just he was that sure that everything was okay?

"Ramirez is a sneaky bastard," he said. After my encounter I had almost forgotten that somewhere there was a real Ramirez and he was probably a great deal more frightening and dangerous than the one I had encountered.

There were people on the stairs, which James seemed to ignore as he walked up. They looked asleep, but I could feel their rheumy eyes against me, no doubt thinking something horrible. I stood close to James as he unlocked the door, which seemed to take forever, and then rushed past him as soon as he was through, even though I had no idea where I was going.

"Cor! I'm home! And I have a guest. Ah, Sheam!"

My eyes grew wide as I took in the cataclysm that surrounded me. The place had been torn apart! I grew tense and suspicious, but then realized that this was not James's reaction. He was hanging up his coat and pulling a pile of junk off a chair that he was offering to me. Maybe this was just how he lived? My hideaway with Els didn't have enough stuff in it to be a mess, but this place had so much stuff in it I couldn't even find the walls.

"Sorry about the mess," he said with a chuckle. "No time to straighten when there's work to do. Please, have a seat. Coffee?"

I sat down as I had been told, even though James hadn't actually *told* me to. At the coffee I shook my head with a frown. Women's voices were coming from another room, or it could have just been the other side of a huge stack of stuff. He disappeared around the corner for a moment speaking to them. I found that my back was growing stiff, and so I tried to relax a little against the chair. In no time James was in the room again and had shoved a plate of strange smelling brown lumps under my nose.

"Cor got the urge to bake today. Want some brownies?"

My nose wrinkled up at the bizarre sweet smell. I frowned and shook my head again. I wanted to explain to him that I was still full from my meal, but I couldn't find my voice. The truth was that they just looked wrong. Who would want to eat lumps of brown? Even their name was brown.

He shrugged a bit and popped one into his mouth, holding it gingerly as if he didn't want bits of it to fall off. The image it provoked suddenly made me call into question why someone like him would be held in such high regard by Daelus. He looked like a buffoon. I saw that he had also picked up a big brown mug from the other room, and was now drinking down the brown

lump with an equally repugnant brown liquid.

A woman appeared who was also dressed in brown, with brown hair, and brown eyes. "James," she said, "why don't you bring Jyre into the kitchen and we can all sit and talk together?"

"Oh of course, of course dear. Jyre?" he said, gesturing for me to follow.

I let out a sigh and moved to the other room. I saw the brown woman returning to a table which was overflowing with used dishes and mugs and books and papers. Then I saw who else was there, and quickly remembered that James had said 'Sheam' when he had come in. She was leaning over to read something, eyes focused with concern and concentration.

Sheam, Daelus's girl at The Circle, was simply stunning. She sat at the table opposite from where I stood, yet she may as well have been on a podium. Her dark blue blouse was buttoned with shiny white discs all the way up to her chin, with similarly buttoned sleeves coming down to her palms. She ignored me, like I wasn't even there. She was everything I wanted to be but knew I never could. At that moment, I convinced myself that Daelus was hers and that is how it would always be.

But then I looked up and she was right before me, putting her face right up into mine with her hand on my shoulder. "Jyre! We were so worried about you!" she said, with the smell of that liquid on her breath. Her eyes looked so bright and happy. I could never be that happy.

"Yes, I'm okay," I said, looking away from her and wishing she'd just get away from me. For an instant I wanted to hiss at her and tell her that I had killed Daelus, but in that instant I had hurt myself far more than saying it could hurt her. I shrunk away into the chair, feeling as if I was about to burst into tears again.

"Cor," James said. I realized then that the room had grown incredibly quiet. "Why don't you take Jyre into the study and share your progress with her." I looked over to see him handing the woman in brown a few things, before she got up and came over to me.

"Come this way dear," she said, disappearing into a dark opening. I got up and followed, but glanced back just before I went. I expected to see that same, mindless, happy look in Sheam's eyes, but I saw only sorrow. I wanted to congratulate myself for hurting her feelings and destroying that smile, but instead I felt worse. She had been kind to me and I showed her ugliness. I left, now sure that she hated me.

The room she led me into was like the others, only about half as cluttered. It was also lit only by a solitary window above a desk, rather than the many gas lamps lining the walls. She sat down at the desk and selected a scroll from a bundle. "Have a look at this," she said, unrolling it across the desk.

I moved closer and looked at it. It was a map of some kind. After I studied it for a moment I realized I was seeing individual houses rather than city blocks. It was of a village, not The City. "So?" I said, annoyed that I didn't understand why she was showing me this.

"Does any of this look familiar to you? Don't just look at the diagram. Look at the way the buildings are drawn and try to imagine yourself down in

it, looking around among them.”

I was going to ignore her advice and just tell her again that I didn't know, but quickly found myself imagining. I saw the way several small homes curved around a courtyard, with some taller buildings sweeping around the other side. Large grassy avenues stretched out beyond there, leading to more shops and homes. Everything sloped up to the north, and even the trees grew taller there. A little stream passed nearby, with farms on either side of it for miles. I remembered walking down that stream, competing with the rabbits to see who could steal the strawberries as soon as they were ripe enough to eat. “It's my home,” I said quietly, feeling so far away. “Do you know where it is?”

“Where it was,” she said, rolling the scroll back up. “No one knows what happened to it, but many also believe they know the truth. This,” she said, unrolling a handkerchief with a blotchy ink drawing on it, “is why I ask.”

I didn't have to examine it the same way I did the map to recognize it. It was the tattoo of The Lady that was on my foot. “How did you...”

“James drew it while you were asleep. You may have noticed that it is similar to the one on your captain friend, but not completely. It is of a very old dialect where the structure of the glyph changes slightly to alter the meaning; it is not simply a letter or a word, but an entire sentence. It's explaining that you are her slave and were captured from this village. Unfortunately, the only others who have been found with this exact same tattoo are all dead. I imagine there must be many more however. Did you ever meet anyone else from your village while in service to The Lady?”

“No,” I said, wishing she'd bring the map back out “just me.” Ever since my time in the forbidden district and the loss of Els, the thought of revenge had left me. It seemed so trivial in comparison to just attempting to maintain the little happiness I had left. Revenge became a distant memory of little meaning. But now it seemed that Els was alive, and needed help. James insisted that Daelus was alive and needed *no* help. This woman, Cor, reminded me of what I had always desired but had partially forgotten. I wanted to go *home*.

“Very soon James is going to ask you for help on a very specific task. He wanted you for this task even before we knew where you were. Out of all of us, you are the only one with actual firsthand experience with The Lady. We will also not be sending you alone.”

I didn't want to look at her, but what she was saying was making me want to smile. I supposed that going home wasn't the only thing that I wanted; I wanted to feel needed. Finally I looked up at her and said, “I will help.”

She smiled broadly. “That will make him happy. But I have something I need your help with too.”

My mouth opened a little as I fought to mask my interest. “What?”

“James and I have taken it upon ourselves to help a young boy make his way as a freed slave. He is a bit younger than you now, but was simply a child when he was rescued. A man, Andrew, who is a good friend of ours, has taken him in, but has recently fallen ill and so the lad spends more and more time

over here. He helps us with chores, though you may have noticed that we are not terribly concerned with such things, in exchange for lessons in the written word and history. I thought that it would be perfect if you would assist in his tutelage. You can read and write yourself, which I find remarkable, and he could use the company of someone close to his own age. Not only that, but you two have similar histories, and I have always found it easiest to talk to someone about something very important if I already know they will understand."

I listened to her quietly, sometimes interested, sometimes not, sometimes worried, and other times wanting very much to help. "What do you want me to do?" I asked, not really understanding what was being asked of me.

"Today I would simply like you to meet him and talk with him. It does not matter what you say, and I will leave you two alone after you are introduced. I just think that it would certainly make his day a little brighter. You see, he is certain that Andrew is not long for this world. Sadly, I believe he is correct, but that does not mean he can spend his days feeling sorry for the fact. He needs something to take his mind off it."

I nodded, "I will talk to him."

She smiled again, and got up. "Thank you dear. Come right this way."

She led me farther into the darkness, until we hit a stairway with the same dim sunlight creeping through a dirty window pane. The stairs creaked as we took every step. She opened the door and called out, "Zin dear, someone here to meet you."

I stood in the doorway feeling as if I was about to be presented before an examiner. I felt a wash of relief when I saw a scrawny boy of about twelve or thirteen, with a freckled face and wavy dirty-blond hair. He seemed so harmless; almost pathetic. "Yes ma'am?" he said in a squeaky voice.

Cor was standing at the door to let me by. The boy had a book open in his lap, sitting cross-legged on the floor. The room was empty compared to the ones I had been in below, but of course was filled with all of the usual furniture one would expect from an upstairs room. "Zin, this is Jyre. She is very much interested in meeting you. I hope you two will get to know each other."

Zin bowed his head down to me. "Miss Jyre," he said with downcast eyes.

I looked over to Cor, feeling quite doubtful, but she was already letting herself out. "I will be up again in just a few minutes to check on you." She closed the door behind her.

Silence. His eyes returned to the book in his lap. I finally went over and sat down next to him. "What have you got?" I asked.

"It's history miss," he said. "History of The City."

"Can you read it?"

He shook his head with a frown. "No Miss. But there are maps and drawings. I like to look at those. Missus Cor and Mister James teach me all about reading, but I can never seem to remember."

I scooted a bit closer to catch a peek at the page he was looking over. There was an elaborate drawing of what looked like a battle with many

horses and spears. I really didn't want to talk about reading. Cor had already gotten me thinking about home, and I didn't want to anymore. "What's your name?" I said. I was already told, and I remembered, but I never knew how to talk to someone new without asking them their name.

"Myr-Zin, Miss." he didn't look up as he spoke.

"Odd name."

His back visibly stiffened when I said that, but he still didn't look at me. In fact his shoulders and chin all seemed to grow closer together. "Myr-Zin is my slave name, miss," he said softly.

"Oh." I felt a chill run through me. I had been told that was the case, but hearing it from him, seeing him and the way he acted; it seemed like such a horrible thing. "You're a slave?"

"Was, Miss. Belonged to the Myr family. Then some thief got me out and brought me here. I live with Mister Andrew now, and work for Mister James."

I didn't know what to say. My own story was so complicated compared to his; unless there was a lot he wasn't telling me.

He sighed, but not a sad sigh, more like he remembered something that helped him relax. "I like it here." He turned to face me, slowly lifting his eyes. "He rescued you too, didn't he?"

I frowned. I didn't know how to answer that. I thought back to the moments after I had been found with Daelus's body...with Daelus, and how I expected to be struck dead right there by the guards. James stopped them. "I didn't deserve it." I watched him as he watched me, waiting for him to speak. It seemed that he had the same idea. The continued silence made me want to say something. "Do you know Daelus...Lord Thresh?" I asked, settling my back against the wall behind me.

He nodded his head furiously, but said nothing.

"What's he like?"

He frowned as he thought. "I see him sometimes when he comes to speak with James. Sometimes he is very quiet, like he is thinking too much to find time to talk. Other times he is different, more like James, grinning and laughing."

I wished I could see that other side of Daelus that Zin mentioned. I could not even imagine it. "What about James?"

"He knows everything, miss! I've never met someone so smart like him before. Every time I think of a question, he knows the answer! I feel like if I was only smart enough to know what to ask, and I kept asking, soon he would tell me everything that there is!"

I smiled slightly. That description excited me, and made me happy that I was here. Still, I shouldn't be here; I should be with Daelus. "What about...the other man, Andrew?"

"He is a good man, miss. He never asked no questions about me when he took me in. Just fed me good and let me stay. All he wants is for me to work hard, learn, and be strong, he says. And he don't never get angry. Never hit me none, neither." He then brightened up even more, growing with excitement. "Are you going to meet him too? Oh you'll like him so much,

miss. He's also smart, like Mister James, but he is more quiet like Mister Thresh."

I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe." I smiled a little more. "I am sure I would like him." A combination of Daelus and James? It was an odd thought.

He smiled more, and began to rock back and forth where he sat. "You'll like it here. I know you will. The food's always so good—oh, have you tasted Missus Cor's brownies?"

I forced my smile to stay, remembering the offending brown lumps. "Yes," I said, lying to preserve his smile.

"Oh they are so good, aren't they miss? I am sure you've never had something so good!"

I felt my smile growing more fake every second as I nodded. "Yes, never." I felt another question burning at the back of my mind. Until now, I had never listened to that voice that had begged me to ask it. I had no reason to expect Zin to know, but I was terrified to bring it up to anyone else. "What about the Hammers?"

He suddenly dropped his eyes and turned away. "Don't know what you mean, miss."

I wanted to tell him that I made a mistake, and to ignore it, but I had to press on. "He works for them. Doesn't he? Lord Thresh I mean?"

Then I noticed the he was trying to conceal a smile. He suddenly closed the book and pushed it off his lap, sliding over quickly to where I sat and put his back against the wall next to me. "Promise not to tell anyone?"

"Who would I tell?"

He grinned. "Welllll," he said, drawing out the word, "It's be like this. Those Hammers, they call Mister Daelus their prophet and says he speaks to gods and such. But I know better." The boy giggled. "They are like his toys. He pushes and prods and they all go running just like he says. Can make them do anything he wants. Not a one can see the truth! Makes me laugh to watch it, to see them all scuttle!"

I knew the look on my face revealed how much of a little liar I thought he was, but he didn't seem to recognize it. But, what if it was true? Was it even more horrible than I had feared, or was it the best possible thing? I didn't know. I didn't even really care anymore. I wanted him back, Hammerites or none.

Cor's face reappeared at the door, grinning ear to ear. From our position she no doubt thought that we had become much better friends than we actually were—I didn't know why I let him get so close to me. "I am so sorry to bother you two, but Jyre, James needs to talk with you now. Zin, how is your studying going?"

"Very good ma'am," he said, "I am almost through with chapter fourteen." I shot him my 'you little liar' face again, and he winked at me. That little wink made me want to run in circles with delight, but of course I didn't. That would have been stupid.

Some Time Prior**— Sheam: In Her Master's Stead —****Day 6: 2:00 pm**

I was holding my mug so tightly that the little ripple of stray clay (which I believed gave it character) had been imprinted into my hand. I let it go and rubbed my palm idly, still listening to Corinne talk. All the conversation about old pagan cults was making me slightly dizzy, so finally I gave in and interrupted. "I am afraid that I know less than you may think. Who is Phaeros Kendrick, and what is his connection to Daelus and James?"

Corrine closed the book in front of her slowly, and then rested both hands on either side of the volume. "In the most immediate sense, the connection is through Jossimer."

I was not as taken aback as I thought I would be. I had no reason to believe that he was anything more than Daelus's butler, but I always felt that he couldn't possibly keep the old badger around if there wasn't a good reason for it. "So I guess I also need to ask, who is Jossimer, really?"

She smiled slightly, and then simply replied, "You're going to get me into so much trouble."

I smiled back a little, but it wasn't out of empathy. "I can tell you really want to tell me anyway."

"Mm," she replied, and then pushed the book away gently. "All things are ultimately connected, but in this case the ultimate connection is quite direct. You have heard James and Daelus refer to themselves and one another as delegates, correct? Well, Jossimer and Phaeros are, or were in the case of Phaeros—no, scratch that, because he may still be alive—are also members of that same delegation."

"So they're from the same place, on the same mission?" I asked, feeling like I was going to get in trouble too for asking too much. Daelus had no reason to tell me more than what he did. I was just his employee. But I reasoned that James would be much more open with his wife.

"Essentially, but maybe not actually. The truth is that I really don't know. James is awfully secretive about some things, and he needs to be. To be honest, I like that about him. I feel like if I were to ever learn the whole truth, he would be slightly less fascinating."

I smiled a slightly crooked smile, able to see her point, but not really agreeing with her. If I were to marry someone, I would want there to be no secrets between us. "What is the mission, then? Do you know that at least?"

"I think I had better start at the beginning," she just said, "though if James caught me talking like that, he'd make fun of me. What I meant to say was, at a point in time far enough into the past as to provide an adequate background to the given topic of concern."

"Yes," I replied. "Can't get caught using a figure of speech, now can we?" I said with a grin.

"It was sixty-eight years ago. Jossimer was a Forward-Commander under The Baron's coat of arms. It had been his goal to rise through the ranks of the

military until he was in a position high enough to stage a coup. He was almost there, within the year he would have made General, and his allegiances within the army and navy were strong.”

Suddenly my mind was flooded with the idea of The City under the martial-law of General Jossimer, or at least I tried to flood it with the idea. After a brief moment I decided it was inconceivable.

“It began when he was quietly investigating evidence that someone of considerable power was attempting to subvert The Baron’s authority from within the government. Jossimer didn’t want them to beat him to the punch, you see, though as far as The Baron knew Joss was doing it out of blind loyalty to him. What he discovered was that rival factions within the government seemed to be propelling one another farther and farther into a state of irrelevance, such that even if his coup was a success, he would have found himself as ruler of nothing.”

I was glad I had not spoken up before, but this time I found myself unable to resist. “That sounds more like The City I live in,” I remarked dryly.

“Indeed,” she said, not fazed by my interruption. “I rather guarantee you that no-one alive knows it, but the pathetic state of our government is Phaeros’s legacy. Things were much different back then; the wardens had to operate under considerably secrecy and constantly feared arrest and for their lives and the Hammerite soldiers were little more than a ceremonial guard. One thing has not changed; the Hammerite High Priest and his council still have no say in official City matters. The difference now is that *official* City matters are meaningless and the Hammerites simply do as they please. I am getting off the subject, however.

“Jossimer discovered that Phaeros was behind it all. The first thing he did was plan a quick assassination, but it failed; backfired even. Phaeros was tipped off to Jossimer and soon the two met face to face. Somehow, which was never revealed to me, when they met face to face Jossimer realized that Phaeros was a delegate.”

“Can they just...tell?”

She shook her head. “I am not sure, but I sense there is more to it than that. As the story was told to me, Jossimer understood that Phaeros was a delegate, but Phaeros did not recognize this fact about Jossimer. So Joss did what he had to do to join forces with Phaeros without ever revealing the truth.”

“Why? Why would he keep it a secret?”

“Because the delegates were not meant to join forces. It is part of their mission to remain separate, to keep from drawing attention to the fact that they are a group. They are forbidden to even know each other’s identifies. Obviously, Daelus, James, and Jossimer have broken this rule. At the time Jossimer was afraid to let it be known that he had broken the rule, so he kept it a secret. It was his only choice, as far as he was concerned. He could continue as planned, killing Phaeros and proceeding with the coup, but Phaeros’s own work was so far along that the coup would have been rendered useless. He could have told Phaeros the truth that he was a fellow

delegate, and risked enraging a powerful and potentially dangerous man. His third option was to vanish, abandon his post, and forgo his mission.”

“So their missions, as part of being a delegate, were conflicting? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes sense when you consider that they are all impossibly far from home, their orders vague, and their talents potentially similar. Phaeros went into politics; Jossimer into the military. Both were to rise to a level of power suitable to exert a real level of influence to change The City, but both happened to go about it in a way which resulted in a direct contradiction.”

“Change it to what end?”

“Right now, just like it has been for ages, The City has been a tangled mess of conflicting powers all trying their damndest to keep the other from making any progress. The delegates aim to change that.”

“I am sorry I keep asking questions and changing the subject. I just want to understand things better.”

“It’s alright. So, Jossimer was in a bad spot. Any option he chose was breaking some code of his; to kill a fellow delegate, to break the rule of no contact, or to abandon his own mission. He chose to break the rule of contact in such a way that allowed Phaeros to technically not break it.”

“Did Phaeros ever find out?”

“Yes, eventually, but you’re skipping ahead. If I may...”

I zipped my lip.

“Jossimer soon proved to Phaeros that he could be of immeasurable use. The two began to collaborate. Phaeros agreed to fake his own death in order to convince The Baron that the threat was gone, and then continued his plot through Jossimer, acting in his stead. Additionally, Jossimer opened doors of influence that had eluded Phaeros, such as the entire armed forces. Within years, the institution was rendered impotent. Under this initiative, it would no longer matter who was Baron or who controlled the military or who was the ruling party within the council. Their powers were stricken slowly, a piece at a time, until many forgot that The City even had a government.

“In time of course things changed from conquest to simple maintenance. Phaeros was happy to allow Jossimer to run things while he pursued other interests—like sorcery. It was not really a tremendous career change, actually,” she said with a wink.

I grinned at her, but had convinced myself I wasn’t going to interrupt anymore.

“Phaeros still did not know that Jossimer was a delegate, so he kept a close eye on things. Jossimer of course returned the favor. By that point Phaeros was already working closely with Tempia, a powerful woman in her own right who dabbled equally in the affairs of the occult and the political. She had aided him in the final years of his campaign to bring down the government, and was now aiding him further with the supernatural. From her, he learned sorcery and ways to interact with the netherworld. What she learned from him, I am less certain, but I suspected that she used it to conduct experiments on herself. She seemed to care little for the danger. She had an

appetite for both risk and some breakthrough that would alter her state of being. She was telepathic, though I am unsure if that was simple a gift or the results of her experiments.

"That's when things got complicated, because a fourth person entered the picture—Em. She, too, was a delegate, but also a tremendous, roguish, insidious troublemaker. She had no qualms about informing Phaeros of who she was. His reaction to her breaking the rule of non-contact was indeed terrible; outrage, condemnation, shutting himself up in his home and refusing to see anyone. Jossimer discovered this, and went to her, attempting to discover what had so troubled his friend. Em was reportedly very good at getting what she wanted, because in no time poor Joss managed to tell her far more than she told him. I suspect that the poor devil fell in love with her at once, knowing the way he tightens into a little knot of wood at the very mention of her."

"Jossimer...in love with a woman," I said, feeling as if those words were the most unbelievable thing discussed tonight.

"Of course, poor Joss, Phaeros did snap out of it, for he too quickly fell for her. The difference was that for Phaeros the love was returned. Of course it drove a wedge between Phaeros and Jossimer, but Jossimer is so serious and so steadfast in his ideas of duty that he never allowed Phaeros to know how he felt."

"She must have been incredible, and awful," I just said, idly.

"It was clear why she was chosen as a delegate. Apparently she was simply irresistible. Can you imagine what she must have been like to have melted Jossimer's heart?"

"Maybe he was different before that, and she's the one who made him so...horrible?"

She shook her head. "Women don't change men, not really. We make them do very strange things, but in the end they're always themselves."

"I suppose you're right."

"Well, as if things could not get more complex, Tempia and Em became good friends, and began to collaborate just as Phaeros did with them both. Then, one day, there was a falling out between the three of them. Em had a sudden about-face, demanding that the three of them abandon their work at once, leave The City and take on simple lives. The feud would last for years. I was never told the details. Jossimer always suspected that part of the feud was much more personal; Em and Tempia fighting over Phaeros's love. When Jossimer discovered this, he completely cut himself off from them, and so the story ends."

"That's it?" I cut in, nearly outraged that I wouldn't know the end of the story on Jossimer's say-so. "The story ends with Jossimer getting sick of it and leaving? Doesn't anyone know what happened after that?"

"Just a little, if you'll bear with me. Jossimer still maintained his position within the government as puppet-master. As the years went by, he grew weary of his work, doing nothing more than ensuring the continued irrelevance of the government, and was confident that the damage he and

Phaeros had done would be irrevocable in his lifetime. It seems he was correct, as you and I both know. He resigned his commission, distanced himself from politics, and took up a position at The University teaching tactics. That's where he met James."

I was wondering when James would come into the story. "How did they realize that they were both delegates?"

"I think it took a while, but you can't work with someone for that long without picking a few things up. As professors, it was their business to share with others what they knew."

"Then why didn't Phaeros ever realize that Jossimer was one?"

She shrugged, maybe indicating that she was guessing. "Because Phaeros was very self-centered, whereas James is extremely perceptive about others."

"And Jossimer?"

"Jossimer is extremely loud about being what he's like," she just said with a smile. At that, she got up and put a fresh kettle of water on the fire.

My mind was spinning even more than it had been. Even after everything she had told me, I knew that I had only just scratched the surface of what had been going on for the past...hundred years. Was I coming on to things at the very end, or somewhere in the middle? Five hundred years from now, would other delegates look back at today and say, 'that was still the beginning.' "What about James?" I called over to her.

"Hm?" she replied back.

"Well, Phaeros and Jossimer had their plans, Em too, and I think I know Daelus's well enough, but what about James?"

She replied back from the kitchen, "As a professor at The University James had the ability to indoctrinate the *intelligencia* with the ideals of the delegates for nearly twenty years. Control the information and you control the people. Other than that, there is of course the network which he developed simultaneously with his academic career."

"Oh, of course," I replied, feeling a little sheepish due to the obviousness of the answer.

Corrine returned to the table a minute later, bringing with her a delightfully smelling treat; a plate full of freshly baked brownies. Once we both had one in hand and I was delicately nibbling, she resumed. "It was many years later, sometime after James had met Jossimer, though before he had met me, when James was first developing his ideas of rebellion against the mission (i.e. The Cause). After learning all he could from Jossimer about their fellow delegates, he decided to try to get in touch with those that were missing in an attempt to recruit them. In spite of Phaeros's past prominence, any information on him newer than fifty years old simply didn't exist. With that trail cold, he turned his attention to another: Em. He was able to track her to a small cottage many miles into the mountains, living as a simple hermit-woman.

"During their brief visit he learned that she had fled The City not long after Jossimer had cut himself off from the other three. She wanted to be free, she told him, and there was no way she could be while either doing her work

as a delegate, or in the company of another delegate. Even though this meant losing Phaeros's heart to Tempia, she had made her choice. Of course, when Jossimer heard this, his heart sank. I suspect that he had always imagined she would go to him if she lost Phaeros, but it seemed never to be."

"I take it Em didn't accept James's offer," I said, reasoning that if she had, I would know about her!

Corrine shook her head. "No, she had no interest in such things; thankfully, I say. More unfortunately, she simply had no idea what had become of either Phaeros, or Tempia."

"How could someone so important just vanish?" I asked, and then quickly started dreaming up ways.

"A better question might be, how could two people vanish so perfectly that even James couldn't track them down?" Corrine said with a grin. "Of course no delegate was more easy to discover than the one of our mutual acquaintance."

"Daelus Thresh, and his tower that he summoned from thin air," I said with a smile and a nod.

"Yes, that bothersome *tower*. James knew that it had to be a work of a delegate. 'Had to have been summoned straight from Dereloth,' is what James said at the time. It did present us with an interesting thought, though."

"Oh?"

Corrine nodded. "That either James, Jossimer, and Daelus are the only delegates left in The City, or that the others, however many there are, are much more keen on following the rule of no contact."

"Do you suppose there's many more of them?" I asked.

"I don't know. James doesn't even know. I don't know if we'll ever know."

We sat in silence for a time, but before I could ask her what James meant by Dereloth, Corrine spoke up, changing the subject. "Our little camping trip was pleasant," she said.

I smiled too. "You mean what James and you were doing when Daelus had to call you back to work? What was it again...battlefields?"

"Mhm," she nodded. "It was a place miles and miles up the coast, where another river lets out into the ocean. An invading force of longboats was trying to go upstream to where that river met up with the one that runs through The City, and then come at it from the opposite direction, completely unprotected. But the Baron at the time got advanced warning from his spies, and so he sent a force of heavy archers to meet them there. It was a real treat to be able to examine the place and compare the scenery with the historical accounts. We even found a few artifacts left over after the shipwrecks had been picked dry."

I smiled as I listened, not only because I found that type of thing exciting, but because I enjoyed the fact that it made her excited. The kettle started to whistle, and immediately Corrine was out of her chair and preparing the coffee. In no time it was finished and a mug was placed before me, and another at an empty place on the table. Corrine sipped hers without putting

anything in it. I added cream and two lumps. "Was it just you and James on the trip?"

"Oh no, the whole thing was spurred by Professor Bronson's visit from Blackbrook. Andrew and little Zin came with us too. Andrew insisted on getting out, and not wasting away like he has been. I think the outing did him more good than harm. Yes, he's weak, but it was good to see him using his legs and smiling again. Zin of course had a grand time of it. I didn't expect him to take much interest in the whole thing, but I could see how excited he got as James became animated and illustrated the narrative to the boy as only James can do. Now that we're back he's set himself to read history, even though the child still can't understand a word of written text. I'm afraid we just don't have time to teach him these days."

"I'm sorry we've kept you so busy," I said, thinking of all the times when we sent James a bit of research work to do that I could have probably done myself; I just always felt like he'd do such a better job.

While I was talking I suddenly heard the door open and James's voice ring out with, "Cor! I'm home! And I have a guest. Ah, Sheam!"

I moved to get up but Corinne signaled for me to stay put. James appeared in an instant and declared "Hello, hello!" He gave Cor a fly-by kiss on the cheek and then scooped up the plate of brownies and the unattended mug off the table which Corinne had set out in anticipation for his arrival. Before I could reply to his greeting he was out the door again and talking to his mysterious guest.

Corinne gave me a look which I knew to mean, 'Ah men, no manners at all,' before slowly following James, though she stopped in the doorway. She was speaking to James and his guest, but for the moment I became distracted. She had brought a letter to the table, no doubt to show James as soon as he arrived, and my eyes fell across the words at the very top of it.

They are not of our clan. Many of our kin have been murdered by their kind. But we cannot go to war. It is not our way. Do what you must, but we...

My attention was pulled away as my mind caught up with my ears and I realized that I had heard the name Jyre. I looked up and saw her standing there, extraordinarily clean for once but with eyes that clearly had been crying a great deal. I left my spot at the table quickly and greeted her, bending down slightly to her height, which wasn't really much shorter than me, saying "Jyre! We were so worried about you!" and giving her the biggest smile I could manage.

"Yes, I'm okay," she said, pulling away from me and scooting into the nearest chair. I at once realized that I had overwhelmed her, and that there was no reason for her to know me as well as I felt I knew her. I didn't say another word, backing off.

"Cor, why don't you take Jyre into the study and share with her your progress." James handed Corinne a few articles which had been tucked under

his arm, and then she moved to Jyre.

"Come this way dear," Corinne said, beckoning her. She got up and moved along, but at the last moment turned back to look at me. She had the look of a person who had given up on life, but then I reminded myself what it was like to be a girl her age living in a place like this. I wanted to tell her I was sorry that things went the way they did, that nothing happened as it should have and that everything that did happen would be shown to have a purpose, even if we had to wait forever to see it, but she was gone. James let out a quick breath of disappointment as he read the note that I had seen.

"Some would gladly slaughter their own, and others would refuse to raise a hand to protect their dearest blood," he said, tossing the page down before taking another drink of coffee. Then he grinned at me. "It is exceedingly excellent that you are here. I was worried that I would have to send for you, but part of me knew that once you had done your business with Gordon, you would be along."

I smiled, enjoying his intuition. "Do you really know me so well?"

"Well, how often do you get out of The Circle anyway, Sheam? Especially considering the circumstances, I found it very unlikely that once you had reason to leave, you would wish to return."

"All too true," I said, and imagined myself wasting the day by staring at the ceiling of the hotel room. "Gordon was only slightly intolerable. The total pay he asked for was, I am afraid, flexible. I suggest you bring an ample quantity when going to retrieve the finished work."

"Of course, of course," he said, sorting through more papers. "Money is no object however. I am not in the habit of fretting over it."

I needed to ask him what was on my mind, even though I was afraid what the answer might be. "What's going on with Daelus? It's the one thing Corinne couldn't tell me."

James looked conflicted, which wasn't a look he wore very well.

"Oh no," I said, instantly feeling my racing heart in my throat. "What's happened?"

"There was a problem at the tower. To make a long story short, Jyre flew into a rage and stabbed Daelus, repeatedly." My hands were at my face as I listened in disbelief. I told myself over and over quickly that if Daelus were dead, I would have seen it on James's face as soon as he walked in. "Now as you know," he continued, "Daelus has displayed a remarkable knack for recovery for any injury he had sustained in the past. I always assumed that he kept a very well stocked medicine cabinet of the most potent magical elixirs, but Jossimer was far more astute. Again, to make a long story short, he was been placed in his healing chamber, but...that, is the last we've seen of him."

"What do you mean; he last you've seen of him!" I demanded, not wanting to seem like I was angry with him but not being able to hold back my horror.

"He had to be locked in, and once inside we can only wait for him to come out. Jossimer did not seem worried however; he claimed that in the past Daelus has disappeared into those lower chambers for a day or more."

I pressed the shock away, but still found myself on the verge of tears. "How could she have done that?"

"She had been misinformed. I cannot explain any more than that it was by her own assumptions and not any malicious intent. Her lack of understanding combined with what little she did learn created an explosive situation. She lashed out, and sadly, took him by surprise."

I shook my head. I was glad he told me, at least. He could have very easily lied to keep me calm, collected, and of high morale. I took a deep breath to ease myself and ran my all my fingers through my hair. "But he's going to be okay, right?"

James grinned again. "No doubt. But Sheam..."

"Quite alright!" a jovial new voice came from the window right before a rather lithe figure slid right into the room. I almost jumped out of my chair and ran, but James didn't seem startled by this. Instead he was laughing.

"Heppet!" James shouted, waving for him to sit. "You always did know how to make an entrance!"

"I am sorry for eavesdropping, but a moment before I would have entered I spied this remarkable creature whom you were entertaining," here he gestured broadly to me, "and so moved I was by her beauty that I could not help myself but to pause, transfixed, before my senses returned to me," he said with a low sweeping bow.

I started at him with wide eyes and an expression which I knew had no business being on the face of a so-called remarkable creature. He was a tall skinny youth who couldn't have been twenty, with rather brown skin and hair tied into many braids. He wore a tight, form-fitting outfit which barely covered his chest and was only slightly darker than his skin. He smelled like rotting meat.

"James, Master Nightfall sends his regards!" Heppet boomed as he spun around to face the man.

"What?" I said just as James said "Oh?"

"Yes, at around mid day he rejoined the Hammerite expedition, for whom I assume my troupe, the illustrious Riverbed Company, is working still undercover. Immediately after he arrived, he took me aside in secret and ordered that I make my best speed to find you and inform you of his whereabouts and state of well being, and to deliver a brief message. *I have the scroll, and it's been destroyed.*"

I was almost ready to forgive him for startling me, his smell, and his voyeurism. "Oh thank goodness, thank goodness," I said over and over.

"What a remarkable—that taffer!" James cried, throwing his hands up with joy.

Heppet seemed to enjoy our reactions very much. "I suspected that there were some remarkable circumstances surrounding his return to us, but he was tight lipped. Know this however; he seems dressed for an adventure. Armor! Weapons! With more untold artifacts hidden about his person! It made us all very excited."

"Oh dear," James said, falling back into his chair. "Daelus always did have

a rash streak in him. Well, the bit about the scroll is good news at least.”

“What? What? What’s going on?” I demanded, not liking the sudden change in his tone.

“Daelus chose to return to the site of The Villa, and before doing so armed himself undoubtedly with his best means; something I knew him capable of but have never known him to do. It’s possible that he feels something there will lead him directly to Delphine and intends to engage with her personally; possibly to kill her. Definitely to kill her. In short, he has set himself to take on a god.”

The only sound was Heppet cracking his neck. “What?” I uttered.

“*What*, indeed,” was James’s only reply before tipping his mug up over his head so high that I was certain it was empty, and he was desperately in search of the last drop, errantly clinging to the bottom, now ceiling, of the mug.

I just shook my head, wondering why it was so easy to care about someone who found it so easy to put themselves in danger. “What about that scroll he destroyed, though?”

Once he gave a satisfied “Ahh,” and set the mug down, James continued. “An artifact that Delphine coveted, and is apparently no longer a concern. He knows what it is he is walking into, and I fear there is little we can do for him now. He would be very useful to Delphine, for his soul is strong and would make an equally powerful tool. However there is much to do which will help him indirectly. Heppet!”

“Yes sir!” he declared.

“I have great need of you; it is fortunate that you are here. Please, before we begin, change your clothes and wash yourself. You smell of the villa!”

“Ah,” he said, glancing down at himself before quickly vanishing through the door.

“Third room on your left,” James said, pointing over his shoulder. James was already writing out a note; no doubt a letter to Jossimer to let him know the good news. He dropped it down the chute and then returned to the table. “Sheam,” he said, sounding much more serious. “How would you feel if we cut our losses with The Circle and moved on?”

“What do you mean cut our losses?” I said, terribly afraid that I knew exactly what he meant, but shocked that he would even suggest it.

“The Circle as an institution is a considerable source of liability to the organization. Now may be the time to end that enterprise and focus more on...less dangerous ventures.”

I stared at him in disbelief as the recollection of the folded note I kept tucked inside my top stung my mind. Did he somehow know about my resignation letter? No, that was impossible. He really was suggesting that we shut The Circle down. I hated the idea that what he was saying made sense, but I hated even more that he was saying it. In spite of my willingness to quit yesterday, closing The Circle was something I simply could not accept. “First of all,” I said, knowing full well it would be a pathetic argument if he had any idea that I was so close to quitting, “it’s my home. I’m not giving it up.”

“Yes of course, but a new home for you can be arranged easily enough. A

rather fine townhouse could be rented out easily at your wages, if not purchased outright." He was unreadable; almost not like himself.

Suddenly I had a feeling all of this wasn't as it seemed, but I wasn't going to back down. "The Circle gives a public face to the organization; a legitimate face. No one treats Daelus like they do the other bosses simply *because* of The Circle. Others have their own museums and libraries, true, but nothing like what we have. It stands for something bigger and better than simply one man's collection; it means things to people, especially me, but beyond me, it's important. How many dozens if not hundreds of people, influential people, has Daelus met and you met and formed deals with because of The Circle? Could that have been possible any other way? What, by attending parties and joining clubs like the others do? By milling around and brownnosing all night? No! Daelus is respected in The City because he built something, and if he lets it crumble away, all of that respect will be gone in the blink of an eye! But if he rebuilds it, ah, they will say; this one is resilient. He's here to stay. He might even outlast *me!*"

James was his usual grinning self by the time I finished my speech. "You are very perceptive, and convincing, Sheam. I am sorry to do that do you, but before I ask you to do what I need of you, I had to be sure where your heart and your head are, right now. I am certain that they are in the right place, and you will do very well."

His reaction shocked me, but not because it had just been a test. I was amazed at how passionately I defended the idea of The Circle, while feeling so close to abandoning it myself. Maybe James knew my desires and intentions far better than I did. Maybe I had been fooling myself for the past two days. I let those thoughts pass from my mind in a flash, and then showed James a toothy grin. "Don't play games with me," I told him with a smirk. "I'll tell Corinne and it will be nothing but peeling potatoes for a week."

"Ah! I love peeled potatoes!" he cried out with a laugh. "But not peeling them. But you are right, I deserve it for that. I..."

There was a distant but distinct click, and then an entire length of kitchen cupboards parted. I knew that James's abode had secret passages, but I never thought that one would lead into his kitchen—but why not? Two men stepped out of the dark narrow passage. The first gave me goose bumps, a smartly dressed man with a metal mask over his face. The second made my skin crawl, a scarecrow with his arm in a sling: Rembrandt.

"Forgive me for allowing Rembrandt the use of the service entrance," the masked one said. "I had to be certain he was not being followed."

"Not at all Othello, not at all. Come, both of you, sit, drink, talk. I was expecting you both, but not both at the same time!"

Corinne seemed to have prepared a limitless supply of coffee, which James was now emptying into a pair of mugs for the strange man and the even stranger man (not to mention a refill for himself. I refused the offer for more). I did my best to avoid looking at Rembrandt, feeling as if he were a dog who would attack if he sensed fear. I also did not want to stare at the other man, Othello, as it would have seemed rude. I was worried that the

mask was not just to hide his identity. So I just studied my cup, and both of them seemed content to ignore me as well.

"Othello, what's new to report?"

"Little sir, but I feel I need to fill in some details I omitted from the letter."

"Very well then, Rembrandt, what have you learned?"

He leaned back in his chair so far I thought the back of it was going to snap off. "Had a hunch, so I skipped the usual routine and went straight for something totally disconnected. It seemed a long shot, but it was an easier lead to follow than trying to poke around inside smoking Hammerite joints looking for clues. It seems the roads cross more often than not, and my hunch was right. Pagans didn't attack the Hammers; it was the *bloody* Bloods!"

"The Bloods! Remarkable, are you certain?" James said, taking out his notepad quickly and writing it down.

"Not quite. Seems their left hand doesn't know what their right is doing. The main body of the group has no idea that their kin are to blame. A faction, within a faction; are the ones that did it, this guy Ranson, and a bunch of guys who joined up with him, plus a few others who've taken a liking to him."

"Ranson!" I said abruptly interrupting him. He didn't seem to care, but did cast his crooked gaze towards me.

"Heard of him, eh? Word has it that he's hot material, used to work for the biggest bitch on everyone's mind. You guessed it—Del-fee-nay. But then the wanker went rogue on her, joined the anti-pagan movement, and has been causing trouble for them ever since." He spit something out onto the floor, which made my skin crawl anew.

"Yes, I know about the friction. But the attacks on Hammerites, is new."

"Oh yeah. The guy thinks he's real bright. You know how the Temple of the Inquisitor was attacked by real live pagans? Well he decides to go all copy-cat, in order to spook the hell out of the population and try to get as many in a panic as he can. So he and his boys all run out fast as their little legs can carry them, toting bombs and oil and all sorts of nasty, and do damage to every type of Hammerite bungalow they can get close to. Idea is to show that there ain't nobody around that'll protect the city from the blighter pagans. If the Hammerites are helpless against them, heh, who do they turn to?—The Bloods."

"It's true," Othello said. "They've set up in taverns and guild halls and any place where people gather, and are working long lines of citizenry who are all signing away for the sake of The Bloods. Most even don't know that they're signing over property and money to the group. What's worse is that by signing the contract, they're all vowing to join Ranson's personal army. He means to march ordinary people into the fires of war for the sake of his vendetta against Delphine."

"Huh," James said, offering an exaggerated frown before writing it down. "Do you mean that figuratively?"

"I am not certain. I do not see any particular place where they would hope to wage this war, as Delphine has still yet to reveal herself. But whatever the outcome; The Bloods now number at over a thousand."

"I fear my letter from the agent West may have been hours older than it needed to be. I must contact him at once. Rembrandt,—"

He interrupted. "Yeah, I can contact him. I won't even have to be sneaky about it; I'm a full fledged Blood myself."

James blinked, going "Oh?"

"If you tell me who you've got working undercover there I'll get the skinny for you."

"Indeed, indeed," James said as he wrote a note and dropped it into a slot on the wall. "But I am afraid I must ask more of you than that. Sheam?"

I looked up at him. I hadn't wanted to say anything for fear that Rembrandt may actually start talking to me again. "Yes?"

"I have a very important mission for you, and Rembrandt and Othello here are going to help."

Rembrandt shrugged. "Sure, whatever you say."

"We must contact The Bloods directly, not as an organization of spies or a criminal underground movement, but as The Circle of Stone and Shadow. They see themselves as a legitimate public party. If we are to go to them we must appeal to that sensibility. Lord Crowley is still in charge, and that is what he will respond to, not cloak and dagger. I need for you to be our ambassador, our public face. You must go to them and bid for an allegiance. With any luck Crowley will see you as an ally against Ranson and a way to take back control of his group."

"But...does The Circle itself want to be associated with them?" I said, cringing.

"That's the right attitude, Sheam," James said, grinning. "He doesn't want his Bloods to be seen as scum; he wants legitimacy and respect. If you go there with the attitude that The Circle is high and mighty, he'll be swayed. It may tarnish our reputation to associate with them, but it will elevate his reputation. That's our bargaining chip."

"But why? Why do we need them?" I asked, searching my own words from several minutes ago for the answer.

"Because they have Els locked up and *we* need *him*. First we attempt an alliance, and then get Els *out* of that cell and Ranson *in* it. If this all fails, if Crowley refuses to deal and threatens to hand over a now rather large and powerful faction to the reckless and potentially psychotic Ranson, we must resort to darker means; Ranson will be assassinated and Els salvaged by force. I'd much rather we do it this way."

"Yes," I said, suddenly feeling the weight of this task upon me. "I can see how this is the better way." As much as the idea of Ranson assassinated appealed to me, I knew this was the better way. It was funny; I knew nothing about him other than that he hurt Jyre, and yet here I was wishing for his death. On the other hand, I would be working to prevent his death.

"Rembrandt, rekindle your ties with your Blood brethren. See if you can get a ball rolling from the inside; stir up the idea that The Bloods need an allegiance with another powerful and legitimate faction. Test the water. Put the thought out there. Be subtle and even subliminal if you can. I want them

ready to receive Sheam without even knowing that they are.”

“Yeah, hah,” Rembrandt said. “I can be subtle. I’ll paint little circle emblems on the walls of the washroom.”

“Such a charming sense of humor!” James said. I never knew him to be sarcastic. Rembrandt pushed himself up from the chair as if he were a tripod being kicked open. “Agent West will answer to the name of Ontwire. He is positioned at the main headquarters, Crowley Castle. Greet him with the pass code, ‘All real processes are irreversible.’

“Got it,” he said, and then let himself out. The room seemed to grow a little brighter.

“Othello, I have a much different task for you. I want you to accompany Sheam as her escort and personal guard. We cannot pull a Gryphon into this; there’s no time to appeal to either Wendle or Canard, and Sheam will, I am afraid, need protection. However I also need a striking figure by her side; eloquent, mysterious, a touch of sinister and a breath of affluence. You, my friend, will embody these things, and magnify their presence in Sheam.”

“I am glad that my ruined state has become so handy,” Othello said in an emotionless tone.

I frowned even more, now certain that the mask was hiding some disfigurement. I did not want to offend him, so I did not want him to take it off. I was not certain that whatever it was that had happened to him wouldn’t result in a very poor reaction from me.

James put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “And I am glad that you are not ruined in the slightest. Sheam,” he said, turning to me. “You must draft a letter to Crowley. I will have it delivered; the sooner the better. It is now,” he checked his pocketwatch, “almost half past three. Urge him to meet with you tonight. We have no time to lose.”

I nodded, resolute. “Do you have official stationary?”

“Yes, you will find it on the fourth desk to the right, third from the top. And there will certainly be a quill and ink in there somewhere!” he declared with a grin. “Now Othello, on the matter of Lord Metzé,”

I excused myself from the table, seeing no reason to tarry. I dove into the mess that was James’s main sitting room, and finally found the articles he had directed me to.

Once seated, I realized there was something very important I needed to do before I began this work. I pulled the tightly folded note free from its hiding place in my buttoned blouse. I unfolded my resignation letter carefully and flattened it out. Lifting the quill from its inkwell, I drew neat lines through every word I had written, striking them all out. Once that was done, I found a nearby lit candle, and set one corner on fire. I watched with satisfaction as it burn slowly until only a small corner around my pinched fingers remained.

The letter was gone. I had made up my mind. This was my life now, and I couldn’t turn my back on it. My eyes had been opened, and rather than run away, I was stepping forward. I believed in what I was doing. It was not just a job.

With those thoughts firmly in my mind, I began to write a new letter: one to Lord Crowley.

— James: Going Active —

Day 6: 3:30 pm

“Aside from providing more details of the conversation, which I can do if you wish, I have only to deliver these.” Othello produced a folder parcel and set it before me. I untied it and unfolded it to find a series of very intricate drawings, undoubtedly by Tempia.

“Very good work; the design drawings for the artifacts he was to create,” I said, going through them one by one. It was a series of odd pieces, none of which indicated a function in the slightest; just bits of richly decorated metal and wood in odd configurations with no sense to any of them. “It always struck me as interesting how the three of them, Phaeros, Tempia, and Em were artists, but they executed their art in so radically different...” talking more to myself than Othello.

“Do you have any other instructions for me?” he asked.

I looked up at him. “Don’t let harm come to her. Daelus would kill me if something were to happen to her,” I added with a grin.

“I mean aside from the obvious.”

“Don’t be afraid to give her advice on anything. Neither of you have done this sort of thing before, but neither of you have been chosen for this because you were simply available. Combine your knowledge and skills with hers, and I am sure that you will be successful.”

“Then I should begin by helping her with that letter,” he said, turning to go.

“Good luck!” I called to him, and then “Cor, sorry to keep you two waiting.”

Corinne escorted Jyre back into the room, who was looking now several leagues more amicable. I had a feeling that a brief encounter with Zin would change her attitude. “Good news!” I proclaimed, looking forward to hijacking Heppet’s happy tale for my own purposes. “Daelus is alive and well, and has resumed the campaign!”

Jyre looked like she was ready to jump out of her skin, like she wanted to run around hugging everything, like she wanted to cry and laugh and sing, but wouldn’t let herself. Instead she just stood there looking like a whirlwind was spinning in her mind, unable to speak but turning slightly red.

“Yes, I just got word from one of The Riverbed Company. He is cleaning up right now. Daelus has returned to the site of the excavation, as if by magic!” I had no trouble supposing that some things occurred by magic. After all, many things did!

“Is he okay? Is he angry with me?” she asked, clear in her priorities. I glanced up at Cor who was breathing a sigh of relief, and then going to busy herself with her previous work.

“I am sure he is perfectly well and not at all angry with you. Now Jyre, I need you to focus. I have an important mission for you.”

"A mission?" she said, sounding very interested. "We're going to go get Els?"

I shook my head. "No Jyre, I am sorry but that is not for you to do. It's..."

"Why not?" she called out. "I have to help him! It's my fault he got captured!"

"Jyre, why on earth would it be your fault?"

"Because I left him and he went looking for me, and I led him to those bad...I led him to them, and now he's captured and it *is* my fault!"

I shook my head. "Well if it is indeed your fault, I am afraid that your punishment must be to not have any part in his safe release," I said with a grin. It didn't make her happy, but it quieted her down. "I have already set in motion a plan to see Els freed. Do not worry; the chances of failure are almost zero!"

She made a really quite funny frown and looked into her lap.

"You and Els made a business of infiltrating The Lady's abodes and outposts and searching for clues. I am going to continue that campaign, but I need an expert on The Lady to accompany my team to provide an experienced set of eyes. I trust you will notice things they have missed."

"But we never found anything on any of those raids," she said.

"Ah, well in that case we should shut down all operations that have thus far met with unsatisfactory results!" I said, teasing. She didn't seem to get it though. "Do not let the past bother you. I trust you will be instrumental in the discoveries we will make at this new location."

"What is it?"

"A small house deep in the woods, far from any village or road; it belonged to a close associate of The Lady. You are to set out at once as soon as I am able to gather the team."

"What use will I be? I can't even look after myself!"

"Hush. I wouldn't have hired you if I thought that were the case."

"Are you going?"

The question gave me pause. I honestly hadn't considered that. "Oh no, no I cannot. I must stay here and oversee the network." I got up and went to a cabinet, and began pulling out various things of use to her. I offered her a bow and small sword, but she backed away.

"I already have my own bow. That sword is too big."

I shrugged and put them away, giving her a dagger instead. "And be mindful of that temper of yours. I don't need that thing in my kidney!" I said with a grin. I also gave her a quiver of arrows, which she did accept, and a new cloak to go over her new clothes. She stood before me looking perfectly fit for this mission, except for the look on her face, which was all wrong. "Cor, is anyone at all available right now?"

She frowned and shook her head. "Not for this type of work. You've got the entire network quite tied up at the moment; things haven't been this busy since the incident with the treason plot six years ago."

I leafed through some papers scattered across the counter. I would have to pull someone off the Ramirez front. This mission was far too important

and dangerous for two, even three. Four would be ideal. I had the third in mind, but the fourth would be harder to come by.

"What do you mean you're not going?" she demanded. "Don't you care if I do this right or not? Isn't it important? What if Daelus dies because I mess up again?"

"Nonsense, Jyre!"

"Do you want him to die? Will you become the boss if he does? Is that why you're sending me, because you know I'll mess up and that will be it?" She scowled. Apparently my advice about her temper was not heeded.

I couldn't help but laugh. "No Jyre, in the event of his death I would certainly stand to lose far more than I would gain. However, I believe I feel myself being persuaded." I knew that her next bargaining chip would simply be to refuse to go, and I may have been rash in expecting her to set out with a group of strangers in the first place. And then there was the matter of that fourth party member. I began considering the gear cabinet. "Cor?"

"James," she said, giving me that look.

"Can you run the network for a while? I am afraid that I must accompany Jyre on her mission."

"You're going operational?" the look continued.

"Um, I think it may be necessary. I believe Jyre could benefit from my experience in the field on her first mission."

"That may be true, but you're quite rusty on your field-craft."

"Yes, but—"

"And you were never topnotch."

"Yes, but if—"

"But if Jyre is going to learn from the best in the business, I can't think of anyone who would be better to guide her." She and Jyre then exchanged a look as only two women could, and they both crossed their arms.

— Jyre: An Unlikely Combination —

Day 6: 3:40 pm

I watched as Cor prepared James for the mission, fussing over him and arguing over every little detail. It made me smile. A few minutes later a strange man walked into the room, which made me jump. He had a wild look about him, as if he had grown up in the woods, and was dripping wet with only a towel wrapped around his waist. I averted my eyes, embarrassed at the sight of him.

"Heppet, I am not sure what your habits are at the ranger lodge, but here we wear clothes while among company," Cor said, scolding. I smiled again, and managed a little peek.

James was now sorting through his travel gear, which he eventually hefted onto his back and strapped across his chest and around his arms. He had a hooded cloak just like the one he gave me, though he had kept the hood off. I pulled hood down quickly, realizing that I had done something wrong. Cor shoved Heppet back into the room he came from along with a bundle of

clothes, and I was fairly sure I spotted a similar cloak.

"He's coming too?" I asked.

"Yes," James said. "When in the woods, it never hurts to bring a ranger." He always grinned. I wasn't used to so much grinning. "Cor, please tell Sheam and Othello of this latest development. It should not affect their plan in the slightest."

She did not reply, but came to him and straightened his cloak out a bit. Then she embraced him, and whispered something to him. James managed a muffled, "I'll try."

I felt embarrassed again at the display, looking down into my lap. I heard the stranger Heppet return. I looked up quickly to see him dressed much like us.

Corinne sunk down into a chair near me. She didn't seem as pleased with herself as she did a moment ago. "Well, stand not upon the order of thy going..."

James seemed at a loss for words. "Yeah, see ya'." He looked at me and then turned to leave the flat; he stopped with shoulders slumped in the door.

I was about to go as well when I found Cor embracing me as well. I expected to want to tear away, but instead I found myself sinking into her squeeze. When she looked at me I caught the glint of a tear in her eye. "Take care of him, please."

I smiled, and then returned her squeeze. "I will. I promise. I will keep him on a short leash." I winked, and Corinne gave me a thankful smile. I found James and Heppet on the other side of the door waiting for me, and the three of us departed the apartment together.

In the stairwell, James paused. The bodies in their blankets seemed much more alert suddenly; their eyes clear and sharp. "I am going operational for the next few days. Corinne is in charge of the network until my return." A chorus of "Yes, sir," replied to him. I blinked in surprise several times, realizing that these decrepit husks were in fact agents. I reminded myself what I had always known about judging at a glance, but could never seem to remember.

We walked out into the streets, and found that same carriage waiting for us. "Hoy Richen!" James shouted. "Right on time!"

The three of us squeezed into the compartment. Heppet smelled odd, like some awful smell being hidden under perfume. I didn't like being pressed up so close to him, but it was much better than the last time I had to share a compartment with someone I didn't like. I knew that if James trusted him then I should. He was interesting, but I didn't want to be interested.

"Two stops before we're out of The City, Richen. Take us to Eastport. Cello court, five one two, D."

— Sheam: The Final Draft —

Day 6: 4:00 pm

I was ready to write it all over again, but I was quickly running out of stationary paper and running out of places to throw wadded balls. Othello sat close by looking over what was hopefully the final draft as well.

Salutations, Lord Mortimer Crowley:

I beseech you to heed this offer for an allegiance. I, Lady Unexumbra Sheam, duly appointed representative of The Circle of Stone and Shadow, as presided over by his Lordship Master Daelus Thresh, officially request a meeting to discuss a partnership in goals and means between our organization and your own, The City-Born Pure-Bloods. I implore you to heed this call at your quickest possible convenience, as hesitation to do so may result in critical loses for both of our groups. I would be happy to meet with you at Crowley Castle-Manor tonight, if this is at all possible.

If you accept this offer, please send escort. I will come accompanied by my personal assistant and guard, Sir Othello.

Yours sincerely,
Lady Unexumbra Sheam

I squinted at the sight of that funny word in front of my name. Othello insisted that two names was the absolute minimum for an occasion like this, considering that Crowley had two names, and I could not appear to be of a lower station than he. I very nearly put down my father's sir name, but it was very common and not at all aristocratic, so Othello suggested against using it. In the end I just wrote down the first thing that popped into my head, one syllable at a time. Othello thought it was an attractive name, though he then urged me to place Sheam at the end so that I would be called Lady Sheam rather than the other way around. He was also kind enough to provide the actual full name for The Bloods, which everyone but Crowley himself had possibly forgotten.

"It's good. A great deal less superfluous than he is no doubt used to from nobility, but I think that will appeal to his 'ordinary man' sensibilities. I think you've managed the best of both worlds with this one."

I smiled. I was used to writing things like this, but not used to them having anything to do with me. I would have to remember the spelling of Unexumbra in case I wanted to use it again.

"Well even if he wants to meet with me tonight, we're going to have some time before that happens. I can think of a hundred things I'd need to do to prepare, but to be honest I don't actually want to do any of them."

Othello nodded. Behind that mask, he could have been frowning, smiling,

or sticking his tongue out at me. Somehow though, I felt that he was the type of person whose face was always a mask even when he wasn't wearing one; blank, expressionless, closed off.

"I can think of one thing though..." I said, musing slightly in a way that I hoped wouldn't offend him.

"What is it?" he said.

"Come with me to The Circle. I think I have a mask for you that would better serve the end that James imagined for you."

He nodded. "I would be happy to see what you have in mind."

I met with Corinne in the kitchen, and found that the apartment was suddenly very quiet and very empty. She told me that James left with Jyre and Heppet, and that he was going out into the field. I showed her the letter, and she fretted over my grammar but didn't suggest any changes. Finally it was addressed and dropped into the slot marked most urgent, and my work, for the time anyway, was done.

"Let's go," I said. "He'll be sending his reply to The Circle anyway."

— James: The First of Two Stones —

Day 6: 4:20 pm

"Oh dear," I said, trying to ruse my fellows into thinking that the obvious had not occurred to me. "This cab will not seat four."

"She can sit on my lap!" Heppet said. The appalled look on Jyre's face reminded me that she had no idea where we were going or what we were doing, and undoubtedly thought that Heppet was in fact referring to her.

"Er, no Heppet. I very much doubt that Petra will sit on your lap." I said with a laugh. "I was wise enough to procure a cab with a doorman's ledge. You can ride outside Heppet, if you don't mind."

He laughed, possibly to hide his disappointment, but agreed. He probably didn't know that I was doing him a favor; his love of women would undoubtedly be tarnished were he to be crammed into a cab compartment with the likes of Jyre and Petra! Were the two to conspire I was sure that they could destroy him!

"If you all would wait here," I requested, checking my watch, "I shall be out in just a moment. She should have gotten my letter by now, and will be waiting." I left them behind, and let myself into the side door of the hostel. This was the agreed meeting place should a face to face discussion be required; room two-oh-eight. I quickly tapped at the door.

It opened a crack, revealing a pair of impossibly dark eyes which seemed to absorb all the light they beheld, surrounded by tight ringlets of equally dark hair. "Must be important if I am to be called off the watch of eternal boredom," she said after she saw me, and opened the door properly. She was indeed geared up and ready to go.

"Oh yes, quite. And as an unexpected bonus, I am coming along."

"How'd Corinne allow that?" she said smugly, closing the door behind her. Her attire made our other outfits seem like beggar's rags; she wore a richly

embroidered leather tunic with a small hooded shawl around her shoulders. Matching leggings and boots adorned her legs, though her arms were bare save for some small fingerless gloves. Sword and bow were on standby.

"Oh, I am afraid circumstances left us with little choice. Come, we have little time to lose. I am happy to say that you will be making two new friends on this voyage!"

"Why?" she asked, as if I had told her that we would be paddling down the river in a red canoe, singing campfire songs.

"Safety in numbers," was my reply as I led her down the stairs.

"You just know that Ramirez is going to try something now that there's a hole in the network."

"Oh, I know. In fact I am counting on it!"

— Jyre: The Magic of Iron —

Day 6: 4:30 pm

I was happy that the man was riding outside, but I did not like this woman either. She was clearly a thief, like me, but she was also clearly a professional who stole for profit and thrill, rather than survival. I didn't like people like that, who hurt others just because they wanted to. It made me feel bad about James for bringing her along, but then again, I really had no idea what James was capable of either.

We rode on in silence. I expected to have more room once the man was gone and the woman sat, but now I felt like I had even less room to breathe. After traveling for what seemed like an hour, we came to what looked like a blacksmith's shop. James jumped out and made ready to close the door, but I jumped out too just before he did. "I need to stretch my legs," I said, really just wanting to get away from the woman.

"Ah, come along then," James said, surprising me with his lack of protest.

The blacksmith's shop was boring. I expected to see all sorts of swords and shields and war axes, but all there was were tools and metal parts. James was having a friendly discussion with the man at the counter, but I only caught the end of it after I decided that it couldn't be more boring than looking around the room.

"Ah, a paltry sum for this level of craftsmanship, and speed!" James insisted, handing over to the man three bulging bags of coin. "It is a shame that this arrow's recipient will most likely not get a chance to actually look at it!"

My eyes went to the thing that James was buying, and I couldn't help but blurt out, "Why are you paying so much for just a useless iron arrow?"

They both quieted down for a moment, and I quickly regretted opening my mouth. The man behind the counter, the smithy I guessed, started to laugh at me like I was an idiot child. James leaned over a little and said, "Men work magic when they make things; and the greater the effort, the greater the magic. The magic of iron is deeply opposed to that of the Wood and of the Faery Queen. This arrow was cold-forged; hammered into shape without

heat. It is a process requiring exceptional effort and dedication. That smith may not feel this way about it, but he works a form of magic. In this instance, he has worked it on an inherently powerful substance, iron that fell from the stars. The Lady possesses a force of Chaos, and this arrow is a very Orderly work. I am also banking on her appraisal of the arrow to be similar to your own, a simple crude weapon of mortals. Thinking it will cause little damage to her, in whatever supernatural form she may be pursuing, will give us a clear opportunity to strike a deadly blow."

I didn't like the sound of 'deadly blow' but I also didn't believe the arrow would do any good, so I kept my mouth shut. Other than that I felt like I had no idea what he was talking about, but I was trying not to let it show. "Okay," I just said, but from the look on his face I knew he didn't believe me. I scuttled out with him, wishing I had stayed in the carriage with the woman. At least then I was sure I would not have been tempted to open my stupid mouth.

As we rode west, James had the carriage stop many more times. At first I thought that he was checking for more letters, but when I actually watched him I saw that he was leaving them behind. Then we were through the city gate and out on the open road. The driver urged his horse faster and faster, until we came to a spot where the road made an abrupt turn. Then he stopped, and James got out. "This is it," he said. "Beyond here we must go," he checked a small metal disc which he produced from his pocket. At first I thought he was checking his watch again, but I saw that this one was black, "west by northwest, into the woods. As I said, there is no road that travels to where we must go."

James paid the driver, who turned the carriage around and headed back to The City. The man, Heppet, seemed excited to be getting back to the woods. The woman, Petra, just stood there like a statue, hands resting at her belt, eyes set on the direction the carriage had vanished. James was going through some papers—why did he always have papers?—before folding them up and putting them back into his pack which he strapped back onto his back. "Well, let's be moving then. We make camp for the night at nine o'clock. Agreed? Goodness, I could use the sleep!"

— Sheam: A Face for Othello, A Mask for Sheam —

Day 6: 7:00 pm

I had never been to The Circle's super-secret level until a few days ago, and now I was back. Othello held the lantern above me as I pushed open a large crate, and began going through the contents. I didn't have to search long before I found what I had come for. I drew it out; a simple porcelain mask. It was expressionless, a full face and forehead, off-white, a faint pattern etched into it, with some black painted in around the eyes and closed lips. I showed it to him.

He was quiet for a moment, even as he took it from me and held it into the light. I watched him for maybe a minute, wondering what it was he was thinking. "I will wear it," he finally said.

"Do you like it?" I asked, hoping for a little more from him.

"It is very nice," he said, though his tone was hard to read. He put the lantern down and looked away from me. His hands were behind his head undoing the metal mask. I was quite thankful for it; even now I didn't think I'd be able to bear seeing what he needed to hide. He set it down and took the other one, putting it into place. He turned to look at me.

It did indeed change his entire appearance. Now it was more like James had said...whereas before it was far too brutal and intimidating. But there was another difference that was even more striking now; I could see his eyes. They were pale blue; vibrant with color, but may as well have been part of the mask itself for all they revealed. "I think it is very good," I said, worried that he must think that this entire ordeal was awful.

He lifted his hand to it, feeling around the top of his head. "I think I will be able to wear my hat with this one," he said.

I smiled. I didn't know what to say, so I just smiled.

"I know it does not sound like it, and I know you cannot see it, and I know that if you could, it would not look like it...but I am smiling too."

"Where is your hat?" I asked, anxious to see him with it.

"I do not actually have one, anymore. It was ruined, but we can go purchase another. The markets will still be open for another hour or so. Would you care to go? Forgive me, but I have in mind a few articles for you as well. I think the coming task is an excellent excuse to budget the purchases."

I smiled even more. "I am starting to hope that Crowley does not want to meet with me tonight after all."

"I hope we will have time for this even if he does. I have...some specific things in mind. I have not previously made the acquaintance of a woman worthy of buying them for."

I didn't say anything to that, only offered him my arm to allow him to escort me to the ladder. But then, for some reason I quickly thought of Ghost. I was supposed to go find him so he could return the choker to me. Even though I felt like a fool for letting Circle property be stolen, I felt as if I didn't want it back. Here was a man who had no choice but to wear a mask. I was foolish for desiring to wear one. I walked with Othello the short distance to the ladder, and urged him to go first. "Don't want you staring up at me as I climb," I said to him with a wink.

I hoped he was still smiling somewhere under there. I did watch him as he climbed up. He was so unlike Ghost; so quiet and reserved. He kept a tight lid on everything; would not betray how he felt about anything. Not like Ghost at all, who would gawk and stare and say exactly what was on his mind. I shook the thoughts from my mind. Ghost was a no-good, rotten scoundrel who really only cared about himself in the end. He had shown his true colors to me. I had a job to do now and it was important, maybe the most important. I couldn't afford to let my mind wander.

Othello was not one to peruse. He knew exactly what hat was proper for this venture, and exactly where to get it. It was a black bowler, perfectly ordinary for any bowler, and did indeed fit neatly on his head even with the

mask in place. Looking at him now was like a vision out of a fantasy; something not quite real, unique in its ordinariness accented with the truly unexpected. It needed something else, though. I stopped him at the last moment and brought him to the back of the shop, where I handed him a hat exactly the same as the one he had picked out, with the exception of a bright red feather tucked into the band. He hesitated.

"You're completely black and white," I told him. "What better opportunity to add a little bit of color. You are...unique in your ordinariness accented with the truly unexpected," my previous thoughts finding equally unexpected voice.

He then put it on. "Perfect," I said, turning him this way and that to look at it. Crowley and his men would surely have no idea what to expect from Sir Othello now.

But then it was his turn. He took me to another shop across the way, and presented me with various articles. There was very little discussion on his part; it was clear to me that these items, like the hat, had been selected by him long ago. We stayed in almost complete silence. He would point to something, usually a bit of jewelry, and I would try it on and look in the mirror. Then I would take it off and either shake my head, or nod. It felt much more like we were putting together a costume in order to make an impression for the meeting rather than a man who was buying gifts for a woman he fancied. He never offered an opinion himself on how any of it looked, nor seemed disappointed if I didn't like something.

In the end I had purchased a pair of white gloves to hide my clearly working-class hands, a necklace which seemed appropriate to wear over the dark blue blouse I had on, a jeweled hairpiece which kept my loose hair locked tightly behind my head and made me seem older, and a bit of makeup, again to make me appear older by virtue of it attempting to make me appear younger. I checked myself in the mirror, all powdered and done up, lips as red as his feather, hair tied up tight with not a strand misplaced, wearing gems and gold. I barely recognized myself as I stood staring into the shop window, now mirror-like as the shopkeeper closed his business and turned out all of the lights within.

Again I thought of Ghost and the choker. I couldn't help but wish I had it now, so that it wouldn't be me who was marching in to Castle Crowley dressed up like a countess to do business with him, but some other woman instead. I pushed the thought out of my mind, remembering my previous bit of inspiration that had been so quickly forgotten. My thoughts were broken as Othello suddenly spoke.

"You appear very beautiful," he said.

I wished he had said it differently, that I *was* beautiful rather than simply *appearing* beautiful. I smiled anyway though, turning to look into those holes in his mask where his blue eyes resided. "It seems you have found a mask for me as well," I told him.

"We should check The Circle for any sign of a reply from Crowley. It is getting late."

I nodded, feeling the pressure of business upon me once again. We crossed the street and headed down a few blocks.

Our timing could not have been more perfect. I spotted a small party approaching the north exit to The Circle's yard. Othello and I ducked into the east entrance, so that we would be approaching them from within. "Slow your pace—a lady must not hurry," he urged me, and I did so. Then he cut his pace to half of my own, and I realized that I truly had no idea what a slow pace was supposed to be like.

I could see through the north gate now; a large stagecoach with several men standing about. They went to attention as they saw us approach. I rummaged around in my pocket to retrieve the key, but Othello quickly took it from me and said, "Ladies do not have pockets nor do they carry keys."

"Lady Unexumbra Sheam and Sir Othello, I presume," said a young man in a red and green tabard.

"I am," I said, suddenly feeling my heart race.

"We are here to escort you to Castle Crowley for the meeting you requested."

I wanted to smile, but I knew that Othello would tell me that ladies do not smile. "Thank you," I said simply as Othello unlocked the gate and moved to open it for me.

I could feel all of them, each dressed in a similar tabard, some armed and some not, watching me as I moved. I accepted the open door of the stagecoach and entered, knowing I was surely acting extremely unladylike, but unable to really figure out how a lady was supposed to enter a stagecoach. Othello was silent again.

The door closed behind him as he sat next to me. We were alone inside; I could feel the men who had greeted us grabbing hold to the outside of the compartment to ride along. There was a crack of the whip and we were moving.

"You did very well," he said. I didn't believe him. I felt like I hadn't done anything.

"I am not sure how long I can keep this up," I said.

"It isn't all about the act, Sheam. You represent The Circle. The Circle is different, and you are different. It is that unique quality...that...bit of unexpected, that is our strength right now."

I swallowed away my fear and nodded. "Yes," I said, forcing a smile, and looking up to that little red feather in his hat. "This is a meeting he won't soon forget."